

Preamble

“Islands have always fascinated the human mind,” perhaps because fascination “is the instinctive response of man, the land animal, welcoming a brief intrusion of earth in the vast overwhelming expanse of sea.” So wrote Rachel Carson in her best-selling book *The Sea around Us* (1951).¹ Islandology argues that there is more to it than that.

In Chapter 1, we begin this argument by defining islands and isolating certain definitions, including the definition of *definition*. After pinpointing the meaning of what logician John Venn calls an “island of meaning,” we explore ways of speaking about actual islands and consider how human imagination of islandness has variably informed cultures. Islandness, we discover, resides in a shifting tension between the definition of *island* as “land as opposed to water” and the countervailing definition as “land as identical with water.” This tension is linked with notions of “social space,” both positive and negative.

The “critical topography” or “philosophical topography” of place (*locus*) involves more than just the real estate slogan “Location, location, location.”² The leading modern geographer, Immanuel Kant, in *Physical Geography*, defines *geography* in terms of nature and politics, distinguishing among the physical objects of study: geography (the entire world), topography (single places), and chorography (regions), as well as orography (mountains) and hydrography (water areas).³ Spatiality, as we will see, influenced Kant’s thinking in general,⁴ including his epistemology, his topography of mental faculties,⁵ and his notion of worldly unity and ownership, as discussed in the *Metaphysics of Morals*.⁶

Said the Sicilian islander and mathematician Archimedes, in the third century BC, “Give me a place to stand on and I can move the earth.”⁷ Understanding islandness requires that place to stand (*pou stō*). Pappus of Alexandria, who reported this statement of Archimedes, was a specialist in projective geometry with a focus on points at infinity on horizons. The limiting beach, which everywhere surrounds dry land on Earth, likewise defines the sea’s coasts.

Suppose oneself, then, at a beach. The coastline marks the cutoff where land ends and water begins. If one believes that one can walk or sail around the land perimeter and end up where one began, then one is probably on an island. (In this sense, an island is an *insula*: “solid earth [*terra firma*] surrounded on the horizontal plane by liquid water [*aqua liquida*].”) If one believes one cannot go all around, or circumambulate, that land, then one probably does not call it “island.” One does not always know, of course, whether one is on an island or on something else, maybe a peninsula or mainland. That uncertainty was especially common before the exploration of the world was complete. On the Europeans’ first sighting of Guanahani (modern Bahamas) or Maracaibo (modern Venezuela), who really knew for sure whether or not the “terra firma” where they might land would be circumnavigable? Floating? Animate? The world, as we will see, remains much unexplored. Just so, we will see how naming a place like Guanahani—or, indeed, any land or water place on Earth—remains much vexed.⁸

ΔΩΣ ΜΟΙ ΠΑ ΣΤΩ ΚΑΙ ΤΑΝ ΓΑΝ ΚΙΝΑΣΩ

Give me a place [*pou*] to stand and I will move [*kinaso*] the Earth [*gē*].

For this dictum of Archimedes, there are many translations. (1) Some translators rely on the Greek-language version passed down to us by John Tzetzes. Francis R. Walton thus translates Archimedes’ *kinēsis* as “move with a lever,” and Bram Stoker renders *pou* as “fulcrum.”¹ Political and social theorists like to emulate this interpretation. Thomas Paine, in *The Rights of Man* (1791), thus calls the American Revolution an Archimedes moment, and the media theorist Marshall McLuhan, in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964), calls electronic technology the Archimedean fulcrum of the modern world.² Such preemptory simile between the natural earth and the human world seems too soon to drive out modern geography’s attempt to understand the logical links between earth and world. (2) Among those who seek to head off the dangers of a mechanical interpretation is René Descartes in his *Meditations*. He translates *gē* as *terra integra*, which the Duc de Luynes (who translated Descartes’s Latin into French) represents geologically as *globe terrestre*.³ (3) My translation of Archimedes’ *pou* as “place,” in the passage quoted, evokes Archimedes’ topography (from *topos*, meaning “place”). At the same time, it recalls such other translations of Archimedes’ *pou* as “somewhere” and “where.”⁴ (4) There is also the more abstract geometrical meaning of *pou* put forward by Descartes in his Latin-language *Meditations* and in the French-language translation by the Duc de Luynes. There *pou* is rendered substantively as *punctum* or *point*. Descartes modifies this *point* with two words lacking in the Greek as passed down to us by Pappus of Alexandria (which is my source text), but suggested in the later versions offered by Plutarch. (4a) The first word is *immobile* (immovable). Plutarch’s interpretation of the dictum already had it that “if there were another

From the viewpoint presented in the last paragraph, an island is “land on which, when one walks along its coastline in one direction, one eventually gets back to where one started.” This perambulatory viewpoint distinguishes sharply the “edge” or “coast” between land and sea, but usually ignores how the difference between earth and water already implies their identity and, in fact, how the word *island* already also means “sea-land” (*is-land*), or the place, no matter how small or large, where water and earth are one and the same.

