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Aeneas' Journey in Contemporary Literature

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AENEAS' JOURNEY IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

CUMA

By Filomena Giannotti

University of Siena
Department of Philology and Criticism in Ancient and Modern Literatures

Translated from Italian by Gavin Williams

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1 MICHELE SOVENTE, *OVER THERE* (1998)

Over there, wrapped tightly in its skin, like the
ancient stone and the hourglass that obstinately
measures the ruinous passage

of the winds, of thoughts, in the milk-white
silence, in the immense frost, over there
lies Cuma, the Sibyl that rants and raves.



Cuma, near to which stands Lake Averno, traditionally regarded as the entrance to Hades, finds an appealing presentation in this and in another poem (*Tu, Cuma...*) in the collection *Cumae* by the poet and literary critic Michele Sovente (1948-2011), who hailed from the Campi Flegrei (another interesting text, *Immobilismo e bradisismo*, harks back to other Virgilian places, such as Cape Miseno, and Lakes Fusaro, Lucrino and Averno, as well as Baia, with its Imperial Palace, and to the Temple of Serapis in Pozzuoli). The distinguishing feature of the collection *Cumae* – which in 1998, published by Marsilio in Venice, won the prestigious Viareggio-Rèpaci Prize – is the fact that it is trilingual. Some poems appear written in Latin or in Campanian dialect, with a translation in Italian, but this aspect does not emerge from the poem *Over There*, which however constitutes a good example both of that arcane profile, and of that tinge of pessimism that places and characters (here, “the Sibyl that rants and raves”) take on as they go through time.

Further reading:

- M. Sovente, *Cumae*, edizione critica e commentata a cura di G. A. Liberti, Macerata, Quodlibet, 2019.

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2 ANTONELLA ANEDDA, *TEARS* (2018)

Rereading book six of the *Aeneid*

before this artificial lake with the remains of a church
now only accessible by boat

I think of how the image of the house of the dead
endures over the centuries,
and how much desire pushes the living into the canyon of the underworld
only to simulate an impossible embrace,
and the fact that the hands I think I am touching are branches
of holm oaks, oak trees, firs – Christmas trees,
an unusual species in these lands.

In the old landscape there was the river
where the women used to go to wash.

Laying out the sheets on the stones
they told of how the shadows of their mothers
took turns to come down from the cliff just to dry
the tears that continued to be poured.



These lines by the poetess Antonella Anedda-Angioy appear as a side note to a revisitation of Book VI of the *Aeneid*. Born in 1955 to a family of Sardinian and Corsican descent, she has a marked predilection for the classics, especially for Tacitus. Indeed, *Historiae*, in which the great Roman historian is cited several times, constitutes the title of one of her masterpieces (and also in the eponymous section of her previous work *Nights of Western Peace*, published by Donzelli in 1999, the poetess draws her inspiration from a famous passage in Tacitus' *Agricola*). *Historiae* is a collection that

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mixes lyrical comment on great tragedies involving peoples – in particular mass emigration to the West, blighted by deaths at sea – with comment on private grief, in particular the death of her mother. While the title (along with the last line) of the poem *Tears* seems to hark back to the famous *sunt lacrimae rerum* in *Aeneid* I 462, the view of a lake conjures up the sights of the “canyon of the underworld” – perhaps, by association, via the image of Lake Averno at Cuma, where, in ancient times, it was thought that the entrance to the “house of the dead” stood. In the middle of the poem we come across the *topos* of the disappointed embrace, which, from Homer to Dante, and all the way down to Giorgio Caproni, permeated the literature of every historical era, but which here directly descends from the scene in which Aeneas tries in vain to embrace his father Anchises:

<p><i>Ter conatus ibi collo dare bracchia circum; ter frustra compressa manus effugit imago, par levibus ventis volucrique simillima somno</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>Aeneid</i> VI 700-702</p>	<p>Three times he tried to throw his arms around Anchises' neck; and three times the Shade escaped from that vain clasp—like light winds, or most like swift dreams.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Translated by Allen Mandelbaum</p>
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The derivation from Virgil, despite the presence of the number two, instead of the canonical three, is evident also, in this same collection, in the third poem in *Before the Wardrobes of the Dead*, a re-evocation of a moment in which the poetess has the sensation of perceiving around her the presence of her late mother: “Twice I emptily embraced her nothingness/ twice I embraced myself/ until I succumbed to the cold. I was returning [...]”.

Further reading:

- A. Anedda, *Historiae*, Torino, Einaudi, 1998.
- M. Buonofiglio, *Ritornare a Tacito (sulle Historiae di Antonella Anedda)*, “Il Segnale”, XL, 2020, 117, pp. 76-85.

3 GIANCARLO BARONI, *THE HYPOTHESIS OF A DREAM* (2020)

It was strange
to find in the midst of this pitch black darkness
inside the fog and the smoke
among these annoying rents
of half-shadow, the idea of a dream.

A man somebody
made of flesh and bone they whispered

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more with docile
curiosity than with fright.
Orpheus, I imagined,
the rash lover who returns again
and again to defy death.

Instead Aeneas they murmured
Aeneas recognized.
It truly was him,
how much I did love him
if, for love of him,
without any love for me, I did kill myself.

Too slow in the end was
his going, and long
the gaze: he
seeking elsewhere
and I my peace.



The Underworld, with its “pitch black darkness/ inside the fog and the smoke”, is the setting for these lines taken from the collection *The Names of the Things* by the poet and writer from Parma Giancarlo Baroni (b. 1953). We see a reappearance by Dido, this time in her place beyond time. And with her again – unusually – not indignation, but nostalgia, together with the regret for that which could not be, namely – even in Hades – “the hypothesis of a dream”. A twist in the story, and suddenly we see the materialization, preceded by curious whispers and by self-satisfied murmurs, not of Orpheus, for a new

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descent into the Underworld, but of Aeneas – here raised up to the level almost of a modern celebrity, made the stuff of legends by his vast popularity. But even amid this surprise what predominates is the point of view of a Dido who is still in love, whose suffering is prolonged by the gaze, presented as in slow-motion, of Aeneas, who (unlike the events in Virgil's poem) passes by and goes away, searching elsewhere.

Further reading:

- G. Baroni, *I nomi delle cose*, Pasturana, Puntoacapo, 2020.
- A. Fo, *Per Giancarlo Baroni*, "L'immaginazione" 322, marzo-aprile 2021, in corso di stampa.