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AENEAS' JOURNEY IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

TROY

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Translated from Italian by Gavin Williams

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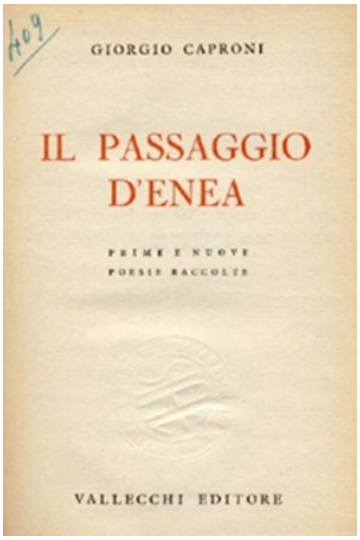
1 GIORGIO CAPRONI, *THE PASSAGE OF AENEAS* (1956)

[…] Aeneas, trying
to bear a crumbling past upon his shoulders
toward safety, and amid the rolling snare
of the toppling city walls, gripping the hand
of a future still so frail it cannot stand
on its own strength […]

Translated by Todd Pornowitz

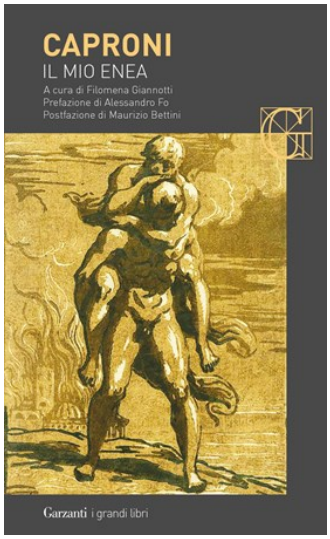


The lines above are taken from the complex short poem *Il passaggio d'Enea*, from the collection of the same name that appeared in 1956, by the Livornese poet Giorgio Caproni (1912-1990), who later became Genoese and Roman by adoption. These lines represent the moment when Aeneas flees Troy, described by Virgil towards the end of book II of the *Aeneid*:

Haec fatus latos umeros subiectaque colla *veste super fulvique insternor pelle leonis* *succedoque oneri; dextrae se parvos Iulus* *implicuit sequiturque patrem non passibus aequis* *Aeneid* II 721-724	This said, I spread a tawny lion skin across my bent neck, over my broad shoulders, and then take up Anchises; small Iulus now clutches my right hand; his steps uneven, he is following his father Translated by Allen Mandelbaum

Despite his reliance on the *Aeneid*, attested also by other sections of *The Passage of Aeneas* and in his other work, Caproni traces the genesis of his short poem to the meeting, which took place in Piazza Bandiera in Genoa in the summer of 1948, with a statue showing Aeneas fleeing Troy with Anchises on his shoulders and Ascanius at his side, that miraculously survived intact among the rubble of the square that was bombed during the Second World War. In that Aeneas who was saved from the blaze

of Troy, who survived all the misfortunes of his voyage, and who had arrived in one of the most heavily bombed cities in Italy, even escaping the bombs of the Second World War, Caproni sees a symbol of himself, having just come out of the conflict, and grappling with a past that was now collapsing around him, represented by the old and sick Anchises, and with a future still to be built, symbolized by the young Ascanius, a boy whose steps were still faltering. The emotional intensity of this meeting was such that Caproni went as far as to call it "the most moving thing I have seen on this earth", and he returned to it, in writing and in talking, incessantly and almost obsessively, for around forty years (all Caproni's writings on Aeneas have now been brought together and commented on by Filomena Giannotti).



