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Intimate Islands. A Return to the Island as the Rediscovery of Identity

*Ugo Vuoso**

Abstract: A composite and ambivalent idea of insularity can be found in geographic and cultural realities, in modern literature and fiction, as well as in the most ancient mythological contexts. A feature that has made islands one of the main topos in Western collective imagination. The recent literary works of many island writers, considerably contribute to expand the knowledge of insularity from the anthropological, psychological, and aesthetic point of view. The autobiographical novel by the Danish-Faroese writer Siri R. H. Jacobsen offers a number of helpful cues to describe the conflicts of identity related to the islands and the islanders who live far away.

Keywords: insularity, identity processes, insular literature, faroe, jacobsen s.r.h.

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D. H. Lawrence at the beginning of the story “The man who loved islands”, writes: “There was a man who loved islands. He was born on one, but it didn’t suit him, as there were too many other people on it, besides himself. He wanted an island all of his own: not necessarily to be alone on it, but to make it a world of his own. An island, if it is big enough, is no better than a continent. It has to be really quite small, before it FEELS LIKE an island;” (2017, p. 6).

A need to control one’s surroundings underlined also by Bill Holm, in his *Eccentric Islands*:

“Islands seduce us because at times the universe seems too big for us. We want to make it a bit smaller, so as to examine it, to see what it’s made of, and where is our place in it. An island is a microcosm. We cannot assess trees, animals, humans, nor insects or orchids, or our own planet, small as it may seem, but we imagine that the creature of an island can be assessable, and sometimes they can.” (2002, p. 10).

This is a concept shared mainly on the continent, where islands are perceived as bits of land surrounded by sea, faraway lands, isolated in fact. Outskirts whose only reason for existing is their natural and ancestral condition. Imaginative rather than geomorphologic.

The mythical and symbolic value of the islands reflects the functions and conditions in which they actually exist.

The varied and complex destinies of small islands are determined by their isolation, by their distance from the coasts of a continent or of other islands, their internal market and costs of transport, or by their political status (independent, semi-independent or dominated by a nearby metropolis), (Sanguin, 1997; Taglioni, 2006; Apostolopoulos et al., 2002).

This condition of separateness and inaccessibility has produced the idea of insularity, a concept that relates distance to the known characteristic of an island to sustain its own type of life - in some cases, unique in its kind - according to an archaic model strengthened by an implant of naturalistic origin.

A status which highlights the vulnerability of these places, conditioned and constrained by socio-economic and structural limits and ties (Doumenge, 1984; 1985), even if some islands, thanks to the development of effective strategies, can be counted among the most prosperous economies in the world (Baldacchino, 2004; Poirine, 2007).

Islands are at the same time micro and macro systemic, a peculiarity that invites islanders to basically live in a *Gemeinschaft*, in the socio-anthropological and economic sense. A countertrend compared to an invasive and globalized *Gesellschaft*.

Sometimes, in open opposition to the dynamics of globalization, the social groups of an island give life to relationships and alliances among the

different factions and groups that create social and cultural areas, often divergent, as regards politics and religion, sports, linguistic codes, traditions:

“In Malta the tribe-like division in politics, the village *partiti* divisions in honour of different saints (if not in honour of different titles of the same saint) and the rift between supporters of Italian and English football are excellent examples of this phenomenon.” (Vassallo, 2015, p. 27).

It seems that the geographic boundary has a decisive influence on the life of island communities:

“Living in a restricted space makes it easy for people to know one another, and even though not everyone knows all the other islanders personally, of course, it is easy for them to understand the sub-system in which a person belongs, and to “locate” an individual in some sort of network which everyone apprehends at least in part. A communal sense of belonging is much more prevalent in small, rightly knit societies. Life is all “of a piece” vis-à-vis outsiders, much more so than in larger societies. What is regarded as deviance is relatively easily located and curtailed through stigmatization, labelling and other social processes that make purported deviants much more visible.” (Vassallo, 2015, p. 26).

Within the constant dialectics, which include both the *topoi* of tourist or natural paradises and those of uninhabited and inhospitable places, the many island typologies are built. These are analysed by the science of islands or nissology (Moles, 1982) from the point of view of psychology of space in the belief that:

“(The) islands offer a particularly good illustration of those essential relationships between the behaviour of living beings and the environments in which they reside. It suggests that the particular geographic forms within which one lives necessarily imply a particular image of the world which, in turn, valorizes – positively or negatively – certain topological structuration of that world.” (Moles, 1982, p. 281).

Over the islands, on top of the local images and peculiarities, projections gather that derive from the determining continental matrix that places on the islands, ever surrounded by mythological and nostalgic mists, the descendants of frugal communities who will not be incorporated by civilization and modernity.

