VINTAGE

THE ISLAND OF THE DAY BEFORE

UMBERTO ECO

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The year is 1643. Roberto, a young nobleman, survives war, the Bastille, exile and shipwreck as he voyages to a Pacific island straddling the date meridian. There he waits now, alone on the mysteriously deserted Daphne, separated by treacherous reefs from the island beyond: the island of the day before. If he could reach it, time – and his misfortunes – might be reversed. But first he must learn to swim . . .

About the Author

Umberto Eco is internationally renowned as a philosopher, historian and literary critic. *The Name of the Rose* was his first novel and became a bestseller throughout the world. He has also written the novel *Foucault's Pendulum* and published a collection of essays, *Travels in Hyper-Reality,* and *How to Travel with a Salmon & Other Essays.* A professor of semiotics at the University of Bologna, he lives in Milan.

BY UMBERTO ECO

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The Island of the Day Before

Umberto Eco

Translated from the Italian by
William Weaver

VINTAGE BOOKS
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Is the Pacifique Sea my home?

—John Donne,
“Hymne to God my God”

Stolto! a cui parlo? Misero! Che tento?
Racconto il dolor mio
a l’insensata riva
a la mutola selce, al sordo vento . . .
Ahi, ch’altro non risponde
che il mormorar del’onde!

—Giovan Battista Marino,
“Eco,” La Lira, xix

CHAPTER 1

Daphne

I take pride withal in my humiliation, 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.

THUS, WITH UNABASHED conceits, wrote Roberto della Griva presumably in July or August of 1643.

How many days had he been tossed by the waves, feverish surely, bound to a plank, prone during the hours of light to avoid the blinding sun, his neck stiff, strained unnaturally so as not to imbibe the water, his lips burnt by the brine? His letters offer no answer to this question: though they suggest an eternity, the time cannot have been more than two days, for otherwise he would never have survived the lash of Phoebus (of which he so poetically complains), he, a sickly youth, as he describes himself, a creature condemned by a natural defect to live only at night.

He was unable to keep track of time, but I believe the sea grew calm immediately after the tempest swept him from the deck of the *Amaryllis,* on that makeshift raft a sailor had fashioned for him. Driven by the Trades over a serene sea, in a season when, south of the Equator, a temperate winter reigns, he was carried for not many miles, until the currents at last brought him into the bay.

It was night, he had dozed off, unaware that he was approaching a ship until, with a jolt, his plank struck against

the prow of the *Daphne*.

And when—in the glow of the full moon—he realized he was floating beneath a bowsprit with a rope-ladder hanging from it not far from the anchor chain (a Jacob's ladder, Father Caspar would have called it), in an instant all his spirit returned. His desperation must have inspired him: he tried to reckon whether he had enough breath to cry out (but his throat was all an arid fire) or enough strength to free himself from the bonds that had cut livid furrows into his skin, and then to essay the climb. I believe that at such moments a dying man can become a very Hercules, and strangle serpents in his cradle. In recording the event, Roberto seems confused, but we must accept the idea that if, finally, he reached the forecastle, he must somehow have grasped that ladder. Perhaps he climbed up a bit at a time, exhausted at every gain, until he flung himself over the bulwarks, crawled along the cordage, found the forecastle door open . . . And instinct no doubt led him, in the darkness, to touch that barrel, pull himself up its side, until he found a cup attached to a little chain. And he drank as much as he could, then collapsed, sated, perhaps in the fullest meaning of the word, for that water probably contained enough drowned insects to supply him with food as well as drink.

He must have slept twenty-four hours. This is only an approximate calculation: it was night when he woke, but he was as if reborn. So it was night again, not night still.

He thought it was night still; for if not, a whole day had to have passed, and someone should have found him by now. The moonlight, coming from the deck, illuminated that place, apparently a kind of cook-room, where a pot was hanging above the fireplace.

The room had two doors, one towards the bowsprit, the other opening onto the deck. And he looked out at the latter, seeing, as if by daylight, the rigging in good order, the capstan, the masts with the sails furled, a few cannon at

the gun-ports, and the outline of the quarterdeck. He made some sounds, but not a living soul replied. He gazed over the bulwarks, and to his right he could discern, about a mile away, the form of the Island, the palm trees along its shore stirred by a breeze.

The land made a kind of bend, edged with sand that gleamed white in the pale darkness; but, like any shipwrecked man, Roberto could not tell if it was an island or a continent.

