

## **Celebrity, Confession, and Performance in Pentti Saarikoski's *I Look Out Over Stalin's Head***

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## Celebrity, Confession, and Performance in Pentti Saarikoski's *I Look Out Over Stalin's Head*

### Abstract

This article examines the dynamics between confessional poetry and celebrity by focusing on *I Look Out Over Stalin's Head* (1969), a lyrical collection written by Pentti Saarikoski, the most prominent literary celebrity in Finland in the 1960s. The collection is highly self-conscious of the conventions of confessional writing as well as of Saarikoski's reputation as an alcoholic and a radical left-wing provocateur. Moreover, Saarikoski's celebrity status contributes to blurring the border between the speaker and the public persona of the writer. The collection can be characterized as a work of confessional performance. Based on recurrent elements in Saarikoski's media appearances and in his confessional works the article argues that the writer's public persona was performatively produced and that *I Look Out Over Stalin's Head* was part of this performance. Applying Judith Butler's ideas of performativity and subversiveness, the article analyses the speaker's performance as an alcoholic and a communist in the context of Finnish celebrity culture and the cultural politics of the late 1960s. In conclusion, the article argues that although Saarikoski was an active negotiator regarding his public persona, his relationship to the media as well as to his readers fell on the border between agency and exploitation.

Keywords: celebrity, confessional writing, Pentti Saarikoski, performance

The rise of modern confessional writing has been connected to the Cold War culture of surveillance, to the reaction against the impersonal poetics of the modernists, to therapy culture, to television as a dissolver of boundaries between the public and private spheres, to the intimatization of media culture in general, to celebrity culture, and to progressive political movements such as women's liberation (Gill, Introduction 3, 6; Middlebrook 634–635). In Finland, modern confessional writing has been closely interwoven with the development of celebrity culture.<sup>1</sup> Due to social, economic, and geopolitical factors, celebrity culture arrived in Finland relatively late. Celebrity culture, as known today, with its intimate interviews of top politicians, pop stars, actors, beauty queens as well as of star authors on television and in popular magazines, did not emerge in Finland until the 1960s.<sup>2</sup> The boom of Finnish confessional writing, in turn, started in the late 1960s and continued throughout the 1970s.

Research on the dynamics between confessional poetry and celebrity is still surprisingly scarce, although the public personae of celebrity poets to a remarkable extent shape the reception of their work, as Elisabeth Gregory has observed:

[F]acts about poets (their 'characters' and whatever is known about their social positions) have long been part of the active penumbra of poetry, throwing shadows around the work that inform its reception. From Dylan Thomas and Marianne Moore to Sir Sidney, John Milton and even Homer and Sappho, the public personae and frequently the celebrity of poets have shaped the way readers approach and absorb their work. Exactly how this happens and how it changes over time as reputations evolve, varies and lies open to dispute. But confessional work brings the issue to the fore. ('Confessing' 36)

In this article I study the relation between celebrity and confessional poetry through the poetry of Pentti Saarikoski (1937–1983), one of the most prominent Finnish poets in the 1960s, also famous for his translations of contemporary English as well as ancient Greek literature into Finnish. Saarikoski was unquestionably the most distinguished Finnish literary celebrity in the 1960s, notorious for his alcoholism, successive marriages and divorces, as well as for his role as a radical left-wing provocateur. Hence, his poetry illustrates in a nutshell the intertwinement of confessional writing and celebrity.

Saarikoski made his literary debut in 1958 as a modernist poet.<sup>3</sup> However, he quickly distanced himself from the impersonal, hermetic style typical of modernist poetry by developing a more open and immediate way of writing with references to day-to-day politics as well as to his personal life. In the late 1960s he experimented with confessional writing, publishing three autographical books which form a trilogy: *The Time in Prague (Aika Prahassa, 1967)* and *Letter to My Wife (Kirje vaimolleni, 1968)*, written in prose, as well as a lyrical collection titled *I Look Out Over Stalin's Head (Katselen Stalinin pään yli ulos, 1969)*, which is the main focus of this article.<sup>4</sup>

*I Look Out Over Stalin's Head* (henceforth *Stalin*) can be characterized as a work of modern confessional writing self-consciously aware of the confessional tradition. The collection shares, for example, the topic of alcoholism with more conventional works of confessional writing, but the speaker's revelations of his drinking carry no hint of the guilt or shame typical of confession. As I will show, the speaker's revelations about his alcoholism, as well as about his views on politics, can be interpreted in terms of performance. More accurately, *Stalin* can be studied as a confessional performance, to borrow a term introduced by Jo Gill in her work *Anne Sexton's Confessional Poetics* (110). The term emphasizes the artificiality and

the staged character of the speaker's confession in *Stalin*. Moreover, it encompasses the crucial relationship between performer and audience (Gill, *Anne Sexton* 110). To quote Richard Schechner, one of the pioneers of performance studies, '[p]erformances exist only as actions, interactions, and relationships' (24). In order to gain access to the expectations and reactions of Saarikoski's audience, I refer to reviews of *Stalin* as well as of the precedent *Letter to My Wife*.

In addition to the term performance, I will employ the term performativity when analysing Saarikoski's public persona and his role as a celebrity writer. Performativity is a 'travelling concept'<sup>5</sup> with a wide range of meanings, as is well known.<sup>6</sup> I will rest on the idea of performative identity which is based on Judith Butler's theory of gender as stylized acts of gender that are repeated (*Gender Trouble* 178–180, see also Loxley 3, 117–120).

Accordingly, I argue that Saarikoski's public persona was a product of repeated public appearances and that *Stalin* was part of this performance.

To begin with, I analyse the reality effect typical of confessional writing by focusing on the allusions to the media and celebrity in *Stalin*. Thereafter, I approach the collection in terms of self-reflexivity, arguing that Saarikoski consciously played with the confessional mode and the expectations of his audience. From the examination of self-reflexivity I proceed to the question of performance and performativity, which reach from Saarikoski's public appearances to the speaker's identification with his idols and to role-playing in *Stalin*. I analyse the speaker's performances as those of an alcoholic and a communist as well as the performative producing of Saarikoski's public persona in the context of the celebrity journalism and cultural politics of the late 1960s. Finally, I discuss Saarikoski's relation to

publicity, asking whether he was a victim of the rise of celebrity journalism or ‘an active negotiator’ who participated in the construction of his public persona (see Moran 10).

