

## **An island of our own**

Estonia is situated on a piece of land between the Baltic Sea, the Bay of Riga and the Gulf of Finland. There are more than 1500 islands north, west and north-west of mainland Estonia. About half of them are inhabited. Approximately two thirds of the Estonian border is made up of island coastline. Islands have always been our border areas, throughout Danish, Swedish, Polish, German or Russian occupations. During the changing history, topographical isolation and existence as a border have been the two constant factors shaping the world of the islands.

Islands depend on the mainland, both politically and economically. Economic backwardness and cultural conservatism, occasionally even archaism, derived from insufficient communication have made these areas the country's borderland. National costumes are still worn in Kihnu; in Orissaare and Muhu schoolchildren walk around with embroidered cloth slippers, people speak the local dialects and want to see boiled potatoes, juniper beer, and dried fish on their table. Traditional skills and customs are much more alive and valued than on the mainland. To some extent, coastal people's traditional division of labour has survived on the islands as well. Men long for the sea, women take care of fields and cattle – earthly and local matters. Since the fishermen's work is seasonal, their employment is an historical problem – for centuries they have sought work outside the home. The islanders have built roads and houses, dug ditches and excavated limestone. The life of an island man has always been more mobile than their womenfolk's; men have crossed the borders, women have stayed behind.

With their constant border crossings, seafaring islanders have kept the island 'open' to overseas countries, brought back new knowledge, skills and experience. Many innovations started namely on the islands – such as using aniline

for dyeing wool or starting the first collective farms in Soviet Estonia (as well as stopping them).

The identities of land and sea are naturally not as clearly distinguished on Estonian islands as they are for example in Fiji (Toren 1995: 171–173), but the past analogy is even evident here to this day. In addition to work, Fiji also distinguished between vegetarian and meat dishes, liquids, everyday utensils, furniture and jewellery that belonged to either the sea or land and supplemented one another. The chief himself, arriving from the sea, was a man of both the sea and land (Sahlins 2002: 115).

Sea identity is associated with masculine view of life, an open horizon, storms and extreme situations, demanding heroic action, strength and perseverance. Sea identity contains a good measure of drama.

Land identity is connected with being settled down, closed security, refuge. It is land that must guarantee essential food, it is home, familiar and safe. These two identity types are certainly not the only ones, nor rigidly conflicting, but they are the main types of an island way of life that make it possible to understand the peculiarity of the island world.

The mythicised images dating from history of a hardworking and brave island woman who knits a sock during the rest pauses whilst ploughing the field, and of a man boldly weathering the storms to conquer or build in foreign lands, are still alive in our collective memory. Such images keep nourishing the islanders' self-consciousness and sustain the mainlanders' interest in the special people and landscapes of the islands. Junipers, stone fences, post mills, sheep on coastal meadows – these stereotype images have an emblematic meaning and have represented the islands in Estonian literature and art for centuries. Islanders are a coastal people. Coastline is the most significant place in economic, political, ideological and cultural function. Coastline – the boundary between the sea and land – is an area that simultaneously separates and unites them. Of those survived, the micro-toponyms of forms segmenting the coastline are among the oldest. Capes, peninsulas and coves still have anthropomorphic names as well: Estonian *nina* ('nose'), *silm* ('eye'), *säär* ('shin'), *kurk* ('throat'), *kael* ('neck'), etc. Here the bodily island meets cleansing and sanctifying water. Anthropologists think that water-related beliefs are especially ancient. The ancient Estonian Mother of the Sea was a divinity without shape or body, whereas the androgynous God of Land could have been male or female (Paulson 1997: 75–78).

Water and land gods are separated by the coastline, which is like a threshold, disruption of continuity in space, means of progressing from one sacral room to another. Hence the religious importance of coastline for ancient Estonians.

The islanders' personal identity is (and has been) multilevel and ambivalent – it designates being both an islander and an Estonian, but also belonging to a wider entity: Europe, the Kingdom of Denmark, Tsarist Russia or the Soviet Union. The continuous choice and the dynamics of emphasis in shaping an islander's personal identity have produced an attitude to life with active and intensive self-consciousness, both in a positive and negative sense. A great number of talented people – writers, artists, musicians – have emerged from the islands, but alcoholism and other border-area problems are acute there as well.

As a counterbalance to certain conservatism, the isolation of the islands has stimulated social activity. An island is like a state within a state and has, compared with other border areas, a clearer social place identity, more intense inner life and level of independence. For mainland Estonia, an island is an element of the state system that 'repeats' the big system's institutional structure and level of self-regulation. An island is the mainland's synecdoche. From the aspect of identity and communal feeling an island could be seen as a paradigmatic case of a small-scale society. Its own products, leaders and institutions have been the objects of continuous social interest and control.