He staggered to the other side of the ship and glimpsed—but distant this time, almost on the line of the horizon—the peaks of another mass, defined also by two promontories. Everything else was sea, giving the impression that the ship was berthed in an anchorage it had entered through a channel separating the two stretches of land. Roberto decided that if these were not two islands, one was surely an island facing a vaster body of land. I do not believe he entertained other hypotheses, since he had never known bays so broad that a person in their midst could feel he was confronting twin lands. Thus, in his ignorance of boundless continents, Roberto had chanced upon the correct answer.

A nice situation for a castaway: his feet solidly planted and dry land within reach. But Roberto was unable to swim. Soon he would discover there was no longboat on board, and the current meanwhile had carried away the plank on which he had arrived. Hence his relief at having escaped death was now accompanied by dismay at this treble solitude: of the sea, the neighboring Island, and the ship. Ahoy! he must have tried to shout on the ship, in every language he knew, discovering how weak he truly was. Silence. As if on board everyone was dead. And never had he—so generous with similes—expressed himself more literally. Or almost—and this is what I would fain tell you about, if only I knew where to begin.

For that matter, I have already begun. A man drifts, exhausted, over the ocean, and the complaisant waters

bring him to a ship, apparently deserted. Deserted as if the crew has just abandoned it, for Roberto struggles back to the cook-room and finds a lamp there and a flint and steel, as if the cook set them in their place before going to bed. But the two berths beside the furnace, one above the other, are both empty. Roberto lights the lamp, looks around, and finds a great quantity of food: dried fish, hardtack, with only a few patches of mold easily scraped away with a knife. The fish is very salty, but there is water in abundance.

He must have regained his strength quickly, or else he was strong when he was writing this, for he goes into—highly literary—detail about his banquet, never did Olympus see such a feast as his, Jove's nectar, to me sweet ambrosia from farthest Pontus. But these are the things Roberto writes to the Lady of his heart:

> *Sun of my shadows, light of my darkness.*
>
> *Why did Heaven not unmake me in that tempest it had so savagely provoked? Why save from the all-devouring sea this body of mine, only to wreck my soul so horribly in such mean and even more ill-starred solitude?*
>
> *Perhaps, if merciful Heaven does not send me succor, you will never read this letter I now indite, and, consumed like a torch by the light of these seas, I will become dark to your eyes, as to some Selene, who, rejoicing too much in the light of her Sun, gradually consumes her journey beyond the far curve of our planet, bereft of the beneficent rays of her sovereign star, first growing thin to recall the sickle that severs the thread of life, then ever-paler, she is completely dissolved in that vast cerulean shield where ingenious nature forms heroic heraldry, mysterious emblems of her secrets. Bereft of your gaze, I am blind for you see me not, dumb for you address me not, oblivious for you forget me.*
>
> *And, alone, I live, burning dullness and tenebrous flame, vague specter that in this adverse conflict of opposites my mind imagines ever the same, and so would convey to yours. Saving my life in this wood fortress, in this rocking bastion that defends me, prisoner of the sea, from the sea, punished by the clemency of Heaven, hidden in this deep sarcophagus open to every sun, in this airy dungeon, in this impregnable prison that offers me everywhere escape, I despair of seeing you more.*
>
> *My Lady, I write you as if to offer, unworthy tribute, the withered rose of my disheartenment. And yet I take pride withal in my humiliation, 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 upon a deserted ship.

But is this really possible? To judge by the date of his first letter, Roberto begins writing immediately after his arrival, as soon as he finds pen and paper in the captain's quarters, before exploring the rest of the ship. And yet he must have required some time to recover his strength, reduced as he was to the condition of a wounded animal. Or perhaps, with a little amorous ruse, after first trying to ascertain his whereabouts, he then writes, pretending to write her before giving any thought to other things. But why, inasmuch as he knows, assumes, fears that these letters will never arrive and that he is writing them only for his own torment (tormenting solace, he would say, but we must not fall into his literary habits)? It is difficult to reconstruct the actions and feelings of a character surely afire with true love, for you never know whether he is expressing what he feels or what the rules of amorous discourse prescribe in his case—but then, for that matter, what do we know of the difference between passion felt and passion expressed, and who can say which has precedence? So Roberto was writing for himself: this was not literature, he was there truly, writing like an adolescent pursuing an impossible mirage, streaking the page with his tears, not because of the absence of the lady, pure image even when she was present, but out of fondness of himself, enamored of love. . . .