### Celebrity and the Reality Effect

In a compilation of his poetry, *The Poems So Far (Tähänastiset runot)*, Saarikoski characterized *Stalin* as a narrative poem in two parts (364). The first part is a lyrical travel diary written during Saarikoski and his wife’s stay in Iceland in May and June of 1968.<sup>7</sup> The second part consists of short poems written in Suomusjärvi, a small rural village in southern Finland, where Saarikoski spent the summer of 1968 after his stay in Iceland. The poems are linked together and form a lyrical suite reminiscent of a diary. According to Saarikoski, the Iceland sequence and the two previous books in his autobiographical trilogy were an experiment in ‘automatic writing’. The poet sat in pubs with a notebook trying to record his observations and reflections as immediately as possible. Like many other Finnish writers from the same era, he was influenced by Henry Miller and Allen Ginsberg, both of whose works he had translated into Finnish in the 1960s (*The Poems So Far* 364).

*Stalin* follows the conventions of confessional writing; it is mainly set in the first person and alludes to the poet’s personal life.<sup>8</sup> The speaker himself is not named, but there are plenty of references to names, locations, and events linked to Saarikoski, blurring the border between reality and fiction and ‘putting in play a reality trope’, to quote Elizabeth Gregory (‘Confessing’ 35). The speaker refers to his wife Tuula, his daughter Helena, and to his friend Jomppa (the Finnish writer Jorma Ojajarju) by their real names. Further, both the stay in Iceland in 1968 and an earlier trip to Iceland in 1955 recollected in the Iceland sequence are

biographical facts.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, references to the poet's abundant use of alcohol and to his divorces, as well as to his work and to his reflections on politics, heighten the reality effect.

The motif of the media plays a crucial part in evoking the reality trope in *Stalin*. The collection was mainly written in the late spring and summer of 1968, and world events from student demonstrations in Paris to the on-going Vietnam War are constantly referred to in the Iceland sequence as the speaker listens to the radio and reads newspapers and magazines. Although the fragments of information are presented as random depending on what the speaker happens to read or what he is able to understand of the Icelandic radio broadcasts, they contribute to the production of the reality effect representing the zeitgeist of 1968.

In the second part of *Stalin*, in which the speaker spends his time in the Finnish countryside, world events are not as much in focus as in the Iceland sequence. Nevertheless, the speaker regularly reads the newspaper, and in one of the poems he brings up the Biafran War in Nigeria (94). He is deeply upset by the famine in Ikot Ekpene, a Nigerian town that suffered seriously during the war. He is furious with what he thinks is the public opinion among Finns towards the victims of the famine. When visiting a small Finnish country town he is confronted with the statements of passers-by, according to whom the victims of the famine should not be given immediate help because it only makes them lazy. At home, frustrated, he ponders the idea of a hunger strike to support the victims. Moreover, he focuses his frustration on women's magazines, which he implicitly contrasts with the news from the Biafran War. Ironically, he recounts that the women's magazines only reveal 'how the wives of the ministers spend / their summertime and what has happened to Peter Townsend [who was best known as Princess Margaret's lover at the time]' (94). Hence, women's magazines become a symbol of the total indifference to Third World Suffering.

Additionally, the quotation alluding to the trivial contents of women's magazines evokes the theme of celebrity. The unveiling of the private lives of celebrities by popular magazines is a recurrent motif in the second sequence of *Stalin*. For instance, the speaker complains that all the magazines he has been reading are bad because they only tell 'how people who do not have any qualities / are getting on, what they like / and whom they sleep with' (91). The critical comments on the popular magazines with their trivial revelations can be interpreted as self-ironical play with Saarikoski's own status as one of the most famous cover boys in 1960s Finland. Additionally, *Stalin* has even more direct allusions to the publicity around the poet: the speaker mentions in passing, 'Today I was on the radio' (84). Moreover, he reflects self-ironically on his reputation and refers to the historians who will ruin his reputation 'when believing they write a song of praise'. Therefore, he feels he has to give them clear instructions: 'My reputation, it is not a trifling matter' (16).

Gregory has used the expression 'celebrity intimacy effect' when explaining how the celebrity of Marianne Moore shaped the reception of her work ('Still Leafing' 57). The celebrity intimacy effect heightens the readers' sense of knowing the poet. Furthermore, the dynamics between the poet and the readers become part of the poet's work. Regarding *Stalin*, Saarikoski's celebrity status certainly contributes to obscuring the border between fiction and reality. Paratexts,<sup>10</sup> such as interviews, letters, and diaries, play an important role in this process and are crucial to the reality effect of texts, even though they do not offer a pretextual truth but are themselves contradictory texts which possess their own paratexts (see Gill, *Anne Sexton* 171). Nevertheless, readers familiar with Saarikoski's public persona and the details of his private life on the basis of various paratexts will find (and have found)<sup>11</sup> it difficult to disregard the autobiographical dimensions of *Stalin*.



### Self-Conscious Confession

By alluding to Saarikoski's celebrity status and to his reputation, *Stalin* plays self-consciously with the celebrity intimacy effect. Self-consciousness, the play with the conventions and expectations of form and genre, is altogether typical of modern confessional writing (e.g., Gill, Introduction 8). Although Saarikoski, similarly to many other poets, distanced himself from the concept of confessional writing by stating in *The Poems so Far* that *Stalin* was not a work of confessional writing but a long dramatic monologue, the speaker of which was not identical with the writer (364), he was profoundly aware of the confessional tradition and played with it in his collection.

