Why the Island is Never Found, Umberto Eco

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UTOPIAS ARE FOUND on islands (with a few rare exceptions, such as the realm of Prester John). The island is thought of as inaccessible, a non-place where you land by chance, and once you have left, you can never return. So only on an island can a perfect civilization be created, and we discover it only through legends.

The Greek civilization lived on archipelagos and ought to have been quite used to islands, yet it is only on mysterious islands that Ulysses meets Circe, Polyphemus, and Nausicaa. There are those islands we read about in Apollonius of Rhodes's Argonautica; there are the Blessed or Fortunate Islands where Saint Brendan lands during his voyage; Thomas More's city of Utopia is on an island, and there are those perfect, thriving unknown civilizations dreamed about in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, such as Foigny's Terra Australis and Vairasse's island of Sevarambes. The mutineers from the Bounty search for the lost paradise on an island (without finding it); Verne's Captain Nemo lives on an island; both Stevenson's and the Count of Monte Cristo's treasures lie hidden on an island, and so on until we reach the dystopias, from the island of Doctor Moreau's Beast Folk to the island of Doctor No, where James Bond lands.

What is the fascination of islands? It is not so much that they are places cut off from the rest of the world. Marco Polo or Giovanni Pian del Carpine found places far away from human society by crossing endless tracts of terra firma. Until the eighteenth century, when it became possible to calculate longitude, mariners would come across an island merely by chance, and, like Ulysses, would escape from it, but there was no way of finding their way back there. From the time of Saint Brendan (and even up to Gozzano) an island was always an insula perdita, a lost island.

This explains the success and fascination of that highly popular genre of island stories in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, which provide a record of all the islands in the world—known islands as well as those about which there were just a few vague legends. The island stories, in their own way, provided as much geographical accuracy as possible (unlike the tales of fabulous lands in earlier centuries) and were a blend of folk tales and traveler's accounts. Sometimes they were wrong. It was thought, for example, that there were two islands, Taprobane and Ceylon, whereas in fact (as we know) there was just one—but so what? They represented a geography of the unknown or, at least, the little-known.

Later came the journals of the eighteenth-century travelers—Cook, Bougainville, La Pérouse . . . They too were looking for islands but were careful to describe only what they saw, no longer relying on folk traditions—and that was quite a different matter. But still they went off looking for islands that didn't exist, such as Terra Australis (which appeared on all atlases), or for an island that someone had once discovered but had never been found again.

This is why, still today, our fantasies drift between the myth of an island that doesn't exist, or the myth of absence; that of one island too many, or the myth of excess; that of the undiscovered island, or the myth of inaccuracy; or that of the un-rediscovered island, or the myth of the insula perdita, the lost island—four quite different stories.

The first is a legendary story. Legends about islands are generally divided into those that require us to pretend the island exists (asking us to suspend our belief)—as with the islands of Verne or Stevenson—and those that describe an island that does not exist by definition and have the sole purpose of reaffirming the power of legends—as with Peter Pan's Neverland. The island that, by definition, does not exist is of no interest to us, at least today. The reason is simple: no one goes looking for it—children don't go to sea looking for Captain Hook's island, nor do adults go in search of Captain Nemo's island.

Likewise, I will pass over the one island too many, not least because there is, I believe, only one case of this phenomenon of excess—the duplication of Ceylon and Taprobane. This story has been told in much detail in an article on island stories by Tarcisio Lancioni1 to which I refer you. In fact, what interests me today is that unfortunate love for an island that can no longer be found, whereas Taprobane was always being found, even when no one was looking for it, and therefore, in terms of sexual exploits, we might say it was not so much a story of hopeless passion as one of Don Giovanni–like incontinence, where the number of maps showing Taprobane had already reached mille e tre.

According to Pliny, Taprobane was discovered during the time of Alexander the Great, and prior to that had been generally indicated as the land of the Antichthones and considered "another world." Pliny's island could be identified as Ceylon, and this can be seen from Ptolemy's maps, at least in the sixteenth-century editions. Isidore of Seville also places it to the south of India and confines himself to saying that it is full of precious stones and has two summers and two winters each year. Marco Polo's Travels doesn't give the name Taprobane but refers to Ceylon as Seilam.