The situation is the stuff of a novel, but, once more, where to begin?

I say he wrote this first missive later, and before writing it, he had a look around; and in subsequent letters he will relate what he saw. But those, too, raise the question of how to treat the diary of a man with poor vision who roams during the night, relying on his weak eyes.

Roberto will tell us that his eyes had been affected since the days of the siege of Casale, when that bullet grazed his

temple. And this may be true, but elsewhere he hints that the weakness was caused by the plague. Roberto was certainly frail, and I infer he was also a hypochondriac—though in moderation: half of his photophobia must have been due to black bile, and half to some form of irritation, perhaps exacerbated by Monsieur d'Igby's salves.

It seems certain that during the voyage of the *Amaryllis* he remained below deck, since the role of photophobe—if it was not his true nature—was the part he had to play to keep an eye on what happened in the hold. Several months in total darkness or in dim lamplight—and then the time on the plank, dazzled by the equatorial or tropical sun, whichever it was. When he lands then on the *Daphne,* sick or not, he hates the sun, spends the first night in the cook-room, recovers his strength and attempts a first inspection the night following, and then things proceed virtually of themselves. Day frightens him; not only will his eyes not tolerate it, but neither will the burns he must surely have on his back. So he goes to ground. The beautiful moon he describes on those nights reassures him, during the day the sky is the same as everywhere else, at night he discovers new constellations (heroic heraldry and mysterious emblems, in fact); it is like being in a theater. He is convinced that this will be his life for a long time, perhaps until his death; he refashions his Lady on paper so as not to lose her, and he knows he has not lost much more than the little he had before.

At this point he takes refuge in his nightly vigils as in a maternal womb, and becomes thus more determined to elude the sun. Perhaps he has read of those Resurgents of Hungary, of Livonia or Walachia, who wander restless between sunset and dawn, hiding then in their graves at cock-crow: the role could lure him. . . .

Roberto must have begun his survey on the second night. By then he had shouted enough to be sure that there was

no one else on board. But—and this he feared—he might find corpses, or some sign that explained their absence. He moved cautiously, and from his letters it is hard to tell in which direction: he names the ship's parts, the objects inexactly. Some are familiar to him and he has heard them from the sailors; others are unknown, and he describes them as they appear to him. But even of the familiar objects—an indication that on the *Amaryllis* the crew probably represented the dregs of the seven seas—he must have heard one in French, another in Dutch, and another in English. Thus he says *staffe*—as Dr. Byrd must have taught him—for the Jacob's staff; at times it is hard to understand how he could be one moment on the poop deck or the quarterdeck, and another on the *galliard d'arrière*, which is the Frenchified way of saying the same thing; for gun-port he uses *sabordo,* and I allow him the word gladly because it recalls the seafaring books most of us read as children; he talks about the *parrocchetto,* which for us is a fore-topsail, but since the French *perruche* is the topgallant, there is no telling what he is referring to when he says he was under the *parrucchetta.* Furthermore, sometimes he calls the mizzen the *artimon,* in the French way, but what can he mean then when he writes *misaine,* which is how the French identify the foremast (but, alas, not the English, for whom the *mezzana* is the mizzen, God help us)? And when he says eaves, he is probably referring to what we would call scuppers. So I have come to a decision here: I will try to decipher his intentions, then use the terms most familiar to us. If I am mistaken, too bad: the story remains the same.

This said, we will assume that on the second night, after finding a store of food in the cook-room, Roberto somehow proceeded in the moonlight to cross the deck.

Recalling the foredeck and the curved sides vaguely glimpsed the night before, judging now by the slim deck, the shape of the castle and the narrow, convex poop, and

comparing all this with the *Amaryllis,* Roberto concluded that the *Daphne* was a Dutch *fluyt,* or flute, or flûte, or fluste, or flyboat, or fliebote, as they are variously called, those trading vessels of medium displacement, usually armed with about ten cannons to ease the conscience in the event of a pirate attack. Given its dimensions, it could be handled by a dozen seamen, and could carry many more passengers if it renounced comforts (scarce to begin with), cramming the space with pallets, until the men tripped over them. Gradually, their number would be reduced by epidemic deaths from miasmas of every kind if there were not enough sanitary provisions. So a flute it was, then, but larger than the *Amaryllis,* yet with a deck reduced, almost, to a single hatchway, as if the captain had been anxious to ship water at every over-lively wave.