As Gill points out in *Anne Sexton's Confessional Poetics*, early interpretations of confessional writing favoured the use of organic and geological metaphors such as those of volcanoes to describe the force of confession (11–12). In *Stalin* the imagery of volcanoes is present in the Iceland sequence in the fact that the Icelandic soil is volcanic. However, the lava does not flow as a stream, according to the idea of confession as an eruptive force, but has instead solidified into stones. Interestingly enough, when examining a few of the lava stones, the speaker parallels them with human beings. The stones remind him of the heads and faces of dead people lying side by side in hell: they have eye sockets, nostrils, and auditory canals. Some of them have stopped breathing only recently, whereas others have been dead for a long time (27). The parallel between lava stones and human beings can be interpreted in terms of metapoetics; in the process of literary creation the emotions and

experiences of the writer are transformed into the characteristics of literary personae. In other words, they undergo a metamorphosis somewhat similar to the solidifying of a stream of lava.

Saarikoski played humorously with the religious tradition of confession as well. The Iceland sequence contains an episode wherein the speaker recollects his previous visit to Iceland (44–45). For some unrevealed reason he had on this occasion lied to his hosts that he was a Catholic, with the consequence that the local priest one early morning had given him a lift to Mass. At Mass, the speaker had refused confession as he had not been able to explain his sins in English. Nevertheless, the priest had absolved the speaker from his sins, telling the speaker that he had understood what the issue was. This comical recollection parodies the tradition of religious confession. In addition, it invokes the relationship between speaker and reader crucial to confessional writing. In brief, the reader is typically constructed as a confessor in confessional writing (see, e.g. Gill, Introduction 4). In the mass episode the absolution given by the priest is ironically based on the mere supposition of sins typical of young men, as the speaker is not able to confess his sins. Accordingly, the reader of *Stalin* can be paralleled with the priest. The episode suggests that like the priest, the reader has presumptions that direct her/his reading. On the basis of genre conventions as well as the writer's reputation the reader expects the speaker to expose his 'sins'. Furthermore, the reader makes assumptions about the speaker's shameful deeds even when the speaker has nothing to confess or when he declines to reveal anything.

In the relationship between the speaker and the reader, the topic of lying is essential as well. The topic alludes to conventional readings of confession, as they depend on confidence in the truth and authenticity of what is expressed by the confessant.<sup>12</sup> In *Stalin* the theme of truth is

raised by the opening line of the episode recounted above: ‘As far back as then I lied’ (44).

The speaker betrays any confidence of telling the truth by indicating that he has lied not only in his adolescence but that he is probably lying even at the very moment he is speaking.

Consequently, when he later emphasizes the importance of telling the truth, his words are difficult to take seriously (52).

Taken as a whole, *Stalin* is a text that is highly aware of its audience and the conventions of confessional writing. For instance, in the second sequence of *Stalin*, in which the speaker spends his summer in the Finnish countryside, he refers to the readers’ expectations concerning confessional writing by stating that he does not tell everything, ‘only so much that there is something about each day / but those days I am in Helsinki I do not write. They are blank days’ (108). As the examples above indicate, the reader is mostly implicitly addressed. However, the speaker occasionally uses second person plural to explicitly address the audience. Significantly, the speaker presumes an audience that is judgemental. Accordingly, the tone of address is either aggressive, as I will show later on, or boastful, as in the following lines, in which the speaker tries to convince his readers that he is a better writer than they believe: ‘I am going to write a serial for a women’s magazine, / so you will see how good a writer I am’ (21).

The lines are not only an example of the boastful way the speaker addresses the audience but illustrate also how the speaker plays with different ideas concerning his writing. In addition to the serial for a women’s magazine, he plans to write a novel or a short story. An awareness of the conventions of confessional writing is apparent when he speaks about his writing.

Similar to Saarikoski, the speaker uses his own life as material. In the Iceland sequence he recounts how the previous day he had watched his wife and himself as if they were fictional characters:

Yesterday, I watched us as characters  
in a novel, but no,  
perhaps a short story,  
I'll never write a novel,  
never be finished that way.  
I felt angry, and Tuula became  
a mean and capricious woman,  
which she is not: she is a tattered sail. (*Poems* 69)

The speaker reveals that as a result of his angry mood he had made his wife Tuula 'a mean and a capricious woman, / which she is not'. This emphasis on the difference between the fictional and the real life Tuula can be interpreted as a metapoetical instruction given to the reader. The reader is reminded of the constructed character of the reality depicted in the collection. Nevertheless, simultaneously, the name of Saarikoski's wife as well as the reference to writing transgresses the border between fiction and reality. Tuula Saarikoski (aka Tuulaliina or Tuula-Liina Saarikoski), whom Saarikoski had married in 1967, was familiar to the audience already before *Stalin*. Not only had she appeared in publicity together with her husband, but Saarikoski had used her as a character in his autobiographical work *Letter to My Wife*, unveiling intimate details about the sexual life between the narrator and his wife. What is more, Tuulaliina Saarikoski was a journalist who occasionally published articles about her husband, thus participating in the construction of his public persona.

Confessional Performance by a Drinker

Since the early 1960s, Saarikoski had been portrayed in the media as an angry young man, a literary genius, a communist, an alcoholic, and a sex symbol. His frequent appearances in popular magazines as well as on radio and television had created a thick web of myths and legends around him. He aroused indignation by appearing in public drunk, and like many other young writers of his generation he was famous for provoking the bourgeoisie.<sup>13</sup> The first lines of the poem ‘Saarikoski’s Advertisement’ (‘Saarikosken mainos’) written by the poet Väinö Kirstinä and published in 1963 are an apt example of Saarikoski’s notoriety, ‘if you read saarikoski for 10 minutes / your breath immediately starts smelling of liquor’ (8).

In the 1960s the relationship between the young generation with left-wing views and the conservative circles in Finland became highly exacerbated. The controversies culminated in censorship as well as in trials. For instance, Saarikoski’s translation of Henry Miller’s novel *Tropic of Cancer* was determined to be pornography and adjudged to confiscation by a decision of the court in 1962. Moreover, in 1961 Allen Ginsberg’s ‘Howl’ was published only as a censored version in Finnish; in 1969 a radio broadcast of an uncensored translation of the poem caused a parliamentary debate.

