

Island as an Unreachable Destination: Umberto Eco's The Island of the Day Before (1994)

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Abstract. An island, owing to its very isolation, has accumulated layers of significances as an image, and turned out in course of time to be a multivalent sign, which has been adapted by writers and artists across lands and ages to articulate a rich spectrum of ideas, discourses, and counterdiscourses. In our times Umberto Eco, in a story, located in the mid-seventeenth century, and placed upon a non-space – neither land, nor water, nor air – for its backdrop, has offered yet another unusual approach to this unique signifier by means of installing a fresh paradigm of voyage and [non]arrival at an island, Umberto Eco's *The Island of the Day Before* is a story about a search for 'Terra Incognita', for 'the Island not Found', and an impossible venture, 'to find the Unfindable'. In spite of the crowded ideas, obscure references and antique time-space continuum the book exerts its own charm upon today's reader. Some of the perennial themes addressed here are love, life, death, 'Time' and God, – and the unreachable island, which is so near, yet remains so far, serves as the pivotal point of this revolving, multi-modal mirror. By means of a superb feat of imaginative flight the dream-element of the situation has been reinforced by the metanarrator as he goes on reconstructing the scraps left behind by the precursor micro-narrator. The hyperreality of Roberto's specific oxymoronic island, along with its 'distant proximity', is accentuated by the dream-tenor of the narrative as well as by covert/and overt mythical allusions, which have been lying strewn about unmistakably. Myths embrace and intersect one another across disparate cultural frames. Eco presents a fantasy island in the garb of mystic knowledge disseminated by a supposedly medieval theologian-cum-scientist. The micro-narrator's search is simultaneously about the Island of Solomon and the longitude, the hundred-eightieth meridian, both belonging to the 'terra incognita'. The theological notion and the (pseudo) scientific concepts (of the 17th century) seem to be interchangeable variables in the context. At one level it is about 'the Island not found', not findable, and the protagonist's paradoxical voyage for the same. How could one reach the unreachable! And yet, who knows! The reader is left only to imagine and wonder about this postmodern Odysseus who has no home, no kin, no land to rest his feet upon, no mission (which has been lost, along with the wrecked ship, in course of the voyage), and finally no destination even.

Keywords: island; enigmatic; voyage; 'Terra Incognita'; metanarrator; fantasy; destination; Solomon; longitude

*You blue-eyed childlike festinator to the future, Ivar.
 What islands had you not visited?
 Islands of poetry in the nervous swirls of Aeolus,
 with dangerously heavy word plains behind.
 The island of asters' light in the lap of the warm
 Mediterranean...*

Jüri Talvet, "21st Baltic Elegy"

The island amidst the wide sea, big or small as it may be in size, has been very special as a locale in literature and the arts. Is it because an island means total isolation? Even a mountain, which touches the pure sky at one end, rolls down at the other to the earth; when apparently inaccessible, it is not yet totally cut off, distanced as it may be. On the other hand, an island, owing to its very isolation, has accumulated layers of significances as an image, and turned out in course of time to be a multivalent sign, which has been adapted by writers and artists across lands and ages to articulate a rich spectrum of ideas, discourses, and counterdiscourses.

William Gray, in his "Introduction" to "the top islands of the world", tries to understand the secret of the inexplicable charm that a remote island exercises upon the imaginative and adventurous mind.

Islands are enigmatic and irresistible. They have always captivated travelers, from ocean-wandering Polynesians and Arabian traders to great navigators like Magellan and Columbus. Of course, there are no longer any islands awaiting discovery – humans have laid claim to the remotest speck and mapped each one from space. But still they fill our daydreams as places to escape the hectic cycle of modern-day life. No matter how many people have made landfall before you, there is always that tantalizing and pioneering sense of exploration when you travel to an island. (Gray 2006: 9)

Gray further contends,

Ultimately, however, the lure of islands is not so much their wildlife, culture or history as the subtle pleasures of being somewhere remote and detached. There is nothing more invigorating or liberating than to shun the mainland for a spell on an island. (Ibid. 9–10)

Perhaps it is this lure of the island which accounts to an extent for the phenomenon that the paradigms of voyage, along with the dream of a promised

island, and the actual fulfillment or denial of that dream, figure in literatures across geographical, cultural, historical spaces since the earliest literatures. If we take into consideration just a few instances from European, Indian and American literatures even of a limited period, say around two hundred years (from the eighteenth to twentieth century), we can enter a site where the paradigms of ‘voyage’ and ‘island’ delightfully intersect each other, reify each other, clash and cohere with each other and lend wonderful insights into each other, as the points of contraction and coincidence explode into meanings under the purview of comparative study.