The duplication of Ceylon and Taprobane appears quite clearly in Mandeville's Travels, which describes them in two different chapters. He doesn't say exactly where Ceylon is located but states that it is "well a 800 miles about" and is

full of serpents, of dragons and of cockodrills, that no man dare dwell there. These cockodrills be serpents, yellow and rayed above, and have four feet and short thighs, and great nails as claws or talons. And there be some that have five fathoms in length, and some of six and of eight and of ten. And when they go by places that be gravelly, it seemeth as though men had drawn a great tree through the gravelly place. And there be also many wild beasts, and namely of elephants. In that isle is a great mountain.

And in mid place of the mount is a great lake in a full fair plain; and there is great plenty of water. And they of the country say, that Adam and Eve wept upon that mount an hundred year, when they were driven out of Paradise, and that water, they say, is of their tears; for so much water they wept, that made the foresaid lake.

And in the bottom of that lake men find many precious stones and great pearls. In that lake grow many reeds and great canes; and there within be many cocodrills and serpents and great water-leeches. And the king of that country, once every year, giveth leave to poor men to go into the lake to gather them precious stones and pearls, by way of alms, for the love of God that made Adam. And all the year men find enough. And for the vermin that is within, they anoint their arms and their thighs and legs with an ointment made of a thing that is clept lemons, that is a manner of fruit like small pease; and then have they no dread of no cockodrills,

ne of none other venomous vermin . . . In that country and others thereabout there be wild geese that have two heads. (The Travels of Sir John Mandeville, chapter 21)

Taprobane, on the other hand, according to Mandeville, is under the rule of Prester John. Mandeville had not yet sited Prester John's realm in Ethiopia, as he would later do, and it was still in the area of India—though Prester John's India was often confused with the farthest Orient, the land of earthly paradise. In any event, Taprobane is to be found in the vicinity of India (and he names the point where the Red Sea flows into the ocean). Like Isidore's account, the island has two summers and two winters and there are enormous mountains of gold guarded by pismires, or giant ants:

These pismires be great as hounds, so that no man dare come to those hills for the pismires would assail them and devour them anon. So that no man may get of that gold, but by great sleight. And therefore when it is great heat, the pismires rest them in the earth, from prime of the day into noon. And then the folk of the country take camels, dromedaries, and horses and other beasts, and go thither, and charge them in all haste that they may; and after that, they flee away in all haste that the beasts may go, or the pismires come out of the earth. And in other times, when it is not so hot, and that the pismires rest them not in the earth, then they get gold by this subtlety.

They take mares that have young colts or foals, and lay upon the mares void vessels made there-for; and they be all open above, and hanging low to the earth. And then they send forth those mares for to pasture about those hills, and with-hold the foals with them at home. And when the pismires see those vessels, they leap in anon: and they have this kind that they let nothing be empty among them, but anon they fill it, be it what manner of thing that it be; and so they fill those vessels with gold. And when that the folk suppose that the vessels be full, they put forth anon the young foals, and make them to neigh after their dams. And then anon the mares return towards their foals with their charges of gold. (The Travels of Sir John Mandeville, chapter 33)

From this point onward, from one map to the next, Taprobane moves about from one place in the Indian Ocean to another, sometimes alone, sometimes duplicating Ceylon. For a certain period it is identified with Sumatra, but sometimes we find it between Sumatra and Indochina, close to Borneo.

Thomas Porcacchi, in Isole più famose del mondo (1572), tells us about a Taprobane full of riches, about its elephants and its immense turtles, as well as the characteristic attributed by Diodorus Siculus to its inhabitants—a kind of forked tongue ("double as far as the root and divided; with one part they talk to one person, with the other they talk to another").

After having recounted various folk stories, he then apologizes to readers for the fact that he has found no exact reference as to its geographical position, and concludes, "Although many ancient and modern writers have referred to this island, I find no one however who indicates its boundaries: hence I too will have to be excused if in this my usual order is lacking." As for the island of Taprobane's identification with Ceylon, he is doubtful: "She was first (according to Ptolemy) called Simondi, and then Salice, and finally Taprobane; but people nowadays conclude that today she is called Sumatra, though there are also those according to whom Taprobane is not Sumatra but the island of Zeilam . . . But some people now suggest that none of the ancients have positioned

Taprobane correctly: indeed they hold that where they have put it there is no island at all that can be believed to be that."