Although Saarikoski’s own works were not censored or banned, *Letter to My Wife* was condemned by several reviewers on account of its intimate revelations concerning the narrator’s alcoholism and sex life (Tarkka, *Pentti Saarikoski* 228–229). In *Stalin* sex is not a topic of concern. Alcoholism, nevertheless, plays an important part, as the speaker continually makes remarks about his drinking. When visiting the headquarters of the Communist Party in Iceland, the speaker is mainly interested in where alcohol can be bought (11). Moreover, he constantly gives short reports on his drinking:

We went to the bank to exchange money.

I bought a bottle of vodka. (42)

I emptied the vodka bottle

but it didn't have any effect. (50)

Yesterday I drank 37.5 cl Wodka Wyborova,

half of it at 10–11 in the morning,

the rest of it at 4–5 in the afternoon,

in the evening I didn't drink.

Today I'll try to cut down to 25 cl.

I have started drinking milk. (65)

Regarding the conventions of confession, the speaker's matter-of-fact account of his drinking is striking. No hint of guilt, shame, or remorse exists in the speaker's revelations about his alcoholism, notwithstanding the fact that his drinking problem prevents him from concentrating on his work.<sup>14</sup> Suffering from severe symptoms of abstinence, the speaker states in the second sequence of *Stalin* that he is mentally ill (105) and describes days when everything feels insignificant and he is not able to do anything other than throw darts or stand on the dock (106). Only writing seems to have an absolving effect on him. Early commentators on confessional writing have emphasized personal catharsis and the therapeutic gain of confession (Gill, 'Your Story' 69). For Saarikoski's speaker, however, the relief of writing has more to do with financial circumstances than with therapy. To earn his bread, he cannot afford 'easy days' without writing or translating work (110). Yet at the end

of the collection the writing is tinged with catharsis as the speaker eventually finishes ‘this book’ (113).

In his attitudes to alcoholism the speaker is akin to the protagonist of Burroughs’ semi-autobiographical novel *Junkie*, which is an important intertext of *Stalin* as the speaker is reading the novel during his stay in Iceland. He is enthusiastic about Burroughs’ novel, especially because the protagonist Bill does not pity himself, caution others about drugs, or swear off using them. Furthermore, the protagonist holds the attitude of a bystander; he neither makes a martyr of himself nor blames anyone else. Inspired by *Junkie*, the speaker compares alcoholism with drug addiction, analysing the similarities and differences between the psychology of using drugs and using alcohol (51–52).

The objectivity of *Junkie* appears to serve as a model when the speaker reflects on his own addiction. Nevertheless, the objective tone is occasionally replaced by a rebellious attitude, especially in the Iceland sequence when the speaker addresses his wife. As Michel Foucault has emphasized, ‘one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, console, and reconcile’ (61–62). In *Stalin* the speaker’s wife is represented as an authority who tends to control and judge the speaker’s abundant use of alcohol. Her nagging irritates the speaker, resulting in rebellion instead of reconciliation: he rebels against his wife by stating he will go on drinking henceforth (37).

The wife is not the only authority whom the speaker addresses. In the following example he addresses an anonymous audience using the plural form of the second person. The ‘you’, characterized by having Christian morals, is a despised authority to rebel against:

[T]he Americans in Vietnam do  
 much worse things to other people  
 than Bill does to himself,  
 you call it selfishness  
 if you kill yourselves instead of your fellowmen,  
 that is your Christian morals  
 you give support to (52)

The lines allude to the war in Vietnam as well as to Burroughs’ *Junkie*. Bill’s self-destructive drug addiction in *Junkie* is compared to the Americans’ operations in Vietnam. The speaker positions himself as an opponent of the Americans’ operations as well as a sympathizer of the protagonist of *Junkie*. The addressed ‘you’ represents completely opposite views. In the context of the cultural climate of the 1960s, the ‘you’ can be interpreted as the representatives of a conformist public opinion to be revolted against.

As mentioned before, the relation between the young left-wing generation of the 1960s and conservative circles was strained. In particular, the relations between the church and the young intelligentsia were antagonistic as a consequence of a prolonged trial caused by the writer Hannu Salama’s novel *Midsummer Dance (Juhannustanssit)* from 1964. Salama, who was a friend of Saarikoski, was finally convicted of blasphemy, and parts of the novel were censored.<sup>15</sup> In *Letter to My Wife*, Saarikoski refers explicitly to Salama’s case and mocks the



church openly (61). In *Stalin* the critique against the church is more restrained, but as the lines quoted above indicate, conformist Christianity was still a target that Saarikoski fired at.

In Finland, the topic of alcohol has traditionally aroused emotions and passions, but in the 1960s it was an especially burning question due to changes in alcohol policy and in attitudes towards drinking. Accordingly, the reformation of the Finnish alcohol policy and the changing moral atmosphere is a significant context of *Stalin*. The purchase of alcohol had been highly regulated before the late 1950s by the state monopoly Alko.<sup>16</sup> However, in the late 1950s the alcohol policy became more liberal. For instance, the alcohol monopoly began to promote mild alcoholic drinks in order to establish a new, 'European' drinking habit among Finns, who had traditionally consumed spirits. Moreover, a new Alcohol Act was being drafted during the 1960s. The legislative reform caused heated debates,<sup>17</sup> but finally the public opinion became more liberal, and the new act was promulgated in 1968 (Kuusi 390–392).

As a result of the reformed alcohol policy and the transformed attitudes towards drinking, alcohol consumption among Finns tripled from 1958 to 1972. Simultaneously, drinking acquired new social and cultural significances. In fiction as well as in feature films and popular songs, classic moral stories were replaced by narratives in which intoxication was not necessarily inappropriate. Typical characters in these new narratives were rebellious youths, radical students, egalitarian women, and bohemian artists (Kuusi 390, 393–394).

The speakers and narrators in Saarikoski's confessional works represent the motif of the bohemian artist to the extreme. Moreover, in *Stalin* the speaker's remorseless attitude to his own drinking is at least partly in alignment with the changed attitudes towards drinking in the

late 1960s. Nevertheless, the liberal attitudes were not shared by everyone, and the speaker's daily consumption of vodka obviously did not correspond with the official alcohol policy. Moreover, heavy consumption of alcohol was still disapproved of in conservative circles. Consequently, the alcoholic discourse in *Stalin* can be read as a provocation directed particularly towards conservative readers. It is no accident that the 'you' explicitly addressed by the speaker in the example quoted above refers to people with 'Christian morals' (52). The address can certainly be read as a hint of the writer's intention to provoke his readers.