In any case, it was a good thing the *Daphne* was a flute. Roberto could move about with some knowledge of how the space was divided. For example, in the center of the deck there should have been a longboat big enough to contain the entire crew; the fact that it was not there suggested the crew was elsewhere. But this did not reassure Roberto: an entire crew never leaves the ship unmanned, at the mercy of the sea, even if that ship is at anchor, its sails struck, in a calm bay.

That evening he promptly headed for the aft quarters and opened the door of the castle shyly, as if he should have asked somebody’s permission. . . . Set next to the tiller, the compass told him that the channel between the two stretches of land ran from south to north. Then he found himself in what today would be called the wardroom, an L-shaped cabin, from which another door admitted him to the captain’s quarters, with its large porthole over the rudder and lateral accesses to the gallery. On the *Amaryllis* the wardroom was not connected to the cabin where the captain slept, but here it looked as if they had tried to save space in order to make room for something else. And, in fact, while

to the left of the wardroom there were two little cubbyholes for junior officers, on the right another cabin had been created, almost wider than the captain's, with a plain bunk at the end, but otherwise arranged as a work space.

The table was cluttered with maps, more numerous, it seemed to Roberto, than those a ship normally requires for navigation. This room seemed a scholar's study. Among the papers he saw some spyglasses lying, a handsome copper nocturlabe that cast tawny glints as if it were itself a source of light, an armillary sphere fastened to the surface of the table, more papers covered with calculations, and a parchment with circular drawings in red and black, which he recognized—having seen various copies of the same on the *Amaryllis* (though of cruder facture)—as a reproduction of the Ephemerides of Regiomontanus.

He went back into the wardroom: stepping out into the gallery, he could see the Island, he could stare—Roberto wrote—with lynx eyes at its silence. In other words, the Island was there, as it had been before.

He must have arrived at the ship nearly naked: I believe that, first of all, besmirched as he was by the sea's brine, he washed in the cook-room, not pausing to wonder if that water was all there was on board; then, in a chest, he found a handsome suit of clothing of the captain's, the outfit reserved for the final coming ashore. Roberto may even have swaggered a bit in his commander's garb, and pulling on the boots must have made him feel in his element once again. Only at this point can a decent man, suitably clad—and not an emaciated castaway—officially take possession of an abandoned ship. With no sense of committing a violation, but rather as if exercising a right, Roberto examined the tabletop until he found, lying open, apparently left interrupted, beside the goose-quill pen and the inkwell, the ship's log. The first page told him the name of the ship, but for the rest it was an incomprehensible sequence of *anker, passer, sterre-keyker, roer,* and it was of

little help for him to learn that the captain was Flemish. Still, the last line bore a date, now a few weeks past, and after a few meaningless words an expression in proper Latin stood out, underlined, *pestis quae dicitur bubanica*.

It was a clue, a hint of explanation. An epidemic had broken out on board. This news did not trouble Roberto; he had had his bout of plague thirteen years earlier, and as all know, whoever has had the sickness gains a kind of grace, as if that serpent does not dare introduce itself a second time into the loins of one who has previously tamed it.

For the rest, the hint did not explain much, and prompted other worries. So they were all dead. But in that case he should have found, scattered in disorder on the deck, the corpses of the last, since the first to die must have been given Christian burial at sea.

There was the absence of the longboat: the last men—or all of them—had left the ship. What makes a ship of plague victims a place of invincible menace? Rats, perhaps? Roberto seemed to decipher, in the captain's Ostrogothic writing, the word *rottenest,* which he took to mean rats' nest—and he immediately turned, raising the lamp as he glimpsed something slithering along the wall and heard the squeaking that on the *Amaryllis* had made his blood run cold. With a shudder he recalled an evening when a hairy creature had grazed his face as he was falling asleep, and his cry of terror had brought Dr. Byrd running. The others then taunted him: even without the plague, there are as many rats on a ship as there are birds in a forest, and you must become accustomed to them if you want to sail the seas.

But in the aftercastle, at least, there was not a whiff of rats. Perhaps they had collected in the bilge, their red eyes glowing in the darkness, waiting for fresh meat. Roberto told himself that if they were on board, he had to know it at once. If they were ordinary rats, in an ordinary number, he could live with them. And what else could they be, anyway?

He asked himself this question, and preferred not to answer it.

He found a musket, a sword, and a knife. He had been a soldier: he picked up the musket, a *caliver,* as the English called them, which could be aimed without a rest; he examined it, more for reassurance than with any notion of wiping out a pack of rats by shooting them, and he also slipped the knife into his belt, though knives are of scant use against rats.