The Soviet-time military regime in the border zone allowed constant border crossing only for the islanders, whereas the mainland people could do so with special permits (which can be regarded as political discrimination). This system increased the islanders' feeling of exceptionality and isolation. One positive outlet was nature reserves being established to counterbalance the polluting military missile and aeroplane bases. The island environment was also protected in an ethical and legal sense. Local crime cannot spread much in a closed community, and the touring criminals who turned up on an island were welcomed by a trap instead of a refuge. The islanders still leave their houses unlocked – a broom leaning against a door marks the absence of the inhabitants.

Perceiving one's own peculiarity and the otherness of strangers is already reflected in historical folklore. Kalevipoeg ('Son of Kalev') is the hero of all Estonia, but Western Estonian islands additionally retain their own legendary character of Suur Tõll ('Big Tõll'). According to *Henrici Chronicon Livoniae* (1224–1227), ancient Estonians' Taara was primarily the god of Saaremaa.

*Leedo*-fire, built on top of a pole, was different from the mainland St. John's Day bonfire on the summer solstice.

The islanders' familiar–alien relations are rather contradictory. An islander has several circles of aliens: mainlanders, their Russian and Latvian neighbours, people from overseas (first of all the Scandinavians, but also all other peoples living by the Baltic Sea), etc. In fact the opposition between one's own and the alien is weaker here than in other areas of mainland Estonia. Higher self-confidence and strong place identity enable wider openness. The others are respected because of their otherness, numerous visitors and owners of summer cottages are willingly helped and generously treated. When a mainland youngster manages to get through a Muhu Island-style 'initiation' – go to Pühadekari, an uninhabited islet 11 km into the sea – he becomes a much respected alien. On the other hand, when the poet and painter Aleksander Suuman temporarily gave up his status as a summer visitor and spent four years on Vilsandi Island, he faced communication problems. He had shed his status as an alien, but in order to become 'one of them' he would have needed to totally identify with the community life.

Relations between 'us and them' in all their complicity have influenced the aesthetic appreciation of an island's landscape. The aesthetic experience of one's own island is polyvalent. Live folklore is still there, stories and songs about places, events and people are remembered and presented to visitors. The creative work of summer holiday-makers, largely consisting of cultural people, has revealed 'views' of the islands' landscape for the islanders as well.

In addition to Estonian literature, art and music, there are romantic or realistic images of an island in the European cultural context, as well – from Avalon, the island of the blessed, to Robinson Crusoe, one of the most significant characters in European mythology, and the whole ensuing Robinsonade. All that put together has helped the islanders to acknowledge their island aesthetically, notice the peculiarity of their environment and see it through the eyes of a stranger. Becoming aware of the environment's aesthetic aspects has certainly strengthened the place identity on both the personal and social level. The island-consciousness of its inhabitants is the result of the joint effect of isolation and 'permeability' of the borders.

Like the islands to mainland Estonia, Estonia itself was a borderland to Russia. The political myth of Peter I cutting a window into Europe in the early 18th century was not only true for St. Petersburg but also for Estonia. Both fulfilled

the function of a window in the economic-political and cultural sense. Talking about culture it is possible to use the metaphor of an island – throughout the existence of the Soviet Union Estonia was considered an island of Western culture. The rest of the Soviet Union knew only the underground avant-garde, whereas in Estonia it was officially permitted or at least tolerated. For foreign observers, Estonia was a ‘shop window’. Estonia as an island of Western culture in a socialist sea of culture was a transparent and permeable border, relatively open in both directions, but nevertheless closing since Estonia was used as a negative example of ‘degenerate Western culture’. For many a Russian artist Estonia was a dream island and a refuge.

In conclusion, one can point out the main layers of meaning where the stratification and mutual contextual impact shape the image of one’s own island, provide it with values and the charm of ambiguity:

- (1) peculiarity of the island experience and life – customs, habits and survived traditions;
- (2) vital place-specific folklore;
- (3) image of the island in Estonian literature and art, the island’s reception on mainland Estonia;
- (4) image of the island in Western European literature and art, but also in social-political discourse.

For Estonians, an island is not so much a romantic and utopian dream place but rather a real location in a familiar landscape. Using the term of art culture, our notion of an island is predominantly realistic and, despite certain difficulties, based on accessible environmental experience. The experience of one’s own island is of ancient origin, familiar to most of us, including mainland people. Founded on collective experience, the island has become an archetypal metaphor that helps us to imagine and understand abstract social structures, either on the level of politics, morals, social or individual psychology. The metaphor of an island also comes in useful in tackling the urban environment. An island is a simile of a life style; an insular way of life or islandisation, however, is a social phenomenon and problem.