There have been unique works on island arising from variegated individual perceptions – philosophical, imaginative, emotional, social-cultural, nostalgic, etc. A comparative study of island literature across ages and lands thus can introduce us to a vast spectrum of ideas, approaches, contemplation, meditation evolving around one particular kind of space, – spots representing unique isolation amidst a vast sea, spots of solid stable land amidst vast turbulent chaotic water, small spots of conscious life amidst vast stretches of indifferent, even hostile, nature.

R. S. Patke concludes his illuminating article on “the islands of poetry” with the following words: “An island, in the end, is no more and no less than the place we stand on, as a place to stand by. It is whatever keeps you from drowning.” (Patke 2004: 194) That is a spot amidst the vast sea to land on, and survive, to draw nourishment from, and also often to sail away from ultimately. Apparently this may seem stating the obvious in a devastatingly simple formulation. But actually, considered in the context of literatures and discourses – which Patke himself does in the above-mentioned essay – if the island serves as a signifier, then the signified are endless indeed, from Homer to Walcott, Valmiki to Defoe, Jose Saramago to Amitav Ghosh, *et al.*, around the world, and across ages!

In our times Umberto Eco has offered yet another unusual approach to this unique signifier by means of installing a fresh paradigm of voyage and [non] arrival at an island, in a story, located in the seventeenth century, 1643 to be specific, and placed upon a non-space – neither land, nor water, nor air – for its backdrop.

Umberto Eco’s *The Island of the Day Before* (subsequently mentioned as *IDB*) is a story about a search for “Terra Incognita”, for “the Island Not Found”, and an impossible venture, “to find the Unfindable”.

The novel opens with the exclamation of an outcast, who has been forced into a situation too extraordinary even for an outcast. The very opening lines register the uniqueness of the situation. “I take pride in my humiliations and as

I am to this privilege condemned, almost I find joy in an abhorrent salvation. I am, I believe, alone of all our race, the only man in human memory to have been shipwrecked and cast up upon a deserted ship.” (IDB 1)

The book begins with the typical situation to start off an island fiction of the imperial-voyaging era of seventeenth century Europe – that of a man “shipwrecked and cast up” (IDB 1); the departure from the paradigm becomes evident as soon as the author mentions the location of the ‘cast up’ – it is not an island, but “upon a deserted ship” (IDB 1). Roberto, an Italian youth from the wrecked English ship *Amaryllis*, eventually gets stuck up in *Daphne*, a grounded Dutch ship in the South Pacific, the favorite zone of the explorers and the “desert island” writers since the seventeenth century onwards. The English ship Roberto had boarded had followed the typical pattern of voyage in those days: “In search of supplies, the ship sailed up the coast of Chile to the west and anchored at a desert island...” (IDB 205) “And the ship continued its voyage, moving through sepia seas.” (IDB 208) The narrator also refers to real sea voyage anecdotes¹ (IDB 244; 298) as well as fantasy sea voyage tales² (IDB 251), which were already in currency by the time of the present story, and which lends a charming period-flavour to the story of Roberto’s individual experience.

The ship Roberto chances to land upon turns out to be a sailing ship, which is well-stocked but mysteriously abandoned in the tropical zone. The ship is stocked well with provisions, but appears to have been suddenly abandoned by its occupants. There is apparently no danger. But the young man, Roberto, cannot swim; and thus getting stranded on the stranded ship he finds himself completely alone, an outcast on board. He has been shipwrecked during

¹ “You would think I was narrating a romance, if Abel Tasman, setting out from Batavia more or less during the months of our story, had not also arrived at a land that he called Van Diemen, which today we know as Tasmania, but since he, too, was seeking the Solomon Islands, he kept the southern shore of that land on his left, never imagining that beyond it lay a continent a hundred times greater, and he ended up southeast of New Zealand, flanked it to the northeast and, abandoning it, reached the Tongas. Thus he arrived by and large where the *Daphne* was, I believe, but there, too, he passed between the coral reefs and headed for New Guinea.” (IDB 244)