He had decided to explore the hull from prow to poop. Back in the cook-room, by a little ladder set against the bowsprit he descended into the larder (or pantry, I believe), where provisions for a long voyage had been stored. The crew, since they could not store enough for the duration of the journey, had only recently replenished supplies at some friendly shore. There were baskets of fish, just smoked, and pyramids of coconuts, and barrels of tubers of an unfamiliar shape but apparently edible. And there were fruits such as Roberto had seen on the *Amaryllis* after its first tropical ports of call, fruits that resisted the seasons, prickly and scaly but with a pungent aroma that promised well-defended pulp, sweet hidden humors. And some island crop must have produced those sacks of gray flour that smelled of tufa and also of the loaves whose taste recalled the insipid warty shapes that the Indians of the New World call potatoes.

In the corner he saw also about a dozen little kegs with bung-holes. He tapped the first, and tasted water not yet putrid, indeed, only recently collected and treated with sulphur to make it last longer. There was not a great deal, but considering that the fruit, too, would slake his thirst, he could survive on the ship for a long time. And yet these discoveries, which should have made him realize he would not die of starvation on board, made him all the more uneasy—as is the way of melancholic spirits, to whom every sign of good fortune forebodes dire consequences.

To be shipwrecked on a deserted ship was in itself an unnatural circumstance; but if the ship had at least been abandoned by men and by God as a worthless relic, with no objects of nature or of art to make it an attractive refuge, this would have been in the order of things, and of the chronicles of seamen. But to find it like this, arranged as if to welcome an expected guest like a subtle offering, smacked of sulphur even more than did the water. Roberto was reminded of fairy tales his grandmother used to tell him, and other tales in finer prose read in the Paris salons, where princesses lost in the forest entered a castle and found sumptuously furnished chambers with canopied beds and cupboards filled with luxurious dresses, and even tables laid. . . . And, of course, the last room would contain the sulphurous revelation of the malignant mind that had set the trap.

He touched a coconut at the base of the pile, disturbing the balance of the whole, and those bristled forms came down in an avalanche, like rats waiting, mute, on the ground (or like bats that hang upside down from the beams of an attic), ready now to climb up his body and sniff his face salty with sweat.

Roberto had to make sure that this was not a spell: he had learned in his travels how to deal with foreign fruits. Using his knife as a hatchet, he cracked the nut open with one blow, gnawing at the manna concealed beneath the husk. It was all so sweetly good that the sensation of a snare grew stronger. Perhaps, he told himself, he was already a victim of illusion, he tasted coconuts but in reality was biting into rodents, he was already absorbing their quiddity, soon his hands would grow thinner, taloned, hooked, his body would be covered with a sour fuzz, his back would bend in an arc, and he would be received in the sinister apotheosis of the shaggy inhabitants of this vessel of Acheron.

But—to conclude this account of the first night—another signal of horror was to surprise our explorer. As if the

collapse of the coconuts had wakened sleeping creatures, he heard coming nearer, beyond the partition that separated the larder from the rest of the lower deck, not a squeaking but a cheeping, a chirping, and the scratching of paws. So this was truly a trap: night animals were holding their council in some lair.

Roberto wondered if, musket in hand, he should confront immediately that Armageddon. His heart beat irregularly, he called himself a coward, knowing that, whether it was this night or another, sooner or later he would have to face Them. He havered, climbed up on deck again, and fortunately glimpsed the dawn already casting a waxy light on the metal of the cannons, until then caressed by the moon’s beams. Day was breaking, he told himself with relief, and he was duty-bound to flee it.

Like a Resurgent of Hungary he ran along the deck to regain the aftercastle, he entered the cabin that was now his, barred the door, closed the accesses to the gallery, placed his weapons within reach, and prepared to sleep so as not to see the Sun, that executioner who with the axe of his rays severs the necks of shadows.

Restless, he dreamed of his shipwreck, and dreamed it as a man of wit, who even in dreams, or especially in them, must take care that as propositions embellish a conception, so reservations make it vital, while mysterious connections give it density; considerations make it profound; emphases uplift, allusions dissimulate, transmutations make subtle.

I imagine that in those days, and on those seas, more ships were wrecked than returned safely home; but to one shipwrecked for the first time the experience must have been a source of recurrent nightmares, which the habit of expressing in appropriate conceits must have made as picturesque as a Last Judgement.

