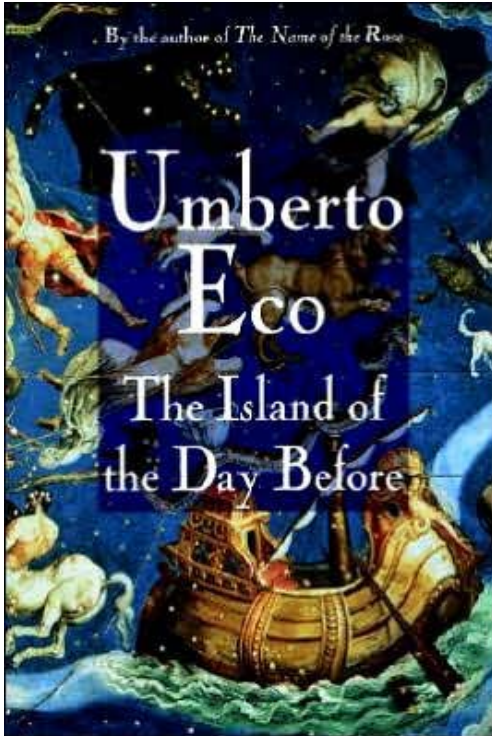


The Island of the Day Before

by Umberto Eco

Reviewed by Stephen Carter – 3/24/2010



Oh Umberto Eco, you shadow of an echo, how you tease us island dwellers!

Lavishly colored by the detailed listings of an antiquarian, encyclopaedic mind, The Island of the Day Before purports to be a romance novel concerning Roberto, scion of a 17th century minor Italian baron. Wandering from his rural manor after the death of his father, Roberto becomes enmeshed in the courtly intrigues of Cardinal Mazzarin and is sent on a spy mission relating to the geo-political contest to accurately compute longitude. The navies and explorers of the century were more or less lost while out of sight of land. It was not until about 1770 that navigational computations achieved reliability with improved clocks. That physical location (or being) on the globe is thus linked to the perception of the passage of time becomes the real subject of rumination.

The narrative and structure of the novel is freely pirated in an increasingly ironic manner from the classics of Defoe, Dumas, Melville, and Victor Hugo. Tattered fragments of the storyline are frequently eclipsed by philosophical musings on a manic magnitude. Eco's atavistic chapter headings plot us a course across a dark sea of cogitative speculation:

- Horologium Oscillatorium
- Anatomy of Erotic Melancholy
- Monologue on the Plurality of Worlds

and best of all,

- Paradoxical Exercises Regarding the Thinking of Stones

The fact that Roberto is frozen in time – he is shipwrecked on a reef facing East across the 180th meridian, hence contemplating an inaccessible island which is yesterday, because it is on the other side of the International Date Line – this fact only aggravates his mental deterioration. As he abandons ship, both he and the novelistic narrative itself drift off in a rather vague, timeless, perhaps ecstatic way; trapped as it were between today and yesterday.

We can sense that this is a book written by an author intoxicated with the nostalgia of old books, old science, and old lore.

In real life signore Eco is a Professor of Semiotics (signs and symbols) at the University of Bologna. That practically defines him as the living incarnation of Il Dottore, the rambling, pendant-clown role from *Commedia dell' Arte*, which is the influential Italian Comedy dating from the 16th century. Umberto surely recognizes this in himself. He employs the learned Latinate tirades in the character of a Jesuit philosopher to comic effect. Professor Eco is also, in real life, a board member of the International Puppet Museum in Palermo, Sicily. That famous puppet character, Pulcinella, puts in an appearance in Chapter 31. For these reasons it is easy for me to believe that Umberto wrote this book especially for me.

~ Stephen Carter
Artistic Director, Carter Family Marionettes

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