Aeneas' statue by Francesco Baratta (1726) in Piazza Bandiera in Genoa

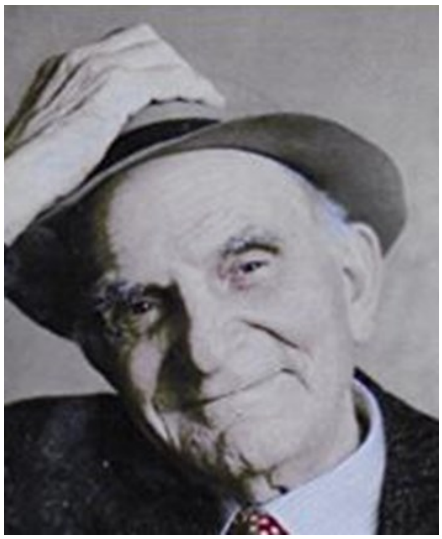
Further reading:

- 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.

2 ATTILIO BERTOLUCCI, *TOWARDS CASAROLA* (1971)

[…] Now, I suppose
it must be time to hoist my child on my shoulders,
so, emerging from the thick, he'll see with wonder
the swirl of smoke and stars above our destined Casarola.

Translated by Todd Portnowitz



The same image, to be precise the closing lines of book II of the *Aeneid*, where it appears for the second time, also inspired Attilio Bertolucci (1911-2000):

Iamque iugis summae surgebat Lucifer Idae *ducebatque diem Danaique obsessa tenebant* *limina portarum nec spes opis ulla dabatur.* *Cessi et sublato montis genitore petivi.* *Aeneid* II 801-804	[…] Now the star of morning rose above high Ida's ridges, guiding the day. The Danaans held the gates' blockaded thresholds. There was no hope of help. Then I gave way and, lifting up my father, made for the mountains Translated by Allen Mandelbaum

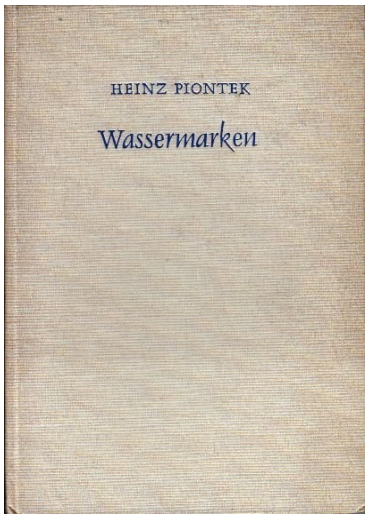
In his poem *Towards Casarola*, the final lines of which appear here, Attilio Bertolucci (1911-2000) recalls the tragic moment of his escape from the Nazis the day after the Armistice, on 8 September 1943, in a bid to take his family to safety in the small town of Casarola, in the mountains near Parma, where the poet originally hailed from. It will not escape the reader's attention that, unlike the Virgilian background, with a star-studded sky, in Bertolucci it is the son who is carried on the shoulders of his father, in a poetic inversion between Ascanius and Anchises. Some years after these lines, the poet returned to this famous Virgilian image, choosing as the title of his review of volume one of the new translation of the *Aeneid*, published in 1978 by "Fondazione Lorenzo Valla – Mondadori", *Con il padre in spalla verso gli alti monti* ("With his father on his shoulders towards the high mountains"), which refers to part of the last verse of book II.

Further reading:

- A. Bertolucci, *Opere*, a cura di P. Lagazzi e G. Palli Baroni, Milano, Mondadori, 1997.
- F. Giannotti, Et haec olim meminisse iuvabit. *Contemporary Italian Writers Remembering the Aeneid*, in *Our Modern Aeneid*, Arizona University State, in corso di stampa.
- P. Schiavo, *Tra memoria e pietas: l'Enea di Caproni e Ungaretti*, in *Gli antichi dei moderni. Dodici letture da Leopardi a Zanzotto*, a cura di G. Sandrini e M. Natale, Verona, Fiorini, 2010, pp. 237-254.