## Island among metaphors

The determining feature of an island's phenomenological order is the relation between the environment's closure–openness. An island has a closed openness. Such essential ambiguity of the environment, dual place identity enables the existential border situations and the related values such as settled–nomadic, protective–dangerous, static–dynamic, in–out, freedom–imprisonment, isolation–connection, solitude–unity, etc., to be experienced with stronger or weaker intensity. When all these blend and intertwine, a special life world is created.

An island is closed by the open sea that restricts freedom of movement. The open sea is dangerous in winter as well, as the roads on the ice-covered sea are only temporary and weathering blizzards and frost on the open sea landscape is certainly a special ordeal. An island is closed in both a temporal and spatial sense because the obstructed movement away from the island considerably changes the temporal structure of island life. The relation between outer and inner, working and free, everyday and festive, physical and mental time is different for a closed and open way of life. In order to compensate for the limited physical movement, mental 'travelling' by way of memory and imagination becomes more active. Isolation provides the predisposition for intellectual, including creative activities. Throughout the history, voluntary isolation has been a blessing and purpose for the intellectually active – be these meditating inhabitants of a monastery and desert saints or artists and writers.

An islander's experience of sea differs from that of a coastal fisherman living on the mainland. For an islander, crossing the sea is the only way out from being closed in, a habitual inevitability where the experience of the open sea only quantitatively differs from trips to a neighbouring island or the nearest mainland. The terrestrial grip that holds the coastal fisherman back is lacking or rather much weaker in an islander. With the advancement of technology this difference naturally decreases, although such primeval attitudes and the islanders' (especially men's) stronger sea identity are not going to vanish in any near future. The islanders are historically known as adventurous wanderers forever thirsty for new knowledge.

The open sea is alluring although dangerous. The open landscape on the mainland is less dangerous than a closed forest. Openness–closure on the sea and land have a different, often totally opposite value. Being inside or out on an island means being on the open sea, i.e. openness. Being inside a forest means

being enclosed. An islander has two different experiences of closed landscape – an island closed in the sea, and space closed in a forest. A person on the sea is outside his native island: he is on a boat or a ship. Boats and ships are like floating islands that enable the insular way of life to become mobile. In ancient Mesopotamia, the inhabitants at the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers made their reed-covered islands float. A building woven of growing reed with a floor that was tightened with clay could be made to float when the reed was cut at root level. The itinerant and settled way of life is also united in the Tongcquil village south of the Philippines where part of the villagers live permanently in boats that are floating houses, and the other part inhabits buildings standing on stakes in the middle of the sea. They are called sea gypsies. Boats, rafts and other crafts are an island's floating analogues and replacements. In Noah's Ark, the metaphors of the island and boat as rescuing refuges are united. Metaphors of islands and boats/ships are directed at each other and reversible. A small islet is just as insecure an abode as a boat, and the other way round.

In the general continuity of the sea, an island is a disruption. Terrestrial experienced locations mostly oppose the sea's abstract vagueness. Those on the sea have meaningful places as well – reefs, atolls, shallows, etc., that are connected with a former experience, with danger, yield, adventure, happiness or some other memory. These, too, are disruptions in the sea landscape; unlike the moving crafts (temporary places) they are permanent like the islands themselves.

A typical example of a closed landscape is the forest, especially the taiga or jungle. Visual closure is usually accompanied with the absence of a passage, a way through. A cleared path in the forest is both a path and a view. The coastal landscape of an island is visually open, and the water border only prevents the movement of the body, or to be more precise – it prevents the continuation of moving on foot.

The basis of an island paradox is the opposition between the experiences of sight and body. You can 'leave' the island by means of something – a boat, ship, raft, etc. The coastal water line is the border for a walker, whereas the border for the viewer is the horizon. It is also possible to swim away from the island, but in that way the chance to see something, the views and panorama all vanish. The bodily crossing of the coastline as a border sets limits to the field of vision. The contradiction between seeing and body does not disappear.