From being one island too many, Taprobane therefore slowly became an island that doesn't exist. Thomas More would treat it thus when he situated his Utopia "between Ceylon and America," and Tommaso Campanella was to use Taprobane as the place where he built his City of the Sun.

Let us now turn to islands whose absence has encouraged (sometimes sporadic) research and an enduring nostalgia.

Ancient epics, of course, tell us about islands that may or may not have existed, so that the isles visited by Ulysses have produced a scholarly literature aimed at establishing which actual places they refer to. And the myth of Atlantis has led to an investigation that is not yet over (judging from the number of mystery magazines and second-rate television programs). But Atlantis was regarded rather more as an entire continent, and the idea was immediately accepted that it had sunk into the sea. It is therefore the subject of legend rather than research.

Navigatio Sancti Brendani was perhaps the first account of the quest for an island.

Saint Brendan and his mystical mariners visited many: the island of birds, the island of hell, the island reduced to a rock on which Judas is chained, and that bogus island that had already deceived Sinbad, on which Brendan's ship lands—not until the following day, when the ship's crew light fires and see the island stir in annoyance, do they realize it is not an island but a terrible sea monster called Jasconius.

But the island that excited the imagination of those in later times is the Isle of the Blessed, a sort of earthly paradise on which our mariners land after seven years of adventure:

A land more precious than all the others for its beauty, for the marvelous and gracious and agreeable things within it, such as its beautiful and clear and precious rivers with waters most sweet and fresh and gentle, and trees most precious in every way with precious fruits, and many roses and lilies and flowers and violas and herbs and all things sweet-smelling and perfect in their bounty. And there were songbirds of every agreeable nature and all sang harmoniously in sweet and gentle song: and the climate seemed truly agreeable like sweet springtime.

And there were roads and paths of every kind, precious stones, and there was so much good that greatly cheered the heart of all those who saw it with their own eyes, and there were tame and wild animals of every kind, and they moved about and lived at their own ease and as they pleased, and lived together in domesticity without wishing to cause any harm or disturbance to the other; and there were birds of the same kind who lived together similarly. And there were vineyards and pergolas always well supplied with fine grapes that its goodness and beauty exceeded all others.

The island paradise visited by Saint Brendan awakens a desire (something that hadn't happened with Atlantis, Ogygia, or the island of the Phaeacians). Throughout the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance there is a firm belief that it exists. It appears on maps, such as the Ebersdorf globe. On a map prepared by Toscanelli for the king of Portugal, it appears in the middle of the sea, toward Japan, to be reached buscando el levante por el poniente, approaching the East via the

west—and lies almost prophetically where America would later be discovered.

It is sometimes on the same latitude as Ireland, though on more modern maps the island moves farther south to the latitude of the Canaries or the Fortunate Isles, and sometimes the Fortunate Isles are confused with the island called Saint Brendan. Sometimes it is identified with Madeira and sometimes with another nonexistent island such as the mythical Antillia, as it was called in the sixteenth-century Arte del navegar by Pedro da Medina. In Martin Behaim's globe of 1492 it was positioned much farther west, close to the equator. And it now had the name Lost Island, Insula Perdita.

Honorious of Autun, in his De imagine mundi (twelfth century), had described it as the most pleasant of islands, unknown to humans, which even when it had been found, had not been found ("Est quaedam Oceani insula dicta Perdita, amoenitate et fertilitate omnium rerum prae cunctis terris praestantissima, hominibus ignota. Quae aliquando casu inventa, postea quaesita non est inventa, et ideo dicitur Perdita"); and in the fourteenth century, Pierre Bersuire spoke in the same terms about the Fortunate Isles.

It is apparent from the Treaty of Évora of June 1519 that the Lost Island was expected to be rediscovered one day. Under the treaty, King Manuel I of Portugal passed all rights over the Canary Isles to Spain, and the terms of the treaty expressly included a Lost or Hidden Isle. In 1569, Gerardus Mercator still marked the mysterious island on his map, and in 1721 the last explorers set off in search of it.2

Saint Brendan's island is not an island that doesn't exist—someone has actually been there, but it is lost since no one has succeeded in returning to it. For this reason it becomes the subject of an unfulfilled desire and its story is an allegory of every real love story, the story of a Brief Encounter, of a mystical Doctor Zhivago who has lost his Lara. The agony of love is not the love we dream of that never happens (the island that we know doesn't exist, the illusion of love for adolescent lovers), but the love that, having once happened, then vanishes forever.