3 HEINZ PIONTEK, *THE MISSING* (1957)

[…]
We stuffed bread and silver into the bags, and pushed open the door.
When night began to flash, we ran to the stables without weapons
and away, on roads of migrant mice.
Ragged metal sheets, and cold: the land of the conquered.
We moved at walking pace. A young woman gave birth between the wheels of the cart.
A blind man stumbled along behind good-hearted people
clinging to a rope, and he shouted to the empty air: "Where are we?"
We have to wait for the crossroads.
We don't have documents…
[…]
We couldn't light a fire.
We couldn't leave the column without permission.
[…]
Our lines became thinner, and filed past with slender shadows;
each one lost the next. The east, like a flaming saga,
was annihilated behind the armies. It was a torment,
and a flight of ashes over desolation, and darkness, as in a former time.
But one man came up to us, leading a boy with him; he was a
robust man, with a uniform scorched by summer suns,
and he carried an old man on his shoulders, his weak father.
Then day broke before our eyes, with the light of pink leaves.
[…]



Meanwhile, in the post-war period, the topicality of Aeneas was also rediscovered outside Italy, for example in eastern Prussia, by the German writer Heinz Piontek (1925-2003). Here, under pressure from the victorious Russian army, the local (German) population tries to get to safety by fleeing in long columns. During this journey born of desperation, hope materializes in the form of a man wearing a uniform, albeit "scorched", who leads a young boy, and who carries his old, weak father on his shoulders. A Virgilian hope, in other words, which in the final lines takes on the hues – Homeric hues, by contrast – of a "light of pink leaves".

Further reading:

- H. Piontek, *Wassermarken. Gedichte*, Esslingen, Bechtle, 1957.
- M. Barchiesi, *I moderni alla ricerca di Enea*, Roma, Bulzoni, 1981.
- M. Bettini, *"Il passaggio d'Enea" di Giorgio Caproni*, in "Semicerchio" (Firenze, Casa Editrice Le Lettere), XXI-XXVII, 2002, *Il passaggio di Enea. I classici greci e latini nella poesia contemporanea*, pp. 53-57 (ora in G. Caproni, *Il mio Enea*, pp. 235-246).
- O. Schönberger, *Der neue Aeneas. Zu dem Gedicht «Die Verstreuten» von Heinz Piontek*, "Antike und Abenland" 16.1, 1970, pp. 78-82.

4 ALLEN TATE, *AENEAS AT WASHINGTON* (1948)

I myself saw furious with blood
Neoptolemus, at his side the black Atridae,
Hecuba and the hundred daughters, Priam
cut down, his filth drenching the holy fires.
[…]
That was a time when civilization
run by the few fell to the many, and
crashed to the shout of men, the clang of arms:
cold victualing I seized, I hoisted up
the old man my father upon my back,
in the smoke made by sea for a new world
saving little – a mind imperishable
if time is, a love of past things tenuous
as the hesitation of receding love.
[…]

We are taken outside Europe, in the same years, by these lines by the US poet Allen Tate (1899-1979), which reinterpret the American myth in the light of Virgil's poetry, with a continual overlapping between past and present, between Troy and Washington. It is in the US capital that Aeneas finds himself catapulted, to face the problems of modern man. And, in response to the destruction of civilization the only thing left to do, once again, is to place his old father on his shoulders and head for the sea, in search of a new world. One is struck, in the initial lines – that translate literally another well-known passage in book II of the *Aeneid* – by the madness of the massacre that Aeneas still sees in his mind's eye:

[…] *Vidi ipse furentem* *caede Neoptolemum geminosque in limine Atridas,* *vidi Hecubam centumque nurus Priamusque per aras* *sanguine foedantem quos ipse sacraverat ignis.* *Aeneid* II 499-502	And I myself saw Neoptolemus, insane with blood, and both of Atreus' sons upon the threshold. I saw Hecuba together with her hundred daughters, and among the altars I could see King Priam, polluting with his blood the fires he himself had allowed. Translated by Allen Mandelbaum

Also especially significant is Tate's conclusion: in Tate's imagination, Troy remains only the shadow of a city that has gone up in smoke and been rebuilt elsewhere, a city for which we are left wondering whether it was worth it all – given the high price that was paid.