² Roberto speculates about the possible causes leading to the abandoning of *Daphne*; possibly the natives, some cannibals had finished the crew, and then would have set upon the ship itself taking it for an animal, but at the last moment gave up being frightened by the canon fired by the lone survivor; Father Caspar had explained, “certain aborigines believed that ships, having come flying from the sky, were the natural mothers of the longboats, which they nursed allowing them to hang from their sides, then weaned them by flinging them into air...that if this animal was meek and its flesh as tasty as the sailors’, it was worth seizing”. (IDB 251)

a storm; thereafter somehow latched up on a raft, he has been floated up to reach this strange ship. Thus the ship itself becomes the epitome and replica of an island, albeit a floating one: “on the lower deck he had found a miniature island” (*IDB* 68). There Roberto takes his shelter for a time, and jots down his diary-notes, scraps of which have been recovered by the present narrator after the lapse of 225 years; he reconstructs the scraps, and in the course of the act intersperses the text with his own interpretations, comments, and occasional admissions of bewilderments

So far it is in the age-old line of voyage literature. However, like all works of Eco, this book too is frankly cerebrative. And like Eco again, it is so many things at the same time. Bob Corbett remarks: “Roberto is, in a sense an everyman – not, however a commoner, but reasonably educated and privileged (as are most of Eco’s readers) who is used to weaving an entertaining story of how such a 17th century man would understand and explore the world.”

At one level the book can be read as a period-piece registering the cultural obsession of the era with sea-voyage, be they real or fantasy. The narrative frankly draws upon the popular paradigmatic sea-voyage tales of the era. It is the cultural climate of the Age of Exploration, – the lure of the new era – the thrill and excitement about the prospect of knowing the ‘Very New’ world (*IDB* 187) – which flavors the narration and conditions the mindset of the narrator within the original narrative which is again placed within the frame of another modern metanarrative: It also aptly highlights the importance of islands in this explorative venture which had captured the imagination of Europe like anything. Furthermore, during the era, and for successive centuries thereafter, the explorers’ favorite zone was the Pacific, and especially the South Pacific. Mazarin explains to Roberto, the would-be-passenger on *Amaryllis*: “In the United Provinces, in England, Portugal, and Spain, there is no noble family that does not have one son off at sea making his fortune...[But] whereas we know enough perhaps of the New World, we know little of the Very New” (*IDB* 187). He is also reasonably anxious about the enterprise of possible rivals in the zone:

After the discovery of a western passage to the Moluccas, this whole vast unexplored zone is at hazard, extending from the western shores of the American continent to the last eastern outcrops of Asia. I refer to the ocean called the Pacific, as the Portuguese have named it, in which surely lies the Austral Terra Incognita, of which only a few islands are known, a few hazy coasts, but still enough for us to assume that it contains fabulous riches. And now, for some time, too many adventurers who do not speak our language have been swarming over those waters. (*IDB* 187)

Understandably, the castaway was a familiar figure of those times which upheld and almost made a cult of voyaging, exploration and 'discovery' of new lands; shipwreck was a common phenomenon during those early days of navigation in the far seas. As Eco's castaway conjectures: "I imagine that in those days, and on those seas, more ships were wrecked than returned safely home." (IDB 14) Thus, through a quite realistic accident he arrives at a fantasy ship.

The narrative smells, as it were, of brine, mist, feel of the water-air-land zone (not far from the watery location of the stranded voyager), and above all of fascination for the yet unmapped 'virgin' islands, which often stir the micro-narrator (Eco himself being the meta-narrator who 'edits' the scraps of notes supposedly left by Roberto on the board of *Daphne*) to lyrical bursts. At the same time, Roberto also knows, like the European voyager of his times: "If he was destined to remain a castaway for a long time, he had to maintain good manners and not become bestialized." (IDB 63)

However, Roberto turns out to be a 'castaway' with a difference; caught up in a no-where situation, he is neither here nor there. From his foothold, i.e., the ship, he can see an island not far away; "he could discern, about a mile away, the form of the island, the palm trees along its shore stirred by a breeze" (IDB 3); this too corresponds to the familiar skyline of the typical desert island fiction of the imperial centuries. But in the present case the castaway's is a special situation of "treble solitude": "of the sea, the neighboring island, and the ship" (IDB 3-4).