But how did islands come to be lost?

From earliest antiquity, ships had no points of reference other than the stars. Using instruments like the astrolabe or the cross-staff, sailors could fix the height of a star from the horizon and calculate the distance from the zenith point; once they knew the declination, they knew on what parallel they were, given that the zenith distance plus or minus declination gives latitude. They therefore knew how far north or south they were from a given point. But to get back to an island (or any other point) the latitude was not enough—the longitude was also needed. We know that New York and Naples are on the same latitude but we also know they are not in the same place—their longitude is different and they are therefore on a different degree of the meridian.

And this is the problem that navigators faced until almost the end of the eighteenth century. There were no certain means for determining longitude, for saying how far east or west they were from a given point.

This is what happened with the Solomon Islands (an extraordinary example of insulae perditae). Álvaro de Saavedra Cerón went in search of these legendary islands in 1528, hoping to find King Solomon's gold, but was sailing about between what are now called the Marshall and the Admiralty

Islands. Álvaro de Mendaña arrived there, however, in 1568 and christened the Solomon Islands. But, after that, no one managed to find them again, not even Mendaña himself when he went back with Queiros, almost thirty years later, in search of them, though he only just missed them, landing instead on the island of Santa Cruz, to the southeast.

And the same happened to others after him. The Dutch set up their East Indies Company at the beginning of the seventeenth century and created the city of Batavia in Asia as a point of departure for many eastbound expeditions. They landed at a place they called New Holland, but never reached the Solomon Islands. Other lands, probably to the east of the Solomon Islands, were similarly discovered by English pirates whom the Court of Saint James hastened to reward with noble titles. But no one was able to find any trace of the Solomon Islands, and for a long time many believed them to be only a legend.

Mendaña had landed on them but had incorrectly fixed their longitude. And even if, through some celestial guidance, he had managed to fix them correctly, then other navigators looking for that longitude (and he himself on his second voyage) could not be entirely sure of their own longitude.

For several centuries the great European maritime powers strove to discover a way of establishing the fixed point—the punto fijo that Cervantes had joked about—and were prepared to pay enormous sums to anyone who found an effective method. Navigators, men of science, and cranks came up with all kind of answers—there was the method based on lunar eclipses, one that examined the variations of a magnetized needle, and the loch, or Dutchman’s log method; Galileo proposed a technique based on the eclipses of the satellites of Jupiter, which are so frequent that they can be seen several times each night.

But all turned out to be inadequate. There would, of course, have been one sure method: to keep a clock on board that tells the time at one known meridian, then to find out the time at place X at sea and, by working on the basis that the globe has been subdivided since antiquity into 360 degrees of longitude and that the sun moves 15 degrees in one hour, to work out the longitude of point X from the difference. In other words, if the clock on board showed that it was, let us say, noon in Paris, and that in place X it was six in the afternoon, by translating every hour of difference into 15 degrees, we would have known that the longitude of place X was 90 degrees from the Paris meridian.

Although it was not difficult to work out the time at the place where the calculation was being made, it was practically impossible to keep a mechanical clock on board that would function perfectly after months of sailing and the inevitable jolts, through winds and waves; hourglasses and water clocks were, of course, out of the question since they need to work on a flat motionless surface. And any clock would have to be of an extremely high precision: an error of four seconds would produce an error of one degree of longitude.

One suggestion mentioned in various chronicles of the time was the use of Powder of Sympathy.

This was a miraculous compound that, when applied to the weapon that had caused a wound, acted (through a sort of almost atomic continuity) on the particles of blood released into the air over the wound, even if the weapon and the injury were a great distance apart. This would heal the

wound, allowing time to take its course, but as an immediate reaction it would cause irritation and pain.

It was therefore decided to wound a dog, to be kept on board the ship during the journey, and to rub the miraculous compound over the weapon each day at the same hour. The dog would have reacted with a whimper of pain and that was how they would know aboard ship what time it was at that moment at the point of departure.3

I dealt with this story in my novel The Island of the Day Before, so allow me to quote one passage since, after all, on such uncertain information, this is the only document that suggests what must have occurred.