Islandness, in this sense of identity confronting difference, informs primordial issues of philosophy: how, conceptually, we connect and disconnect parts and wholes, for example, and how we connect and disconnect one thing and another. Whether islandness, and hence geography, is fundamental to philosophy and its history or is merely contingent or exemplary is a question we pursue in *Islandology*. If there were not islands already, as we will see, it would it be necessary for human beings—the logical and political creatures that we are (or strive to be)—to

earth, by going into it [Archimedes] could remove this [earth]” (as rendered by John Dryden). The hypothesis involves a mariner’s notion of infinite space. In islandic terms, that would entail a partly otherworldly bridge linking a movable object with an immovable one; in planetary terms, that would mean a spaceship space-traveling between a kinetic object and a nonkinetic one. (4b) Descartes likewise modifies the Archimedean *point* as “firm.” This modification suggests the heavenly firmament even as it requires a “firm spot,”⁵ which is how many later translators render “*pou*.” *Firm* serves to suggest an imagined *terra firma*: a “continent,” “mainland,” or “dry land” in the midst of an infirm universe or all but boundless ocean. The Sicilian island mathematician Archimedes, famously concerned with issues of buoyancy, flotation, and horizon in the service of Syracusan tyranny, put forth a vision of a universal archipelago on which, thanks to cartographical coordination and perspectival calculus, human understanding might really come to stand.

1. Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, trans. Francis R. Walton, Loeb Classical Library 409 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), vol. II, bk. 26. Walton is working with his own translation of John Tzetzes, *Cbiliades* 2:129–130; see also Mary Jaeger, *Archimedes and the Roman Imagination* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 104. Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1897), chap. 25.

2. Thomas Paine: “What Archimedes said of the mechanical powers, may be applied to Reason and Liberty: ‘Had we,’ said he, ‘a place to stand upon, we might raise the world.’ The revolution of America presented in politics what was only theory in mechanics.” Paine, *The Rights of Man* (London: H. D. Symonds, 1792). Marshall McLuhan: “Archimedes once said, ‘Give me a place to stand and I will move the world.’ Today he would have pointed to our electric media and said, ‘I will stand on your eyes, your ears, your nerves, and your brain, and the world will move in any tempo or pattern I choose.’ We have leased these ‘places to stand’ to private corporations.” McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

3. René Descartes, *Meditations de prima philosophia* (Paris: Michel Soly, 1641), Meditation II, para. 1. For the French translation: Duc de Luyne, trans., supervised by Descartes, *Méditations métaphysiques* (Paris: J. Camusat & P. Le Perit, 1647).

4. For “somewhere”: Ivor Thomas, *Greek Mathematical Works: Aristarchus to Pappus*, Loeb Classical Library 362 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1941), 2:35. For “where”: John Bartlett, *Familiar Quotations*, ed. Emily Morison Beck, 14th ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1968), 105. This version of the Archimedes dictum comes from Pappus of Alexandria, *Synagoge* [Collection], bk. 7.

5. See, for example, *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1953).

invent them. This book thus names “islandology” the discourse that marks off human beings not only as children of the main, understood as both “land” and “sea,” but also as creatures of the natural shore who inhabit, at once, both positive and negative space.

In the previous discussion, we considered a patch of land when we are standing on it, so that it seems possible to begin immediately its attempted circumambulation. Consider now a patch of land, seen at a distance from across the waters, as if we were on another patch of land, or imagine a ship (or a “floating island”), or picture a peninsula that, without our knowing, is connected horizontally with the land whereon we stand. For all we know, we cannot get there without going underwater (like seals, submarines, or passengers in underwater tunnels) or without traveling on the surface of the water (like water striders, surface ships, or pedestrians on pontoon bridges) or without flying above that surface (like birds, airships, or passengers on airships). We dream of swimming now instead of walking.

Swimming is understood here as *natation*, an English-language term that is cognate with the ancient Greek *nēsos* (usually translated as “island”).⁹ The term emphasizes the sense in which main and mainland are one and how all stations, including Earth and the place where the little boy sits in *A Child’s Geography of the World* (Illustration 6), are equally insular and mainland. To understand islandology after the first scientific Age of Exploration means not only looking out to sea from the viewpoint of land but also looking out to land from the viewpoint of sea. It means wondering whether there is any safely stable harbor, *pou stō*, wherefrom even to look out.