The cultural obsession of the era with islands – discovering, reaching, mapping of the fragments lying scattered in the far seas – has been effectively captured by the author. For instance Roberto imagines the possibility of islands even in the moon. "Sometimes I look at the Moon, and I imagine that those darker spots are caverns, cities, islands, and the places that shine are those where the sea catches the light of the sun like the glass of a mirror" (IDB 80). The moon is envisioned by him as the replication of the earth, and the replication includes the 'island' and the 'sea', as the most important items of the lunar topography in the dreamer's perception.

Roberto's fascination and obsession with 'islands', a characteristic feature of the age, is evidenced by his dream-visions as well in which he envisions various real, surreal, and hyperreal islands. Again, the course of Roberto's 'dream' or imagination also follows the paths as laid out by the fantastic travel-tales of his times. Indeed the narration itself pertains of the quality of a wry dream (fragmentary too, like Coleridge's *Kubla Khan's!*): Roberto imagines/ dreams sea voyages and arrival at islands from "infinite parallaxes" (IDB 441; IDB 442-448): the fantasy island in the Pacific (IDB 442); the grotesque island (IDB 442); horrid nightmarish islands (IDB 442-443); the island of Invisible

Men (*IDB* 443); island of the Fount of Youth (*IDB* 444). Roberto dreams of islands; he also dreams of the islanders (of the 6th island of Roberto's dream) who could live only if narrated (*IDB* 444).

Eco's novel is indeed a period piece, but it is so in more senses than one, embracing and incorporating alongside material detail, various philosophical, metaphysical, scientific (including astronomy and physics), and theological discourses of the time and place, i.e., Europe in the early 17th century. The continuum is not unfamiliar to the readers of Eco's fiction. The author, as is usual with him, seems to be almost juggling, with as much skill as enjoyment, between these varied ideas and discourses. And the playfulness of the act of juggling bubbles up at various turns of the narrative, which is again dished out as the result of an 'editing' of the notebook of Roberto, done by a later-day ephebe, obviously Eco himself.

However, one cannot but acknowledge that in spite of the crowded ideas, obscure references and antique time-space continuum the book exerts its own charm upon the reader. Some of the perennial themes addressed here are love, life, death, 'Time' and God, – and the island, which is so near, yet remains so far, serves as the pivotal point of this revolving, multi-modal mirror.

Initially Roberto wants to reach the island, – the bit of the island which he can see from the ship but cannot access.

Shall he ever reach the island?

Furthermore, what is it like? What things are there? Or is it just an illusion like some charming but unreal mirage? Roberto gradually sinks into endless speculations, which branch off in vague and infinite directions.

The distant view of the island continues to fascinate him; it is 'marvellous', but not a 'possession'³ (*à la* Greenblatt). Day by day Roberto is seen getting captivated by the spell of the distant island (*IDB* 276). He uses the spyglass he had found in the adjoining cabin, and continues to gaze at the farthest corner of the bay. "The island seemed pale, its peak tufted with a patch of wool. As he had learned on the *Amaralis*, ocean islands retain the humidity of the Trades and condense it in cloudy puffs, so that sailors often recognize the presence of land before they can see the shores, from the clumps of the airy element that it holds as if they were anchored there" (*IDB* 100).

In his isolation on board the young voyager speculates about the presumably 'virgin' land, and wonders if it really contains the pristine purity of a pre-lapsarian utopia.

³ Greenblatt, Stephen. *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991.