Finally one morning, taking advantage of a sailor's bad fall from a yardarm, which fractured his skull, while there was great confusion on the deck and the doctor was summoned to treat the unfortunate man, Roberto slipped down into the hold. Almost groping, he managed to find the right path. Perhaps it was luck, or perhaps the animal was whimpering more than usual that morning: Roberto, more or less at the point where later on the Daphne he would find the kegs of aqua vitae, was confronted by a horrid sight. Well shielded from curious eyes, in an enclosure made to his measure, on a bed of rags, lay a dog.

He was perhaps of good breed, but his suffering and hunger had reduced him to mere skin and bones. And yet his tormentors showed their intention to keep him alive: they had provided him with abundant food and water, including food surely not canine, subtracted from the passengers' rations. He was lying on one side, head limp, tongue lolling. On that exposed side gaped a broad and horrible wound. At once fresh and gangrenous, it revealed a pair of great pinkish lips, and in the centre, as along the entire gash, was a purulent secretion resembling whey. Roberto realized that the wound looked as it did because the hand of a chirurgeon, rather than sew the lips together, had deliberately kept them parted and open, attaching them to the outer hide.

Bastard offspring of the medical art, that wound had not only been inflicted but wickedly treated so it would not form a scar and the dog would continue suffering—who knows for how long. Further, Roberto saw in and around the wound a crystalline residue, as if a doctor (yes, a doctor, so cruelly expert!) every day sprinkled an irritant salt there.

Helpless, Roberto stroked the wretch, now whimpering softly. He asked himself what he could do to help, but at a heavier touch, the dog's suffering increased. Moreover, Roberto's own pity was giving way to a sense of victory. There was no doubt: this was Dr. Byrd's secret, the mysterious cargo taken aboard in London.

From what Roberto had seen, from what a man with his knowledge could infer, the dog had been wounded in England, and Byrd was making sure he would remain wounded. Someone in London, every day at the same, agreed hour, did something to the guilty weapon, or to a cloth steeped in the animal's blood, provoking a reaction, perhaps of relief, but perhaps of still greater pain, for Dr. Byrd himself had said that the Weapon Salve could also harm.

Thus on the Amaryllis they could know at a given moment what time it was in Europe. And knowing the hour of their transitory position, they were able to calculate the meridian! (translated by William Weaver)

If the story about the dog seems fanciful, in the same novel I described an instrument proposed by Galileo in a letter of 1637 (to Lorenzo Realio). Galileo thought of fixing longitude by observing the positions of Jupiter's satellites. But once again, on a ship at the mercy of the waves, it would be difficult to point the telescope accurately. And here Galileo suggested an extraordinary solution. To enjoy its comedy, we need not read the humorous account in my novel—it is enough to read Galileo himself:

As for the first problem, this is certainly the most difficult, but I think I have found a remedy for this, at least for the ordinary movements of the ship; and this should be enough since, during great storms and tempests, which normally prevent the sun and other stars being seen, all other observations cease, as indeed do all mariner's duties. But during ordinary movements I think it is possible to reduce the state of the person who has to make the observations to a tranquility similar to that of the peace and calm of the sea; and to achieve this benefit I have thought of placing the observer in a specially prepared part of the boat so that he does not feel either the movements from bow to stern or the rocking from side to side: and my thinking is based on this.

If the ship is always in calm waters and without waves, there is no doubt that the use of the telescope would be just as easy as on land. Now, I want to place the observer in a small boat placed inside the large boat, the small boat being in such necessary quantity of water as I will explain below. Here, first of all, it is clear that the water contained in the small vessel will remain in equilibrium, even when the large boat inclines and reclines to right and left, forward and backward, without any part of it being raised or lowered, but will always remain parallel to the horizon; so that if in this small boat we build another smaller boat, floating in the water contained within it, it would find itself in an extremely calm sea, and would therefore stay there without moving: and this second boat is the place where the observer must be placed. I therefore want the first vessel, which has to contain the water, to be like a large semi-spherical basin, and that the smaller vessel is similar to it, except that it is smaller, and that the space between its convex surface and the concave inner surface of the container is no more than the thickness of a thumb; so that a very small quantity of water will be enough to float the inner vessel, as if it were floating in the wide ocean . . .