Saarikoski discussed provocative topics not only in his literary works but in the media as well. During his stay in the village of Suomusjärvi in the summer of 1968, he posed in the nude for a left-wing women's magazine and published in connection with the photograph a short article titled 'Is This Picture Pornography?' ('Onko tämä kuva pornografiaa?'), taking a stand on pornography with allusion to the case of Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*. In the autumn another women's magazine published an interview titled 'Saarikoski and Sex' ('Saarikoski ja seksi'), in which the poet openly spoke about his sex life. In addition to his sex life, Saarikoski's drinking habits received attention in the interview: the journalist carefully registered how Saarikoski's bottle of vodka emptied during their talk (Jokinen).

Significantly, certain elements in Saarikoski's media appearances as well as in *Stalin* and in his other confessional works recur, the most obvious of them being the boastful or at least remorseless talk about his drinking. The repetitive character of the alcoholic discourse as well as Saarikoski's appearing drunk or holding a bottle in public give occasion to speak about a continual performance. In hindsight, Saarikoski stated that his drinking in the 1960s had been a publicity game, his drunkenness 'a media intoxication': '[w]hen the journalists asked me how I was, I said that I drank, suffered from hang-overs and drank still more; the image of a

deeply ruined alcoholic was created very fast, and I began deliberately to sharpen this image. It was a conscious, arrogant attitude towards drinking' (Paasilinna 16; see also Hosiaislouma 337).

Although Saarikoski's own retrospective statement does certainly not represent the whole truth of his drinking problem, it indisputably supports the interpretation of the alcoholic discourse in *Stalin* as a performance. Accordingly, in *Stalin* the mode of confession is not employed in order to reveal the speaker's most intimate secrets and to express repentance as much as to provoke the reader and, above all, to consolidate the public image of the bohemian writer by repeating a performance already familiar to the audience. In other words, the provocative alcoholic discourse answered the reader's expectations shaped by Saarikoski's earlier works and his media appearances. Consequently, *Stalin* can be characterized as a work of confessional performance.

### Identification and Role-playing

The characterisation of *Stalin* as a performance invokes the question of role-playing. Role-playing was typical of Saarikoski; in his diary he called himself 'an actor, a jester and a man without qualities' (*Diaries of a Translator*, 305). In public he, significantly, played the role of a bohemian artist, slightly varying his performance over the course of time. For instance, he was famous for wearing different caps that followed the changing trends of his time (Riikonen 88–89, 116). In the autumn of 1968 he wore a black beret decorated with a red star which he had received from the Chinese embassy. With his dark hair and beard he looked

like the revolutionary icon Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara in his beret; aware of the likeness, he posed in many pictures in his ‘Che outfit’.<sup>18</sup>

In *Stalin* role-playing is not as obvious as in some of Saarikoski’s earlier poems in which the speaker identifies himself as a fictive character according to the conventions of dramatic monologue. For instance, in a lyrical sequence from 1966 the speaker calls himself Odysseus and Oudeis (*Poems* 63–65).<sup>19</sup> Crucially, the identity of the persona of *Stalin* is all but stable and continuous. The speaker even states he has ‘many nationalities and many biographies’ (33). In addition, the speaker has a strong identification with the people and characters he reads about. When reading *Junkie*, the speaker addresses Burroughs by stating ‘you are one of the few of us’, referring to their common identity as addicts (48).

Another object of identification is the legendary Russian ballet dancer Vaslav Nijinsky, whose diary the speaker reads after reading *Junkie*. The diary was written during a short period in 1919, when the dancer suffered from severe mental problems. Although heavily edited by Nijinsky’s wife, the diary, published in 1936, has become a classic work of confessional writing (Acocella VII, XVIII–XXVI). Nijinsky, in turn, has become a prototype of a mad genius and a suffering artist. In literature his mental breakdown has become a symbol of the emotional sensitivity of an artist (Coelsch-Foisner 271, see also Acocella XLI).

In *Stalin* the speaker is a fellow sufferer of Nijinsky: he compares himself with Nijinsky (54), quotes Nijinsky’s diary (54– 55, 58), and addresses the dancer (58). One thing both artists have in common is an obsession with writing, a compulsion to write as quickly as possible (55). In addition, the speaker identifies with Nijinsky’s ecstatic relationship to God and to his neighbours. Nijinsky had undergone a conversion to Tolstoyism a year before his mental

illness broke out (Acocella XVII), and in the diary his faith is confusingly intermixed with the omnipotence of a schizophrenic mind. He embraced different identities and pictured himself as God (see Nijinsky 184).

The speaker in *Stalin* adopts Nijinsky's Tolsoyistic message of love and peace by stating that 'I do not know how to hate people, / although their deeds were bad' (54). Further, he is almost as ecstatic as Nijinsky and adopts the dancer's fantasies of being God: 'Nijinsky is wonderful! I, too, am happy and I love and I am God!' (54). Despite the identification with Nijinsky the speaker is not able to completely embrace the faith of the dancer; he feels that the God Nijinsky spoke about died along with the dancer in 1950 (57, see also Tarkka, *Pentti Saarikoski* 203).

The speaker's identification with Nijinsky and the protagonist in Burroughs' *Junkie* are examples of the role-playing in *Stalin*. By identifying with his role models, the speaker performs the role of an individualist artist and an addict. However, he plays other roles as well. Importantly, at the beginning of the Iceland sequence he introduces himself as 'an unemployed revolutionist' (15); in the early stages of the writing of *Stalin* Saarikoski even used this epithet as the title of the collection (Varis 169).