Non-islanders schematize island life in a romantic light, blending the many characterizing myths, within a single archetype identifying it as the sheltered place where they can rediscover their own roots surrounded by a spontaneous and maternal nature, while sea or water serve as a primigenial and reassuring element.

“Islands metaphorically replicate the maternal womb in which the original iteration on the individual floats in serenity and is fully protected. In some mysterious way, the water that surrounds islands evokes emotions that are linked to the need to look for solutions to problems of ultimate meaning, of the meaning of life and death. The resultant attitudes are those of liberation, of shedding the inhibitions of “normal life”. This is especially true of islands which have developed as places where tourists flock to. The example of Ibiza is perhaps typical in this regard.” (Vassallo, 2015, p. 25).

This composite and ambivalent idea of insularity is present in literature and in contemporary fiction as well as in the most ancient mythological contexts, a characteristic that makes the island one of the main topos of Western collective imagination.

According to the myths of Babylonian creation, Uta-Napishtim and his wife, once they had obtained goods, animals, riches and immortality, decided to settle down on an island, leaving civilization behind. Greek mythology is rich with references to islands: from the Elysian Fields, located on White Island (Neso Leuke), to the Islands of the Blessed (Neso Makaron) reserved to the Initiates. The Arthurian cycle places essential elements of that mythology on the many islands of its mythical geography. The literary and philosophical tradition later developed stratified and substantial images of the Island: from Thomas More’s *Utopia* to Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and Enid Blyton’s *Kirid Island*, an exemplary literary work, which has fed the imagination and the cultural taste of many young Anglo-Saxon readers.

The Islands recounted and “inhabited” in literature (and in the most polygenic fiction), seem capable of generating good margins of knowledge and significant interpretative contributions to the concepts of insularity, new objects of study and scientific elaboration that place the cultural character of islands at the centre of their interests¹.

Research approaches of this type tend to identify and interpret the historic-literary, and therefore a socio-anthropological, substratum of islands lost in the middle of the sea, as they move along the narrative and mythical horizon. They are therefore difficult to identify and trace, as suggested by the sense and value of that *Insula Perdita* which is the destination of Saint Brendan’s paradigmatic journey. Since then our fantasies on island-locations wonder among the myths of Never Never Land (an absent island), of an island that is too much there (a surplus island), an island that can’t be found

¹ Islands Dynamics is a network dedicated to the scientific study of the islands. Look at <https://www.islanddynamics.org/>
The present contribution derives from the insularity research program promoted by Usri Studi e Ricerche Isola d’Ischia (Naples Health Authority 2) and the Ceic Institute.

(the myth of inaccuracy) and that of an island not rediscovered (the myth of loss).

These four different stories, according to the semiological analysis of Umberto Eco (2011), circumscribe the entire insular mythical-narrative universe. Never-never land is actually a composite folks tale category, as it contains both the artifice of the island that exists (as described for example in J. Verne's and Stevenson's literary work) and that of the island that does not exist (by definition: Peter Pan). The insular surplus seems to concern above all the exemplary case of Ceylon-Taprobane, already mentioned by Pliny. The superimposition and the duplication of Ceylon-Taprobane are very clear in Mandeville's travel reports. Porcacchi credits Tapobrane with riches as well as biological and natural peculiarities, while for T. Campanella it's the location of his *The City of the Sun*. Revitalizing the insular surplus, T. More will position his Utopia somewhere between Ceylon and America. The island to be searched, however, is the one described in the *Navigatio sancti Brandani*.

Saint Brendan and his mystic sailors discovered many islands. But the island of the Blessed, a sort of earthly paradise, is the one that instils the wish to find it in those who, even during the Renaissance, saw it reproduced on the maps of the time. In time, the Island of the Blessed disappeared, it got lost and that's why the desire to find it again became stronger.

A serious navigation problem made it impossible to find the islands. In fact, seafarers used to identify islands by sight and their geomorphologic profiles. Only with the determination of longitude (in addition to latitude, already used for some time for sailing), a technique that was generally adopted in the eighteenth century, islands could be placed on the nautical charts more accurately. And they could be found.

Once the islands can be looked for and identified, the expressive typology of the newfound island is revived and defined with new methods.

The literature on the subject of islands becomes more consistent and more qualified thanks to the contribution of the numerous island writers.

North-European literature is extremely representative from this point of view, as writers in the local languages, translated into a number of other languages, greatly contribute to spread the culture and image of the Nordic and Arctic islands and those aspects of otherness which, in the universe of insularity, have always found their most pregnant objectification.