In Estonia, just like in Finland, Northwestern Russia and other Northern

temperate zone areas the surviving forests produce a half-closed/half-open type of landscape. The horizon in these parts of the world is primarily a boundary between the sky and the sea; a visual bordering of land and sky is a rare and infrequent experience. Our open landscape is a coastal landscape; for the inhabitants of the steppe, desert or tundra it is the open country that reaches up to the horizon. An islander thus has the experience of two simultaneous borders, different to the eye and senses of the body, and they do not coincide, as it happens in the forest. A free field of vision is also afforded to the one standing on top of a hill or a mountain, but you have to climb there. The mountain paths could be difficult to manage but this obstacle – mountain as a border – is nevertheless achievable on foot. A mountain as an island – a rocky island – has united a free field of vision with the absence of direct access. Such a place in landscape is extreme in its utmost isolation. A rocky island in the sea is topographically protected from strangers; a glance from the island checks the goings-on in the field of vision. A person standing on top of a mountain or up in the tower has the same chance of perception and protection (checking the view from above and centre), and so does the one in the middle of an open country when he has surrounded himself with protective walls, ramparts, moats and watchtowers which means that he has erected a fortification. A rocky island in the sea is a natural fortification, archetype of man-made strongholds and a paragon to medieval towns.

A mountain and an island are both semantically saturated metaphors, and by interlocking they amplify each other further. Geographically, an island is a mountain (or a hill) that emerges from the bottom of the sea to tower above the water. The structural similarity of the phenomenological order between such types of landscape as an island in the middle of the open sea, a mountain in the middle of an open country, or an oasis in the desert allows the similarity of metaphorical meanings of an island, mountain and oasis until total coincidence. These metaphors can be replaced with one another.

In the solidarity of his genius, in the icy coldness of existence at the top, Adrian Leverkühn, the protagonist of Thomas Mann's novel *Doctor Faustus*, finds himself in voluntary isolation, on a solitary island of his own making. Precisely the same goes for two characters in Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy* – Quinn (*City of Glass*) and Black (*Ghosts*). Isolation is destructive, identity vanishes and the outcome is the death or re-incarnation of a personality, identical in their meaning.



Individual islandisation, unlike insulation or isolation, is never absolute or technically perfect, to which these metaphors grown out of technology refer. Upon an intellectual's separation from society – either voluntarily chosen solitude on an island, on a mountain, in the desert or his urban home – he nevertheless retains both mental and physical connections with the world, either visual, linguistic or sonant. Creative work simultaneously unites and separates, being one of the most widely spread causes for individual islandisation. In its ultimate form this can lead to an extreme way of life, to fatal isolation.

An island can be an extreme environment, depending on its size and degree of separation from the mainland or other inhabited islands. The smaller an island's world, the more closed and reclusive it is. The furthest island is Chile's Easter Island, situated 3700 km from the South American continent. According to the press, the first murder in 15 years took place there at the end of 2002. A closed island is a secure place.

Security is one source of attraction of the holiday islands. The initially elitist holiday on an exotic South Sea island has become – due to urbanisation, i.e. as a result of industrial revolution – a hugely popular trend since the late 19th century. Social tensions in the city made private space on the islands highly valuable. 'Bicoastalism' (Gottdiener 2001: 141–146) is not typical only of Hollywood stars. Possessing two or more homes is a typical feature of the mobile way of life, neo-nomadism; it denotes a constant alternation and opposition of common and private space. An island is a place where people seek solitude; an island attracts and 'imprisons', offering a chance to live another life, 'freely' and with pleasure. Ibiza in the middle of the Mediterranean is a paradise for free adventurous spirits, for neo-hippies as well as for drug addicts. This type of island, however, may turn out to be a trap. It would be only too easy to find someone wanted by the police.

After all, Easter Island with its historical ebb and tide became a trap, too. The islanders themselves caused the destruction of the environment and were unable to escape from it. In the course of one thousand years (5th–15th centuries) they managed to establish one of the most highly developed societies in the world at the time. However, the population increase and people's cultural ambitions turned out to be too demanding considering the limited natural resources at their disposal. The society collapsed and descended into a near-barbarian state (Ponting 2002: 13–20). Paradise became hell, safe haven a trap.

In the course of conquering new continents, e.g. America or Australia, the nearby islands have always been taken first in order to set up bases there for further attacks. The world map is full of islands inhabited by military bases. Conquering the islands either at the beginning of the military campaign (arrival from sea) or at the end (arrival from land) has enormous tactical significance. One role of the island is to be a foothold, fortress and refuge for the invaders.

Besides occupying the islands, military history abounds with laying sieges to castles, fortresses and towns, breaking down the protective wall and isolating it by a dangerous circle, to be followed by the invasion. The idea of a siege is to cross, break and annihilate the existing border. The besieged town and conquered island are both traps whence it is difficult if not downright impossible to flee or escape. The new border established by the conqueror, the invader, imprisons those inside it. Violence turns the island from a secure refuge into a life-threatening trap and prison.