The size of these vessels must be such that the inner and smaller vessel can hold the weight of the person making the observations without sinking, as well as his chair and the other equipment on which the telescope is fixed. And in order to keep the smaller vessel separate from the outer one so as not to touch it, so that it cannot be influenced by the motion of the ship in the same way that the larger one is, I want the internal concave surface of the inner vessel to be held with several springs, eight or ten in number, which stop the two vessels from touching each other, but do not prevent the inner vessel from not responding to the raising and lowering of the sides of the outer container: and if, rather than water, we wish to use oil, that would be even better, nor would the quantity be great, since two or three barrels would be enough . . .

I have already made a kind of curved helmet on the same principle, for the use of our galleys, which, when placed on the head of the observer, and a telescope being placed upon it, adjusted in such a way that it was always directed towards the same point at which the other free eye was looking, without doing anything else, the object that he was looking at

with his free eye was always to be found through the telescope. A similar machine could be built which is not just held on the head but over the shoulders and bust of the observer, on which is fixed a telescope of the size necessary to clearly distinguish the stars of Jupiter.

In order to resolve the problem—with all due respect to Galileo, whose extraordinary invention no one had the courage to finance, and to the whole plethora of inventors of other extraordinary methods for fixing longitude—we had to wait for Harrison's invention of the marine chronometer, or rather, his final version in the 1770s. From then on, even during storms, the clock would keep the correct time for the point of departure. But before that moment the insulae were fatally perditae.

Before then, the history of Pacific exploration is the history of people forever discovering lands they were not looking for. Abel Tasman, for example, while searching for the Solomon Islands in 1643, arrives at Tasmania (which is forty-two degrees latitude farther south, as if that were nothing), sees New Zealand, passes Tonga, arrives in Fiji without disembarking, where he sees only a few small islands, and reaches the coast of New Guinea, without realizing that inside that loop he had made stood Australia. No mean achievement. He had gone from point to point like a billiard ball, and for many years after, other navigators came extremely close to Australia without seeing it.

In short, it was a madcap voyage between islands, coral reefs, and continents, without any apparent plan. And poor them. We can set a course today using the maps created after Cook, but they were all basically wandering about like Captain Bligh, in a ship's launch, heading toward the Moluccas, and the most important thing was not to bump into the Bounty again.
But even after the problem of longitude had been solved, it was still easy for ships to lose themselves among such islands. Look at the voyages of Corto Maltese and Rasputin in Ballad of the Salt Sea. The characters in the Ballad are avid readers. At one point, Pandora seems to be happily immersed in the complete works of Melville while Cain is reading Coleridge, the author of another ballad, the one about the Ancient Mariner—curiously he finds it on the German submarine of Slütter who, when he dies, will also leave his copies of Rilke and Shelley at Escondida. And toward the end, Cain quotes Euripides.

And even an old jailbird like Rasputin, at the very beginning, is reading Voyage autour du monde par la frégate du roi La Boudeuse et la flûte L'Étoile. I can guarantee that this is not the first edition of 1771, which does not carry the author's name on the title page and is not in three columns.

The book is open about halfway through and, at least in the original edition, of the same size, this is the point where chapter 5 begins: "Navigation depuis les grandes Cyclades; découverte du golfe de la Louisiade . . . Relâche . . . la Nouvelle Bretagne."

If he was up-to-date with the techniques of 1913, Rasputin ought to know that he is on the 155-degree meridian west (according to Hugo Pratt's map), but if he relies on Bougainville he should be on the crucial 180-degree meridian, the date line. There again, Bougainville referred to the "Isles Salomon dont l'existence et la position sont douteuses."

When the Dutch cargo ship meets Rasputin's catamaran, the first thing the officers and the Fijian sailor notice is that the boat seems rather off

course for a Fijian vessel, since the Fijians usually head east and south. And this is what they should have done, as we shall see later, since the Monk's island is much farther southeast.