The role of 'an unemployed revolutionist' reflects Saarikoski's own experiences. Saarikoski was one of the leading figures among the politically active young left-wing writers during the 1960s. He was the chief editor for a cultural review published by the left-wing party SKDL (Finnish People's Democratic League). Moreover, in 1966 he was a parliamentary candidate of the same party but was not elected as an MP. In the late 1960s his belief in politics began to falter because of his disappointment in left-wing politics in Finland. Notwithstanding his

critical views, Saarikoski became a member of the Communist Party of Finland in the spring of 1968 and was a parliamentary candidate for the SKDL as late as in 1970.<sup>20</sup>

Similar to Saarikoski, the speaker of *Stalin* is disappointed in the politics of his comrades. According to him, distinguishing between a left-wing and a right-wing radical is no longer possible, and he concludes that the right way to influence a cause is not from within the political institutions (59–60). His former belief in politics has changed into resignation, and he states that he is ‘not a radical’ (14). Nevertheless, during his stay in Iceland the speaker occasionally adopts the role of a political activist. For instance, he takes part in a demonstration against the American NATO base in Keflavík. In addition to NATO the demonstrators protested against the Vietnam War and ‘US imperialism’ in general. In spite of his desire to support the North Vietnamese regime, the speaker’s attitude to the demonstration is sceptical. He addresses the North Vietnamese communist leader Ho Chi-Minh and asks self-ironically if a demonstration in Reykjavík is of any use to the North Vietnamese (37–40).

In addition, inspired by the demonstrators who cheer ‘Che’, the speaker addresses his idol, alluding to Guevara’s writing ‘Create Two, Three... Many Vietnams, That is the Watchword’ (1967):<sup>21</sup>

[B]ut Che

what I would like to tell you

is that the youth of the whole world loves you,

you say that death is welcome

if your weapons fall into the right hands,

there is no other national anthem  
than the staccato of machine guns. (38–39)

Guevara represents for the speaker a true revolutionary hero, and one of the reasons for the speaker's resignation is the death of his idol in 1967. The speaker states, referring to Guevara's execution, that the killing of Guevara put an end to the revolution and that 'the red flag is no longer anything else than a red flag' (19).

Importantly, the speaker's identity as a left-wing radical who takes part in a demonstration supporting 'Che' can be interpreted in terms of role-playing. The speaker additionally plays the role of 'a true communist' when he together with his wife celebrate with their Icelandic acquaintances during their stay in Iceland. Afterwards, he recounts how they discussed trade union politics, the cost of living, socialism, Yankees, and other issues in a lively manner. Moreover, they 'sang folk songs and internationals' and 'were true communists' (36). The speaker's characterization of himself and his fellow celebrants as 'true communists' is significant; to be a communist appears to be a result of behaving like a communist, that is, discussing topics typical of communists and singing a particular repertoire of songs. A good deal of self-irony is found in the speaker's account of the celebration, and more importantly, he is highly aware of the fact that his own political activism is first and foremost a performance. In conclusion, the short narration of 'the communist performance' can be read as a parody of the new left-wing generation for whom left-wing politics was not always a conviction as much as a trend.

Performativity and Subversiveness

Thus far, I have focused on the issue of role-playing in *Stalin* and studied the speaker's performance as an alcoholic and a communist. As I have shown, Saarikoski's public appearances and the performances of the personae in his confessional works were closely interconnected to each other as products of repetitive acts. Significantly, the style and content of the performances were not random but regulated by cultural and social expectations. Hence, the construction of Saarikoski's public persona as well as his confessional performances can be scrutinized in terms of performativity.

Butler has emphasized the normative dimension of performativity by stating that performativity is 'a reiteration of a norm or set of norms' (*Bodies that Matter* 12). For instance, gender is construed by a repetition of acts that take place in the public world, and, importantly, are conventional (*Gender Trouble* 179; see also Loxley, 119). Further, no voluntarist subject can, according to Butler, exist apart from socially established regulatory norms. Rather, the subject is produced by the very norms she/he opposes (*Bodies that Matter* 15).

Despite the emphasis on norms and conventions, Butler's view on performativity is not altogether deterministic. On the contrary, her approach to performativity is a theory of agency (Preface 1999 xxiv). Agency for Butler is, nevertheless, not external to the regulatory norms that the subject resists but immanent in a repetitive practice regulated by power (*Bodies that Matter* 15). Significantly, the possibility of agency is found in repetition. A failure to repeat or a parodic repetition based on arbitrary relations between repeated acts expose the artificial nature of the normative practice and hence enable transformation and the subversion of norms (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 179).



Normativity and subversiveness are crucial in the construction of Saarikoski's public persona. To begin with, Saarikoski's performance as a bohemian provocateur was subversive, arousing indignation among the audience. However, in the late 1960s the performance began to lose its subversive quality due to repetition and commercialization, following a typical development of subversive performatives, which 'always run the risk of becoming deadening clichés [. . .] through their repetition within commodity culture where "subversion" carries market value' (Butler, Preface 1999 xxi). The popular magazines as well as the literary market were almost saturated with confessions of young alcoholic writers at that time; although Saarikoski was the most celebrated bohemian writer of his generation, he was far from the only one. What had started as a subversive performance had become a convention repeated over and over again.

The literary critics in Finland attacked the increasing commercialization of confessional writing. For instance, according to one of the most spiteful reviewers of *Letter to my Wife*, Saarikoski was to share the fate of Dylan Thomas and Brendan Behan, who during their last years had ended up in the role of 'commercial alcoholic clowns' (Svedberg). In contrast to *Letter to my Wife*, *Stalin* was received mainly positively by the literary critics. The very same reviewers who had condemned the previous work of prose praised the lyrical collection. One of the reasons for the change may simply have been Saarikoski's choice of genre; he was, after all, more talented as a poet than a novelist. More importantly, as mentioned earlier, the revelations of *Stalin* were not as intimate and bodily as in *Letter to my Wife*. As a consequence, one of the reviewers even called the book 'pure' (S. K.).

