

## ON THE MONSTROSITY OF ISLANDS

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*"Nothing changes form so quickly as clouds, except perhaps rocks."*

—Victor Hugo

An island is a bit of earth that has broken faith with the terrestrial world. This quite naturally gives rise to concern about the reliability and good will of these landforms, which have so clearly turned their back on geographical solidarity. Creeping anxiety along these lines likely accounts in some measure for the prominence of islands in the robust literatures of betrayal, solitude, madness, and despair. One is abandoned on islands (Ariadne, Philoctetes), trapped on them (Odysseus, repeatedly), and subjected thereupon to the whims of lunatics (e.g., the islands of doctors No and Moreau). Prisons and penal colonies abound, encircled by an oceanic moat: Devil's Island, Alcatraz, Rikers, Robben Island, Saint Helena, Guantánamo.

Yes, one can be "saved" washing up on an island (*Lost*, Robinson Crusoe, "The Most Dangerous Game," *Lord of the Flies*), but this tends to be the beginning of a disaster still more exquisite and grotesque than that from which one initially rejoiced to escape. Under the palms, a castaway is more or less guaranteed to encounter atavism, primitive reversion, cannibal appetites, and primordial blood lust. Neighbors, if any, tend to be unreliable, since islands are consistently home to mutineers (Pitcairn, Cocos), wreckers (Anegada, Stroma), "savages" of one description or another (New Guinea, the Marquesas, Tierra del Fuego), and, of course, pirates, those great enemies of humanity (*hostis humani generis*), who've long holed up in inaccessible insular outposts from Tortuga to Reunion, Jamaica to the Solomons. One sees a fair number of monsters, too: Sirens, Komodo dragons, Scylla and Charybdis, the Minotaur, King Kong.

What about those "happy isles" adverted to in assorted legends? To be sure, the trackless oceans of mythology are speckled with a blessed archipelago (Atlantis, *The New Atlantis*, Cythera), but the coordinates of these inviting havens remain conspicuously uncertain, and those who report visits reliably encounter great difficulty returning. Are there Edenic islands? In principle, yes. But in practice they turn out to be uniformly as illusory as that dogged "no place" lying nascent in the etymology of every *u-topia*. And what about the promise of an earthier sort of paradise? Yes, great sex gets offered on some important islands (Aiaia,

Tahiti, Capri, Hawaii, etc.), but then there's nearly always some serious mourning in the morning (seeing all your friends turned into pigs; contemplating the demise of "natural man"; reckoning with Tiberius in his madness; witnessing the murder of Captain Cook, etc.).

All this ancient island-unease now mostly lies buried under the sifted gypsum of manicured resorts. Whence the arriviste *Travel & Leisure* version of insular life, with its swizzle sticks and cabana boys? Somewhere between Ernest Hemingway (*Islands in the Stream*) and Jimmy Buffet ("Margaritaville"), Americans (at least) seem to have decided that islands can be counted on to provide an escape from the straitening exigencies of continental life. Unfortunately, the erection of the infrastructure necessary to sustain this illusion has wrought significant ecological damage across the Caribbean and beyond, making it increasingly difficult to retail the (tenacious, marketable) fiction that a trip to the islands is a restorative return to nature, salved with the balm of cocoa butter.<sup>1</sup> Particular pilgrimages still nurture this fantasy nonetheless—signally those eco-tours to the Galapagos, the *omphalos* of ostensibly unspoiled insulation, which retain a privileged place in the environmental consciousness of modernity on account of Darwin's brief layover there while voyaging on the *Beagle*.

Young Charlie was himself more deeply marked by the old insular anxieties. He noted in his journal that the place had a fearsomely desolate air, and, Hamlet-like, he attended to a gothic Galapagan detail: a sun-blached human skull upon which he stumbled while gathering his natural history specimens. Oh that, sniffed his guide—it belonged to a raider who got bumped off by some frenemies. Welcome to the islands. *Et in arcadia ego*.

Except it wasn't even arcadia. It was more like hell. "Apples of Sodom" is what Herman Melville (writing as Salvator R. Tarnmoor) called the same isles after stopping by a few years later, and he went on to argue that there was no place in the world where one could better grasp "the aspect of living things malignly crumbled from ruddiness into ashes." (NB: poor ad copy for an eco-tour.) He, too, paused upon a casual grave (this one an ordinary sailor's) and suggested that the best way for an armchair traveler to conceive the Galapagos was to imagine twenty-five cinder heaps "magnified into mountains" or to sketch in the mind's eye how the world might look after a vast and vengeful "penal conflagration." He entitled this pseudonymous essay "The Encantadas, or Enchanted Isles," but they were anything but enchanting.