The study of islands, as isolates known and unknown, is not new. There have been dozens of approaches to the topic. Some focus on particular colonial and postcolonial settings—as does Rebecca Weaver-Hightower in *Empire Islands* (2007).¹⁰ Others speculate on how thinking about islands encourages scientific hypotheses and literary fictions—as does Jill Franks in *Islands and the Modernists* (2006).¹¹ A few provide psychological examinations of persons who suffer from island mania—as does Jill Franks in “Men Who Loved Islands” (2008).¹²

Professional geographers study the smallness of islands in relation to the largeness of mainlands,¹³ examine the effect of bridging islands with mainlands, scrutinize the sociology of modern tourism,¹⁴ investigate specific environmental issues,¹⁵ and study the characteristics of insular cartography.¹⁶ Richard Grove, in *Green Imperialism* (1991), shows how global politics exacerbates islandic environmental issues.¹⁷ The anthropological historian Marshall Sahlins, in *Islands of History* (1985), stresses the intellectual advantages of an island-centered historiography of mobility.¹⁸ Fernand Braudel argues in *The Mediterranean* (1949) that “the events of history often lead to the islands.”¹⁹ And John R. Gillis, in *Islands of the Mind*:

How the Human Imagination Created the Atlantic World (2004),²⁰ discusses how conceiving islands in terms of long distance helps explain the historical process of continental discovery. Islandology, in its study of how we speak about islands, recognizes these approaches—and many more to be cited in the chapters that follow—and, at the same time, builds on them.

Part 1 of *Islandology* includes, in Chapter 1, a study of definitions and isolations, with special attention given to the horizontal plane. Chapter 2 moves the focus to the vertical plane, and an examination of animate and floating islands follows in Chapter 3. The difference made by differing material substances and differing states of matter is the subject of Chapter 4.

Part 2 focuses on kinds of geographic places and concomitant human constructions. Chapter 5 concerns island-cities, among them Venice and Hormuz. Chapter 6 focuses on the politics of island toponymy and sovereignty. Chapter 7 considers how islands, real and imaginary, provide scientific, literary, and political hypotheses for thinking about the world (Thomas More, Jonathan Swift, Daniel Defoe, and Charles Darwin). Finally, Chapter 8 investigates the ways that ancient Greek geography informs foundational epic poetry (Hesiod and Homer), tragedy (Euripides, Sophocles, and Aeschylus), and dialectical thinking (Plato and Aristotle).

Parts 3 and 4 provide a broadly based double “case study” for many of the subjects introduced in Parts 1 and 2, even as they redevelop them. Part 3 provides a historical, textual, biographical, and geographical analysis of *Hamlet*, Shakespeare’s Scandinavian play. *Hamlet* is arguably the best-known work in world literature, but its islandological structure and meaning heretofore have been unrecognized. Its contribution to global thinking—and to the study of islandness—has not yet been digested by geographers and other theorists. These chapters on *Hamlet* answer for the first time the question, Why does Shakespeare move the distinctly continental setting of the old Hamlet story, mainland Jutland, to a definitively different setting, island Zealand (sea land)? They show what this particular difference between mainland and island makes, not only to our understanding of this one work of literature, however brilliant and influential in its own right, but also to the more general geographic comprehension of the polity and nature of human beings.

The specific viewpoints of these chapters include a study of the *holmgang*—an originally Scandinavian English-language word referring to a struggle for island possession or a struggle that takes place on an island—and an examination of how islandness informs human conceptualization of the body and organization of the family. When it comes to dramatic stagecraft itself, we will see that the peninsular aspect of Shakespeare’s stage is crucial. When it comes to politics as statecraft, we

discover Shakespeare's needfully esoteric meditation on the origins of British parliamentary democracy in the *ting*—another originally Scandinavian English word that indicates a popular meeting held for legislative purpose or political election. The essential location of the *ting*, as we will see, is the *tingholm*.

Part 4, likewise a series of representative case studies for understanding islandology, discusses two interrelated ways in which mainland German national thinkers, mostly in the nineteenth century, sought to discover or create a unified German nation. First, they sought the “German future” reflected in the history of island Britain, a search that included defining the German character in terms of Shakespeare's Danish island play. Second, they discovered a true “German past,” not so much on the islands of ancient Greece, where eighteenth-century thinkers had focused their attention, as on the islands of the Baltic Sea, especially Rügen and other islands long inhabited by various Scandinavian groups.