The autobiographic novel by Siri Ranva Hjelm Jacobsen (2016) is a valuable working plan to identify the functions and values of the culture of the islands within the broader cultural processes that mark our time.

In the liminal Faroe, the contradictory dynamics of globalization fade and crumble against solid neo-identity resilience and atavistic structural persistence. Migrations, political autonomy, cultural resistance and a strong

sense of community are the main themes of the narrative thread along which the biographical narration is developed.

The journey to the green and windy Suduroy, the southernmost of the Faroes, on the occasion of the death of his grandmother, is a return.

For the family of the protagonist, who had emigrated leaving their island roots to pursue their aspirations, this is one of the comebacks to the home-island, while for the writer it represents a haven she was not born in but had always heard talked about as home.

Although she is not an islander, the protagonist feels that she belongs in that world made of landscapes, family legends, linguistic registers. Faroese is different from the Danish language, perceived as foreign and continental: Faroese is the only language that can be used for the island sagas.

This emblematic journey to the island is actually a research of the places, the feelings and intimate landscapes that are encountered, or that emerge to consciousness, as lemmas of the arcane and powerful language of identity and belonging.

“Those who have no roots, who are cosmopolitan - wrote Ernesto De Martino - travel towards the death of passion and human feelings: to avoid being provincial one needs a village in one’s memory, where images and heart can always return to and science and poetry shape into the universal voice.” (De Martino, 1975, p. 6).

The protagonist, suspended between Denmark and the islands, during her trips and the many flashbacks appearing to investigate her grandparents’ life, begins thus to understand something more about her own lack of roots and reflects on the geographical and philosophical meaning of home. To bear her company is the deep melancholy of her grandfather, who had turned his back on a fisherman’s life at the Svalbard in the Arctic Ocean, to defeat a great loneliness and build his future as an engineer. Melancholy, immigration, suspended between two worlds: the insular universe, made of stories and small and strong relationships, is not subordinate to the continental one because, in reality, no island is ever an island.

The Faroe Islands have an independent government that operates “outside Europe”, with their own Parliament and flag, white red and blue, called Merkio: “of blood the cross, blue the sea and white is the foam on the homeland shores.”

The small island nation inhabited by cod fishermen enhances its remoteness by accenting its folk culture, language and traditions that merge and strengthen its community and give insularity a conscious centrifugal direction because “down there, under the sea, all lands meet.”

Through the deforming lens of the ambiguous island marginality, Jacobsen recounts, through the metaphor and the reality of his newfound island, the reconstruction of a complex and deflagrating identity process.

It is the generations of migrants who interpret the cultural mutations of the island. There are at least three types in the history of the island, the latest being:

“It’s too short a blanket: they are totally informal and free from cultural influences or they are only half at home, mastering only half the language, building an identity in the furrow of the plough on the rock, with the arrival date of their blood stamped on their forehead like a tattoo. But they drew the tattoo by themselves, with a pen, and they say their name proudly among foreigners, but in a whisper among their fellow countrymen. The “poor-me”, the “I’m alone”, generation. The generation neither-nor. The third one is an invisible, theoretical generation, whose skin blends with the upholstery, and whether they know it or don’t, they bear their journey as a loss.” (Jacobsen, 2018, p. 78).

With the last generation the islands return to be ambiguously distant territories, part of a whole whose centrality is somewhere else. A globalized and dissociating spatiality that makes those, who sever the threads of belonging, vulnerable. And inexorably transforms them into melancholy solitudes.

On the blue mountain overlooking Vagur, in the summer days of Saint John many tourists become lost. They usually are women who are “captured” by the mountain:

“They go up there and disappear. I think I had heard of these women who go to the north to die. A suicide vacation. A kind of nostalgia. Maybe they brought it along during the whole journey, or it fell upon them suddenly, in the North Atlantic air.” (Jacobsen, 2018, p. 76).

It is perhaps nostalgia that drives the anthropological mechanisms of the insularity experienced, sought or found.

The echoes of the stories about the hulda, the inhabitants of the woods and of the ancient sagas, is a counterpoint for the emotion caused by the discovery of the home-island which very nearly resembles the rediscovery of one’s identity, of being part of a whole felt or thought of as closed, that can even be recognized in the way the Faroese women move their hands as they knit.

If Siri Jacobsen, when he rediscovers the island, knows that he is not pursuing an abstract and elusive identity, he also knows he is looking for “something easier to obtain, that is a bit of coherence, continuity, stability” (Remotti, 2010, P. XXI).

The island, a parallel world where man is tested, a place of training and the theatre of utopias and dystopias, the finishing line of the narrative, does not seem to renounce its deformed centrality.

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