Yet not all the critics were unambiguously delighted with *Stalin*. The individualistic emphasis of the collection was welcomed by the non-socialist press, but the response of the left-wing papers on the contrary was embarrassed (Hosiaislouma 214–215; Tarkka, *Pentti Saarikoski* 254–255). The reviewer for *Kansan Uutiset* (*People's News*), the newspaper of the SKDL and of the Communist Party of Finland, was especially critical, seizing upon the theme of political disappointment and resignation. To him Saarikoski was a traitor, and Saarikoski's inclination to withdraw from politics 'a direct vote of no confidence in Finnish Communism'. Further, he read the collection as 'a document of how a sentimental revolutionary poet is pushed to the wall in a small northern country governed by a popular front government'<sup>22</sup> and concluded by stating ironically that 'when Saarikoski writes about revolution I am not sure if he truly writes about revolution or about Christmas' (Virtanen).

At least from the perspective of the left-wing press the communist performance of *Stalin* was a failure as 'Saarikoski' had deviated from his role as a political activist and had not repeated his performance 'correctly'. On the contrary, the performance contained parodic elements, as discussed above. Even the somewhat enigmatic title of the collection is parodic: Stalin's head refers to a small plaster head of Stalin found by Saarikoski at a dump in the village of Suomusjärvi.<sup>23</sup> The plaster head is a recurrent motive in the second sequence of the collection. The speaker refers to the head in a playful, disrespectful tone when applying insect oil to it: 'he [Stalin] looked funny with flies on his head' (111). Accordingly, the plaster head has been interpreted as a symbol of socialism become set in a fixed mould (Hosiaislouma 213).

The parodic elements of the communist performance in *Stalin* criticized by the left-wing press evoke the question of subversiveness. Yet one can ask with good reason if a literary

work praised by the leading non-socialist newspapers can be characterized as subversive. Paradoxically enough, in the context of the late 1960s a positive answer can be given to the question. In the parliamentary election of 1966 the left-wing parties achieved an established status in Finland, and thereafter the young left-wing writers and other artists gained hegemony in cultural politics. Hence, the disappointment in left-wing politics and the play with the image of a left-wing activist can be interpreted as acts of subversiveness. In contrast with the communist performance, the alcoholic performance in Stalin abided by the expectations of the audience. Nevertheless, both performances illustrate how Saarikoski consciously played with his reputation.

#### An Active Negotiator or a Victim of Celebrity?

In his research on literary celebrity Joe Moran has emphasized agency by arguing that authors tend to actively negotiate their own celebrity and thus participate in the construction of their public personae. Moreover, celebrity writers often reflect on the problems related to celebrity in their literary works (10, 68–70, 79). Saarikoski's autobiographical works as well as his diaries show that the question of celebrity constantly occupied the writer's mind. The publicity around him was perhaps most intensive in 1967 and 1968. In late 1968, he suffered from a severe crisis caused by health problems related to heavy drinking. After a three-week long period in hospital care, Saarikoski was obliged to change his drinking habits (however, he did not cut down his drinking completely but continued to drink alcohol for the rest of his life). Additionally, Saarikoski tried to avoid publicity, but his status as a celebrity was established to such a degree that being completely free of publicity was not possible in the long term.<sup>24</sup> Besides, he was too addicted to media attention to reject requests for interviews.

For instance, in late 1968 he wrote in his diary, '[t]o perform and to be in the limelight is necessary for me, but it is terribly exhausting' (*Diaries of a Convalescent* 130).

The stir caused by *Letter to My Wife* drove Saarikoski to reflect on the relation between his private self and his public persona. His contradictory reflections in his diary indicate that the issue was problematic for him. He wrote, on the one hand, that 'a book that is intentionally revealing is, actually, a mask and an armour' (*Diaries of a Convalescent* 139). On the other hand, he felt that in the wake of his celebrity, his private self and his public persona had become inseparable, '[n]ot until now do I realize that I am actually nothing else than a public person' (*Diaries of a Convalescent* 131). Moreover, he wrote that he had lost his identity and felt he was 'a fictional person' (*Diaries of a Convalescent* 102).

Saarikoski's relation to celebrity was ambivalent; he was addicted to publicity but felt simultaneously that he was a prisoner of his reputation. Consequently, it would be easy to jump to the conclusion that Saarikoski was a victim of the rising celebrity journalism of his time and had been exploited by the media. Nevertheless, this was a role he was not willing to play. For instance, in an interview included in a biography of Saarikoski, written by his friend Salama in 1975, Saarikoski wanted to give the impression that he was indifferent to what journalists wrote about him as long as what was written did not negatively affect the sales of his books. Moreover, he stressed that he was himself partly responsible for his reputation (Salama 120–121). In the same interview he, nonetheless, praised his new life in Sweden, where he was not a celebrity but an ordinary person (Salama 119). In early 1975 he had met the Norwegian-Swedish writer Mia Berner, left his family, and moved to Sweden to live with Berner, whom he married later that year. They lived on an island on the west coast of Sweden far from the limelight of Finnish public life. However, Saarikoski did not totally detach

himself from publicity and occasionally appeared in public in Sweden as well as in Finland.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, as his confessional works from the late 1970s and early 1980s show, his status as a celebrity continued to occupy his mind up to his death in 1983.

To sum up, *Stalin* shows that Saarikoski was highly aware of the dynamics between confessional writing, celebrity, and the expectations of his audience. The collection is full of references to Saarikoski's personal life, and as a result of his celebrity status it is difficult to disregard the autobiographical dimension of the work. On the other hand, the collection plays self-consciously with the conventions of confessional writing, reminding the reader of the fictionality of the text.

In the mode of confessional performance *Stalin* participated profoundly in the construction of Saarikoski's public persona. The speaker in *Stalin* plays different roles and identifies with his role models. As we have seen, these roles were not random but regulated by the expectations of the audience. The alcoholic performance mainly strengthened the image of Saarikoski as a bohemian artist, whereas the speaker's performance as a left-wing radical had subversive potential in the political context of the late 1960s.

Like many other literary celebrities Saarikoski was an active negotiator of his public persona who played with his reputation. However, his celebrity status had a darker side, too. Although he was not eager to play the role of a victim exploited by the media, the public pressure to perform the role of 'Saarikoski' was a burden for him. Accordingly, *Stalin* does not depict a relationship between poet and reader or poet and media based on collaboration but portrays a writer who despises the celebrity journalism of popular media and for whom the reader is mainly an antagonist to be deceived and rebelled against.