We now think of this volcanic chain as the holy land of island biogeography, the veritable cradle of the



John Webber, *The Death of Captain Cook*, ca. 1781–1783.





Hand-colored plate from Honorius Philoponus's book *Nova Typis Transacta Navigatio: Novi Orbis Indiae Occidentalis*, 1621. Courtesy the Granger Collection.

science of life. Its nineteenth-century visitors, however, reckoned a verminography of some color and precision. Melville's rutter, for instance, included the following census of Albemarle, now famous for its picturesque and instructive finches:

<i>Men</i> .....	<i>none</i>
<i>Ant-eaters</i> .....	<i>unknown</i>
<i>Man-haters</i> .....	<i>unknown</i>
<i>Lizards</i> .....	<i>500,000</i>
<i>Snakes</i> .....	<i>500,000</i>
<i>Spiders</i> .....	<i>10,000,000</i>
<i>Salamanders</i> .....	<i>unknown</i>
<i>Devils</i> .....	<i>ditto</i>

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*Making a clean total of 11,000,000 exclusive of an incomputable host of fiends, ant-eaters, man-haters, and salamanders.*

On these terrible islands, "Mr. Tarnmoor" came to think of enmity itself as a kind of spiritual attainment. In one of the *isolatoes* there resident (name, Oberlus; mother, Sycorax; occupation, assassin), the beach-comber who created Ahab (himself of island origin) claimed to see "a creature whom it is religion to detest, since it is philanthropy to hate a misanthrope."

Lest all this seem merely idiosyncratic, the hyperbole of a notorious eccentric, it is worth lingering for a moment on a roughly contemporary masterwork of monstrous insularity, Victor Hugo's titanic *Travailleurs de la mer (Toilers of the Sea)* of 1866. Hugo pitched this novel as part three of a cosmological trilogy. Human beings, he alleged, confront a triad of terrifyingly immovable adversaries: the *ananke* of dogmas, the *ananke* of laws, and the *ananke* of things; or, to put it differently, religion, society, and nature. Hugo asserted (*post hoc*, it should be said) that he had confronted the first two of these fatalities in *Nôtre-Dame de Paris* and *Les Misérables* respectively, slicing fiercely through superstition and prejudice along the way. That left one final showdown: not humans versus the superhuman (i.e., God), or versus other humans (i.e., the City), but rather the human versus the *inhuman*. And this is indeed the theme of *The Toilers of the Sea*, which pits a man against an island, here making a cameo appearance as nothing less than *everything that stands against us*.

And what an island! We are abandoned (with our hero, Gillatt) on no ordinary cay. Hugo exhausts the ultraviolet extremities of purple prose in his effort to evoke these forbidding rocky outcrops, which he calls Les Douvres: the granite forms are a "Babelism," a "petrification

of the tempest," erected by a chained Titan (Enceladus) according to the plans of the dashing and careless architect known as "the Unknown"; the (non-human) inhabitants are "horrible, living secretions," resident on and in a sepulcher vast like a mountain and extravagant as a pagoda.

Will we stumble on yet another skull as we stride the pocked strand of this terrible wrack? No. Hugo ups the funereal ante: rather than kicking a simple bit of bone, Gillatt finds his way into a sea-cave at the center of the reef, its unholy sacristy:

*The cavern resembled the interior of an enormous and magnificent death's head; the vault was the cranium, the arch was the mouth; the sockets for the eyes were missing. The mouth, swallowing and disgorging the inflow and outflow of the sea, wide open to catch the full light of midday, drank in light, and vomited forth bitterness.*

The island *is* a skull. We are, it is clear, in a seriously bad place. Hugo sums it up thus: "a palace of death, in which Death was content." Erp.