Further reading:

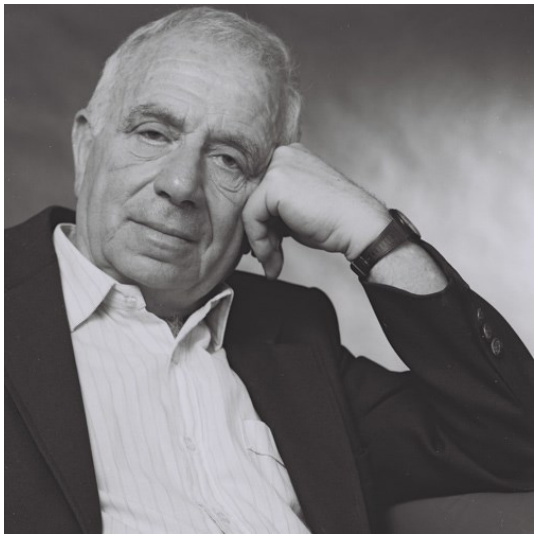
- A. Tate, *Poems 1922-1947*, New York, C. Scribner's Sons, 1948.
- M. Barchiesi, *I moderni alla ricerca di Enea*, Roma, Bulzoni, 1981.
- M. Bettini, *"Il passaggio d'Enea" di Giorgio Caproni*, in "Semicerchio" (Firenze, Casa Editrice Le Lettere), XXI-XXVII, 2002, *Il passaggio di Enea. I classici greci e latini nella poesia contemporanea*, pp. 53-57 (now in G. Caproni, *Il mio Enea*, pp. 235-246).

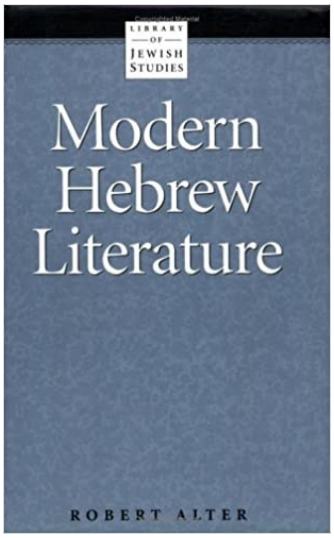
- L. Feder, *Allen Tate's Use of Classics*, "The Centennial Review of Arts & Science", 4.1, 1960, pp. 89-114.

5 YEHUDA AMICHAI, *THE TIMES MY FATHER DIED* (1959)

[…] But, as I said at the beginning, my fathers still keeps dying. He comes to me in my dreams and I am afraid for him and say: take your coat, walk more slowly, don't talk, you mustn't get excited, take a rest from this awful war. […] Once I was walking along the Via Appia in Rome. I was carrying my father on my shoulders. Suddenly his head sagged down and I was afraid he was going to die. I laid him down at the side of the road, with a stone under his head, and went to call a taxi. Once they used to call on God to help; now you call a taxi. […] I didn't know if he was still alive. I turned round again and saw him, a very distant object, through the ancient arches of San Sebastian's Gate. […]

Translated from Hebrew by Yosef Schacter





The excerpt above is the final page of a short story by Yehuda Amichai (1924-2000), one of the greatest Israeli writers of the 20th century. The title of this autobiographical short story, told from the point of view of the son – who is Amichai himself – refers to the various moments of crisis his father went through in the course of his life, which are presented as moments of death in a metaphorical sense (in the trenches of the Great War; on his arrest by the Nazis; during his flight from Germany to Palestine). After his biological death, the protagonist imagines, in a scene that has markedly dream-like features, that he is carrying his father on his shoulders. Although Aeneas is not mentioned, Amichai's horizon of reference is constituted by the world of ancient Rome, which is evoked by the Via Appia and Porta San Sebastiano, and by the Virgilian poem. The scene of Aeneas' flight from Troy with his father Anchises on his shoulders appears merged together with the other famous episode in the *Aeneid* involving the meeting between the two in the Underworld, represented here by the Via Appia, as a sort

of liminal place (as in another piece of writing in which, similarly, Amichai sees an unidentified individual, probably his father, walking along the Via Appia). And, in the same words with which Aeneas prays to the Sibyl, for that matter, the two scenes already somehow overlap:

Illum ego per flammas et mille sequentia tela *eripui his umeris medioque ex hoste recepi* *Aeneid* VI 110-111	For through the fire, a thousand spears behind us, I carried him upon these shoulders; from the press of enemies I drew him on Translated by Allen Mandelbaum

Moreover, as in the *Aeneid*, so too in this page by Amichai, it is always in dreams that the father appears to his son:

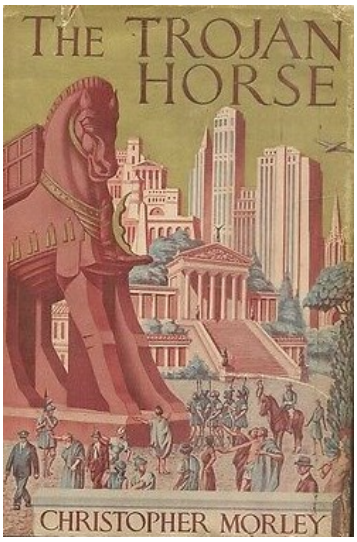
Me patris Anchisae, quotiens umentibus umbris *nox operit terras, quotiens astra ignea surgunt,* *admonet in somnis et turbida terret imago* *Aeneid* IV 351-353	For often as the night conceals the earth with dew and shadows, often as the stars ascend, afire, my father's anxious image approaches me in dreams. Anchises warns and terrifies Translated by Allen Mandelbaum
Visa dehinc caelo facies delapsa parentis *Anchisae subito talis effundere voces* *Aeneid* V 722-723	[…] then down from the sky the image of his father Anchises seemed to glide. His sudden words Translated by Allen Mandelbaum

Further reading:

- Y. Amichai, *The Times My Father Died*, in R. Alter, *Modern Hebrew Literature*, New York, Berman House, 1975, 315-325.
- G. Loi, *Yehuda Amichai's* The Times My Father Died (1959). *A Jewish Aeneas in Flight from the Holocaust*, in *Our Modern Aeneid*, Arizona University State, in press.

6 CHRISTOPHER MORLEY, *THE TROJAN HORSE* (1937)

It's the earth's most famous town, so it belongs to everybody, and all times at once. […] We think a lot of Now, but isn't Then always getting the better of it? Let's mix them together and make Always. […]



These words, on the universality and eternity of the city of Troy, mark the opening of the novel by the American writer Christopher Morley (1890-1957), translated into Italian by Cesare Pavese in 1940, chosen here by way of example, for its flamboyance and eccentricity, in the bewildering number of novels set in Aeneas' homeland.

Unlike the impression given by the title, the fall of Troy and the deception of the horse are merely the formal setting of the tale of the tragic love story between Troilus and Cressida, which the novel centres upon. The young man is the youngest of Priam's children, and an excellent warrior. Cressida is the daughter of Dr Calchas, a noted Trojan economist, who decides to switch sides and join the enemy, the Greeks, after having seen and analysed graphs showing the city of Troy to be doomed.

As will be clear from this brief reference to the plot, the whole story is projected into the present, complete with skyscrapers and nightclubs, taxis and trams, while Aeneas and the other Trojan heroes take on their eternal enemies the Greeks on a football field, afterwards meeting up in the evenings to talk over the latest game, at the "seaside roadhouse down by the beach, Sarpedoni's Shore Dinner", below which lies the threatening Greek camp, and its fleet.