Historically, the island has been a means of exercising special socio-political power. In 1922, Soviet Russia decided to set up the Solovets camps called *Slon* on five White Sea islands. In six years' time, 38,000 people were already living there. Australia's colonisation started in 1788 with the establishment of Port Jackson, a colony of hard labour camps at Botany Bay on the East Coast. This English punitive colony was used until 1868. Australia was taken as an isolated island. Islands have often been employed as prisons – for example the legendary Alcatraz near San Francisco. Such islands are opposites to paradise islands with their utopian promise of happiness; utopia of freedom is replaced by dystopia of isolation. Violent separation and seclusion in an insular space evokes social claustrophobia, the open sea around it causes agoraphobia. An island's natural phenomenological order has been ruined, metaphoric deep meaning constricted.

An island gathers around it a whole cluster of latching metaphors. The most significant of them forms two intertwining, overlapping or rebounding chains of meaning. An island is a refuge, ship, fortress, Garden of Eden, place of happiness and peace in the world beyond or earthly future, etc. – thus a utopian site that offers sheltering isolation, freedom and happiness. An island is also a prison, a trap, stronghold of dangerous alien invaders – a dystopian location associated with fear, vulnerability and lost freedom.

In the metaphoric round dance around the island, a U-turn is possible. By

means of different metaphors we become aware of the island, and the other way round – by means of the metaphor of an island we know a fortress, ship, town, etc.

## **Conclusion**

Due to topographical dual essence the island is an ambivalent phenomenon. The island belongs to both the sea and land. The common feature of the phenomenological order, varying from island to island, is the relation between being open and closed and a special experience of a border – a special relation of unity/separation.

The precondition of an island's metaphorisation is its existence in environmental experience. Notwithstanding the set layers of cultural meaning that have made the initial typical form of natural environment transparent, the metaphor of an island has retained man's relation with nature.

The oldest layer of our environmental experience comes from nature. We continue to carry it with us while interpreting cultural and artificial environments, as well. An island as an archetypal metaphor forms the basis for the image of a geographical non-island even in its latent form. As a metaphor, an island is a generalising means of perception that creates a temporal and spatial whole. It has had a role in the self-determination of the universe, civilisations, countries, cities, but also of an individual, nation or culture. The Gilgamesh epic contains two types of islands. The immortal Utnapishti lived on an island separated from the inhabited world by deadly waters. The earth itself floated on an Ocean – a river that is simultaneously the sea of the world.

An island's metaphor is the key to understanding the essential similarity of different cultures. This does not only concern the island states (Hellas, Iceland, Japan, Great Britain, etc.), but the whole continents (America, Australia, Africa). Throughout history they have been united by an urge to open up, expand and join together, just as much as by an urge to close, be different and separate. Being open and/or closed is the most significant determinant and feature of an island's ontological status.

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## Saar

### Kokkuvõte

Topograafiline eraldatus ja piiripealsus on kaks püsitageurit, mis on kujundanud saarte elumaailma. Saarlase ruumikogemus erineb metsa- ja preeriaelaniku omast. Keskkonna olemuslik mitmetähenduslikkus ja intensiivne reaalse piiri kogemus on mõjutanud saarlaste eetilisi, esteetilisi jt. väärtushinnanguid. Mandri-Eesti piiril asuvatel saartel on igal oma piir, oma rannajoon, mis on saare kõige olulisem ja aktiivsem ala, olemata seejuures eluaseme koht.

Avameri on kutsuv, kuid ohtlik; saared on varjupaigad, sellesama avamere poolt suletud maastikud. Tänu oma topograafiliselt kahetisele loomusele on saar ambivalentne nähtus. Saar on osa nii merest kui maast. Saarte fenomenoloogilise korrastatuse aluseks on avatuse ja suletuse suhe ning eripärane piirikogemus – ühtsuse ja eraldatuse eriline kombinatsioon.

Saarega on seotud terve kobar üksteisega põimunud metafoore. Olulisimad neist moodustavad kaks omavahel seotud, osalt kattuvat või teineteiselt tagasi peegelduvat tähendusahelat. Saar on varjupaik, laev, kindlus, paradiisiaed, õnne ja rahu varjupaik, eemal muust maailmast või maapealsest tulevikust – niisiis utoopiline paik, mis pakub varjavat isolatsiooni, vabadust ja õnne. Kuid saar on ka vangla, lõks, ohtlike võõrvallutajate kindlus – düstoopiline paik, mis seostub hirmu, haavatavuse ja kaotatud vabadusega.