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**Aeneas' Journey in Contemporary Literature**

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# AENEAS' JOURNEY IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

**GAETA**

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**November 2021**

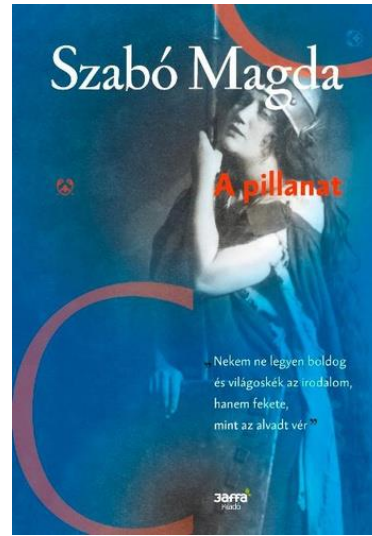
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### 1 MAGDA SZABÓ, *THE MOMENT (CREUSAID)* (1990)

[...] Caieta isn't here, oh, Caieta isn't here, [...]. On Caieta's cold bed [...] there is what is left of her, and that still represents the wet-nurse: in her place there is the beautiful mask that covered her face, and it is a wonder to look at, there is also her hair with its thick locks, tied up in a pretty bun; she has even left her smile, her teeth set in the coral of deep waters: she laughs, she who is not here, with a great, secret laugh. [...] Her smile from the depths of the sea [...] is guarded by the darkness, a rock bears her name together with the countless songs of the rhapsodes. [...]



In this bizarre, feminine rewriting of the *Aeneid*, Magda Szabó (1917-2007), a classically educated Hungarian writer, imagines that Creusa rebels against her fate as a secondary character, destined to disappear during the flight from Troy, to allow Aeneas' destiny to be accomplished. Creusa revolutionizes the whole Virgilian story, taking on the role of the protagonist (as well as first person narrator), turning the poem into a *Creusaid*. But, in the plot of the novel, all this is made possible by Caieta: “when I began to work on her as a character, I still didn't imagine how important her role would be in the strange amalgam invented by me [...]. Without Caieta's decision, it would not have been possible to write the novel” (from the author's introduction, *Story of the Origin of a Novel: the Creusaid*). The “decision” that Szabó alludes to is the one that means that, in changing the order of the fugitives, Caieta ensures that Creusa leads their number, instead of being at the back, and once they arrive at the Main Gate of the Dardanians, it is again Caieta who instigates Creusa to kill the cowardly Aeneas in a duel, and to take on his role. From that moment, she will be the *pious Aeneas*, an Aeneas in female form hidden in armour, until the arrival in Lazio and the intermingling of Italic peoples and Trojan survivors. Creusa seized “the moment” referred to in the novel's title, but the highest price is paid by Caieta. In order to achieve all this, the wet-nurse, who was very fond of Princess Creusa, had to call upon the goddess And-Who-Is-She, Venus' twin sister, who brings ruination upon those on whom she bestows a favour. Thus Caieta is allowed to survive, but in the form of a skeleton (later

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covered by a mask), continuing until the end, in this non-form, to shield Creusa in all her adventures. It is to this 'horror story' that the detail cited above, of "the beautiful mask that covered her face", refers.

Further reading:

- Magda Szabó, *Il momento (Creusaide)*, traduzione it. di V. Gheno, Milano, Edizioni Anfora (20081, 20162)
- <https://www.edizionianfora.net/il-momento-di-magda-szabo> (with a list of the reviews of the Italian edition).

## 2 MATTEO PELLITI, *GAETA*\* (2021)

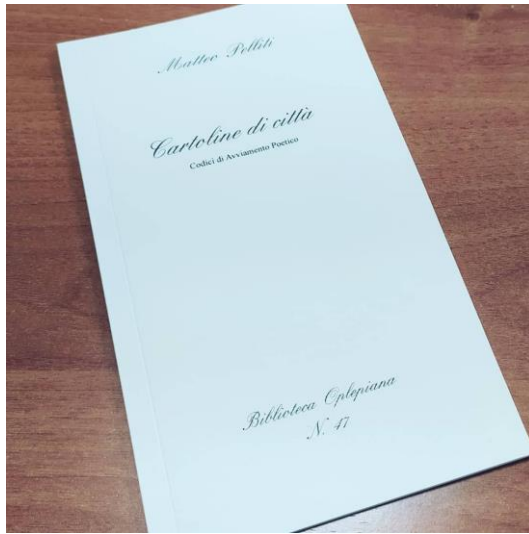
Taking its name from his wet-nurse,  
Devoted she was, the warrior's nurse,  
It came to pass that she met the Grim Reaper  
Burning in an urn of lofty style.

Of the marble tumulus we are told  
By good Ovid too, truth to tell,  
He describes the epitaph, and blesses  
The sincere love of her godson.

Bastion of the Sicilies and of strong Popes,  
Here it was that Garibaldi decided Italy.

\* The reference here is to the legend of the place-name GAETA, deriving from Aeneas' wet-nurse, Caieta, the faithful nurse who accompanied him until her death, which took place here, on the coast of Latium. A reference to Caieta's burial is found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* with a rewriting of book seven of the *Aeneid* that is in keeping. Finally, the siege of Gaeta, between 5 November 1860 and 13 February 1861, was one of the last military actions in the operations to conquer southern Italy in the course of the Italian Risorgimento. The town of Gaeta, on the border between the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and the Pontifical State, was defended by the soldiers of the army of the Two Sicilies, who had taken up position here after the Expedition of the Thousand and the intervention of the Royal Sardinian Army. The fall of Gaeta, together with the capture of Messina and the siege of Civitella del Tronto, led to the proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy. In Italian, the initial letters of the text proposed (ADABDADABD) correspond to the transliteration of the postal code of Gaeta (04024), duplicated to get 10 lines (see my *Cartoline di Città*, Biblioteca Oplepiana n. 47, 2021).

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Proposed as an addition to his very recent collection *Cartoline di Città*, these lines, followed in the asterisked note by the author's own explanation, are the last work of poetry by Matteo Pelliti. Born in Sarzana in 1972, Pelliti is a poet and a philosopher, and has also collaborated with the singer Simone Cristicchi. With his collection entitled *Saying the Exact Colour* (Rome, Luca Sossella Editore, 2019), he won the Pisa 2020 National Literature Prize – in the poetry section. The lines published above, according to Pelliti's own definition, are a "rewriting" that is "in keeping" with Ovid's account (*Met.* XIV 441-444) of the short passage in Virgil's poem dedicated to Aeneas' nurse, who is said to have met her death in the port of Gaeta:

*Tu quoque litoribus nostris, Aeneia nutrix,  
aeternam moriens famam, Caieta, dedisti;  
et nunc servat honos sedem tuus, ossaque nomen  
Hesperia in magna, si qua est ea gloria, signat.*

*Aeneid VII 1-4*

In death, you too, Aeneas' nurse, Caieta,  
have given to our coasts unending fame;  
and now your honor still preserves your place  
of burial; your name points out your bones  
in broad Hesperia—if that be glory..

Translated by Allen Mandelbaum

Further reading:

- <http://www.coltisbagli.it/>