How would the island seem to him if he were to reach one day ... Was it perhaps the Eden where milk and honey flow in streams, amid abundant trophies of fruit and flocks of meek animals? ... A Terra Incognita that would finally renew the offerings of a vale untainted by the sin of Babel or by the Flood or by Adam's Fall? ... (IDB 104)

The very idea causes consternation, and indecision

But if this was so, would he not be repeating the error of the first sinner if he chose to violate the virginity of the island? Perhaps Providence had rightly wanted him to be a chaste witness to a beauty that he should never disturb. (IDB 104)

For opposite and conflicting reasons he thinks it positively undesirable for a time. Firstly, if it is a place inhabited by innocent pure people who know no avarice, then why should one taint it with the sin of greed? Secondly, if it were to be equated with his Lady, then was it not his duty to prevent intrusion from outside, to forestall violation of the "virginity of the Island" (IDB 104)? "And to that same chastity he must feel bound with regard to the Island: the more he wished it to be rich in promises, the less he should want to touch it." (IDB 105)

At the same time, however, he is not sure if he has been right in his guess; it may be terrible as well; it might have been holding terrible people; and that too offered sufficient ground for withdrawal: "Was the island he saw really like that? ... It was known that from the time of the first voyages to these islands, situated vaguely on the maps, mutineers were abandoned there, and the islands became prisons with bars of air, in which the condemned were their own jailers, punishing one another reciprocally. [Therefore] not to arrive there, not to discover the secret was, more than a duty, a reprieve from endless horrors." (IDB 105)

On the one hand the textuality of the 'desert island' has been evoked and emphasized again and again. At the same time, on the other hand, the narration, which often reverts to an interior monologue, takes wings to the dream-region of the romantics. By means of a superb feat of imaginative flight the dream-element of the situation has been reinforced by the meta-narrator as he goes on reconstructing the scraps left behind by his precursor, the micro-narrator.

... he had often asked himself if he was not dreaming. What was happening to him did not usually happen to humans; at best it evoked the novels of childhood. Like dream-creatures were the ship and the animals he had encountered on it; of the same substance as dreams were the shadows that for three days had

enfolded him ... Could not, then, the great theater of celestial crews, which he thought he now saw on the horizon, be likewise a dream? (*IDB* 64–65)

This may be seen in connection with, and in the light of, the theory of Pedro Calderón de la Barca (1600–1681) which held the day in Spain around the same time-period, that ‘this life’s a dream’⁴.

While remaining physically stuck up on the anchored ship Roberto makes a dream-voyage, following the course of his imaginary double, Ferrante, on the latter’s voyage. Before setting out, he persuades himself that the world could be experienced from “infinite parallaxes” (*IDB* 441). It is a fantasy voyage, almost Odyssean in its play of imagination, where the voyagers meet sea-monsters and a host of similar miraculous phenomena. He visits in dream seven such islands, some beautiful, some hideous, some terrifying, some alluring, in a quick and smooth succession (*IDB* 442–447).

The hyperreality of Roberto’s specific oxymoronic island, so near yet so far with its ‘distant proximity’ is accentuated by the dream-tenor of the narrative as well as by covert/and overt mythical allusions, which have been lying strewn about unmistakably. For instance, the evocation of the Lotos-Eaters: “The only reality of the Island was that in its center stood, tempting in delicate hues, the Tree of Oblivion, whose fruit, if Roberto ate it, could give him peace ... To disremember...” (*IDB* 105)

Other mythic evocations include Aeneas, holding the golden bough, and descending into Hades (*IDB* 353); the doves of the Greek and Biblical myths (*IDB* 353); the Adonis myth in the 4th island of Roberto’s dream (*IDB* 444); the Narcissus myth in the 5th island of Roberto’s dream (*IDB* 444); Neptune (*IDB* 484); the Biblical allusion to the dove (*IDB* 279); Roberto’s dream-visions of various islands (*IDB* 442–448) are finally clinched with the ‘dove’: “on an almond tree bejewelled with blossoms lamented the Orange Dove...” (*IDB* 448, 344, 347), [the reader would be reminded of the Emperor’s nightingale in Yeats’s ‘Byzantium’]; Christ and the Orange Dove (*IDB* 459); the book ends with the vision of the Orange Dove, – Roberto’s anticipation to “see rising in flight – like an arrow eager to strike the sun – the Orange Dove.” (*IDB* 503, 508)

At times Roberto would even wonder, “Was he seeing them because he had truly been shipwrecked at the edge of the Garden of Eden, or was it because

⁴ It is quite likely that Eco should have Calderón at the back of his mind while writing *IDB*, because in the last decades of the 20th century the *fin de siècle* Europe witnessed a revival of interest in Calderón; for detail see Talvet 2005.

he had emerged from the belly of the ship as from a hellish funnel? Both perhaps..." (IDB 108).