Since the evening before, it was as if the air had sickened with catarrh, and it seemed that the eye of Heaven,

brimming with tears, could support no longer the sight of the expanse of waves. The brush of nature had now diluted the line of the horizon and was sketching distances of indefinite provinces.

Roberto, whose viscera have already predicted an imminent catastrophe, flings himself on his pallet, rocked now by a nurse of giants, dozes amid uneasy dreams of which he dreams the dream he relates, and beholds before his very eyes a host of galactic wonders. He wakes to the bacchanal of thunder and the cries of the sailors, then streams of water invade his berth, Dr. Byrd looks in and, running, cries to him to come up on deck and cling firmly to anything more firm than himself.

On deck, confusion, groans, and bodies, as if lifted, all, by a divine hand and flung into the sea. For a moment Roberto grasps the spanker boom (if I have understood correctly), until the sail is rent, shredded by thunderbolts, the boom and the gaff both start emulating the curved course of the stars, and Roberto is flung at the foot of the mizzenmast. There a goodhearted sailor, unable to make room for him, throws him a rope and tells him to tie himself to a door torn from its hinges and hurled here from the castle, and luckily for Roberto the door, with him as its parasite, then slides to the bulwarks, for in the meanwhile the mast snaps in two, and a yard crashes down and splits open the head of his erstwhile Samaritan.

From a breach in the flank Roberto sees, or dreams he is seeing, cyclades of accumulated shadows as thunderbolts dart and roam over the fields of waves; and to me this seems excessive indulgence of a taste for precious quotation. But in any event, the *Amaryllis* tilts in the direction of the castaway ready to be cast away, and Roberto on his plank slides into an abyss above which he glimpses, as he sinks, the ocean freely rising to imitate cliffs; in the delirium of his eyelids he sees fallen Pyramids rise, he finds himself an aquatic comet fleeing along the

orbit of that turmoil of liquid skies. As every wave flashes with lucid inconstancy, here foam bends, there a vortex gurgles and a fount opens. Bundles of crazed meteors offer the counter-subject to the seditious aria shattered by thundering; the sky is an alternation of remote lights and downpours of darkness; and Roberto writes that he saw foaming Alps within wanton troughs whose spume was transformed into harvests; and Ceres blossomed amid sapphire glints, and at intervals in a cascade of roaring opals, as if her telluric daughter Persephone had taken command, exiling her plenteous mother.

And, among errant, bellowing beasts, as the silvery salts boil in stormy tumult, Roberto suddenly ceases to admire the spectacle, and becomes its insensate participant, he lies stunned and knows no more of what happens to him. It is only later that he will assume, in dreams, that the plank, by some merciful decree of heaven or through the instinct of a natant object, joins in that gigue and, as it descended, naturally rises, calmed in a slow saraband—then in the choler of the elements the rules of every urbane order of dance are subverted—and with ever more elaborate periphrases it moves away from the heart of the joust, where a versipellous top spun in the hands of the sons of Aeolus, the hapless *Amaryllis* sinks, bowsprit aimed at the sky. And, with it, sinks every other living soul in its hold, the Jew destined to find in the Heavenly Jerusalem the terrestrial Jerusalem he would reach no longer, the Knight of Malta parted forever from the island Escondida, Dr. Byrd from his acolytes and—finally rescued by merciful Nature from the comforts of the physician’s art—from that poor, infinitely ulcerated dog that, as it happens, I have not yet been able to mention because Roberto does not write of him until later.

But, in fine, I presume that dream and tempest made Roberto’s sleep so uneasy that it was limited to a very brief time, to be followed by a bellicose wakefulness. In fact,

accepting that outside it was day, but reassured that faint light penetrated the large opaque windows of the castle, and confident that he could go below by some interior stair, he mustered his courage, collected his weapons, and with audacious fear set out to find the source of those nocturnal noises.

Or, rather, he does not set out at once. I must crave indulgence, but it is Roberto who, in telling this to the Lady, contradicts himself—an indication that he does not tell in complete detail what has happened to him, but instead tries to construct his letter like a story or, more, like a sketch for what could become both letter and story, and he writes without deciding what things he will select later; he drafts, so to speak, the pieces of his chessboard without immediately establishing which to move and how to deploy them.