Tell me why Corto should find Slütter's submarine below the western point of New Pomerania—he is sailing west, having departed from Kaiserine, whereas the submarine's destination is Escondida, and the Monk's island of Escondida (19 degrees south and 169 west) ought to be south of the Solomon Islands and west of Fiji. A German naval officer who sails toward New Guinea to get to Escondida and says (as he does) "We'll be arriving shortly at Escondida" (which is 20 degrees away) is caught in Rasputin's net, a dreamer who has confused the frontiers of space. The fact is that Rasputin or Pratt, or both, are also trying to confound the frontiers of time.

Cain and Pandora are captured by Rasputin on November 1, 1913, but they all arrive at Escondida after August 4, 1914 (the Monk tells them that war has broken out on that date), at some time between September and the last ten days of October, when the English appear on the scene. After two pages of Coleridge and a few discussions with Slütter, a year has passed, during which time the submarine navigates vague routes, with the curious indolence, the thirst for drifting, of seventeenth-century buccaneers, the Ancient Mariner, and Captain Ahab.
All of the main characters in the Ballad act as though they are living in the times of Bougainville, or even Mendaña: they travel in the archipelago of uncertainty.

The fascination of islands is precisely that of losing ourselves. Heaven help us if we find our way straight back, like taking one of those wretched ferry crossings from Manhattan to Ellis Island. The eternal fascination of the island is still that celebrated by Guido Gozzano.

But more beautiful than all, the Island Never Found:
 The one the king of Spain had from his cousin
 the king of Portugal with sealed signature
 and papal bull in Gothic Latin.
 The Infante sailed off for the legendary realm,
 saw the Fortunate Isles: Iunonia, Gorgo, Hera,
 and the Sargasso Sea and the Dark Sea
 searching for that isle . . . But the island was not there.
 In vain the round-bottomed sailing galleys,
 in vain the caravels armed their bows:
 with due respect to the pope, the isle is hidden,
 and Portugal and Spain still search for it.
 The isle exists, appearing sometimes from afar
 between Teneriffe and Palma, suffused in mystery:
 " . . . the Island Never Found!" From the high peak of Teide
 the good Canarian points it out to the foreigner.
 Marked on the ancient maps of the corsairs.
 . . . Hifola to—be found? . . . Hifola pilgrim? . . .
 The magic isle that glides over the seas;
 mariners sometimes see her near . . .
 And point their bows toward her blessed shore:
 Among unfamiliar flowers soar lofty palms,
 The divine aromatic forest, thick and lush,
 Weeping cardamom, seeping rubber sap . . .
 Herald like the arrival of a perfumed courtesan,
 the Island Never Found . . . Yet, if the pilot draws closer,
 it rapidly fades away, like a vain shadow,
 tinged with the azure color of faraway . . . ("La più bella")

I don’t suppose Gozzano had in mind some of the maps we find in eighteenth-century books on sea travel, but this idea of the island that “fades away, like a vain shadow, tinged with the azure color of faraway” makes us think about the way in which, before the problem of longitude had been solved, islands were identified using drawings of their profiles as they had been seen for the first time. Arriving from a distance, the island (whose shape did not exist on any map) was recognized from its skyline, as we would say of an American city today. And what happened if there were two islands with very similar skylines, as if there were two cities, both with the Empire State Building and (at one time) the Twin Towers south of it? They would land on the wrong island, and who knows how many times this happened.

Moreover, the profile of an island changes with the color of the sky, the haze, the time of day, and perhaps even the time of year, which alters the appearance of the vegetation. Sometimes the island is tinged with the azure color of faraway, it can disappear in the night or in the mist, or clouds can hide the shapes of its mountains. There is nothing more elusive than an island about which we know only its profile.

Arriving on an island for which we have neither map nor coordinates is similar to moving about like one of Edwin Abbott’s characters in Flatland, where there is only one dimension and we see things only from the front, like lines with no thickness—with no height and no depth—and only someone from outside Flatland could see them from above.

And it was said, in fact, that the inhabitants of the islands of Madeira, La Palma, La Gomera, and El Hierro, deceived by the clouds or by the mirages of the fata morgana, sometimes thought they had seen the insula perdita toward the west, shimmering between the water and the sky.

Thus, in the same way that an island that didn’t exist could be sighted among the reflections of the sea, so it was also possible to confuse two islands that did exist, or never to find the one that was the intended destination.
And that is how islands become lost.
And why islands are never found. As Pliny said (book 2, chapter 96), some islands are forever wavering.

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The end