The reader can identify many such Biblical echoes which are but natural considering the time-frame of the novel; for instance, the myth of Jonah (IDB 447), the Flame Dove, the Solomon Island (IDB 177), etc.

In addition to this host of myths and allusions Eco addresses and elaborately draws upon one of the most trendy and urgent preoccupations of the times – the search for the actual location of the Biblical Islands of Solomon (IDB 244), and relates it to the famous ‘Longitude Problem’ – the attempt of the European nations at the time to discover longitude. Longitude is a motif of the novel, and search for it constitutes a significant motive behind the action.

Roberto della Griva, the young castaway, has a hunch that it was perhaps ‘the island of the day before’, and accordingly, if he could swim across, he would have been able to change his fate.

The search is simultaneously about the Island of Solomon and the longitude, the hundred-eightieth meridian, both belonging to the ‘terra incognita’. The theological notion and the [pseudo]scientific concepts seem to be interchangeable variables in the context.

Roberto asks Caspar, the pseudo-scientist theologian:

“Were you hunting for the Islands of Solomon or did you want to solve the mystery of longitudes?”

“Why, both, is it not? You find the Islands of Solomon and you have learned where is the hundred-eightieth meridian, you find the hundred-eightieth meridian and you know where are the Islands of Solomon!” (IDB 252–253).

The meta-narrator adds with a touch of dry humour: “What does it matter, finally, whether it is there or not? ... If you would listen to stories ... you must suspend disbelief. So the *Daphne* was facing the on-hundred-eightieth meridian, just at the Solomon Islands and our Island was – among the Islands of Solomon – the most Solomonic...” (IDB 260).

The seventeenth-century myth and the nascent science of the time here join hands, both as it were clouded by the vague mist coming up from the sea.

“... at this point of the earth there is a line that on this side is the day after and on that side the day before...” (IDB 266) Roberto opts for the antipode island (IDB 340), and his brain-child Ferrento sets sail for the Islands of Solomon (IDB 440). Apparently the allusion is to the antipodal meridian which today we call the International Date Line.

Eco presents a fantasy island in the garb of mystic knowledge disseminated by a supposedly medieval theologian-cum-scientist who subverts the basic tenets of Crucifixion and Redemption. Ferrante, the alter ego of Roberto, claims to have gone to the far side of the Island of Solomon, and hijacked Christ from Calvary:

“...sailed through my long Thursday towards Jerusalem, found the other Judas on the verge of betraying, hanged him from tree, preventing him from handing over the Son of Man to the Sons of Darkness, entered the Garden of Olives with my men and abducted Our Lord, stealing Him from Calvary! And now you, I, all of us are living in a world which has never been redeemed!”

“But where Christ now?” (*IDB* 459)

“Do you then not know that the ancient texts already said there are doves the color of flame because the Lord, before being crucified, wore a scarlet tunic? Have you not yet understood? For one thousand six hundred and ten years Christ has been a prisoner on this Island, whence He tries to escape in the form of an Orange Dove, but is unable to abandon that place, where next to the *Specula Melitensis* I have left Judas’s scapular, and where it is therefore forever the same day.” (*IDB* 459)

That this island is supposed to belong to empirical reality, and yet to embrace the domain of hyper-reality, is a further reason for its unreachability as well as its attraction. At one level it is about ‘the Island not found’, not findable, and, paradoxically, the protagonist Roberto’s paradoxical voyage for the same. How could one reach the unreachable! And yet, who knows! The ironical allusion to Othello’s famous speech seems to quiver with the weight of signification: “...ignorance of the fisherman of the Island Not Found who, beyond the last horizon of the Canaries, foolishly discards the rarest among pearls...” (*IDB* 130).

Roberto’s yearning for the island, so close, yet so inaccessible, continues to grow, and oppress him almost like a lover yearning for his beloved. While on board the *Daphne* Roberto has come across some island maps. “Some cartographers, to make an island recognizable, simply drew with great precision the form of the peaks...Late in the night we find Roberto daydreaming over the map now transformed into the desired female body... The map repeated many times the features of that beloved body, in various attitudes of bays and promontories.” (*IDB* 129) However, he will be denied the possession of both.