In one letter he says he went off to venture below. But in another he writes that, barely wakened at the morning light, he was struck by a distant concert. Sounds coming surely from the Island. At first Roberto imagined a horde of natives cramming into long canoes to raid the ship, and he clenched his musket, but then the concert sounded to him less combative.

It was dawn, and the sun did not yet strike the panes: he stepped into the gallery, caught the smell of the sea, opened the window slightly, and with his eyes half-closed he tried to make out the shore.

Aboard the *Amaryllis,* where he never went out on deck during the day, Roberto had heard the passengers tell of fiery dawns as if the sun were impatient to shoot its arrows at the world, whereas now, with no tears, he saw pastel hues: a sky foaming with dark clouds faintly edged in pearl, while a tinge, a memory, of pink was rising behind the Island, which seemed colored turquoise on rough paper.

But that almost nordic palette was enough for him to understand that the outline, which at night had seemed homogeneous, was created by the lines of a wooded hill that ended in a steep slope over a stretch covered with tall trees, down to the palms that lined the white beach.

Slowly the sand grew more luminous, and along the edges, at the sides, he could discern what seemed gigantic embalmed spiders as they were moving their skeletal limbs into the water. Roberto, from the distance, conceived of them as “ambulant vegetables,” but at that moment the glare of the sand, now too bright, made him withdraw.

He discovered that where his eyes might fail, his hearing would not betray him, and he entrusted himself to that sense, closing the window almost completely and lending an ear to the noises from land.

He was accustomed to the dawns of his native hill, but he realized that for the first time in his life he was hearing birds really sing, and he had never heard so many, so various.

By the thousands they hailed the sunrise; it seemed to him that he could recognize, among the parrots’ cries, the nightingale, the blackbird, the calander, an infinite number of swallows, and even the shrill sound of the cicada and the cricket, and he wondered if the animals he heard were actually of those species and not some antipodal cousin of theirs. . . . The Island was distant, and yet he had the impression that those sounds carried a scent of orange blossoms and basil, as if the air of all the bay were steeped in perfume—and for that matter M. d’Igby had told him how, in the course of one of his voyages, he had recognized the nearness of land by a waft of odorous atoms borne by the winds. . . .

He sniffed and listened to that invisible throng, as if looking from the battlements of a castle or the slit-windows of a fort at an army vociferously fanning out along the slope of the hill and the plain below, and along the river that protected the walls. He had the impression of having

already experienced what he was imagining; and in the face of the immensity that besieged him, he felt besieged, and he almost aimed his musket. He was at Casale again, and before him was spread out the Spanish army, with the noise of its wagons, the clash of arms, the tenor voices of the Castilians, the shouting of the Neapolitans, the harsh grunts of the Landsknechts, and in the background some trumpet blasts that, however, reached him muted, above the muffled sounds of an occasional arquebus, *klok, paff, taa-boom*, like the fireworks on the feast day of the local saint.

As if his life had been spent between two sieges, one the image of the other—with the sole difference that now, at the conclusion of this circle of two full lustra, this river was too broad and also encircling, so any sortie was impossible—Roberto lived again the days of Casale.

CHAPTER 2

An Account of Events in the Monferrato

ROBERTO TELLS US very little about the sixteen years of his life preceding that summer of 1630. He refers to episodes of the past only when they seem to have some connection with his present on the *Daphne,* and the chronicler of his turbulent annals must read between the lines of the story. To judge by his quirks, he is the sort of author who, to postpone the unmasking of the murderer, gives the reader only the scantiest of clues. And so I must wrest hints from him, as if from a delator.

The Pozzo di San Patrizio family belonged to the minor nobility, lords of the vast estate of La Griva along the border of the province of Alessandria (in those days a part of the duchy of Milan, and hence Spanish territory); but whether for geographical reasons or because of temperament, they considered themselves vassals of the marquis of Monferrato. Roberto's father spoke French with his wife, the local dialect with his peasants, and Italian with foreigners; to his son he expressed himself in various ways, depending on whether he was teaching the boy a secret of swordsmanship or taking him on a ride through the fields, cursing the birds that were ruining the crops. For the rest, the young Roberto spent his time without friends, daydreaming of distant lands as he wandered, bored, through the vineyards, or of falconry if he was hunting swallows, or combating dragons as he

played with his dogs, or hidden treasure as he explored the rooms of their little castle or fort, as it could also be called. His mind was inspired to wander thus by the dusty volumes of romances and chivalric poems he found in the south tower.