One might pause here to consider whether death has really set up on a proper island. Though the Douvres are habitable (at least temporarily), Hugo generally calls them an *écueil*, which is usually translated into English as "reef." This word now tends to conjure up submarine images of tropical coral, but in Hugo's day both the English and the French terms could be used to refer to any low-lying or treacherous island, and most especially to those wave-washed labyrinths that seemed equal parts stone and sea. As the landform that most clearly refused to come clean about its terrestrial nature, the reef distilled the sour mash of ordinary island-anxiety into a potent elixir of nineteenth-century horror. The monster at the heart of Les Douvres was more than ordinary death, it was death by hypocrisy, fraud, and deceit. Concretely speaking, the beast in question is a big octopus (which changes color, alters form, lurks in wait) *and*, of course, Gillatt's archenemy, the hyper-evil Sieur Clubin (who is octopus food, in the end). Allegorically speaking, however, we are dealing here with all the bad faith of islands in general, and reefy islands above all.<sup>2</sup>

But no story better encapsulates the durable monstrosity of islands than the ramifying and bottomless tradition of the *Aspidochelone*, aka *Fastitocalon*, or, sometimes, *Jasconius*. Under these names and a dozen others (all lovingly stroked by the philologists) are preserved the many versions of that ancient tale of a mariner who comes upon an enticing island in the



Victor Hugo, *The Ortach Rock*, ca. 1864. In *The Laughing Man*, Hugo describes the rock, which is near Jersey and Guernsey: "The Ortach reef, all of a piece above the thwarted impact of the surging sea, rises straight up to a height of eighty feet. Waves and ships break on it."

middle of a forbidding sea. He and his men moor, taking refuge in the lee, and go ashore for wood and water. No sooner do they strike fire and lay on their kettle than the island quakes, rolls, and awakens. They are not ashore, but rather on the back of a great beast, which then proceeds (depending on the version of the story) to take them all to the bottom, or to catch fire and blaze a trail of smoke to the horizon, leaving its erstwhile visitors to scramble back to their craft.

The textual history of this folkloric gem twists from the Babylonian Talmud to the Zoroastrian hymn of *Zend-Avesta*, from Sinbad to the *Physiologus* (with entanglements in Al-Kazwini, Lucian, Nearchus, and Pontoppidan). Upon the true stemma of the story the experts cannot agree.<sup>3</sup> Are we talking of a huge serpent, a turtle, a giant fish, or a whale? Again, it is hard to say.<sup>4</sup> What is certain is that the monstrosity of the monster and the monstrosity of islands themselves are here tightly bound, and a scent of brimstone hangs in the air. The dutifully Christianizing *Physiologus* (a medieval bestiary) is quite clear on this, presenting the whole affair as an allegory of diabolical deception with a punchy moral: anchor not thyself in the devil's harbor. Which is to say: steer clear of islands.

Except, perhaps, when they steer to you. The most elaborate effort to dress this pagan tale in white robes is the version presented in the enormously popular "Voyage of Saint Brendan," which exists in Latin, Dutch, Anglo-Norman, old German, and a host of other medieval languages.<sup>5</sup> There, a globe-trotting Irish missionary

is presented by God with a convenient island that surfaces every Easter to allow him and his crew to come ashore and say the mass. It is, of course, the devil-beast, the asp-turtle, the Leviathan—broken, temporarily, into a lap-dog of the resurrection.

Brendan is predictably relaxed each year, but the whole thing makes his men exceedingly nervous. They are sailors, after all, who know better than to trust an island.

1 Interestingly, there is a good argument that the very possibility of anthropogenic environmental change was discovered on islands, which tend to have fragile ecosystems. See Richard Grove, *Green Imperialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

2 If this seems far-fetched, consider, by way of comparison, James Fenimore Cooper's equally weird tale of reef-madness from the same epoch, *Jack Tier, or the Florida Reef* (1848), which comes complete with mind-bending gender ambiguity and cruel betrayals by men named Spike and Clench.

3 See, *inter alia*, J. Runeberg, "Le Conte de L'Île-Poisson," *Mémoires de la Société Néo-Philologique à Helsingfors*, no. 3 (1902), pp. 343–395; Cornelia Catlin Coulter, "The 'Great Fish' in Ancient and Medieval Story," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, no. 57 (1926), pp. 32–50.

4 For the minutiae here, consider the introduction to Albert Stanburrough Cook, ed., *The Old English Elene, Phoenix, and Physiologus* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1919).

5 For representative texts, see W. R. J. Barron and Glyn S. Burgess, eds., *The Voyage of Saint Brendan* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002). Also useful is Clara Strijbosch, *The Seafaring Saint*, trans. Thea Summerfield (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000).