Among philosophical islandic thinkers we consider in Part 4 are Johann Gottfried von Herder and Friedrich Nietzsche, as well as the Nazi ideologue Carl Schmitt. Among painters is Caspar David Friedrich, and among composers is Richard Wagner, whose opening scene of *The Ring of the Nibelung* at an island reef, taken together with Charles Darwin's island-centered geological and biological theories of evolution, marks a turning point in modern islandology.

Islandology engages problems of political import: the modern tendency to confuse circumferential natural borders with political ones and the ancient inclination to except circumferential seas from imperial sovereignty. Both problems focus on issues of pressing environmental concern. A reexamination of the Darwinian theory of coral island reefs and volcanic islands in relation to insular plate tectonics conceives anew the pressures of “global warming,” for example. Likewise, contextualized interpretations of movies, among them the Danish *Smilla's Sense of Snow* and the German-American *S.O.S. Eisberg*, rethink the melting of the polar ice caps in terms of both different states of matter and different material substances.

Nineteenth-century thinkers, both American and German, often relied on tendentious and needless theories of climatic and geographic determinism; this reliance, no matter how productive in its way, brought with it needless and unhappy political consequences. Most likely, the extensive closings of departments of geography worldwide—especially in the United States—during the latter part of the twentieth century had some of the “value-neutral purposes”—beneficent at least in the short term—that backers of the then-competitive disciplines (international politics, comparative literature, earth and planetary sciences, linguistics, and environmental studies) often articulated. Yet none of these disciplines has recovered the global and philosophical vision of geography, now so much required, that sees all lands and seas on Earth as participants in a single archipelago.

THE WORD *islandology* provides this volume with its title. It refers both to the *rhetoric* of speaking about islands and to the *science* of islands. (The suffix *-logy* indicates no less a way of speaking, as for *brachyology* [a condensed expression]²¹ and *tautology* [a proposition which is unconditionally true . . . by virtue of its logical form], as a field of study *theology* [the study of God].)²² Where the subject matter is the definition of *definition*, as it is in Chapter 1, the rhetoric and the science verge on the same. How the logical definition of *definition* merges with the geographic definition of *island* is part of the science of rhetoric. *Islandology*, in this context, is one of those neologisms that, no matter how awkward, has its place in the language. In Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), Angel Clare comments on Tess's imaginings in this way:

What are called advanced ideas are really in great part but . . . a more accurate expression, by words in *logy* . . . of sensations which men and women have vaguely grasped for centuries.²³

The introduction of the word *islandology* combined institutional aspects with a geopolitical impetus. In 1945, Raine Edward Bennett founded the American Institute of Islandology (Washington, DC), partly in response to his island experiences during the two world wars. The institute's first purpose was determining whether Australia was an island or a continent. While Bennett said that Australia was "the world's largest island," an Australian newspaper reporter probably had it right when he said, "We [Australians] [wi]ll want [the nomenclature] both ways . . . as the smallest of the large [continents] and the largest of the small [islands]."²⁴ This droll impasse caused the institute's founders to stumble out of the starting gate, which explains why the institute's second goal was never accomplished: assembling and publishing a fifteen-volume encyclopedia of islands with a worldwide focus.

Half a century later, other scholars published an *Encyclopedia of Islands*,²⁵ which presented no general "islandology" of a philosophical and historical nature. The editors of this modern encyclopedia use *island* loosely to mean "any discrete habitat isolated from other habitats by inhospitable surroundings." For them, it seems to mean *biosphere*. Yet the word *island* has, as we will see, cross-cultural political, geographic, and cultural baggage, in a different sense from that of the presumably value-neutral word *biosphere*, whose inventor, the geologist Eduard Suess, defined in his study of the Alps (1875) as "the place on Earth's surface where life dwells."²⁶ (Vladimir Vernadsky, in his 1926 *Biosphere*, teased out of Suess's notion the idea that the *geosphere* is where there is only inanimate matter.)²⁷ Such ways of defining *island* have no determinate reference either to the interaction of land with water (geology) or to the different ways of understanding that interaction among cultures and logical systems. In that sense, these scholars avowedly

apply an island “metaphor” to a palpably noninsular setting, whether biospherical or otherwise characterized.²⁸ (In much the same way, for example, the geographer David Harvey uses *island* to mean “a group of people living in wealthier fashion than their neighbours” and passes over the traditional meanings of the word, as if the traditional discipline and its geopolitical aspect were of no consequence.)²⁹

Edmund Burke, in *A Philosophical Inquiry* (1759), says, “When we define, we seem in danger of circumscribing nature within the bounds of our own notions.”³⁰ The logical definition of *island* is linked with the logical circumscription of definition in a way that cannot avoid the linguistics and natural history of islands.