So he was not uneducated, and he even had a tutor, if only seasonally: a Carmelite who had supposedly traveled in the Orient, where, it was murmured—the boy's mother would repeat, blessing herself—he had become a Mussulman. Once a year he would arrive at the castle with a manservant and four little mules laden with books and other scribblings, and he would be housed there for three months. What he taught his pupil I cannot say, but when Roberto turned up in Paris, he made a favorable impression; in any case he was quick to learn whatever he was told.

Of this Carmelite only one thing is known, and it is no accident that Roberto mentions it. One day old Pozzo cut himself while polishing a sword, and whether because the weapon was rusty, or because he had injured a sensitive part of his hand or fingers, the wound provoked severe pain. Then the Carmelite took the blade and sprinkled on it some powder that he kept in a little box; immediately old Pozzo swore he felt relief. In fact, the next day the wound was already healing.

The Carmelite enjoyed the general amazement, and he told father and son how the secret of this substance had been revealed to him by an Arab; it was a medicine far more powerful than the one Christian spagyrists called *unguentum armarium*. When they asked him why the powder was put not on the wound but, rather, on the blade that had produced it, he answered that such is the working of nature, among whose strongest forces is a universal sympathy, which governs actions at a distance. And he added that if this seemed hard to believe, they had only to think of the magnet, which is a stone that draws metal filings to itself, or of the great iron mountains, which cover

the northern part of our planet and attract the needle of the compass. And so the unguent, adhering firmly to the sword, drew out those virtues of iron that the sword had left in the wound, impeding its healing.

Any man who in youth witnesses something of this sort cannot but remain marked by it for the rest of his life, and we shall soon see how Roberto's destiny was sealed by his attraction towards the attractive power of powders and unguents.

This, however, is not the episode that left the greatest mark on Roberto's boyhood. There is another, though properly speaking it is not an episode; it is more like a refrain, of which the boy preserved a suspect memory. It seems that his father, who was surely fond of his son even if he treated him with the taciturn roughness characteristic of the men of those lands, sometimes—and precisely in the first five years of Roberto's life—would lift him from the ground and shout proudly: "You are my firstborn!" Nothing strange, to be sure, beyond the venial sin of redundance, since Roberto was an only child. But, as he grew up, Roberto began to remember (or convinced himself that he remembered) how, at these outbursts of paternal joy, his mother's face would assume an expression of pleasure mingled with uneasiness, as if the father did well to say those words, though their repetition stirred in her an anxiety never completely eased. Roberto's imagination had long leaped and danced around the tone of that exclamation, concluding that his father did not utter it as if it were an assertion of the obvious but, rather, as an odd investiture, underlining the *you*, as if to say, "You, and not another, are my firstborn son."

Not another, or not *that* other? In Roberto's letters there appears always some reference to an Other, who haunts him; and the idea seems to have been born in him during those very years, when he became convinced (and what else could a little boy brood over, isolated as he was among

bat-infested turrets, vineyards, lizards and horses, awkward in dealing with the big peasant boys his age, his unequal peers, a boy who when he was not listening to the fairy tales of his grandmother listened to those of the Carmelite?), convinced that somewhere an unrecognized brother was at large, who must have been of an evil nature, as their father had repudiated him. Roberto was at first too little and then too modest to wonder if this brother was his on his father's side or on his mother's (in either case one of his parents would have been living under the cloud of an ancient, unpardonable sin): a brother in some way (perhaps supernaturally) guilty of the rejection he had suffered, and because of it he surely hated him, Roberto, the favorite.

The shadow of this enemy brother (whom he would have liked to know, all the same, in order to love him and be loved) had troubled his nights as a boy; later, in adolescence, he leafed through old volumes in the library, hoping to find hidden there—what?—a portrait, a certificate from the curate, a revelatory confession. He wandered through the garrets, opening old chests full of great-grandparents' clothes, rusted medals, a Moorish dagger; and he lingered to question, with puzzled fingers, embroidered dresses that had certainly clad an infant, but whether that was years or centuries ago, there was no knowing.

Gradually he had also come to give this lost brother a name, Ferrante, and had begun attributing to him the little crimes of which he himself was wrongfully accused, like the theft of a cake or the improper liberation of a dog from his chain. Ferrante, privileged by his banishment, acted behind Roberto's back, and Roberto in turn hid behind Ferrante. Indeed, little by little the habit of blaming the nonexistent brother for what he, Roberto, could not have done, became transformed into the habit of inculpating him with what Roberto had done, and of which he repented.