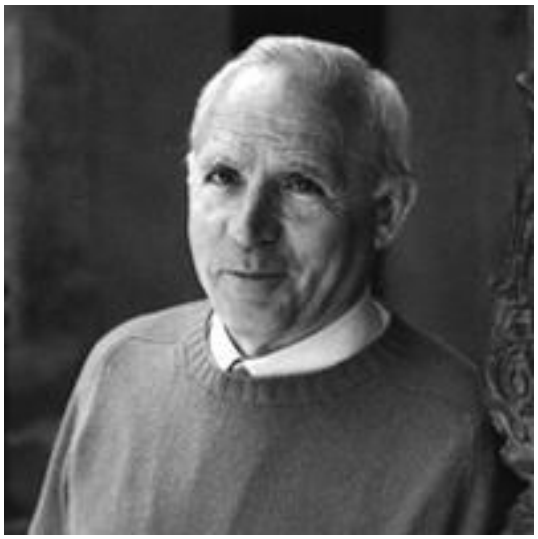
Appearing as tragic and comic, tender and humorous, at one and the same time, this novel gives a modern guise to an ancient story: while the two protagonists are already mentioned in the *Iliad*, a love story between them is first narrated in the 12th century by Benoît de Sainte-Maure in the poem *Roman de Troie*, and is later returned to in Boccaccio's *Filostrat*o, in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* (which was continued at the end of the 15th century by the *Testament of Cresseid* by the Scots poet Robert Henryson), and in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*. But it is perhaps this very transposition into our era that underlines the transversal nature of a myth connected to the fall of Troy, which, since its origins in the classical world, and passing through the filter of the medieval knightly genre and the sensibilities of Boccaccio, Chaucer and Shakespeare, has continued on down the centuries, projecting itself beyond its own particular time limits.

Further reading:

- Ch. Morley, *Il cavallo di Troia*, traduzione it. di C. Pavese, Milano, Bompiani, 1941.
- M. I. Wallach - J. Bracker, *Christopher Morley*, Boston Massachusetts, Twayne Publishers, 1976.

7 VINCENZO CONSOLO, *BY NIGHT, HOUSE-TO-HOUSE* (1992)

Longa tibi exilia et vastum maris aequor arandum



These words, taken from Creusa's prophecy to Aeneas, "Along your way lie long exile, vast plains/ of sea that you must plow;" (*Aeneid* II 780, translated by Allen Mandelbaum), act as an epigraph to the last chapter in the novel *By Night, House-to-House*, winner of the Strega Prize, by Vincenzo Consolo (1933-2012). In response to the unstoppable rise of fascism, the protagonist, Petro Marano, chooses the path of exile, and takes ship from Palermo bound for Tunis, a latter-day Aeneas searching for a new homeland. Historically there was a community of antifascists in Tunisia, and a community of anarchists had been founded in Tunis by the Sicilians. The fact that this is not just a simple coincidence, but an historical phenomenon, seems to be confirmed by the meeting on the boat between Petro Marano and the anarchicist Paolo Schicchi. But Aenea' exile (*Aeneid* II 707-710) was also harked back to by Consolo on other occasions, more recently (articles and short essays) regarding a subject particularly dear to him, emigration in the Mediterranean, with reference both to the tragedy of the "iron coffins at the bottom of the sea", and to the prospects of economic and cultural enrichment afforded by the encounter with foreign migrants.

Further reading:

- V. Consolo, *Nottetempo, casa per casa*, Milano, Mondadori, 1992.
- V. Consolo, *Gli ultimi disperati del canale di Sicilia*, "La Repubblica", 18 settembre 2007.

- V. Consolo, *I muri d'Europa*, in L. Restuccia, G.S. Santangelo (a cura di), *Scritture delle migrazioni: passaggi e ospitalità*, Palumbo, Palermo, 2008, pp. 25-30.
- A. Bellanova, *Un eccezionale Baedeker: la rappresentazione degli spazi nell'opera di Vincenzo Consolo*, Milano-Udine, Mimesis, 2021.