Me, You and my Old Coat: Communication Acts in Estonian Runosongs

The Estonian runosong tradition forms a branch of larger Finnic tradition known among most of the Finnic ethnic groups. Especially in the Estonian area, but also elsewhere, it is peculiar to this tradition to express many things through the eyes of lyric first-person “I”. This does not apply to all songs, but still is a prevalent tendency in Estonian songs. The lyric “I” can be a narrator, or the song text may be conceived as a communication act, with the intention to directly influence the listener: Let us go and do things!; Shut up you unworthy!; Grow, rye!

There also exist song types that are usually sung in the third person, without the engagement of the singer; these are more often narrative songs and songs about animals. In the Karelian tradition, where mythological narratives prevail among recorded song texts, the plot is usually told in the third person, with the mythological singer Väinämöinen as the main character. When the same motifs occur in Estonian tradition, the lyric “I” of the singer is usually engaged as a mythological character itself or somehow taking part in the actions. For example, in the song about creating the world, the bird who lays its eggs and later on distributes the nestlings as sun, moon, stone, etc., is looking for a nesting place in “our backyard”. In brief, the main character in Estonian runosongs is “I”, the singer.

Another feature reflected in runosong tradition is an animistic worldview present in the Finnic belief system. As all the world is considered to be animated, the communication acts in runosongs do not happen only between humans, but also between singer and the entities or phenomena in the environment: trees, wind and cold, feast days, field, human limbs, etc. The communication between birds and animals can be allegorical or not.