The attraction of the unaccessed ‘Island’ for Roberto’s mind is accentuated through the equation between the spit of land and his beloved. The first time Roberto realized that he was inside the “wooden womb” of a “floating house” (*IDB* 100), “he thought of the island and defined it as unattainable proximity”

(*ibid.*); this leads him further to conjecture on the comparability of the island with his ‘Lady’, a thought that thrills his mind: “Was possession of the island not possession of Lilia” (*ibid.*). The meta-narrator adds: “This fine conceit showed him, for the second time that day, the dissimilar similitude between the island and the Lady, and he stayed awake into the night to pen the pages I have drawn on for this chapter” (*ibid.*). Then it becomes the epitome also for his eluding beloved, thus obliquely suggesting an equation between the island and the elusive love: “He suffered doubly, because of the island he did not have and because of the ship that had him – both unattainable, one through its distance, the other through its unbelonging. He feels “Far from the Lady, far from the Island, he should only speak of them, wanting them immaculate as long as they could keep..., touched only by the caress of the elements. If there was beauty somewhere, its purpose was to remain purposeless.” (*IDB 105*) Therefore sometimes he would get resigned to the idea that both the lady and the island remain equally inaccessible.

The wreck had granted him the supreme gift, exile, and a Lady whom no one could now take from him ...

But the island did not belong to him and remained distant. *The Daphne* did not belong to him ... (*IDB 227*).

Thus he becomes a seventeenth century prototype of the modern ‘no-where-man’ in the very modern sense of the term.

Parallel to the above thematics runs the theme of self-discovery, a kind of mental journey toward an innermost island, by wading through the intangible waves of time. The storeroom of the *Daphne* contains all sorts of clocks – water clocks, sand clocks, solar clocks, mechanical clocks (*IDB 149–50*): “Imagine a castaway, amid the fumes of aqua vitae, on an uninhabited vessel, finding a hundred clocks almost all in unison telling the tale of his interminable time ... a man sentenced to a very long death” (*IDB 150*). At one point, in his extreme frustration Roberto tries to conquer time by means of throwing away all the clocks on the ship, proclaiming yet another fascination of the time, but in his case they seemed to proclaim the doom awaiting. So a time comes when he can hardly bear with them.

At the end “he flung into the sea all the clocks, not thinking for a moment that he was wasting valuable time: he was erasing time to favor a journey against time” (*IDB 502*). But the act of simply throwing away the clocks cannot save him ultimately.

Towards the end Roberto realizes the inescapability of his situation, – that he should “never wander”, neither towards the island, nor towards the outer

sea; but this brings a strange feeling of freedom/peace attained through speculations about being and nothingness. He thinks of the mystery of death and the greater mystery of life, of the beginning. And he comes to the conclusion: "This was why he had been cast up on the *Daphne*... Because only in that restful hermitage would he have had the leisure to reflect on the one question that frees us from every apprehension about not being and consigns us to the wonder of being." (IDB 468)

So he gives up worrying over not finding the unfindable, not reaching the island that cannot be reached.

Yet finally a time is coming when Roberto would take his final plunge towards the island: after freeing the birds, and throwing away all the clocks, "because he was erasing time to favor a journey against time" (IDB 502), "he descended into the sea" (IDB 503).

Before destiny, and the waters, decide for him, I hope that – pausing for breath every so often – he allows his eyes to move from the *Daphne*, as he bids it farewell, to the Island.

There, above the line traced by the treetops, his eyes now very sharp, he should see rising in flight – like an arrow eager to strike the sun – the Orange Dove. (IDB 503)

Is it the phoenix, or the Resurrected Son of God? Myths embrace and intersect one another across disparate cultural frames.

Anyway, by this act of 'descending' he loses his foothold – the miniature island of the ship – perpetually. But does he reach the 'Island'? One cannot tell. Who knows? Now he is in no position to leave diary-notes any more, and the reader is left only to imagine and wonder about this postmodern Odysseus who has no home, no kin, no land to rest his feet upon, no mission (which has been lost, along with the wrecked ship, in the course of the voyage), and finally no destination even.

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