## Notes

1 For the interconnection between celebrity culture and the boom of confessional writing in Finland in the 1960s and the 1970s, see also Hollsten 2012; Karkama 259–261; Makkonen 111; Viikari 163. Naturally, confessional writing in Finland was popular during that time for other reasons as well. For instance, in the 1970s second wave feminism played an important role.

2 For the rise of the Finnish celebrity culture in the 1960s, see Saarenmaa.

3 Modernism was a latecomer to Finnish-language literature; the period of high modernism in Finnish-language literature is the 1950s. In the 1920s and the 1930s a few authors experimented with modernist writing, but the policy of the young nation (Finland gained independence in 1917) emphasized a nationalistic culture, and modernism, which had an international and revolutionary stamp, was not favoured. However, after World War II Finnish culture became more open to international influences. As a result, modernist poetics gained an established position in the 1950s. The history of Swedish-language literature in Finland is quite different; modernism appeared for the first time in 1916 with Edith Södergran's (1892–1923) first collection, and the modernist diction was relatively soon canonized.

4 Unfortunately, only two extracts of *Stalin* have been translated into English; they are published in *Poems 1958–1980* (1983), a selection of Saarikoski's poetry edited and translated from Finnish by Anselm Hollo. Therefore, if not otherwise indicated, the quotes

are from the original Finnish volume translated by me. Similarly, the translations of the quotes from all the other primary sources in Finnish are mine.

5 For ‘travelling concept’, see Bal.

6 For the different meanings of ‘performativity’, see, e.g., Loxley. The usage of the term can be divided into two main lines. Firstly, it is a term that can be traced back to J. L. Austin’s speech act theory and has been further developed by, for instance, Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler. Secondly, it is used in performance theory as a derivative of the noun performance.

7 The authentic diary has been edited and published posthumously in 1999 by Saarikoski’s biographer Pekka Tarkka. A comparison between the original diary published in the volume *Diaries of a Drinker (Juomarin päiväkirjat)* and the lyrical sequence published in *Stalin* shows that Saarikoski edited his diary only little before publication. It has a few additions and some deletions – for instance, the dates have been deleted – but to a large extent the published poem and the diary are identical.

8 For the conventions of confessional writing, see, e.g., Gregory, ‘Confessing’ 34.

9 Saarikoski’s life has been thoroughly documented by researchers as well as by his family members. Pekka Tarkka’s biography in two volumes, *Pentti Saarikoski: The Years 1937–1963 (Pentti Saarikoski: Vuodet 1937–1963)* and *Pentti Saarikoski II: The Years 1964–1983 (Pentti Saarikoski II: Vuodet 1964–1983)*, is the most accurate of the biographies.

10 According to Gérard Genette (1, 5), paratexts are ‘accompanying productions’ that surround and extend the text within or outside the book. More accurately, he calls the paratexts within a book peritext and the paratexts outside the book epitext.

11 Significantly, the paratextual framework changes over the course of time. Contemporary readers of *Stalin* were familiar with details of Saarikoski’s private life on the basis of interviews and other media appearances. At present, media texts from the late 1960s are available mostly in archives and libraries. However, present-day readers have access to an abundance of biographical material published after Saarikoski’s death, such as biographies, Saarikoski’s diaries, and the memoirs of family members.

12 For the theme of truth and authenticity in the conventional readings of confessional writing, see, e.g., Gill, ‘Your Story’ 74.

13 For Saarikoski’s reputation, see, e.g., Hosiaislouma 332; Riikonen 86; Tarkka, *Pentti Saarikoski* 167–174.

14 The speaker’s matter-of-fact account of his drinking corresponds to Saarikoski’s own attitude to drinking. In summer 1967 he began to drink according a certain daily schedule (Tarkka, *Pentti Saarikoski* 171).

15 For a detailed account of Salama’s trial, see, e.g., Tarkka, *Salama* 160–167.

16 In Finland, the years from 1919 to 1932 were a period of prohibition. The Spirit Acts of 1932 repealed the prohibition and established the state monopoly Alko to produce and sell



alcohol beverages as well as to control the consumption of alcohol. From 1943 to 1957 Alko practised a customer control policy called buyer surveillance. The citizens had personal liquor cards, and when they wanted to buy alcoholic beverages the seller first stamped the card and checked how much alcohol the customer had recently bought. If the purchases were too excessive, the customer was referred to a control officer, who had authority from the police to track alcohol abusers (see, e.g., Kuusi 391–392).

17 The most heated debates concerned the selling and serving of alcohol in the countryside, the possibility of selling medium strength beer in grocery shops, and the age limits for buying alcohol (Kuusi 392).

18 ‘Now I look exactly [like] Guevara’, Saarikoski wrote in his diary in September 1968 (*Diaries of a Drinker*, 280). For pictures of Saarikoski from the autumn of 1968, see Tarkka, *Pentti Saarikoski*.

19 Oudeis, meaning nobody, is the name with which Odysseus deceived the Cyclops Polyphenus. Odysseus was an important character for Saarikoski from early on. He identified with Odysseus in the diary he wrote in his youth (Riikonen 86–87). He has translated James Joyce’s *Ulysses* into Finnish as well as Homer’s *Odyssey*. The translation of *Ulysses* was published in 1964 and that of *Odyssey* in 1972.

20 For Saarikoski’s political activism, see, e.g., Tarkka, *Pentti Saarikoski* 39–77, 178–179, 239–243.

21 Guevara is mentioned several times in *Stalin*. The speaker, for example, reads his memories (90). For the quotation on Guevara's writing, see Saarikoski, *Diaries of a Drinker* 335.

22 What were called popular front governments were formed by the centre and left-wing parties in 1966–1971.

23 The house Saarikoski hired when he wrote the second part of *Stalin* in the summer of 1968 was the former residence of a communist politician (Saarikoski, *The Poems So Far* 364).

24 For Saarikoski's public appearances as well as his health problems caused by the abundant use of alcohol in 1967–1968, see Tarkka, *Pentti Saarikoski* 167–178, 213–230.

25 For Saarikoski's years in Sweden, see Tarkka, *Pentti Saarikoski* 353–647.

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