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Everyday Ecology: An Ecocritical Reading of Pentti Saarikoski's *The Dark One's Dances*

ZACHARY BOISSONNEAU
Bridgewater State University

One quarter of the world's rivers no longer reach the ocean. Many of those that *do* reach the ocean carry toxins from agricultural runoff that have left close to 500 ocean dead zones. In the past 6,000 years, nearly all of the planet's topsoil, forests, prairies, and wetlands have been depleted. This says nothing of climate change or species extinction, nor does it fully address the people exploited to keep hi-tech civilization afloat. These are just some of the facts cited by controversial activist Derrick Jensen in his 2016 polemic, *The Myth of Human Supremacy*. While many have criticized Jensen for his apocalyptic views, the facts mentioned above make it difficult to argue with his conclusion that there is something

catastrophically wrong with the way humans are interacting with the earth. Taking the severity of these environmental crises into account, a series of crucial questions arise that will be considered in this paper. For one, why have humans living in highly technological societies behaved in such a destructive fashion? In addition, can these humans return to an ecological existence that is more conducive to life?

With regard to the second question, the final published work of Finnish poet Pentti Saarikoski--1983's *The Dark One's Dances*--reveals that, yes, humans can rediscover a life more in tune with the rest of the world. Saarikoski's work, and the ecological perspective it demonstrates, suggests that ecological survival requires a paradigm shift that would entail humans no longer viewing themselves as separate from and somehow dominant over nature. Part serial poem, part meditations on (or should I say *in*) the everyday, the poet's work blurs the lines between humans and nature; essentially, it reflects a dissolving of the anthropocentric ego. In the words of the poet himself, "The unexpected always happens, so unexpectedly that I have to pay attention every second: everything might suddenly shift into a new light. Nothing has changed, but everything's lit differently" (qtd. in Hollo 19). The difference between an anthropocentric and an ecocentric worldview is a matter of repositioning the light in this way.

Before any such argument can be made, however, it is important to discuss ecocriticism and its critique of the binary opposition between humans and nature. Broadly defined, ecocriticism is a diverse and interdisciplinary field that explores the interactions between literature and the environment;

ecocritics frequently take influence from other fields, like ecology--the central tenet of which, according to mammalian ecologist Neil Evernden, is the interrelatedness of all things (92). Fundamental to ecocriticism, and directly related to ecology, is the question of humankind's relationship with nature, leading to a critique of the human/nature binary. According to ecocritic Ben Bunting, the very existence of the word nature implies a separation from it; in other words, the concept of nature is a human idea, something we use to "other" what we view as being separate from human civilization (2). Despite its best intentions, ecocriticism sometimes reifies this human/nature binary. By focusing too much on the concept of "wilderness" in their interpretations, critics portray nature as something separate from humans. It may seem a small thing, but such a separation has had severe negative environmental impacts (Bunting 3-5). The idea is that since humans view themselves as separate from nature, they view themselves in competition with and superior to it, all the while seeking to progress further along (and higher up) the ladder of beings. According to Bunting, agriculture and the linear conception of history are two effects of this dichotomy, both of which lead to attempts at domination and, correspondingly, to ecological catastrophe (3-5). In this essay, I will not so much discuss the downfalls of anthropocentrism, but highlight the possibilities of the more ecological future alluded to in *The Dark One's Dances*, a future in which the separation between human subjects and environment are blurred to the point of dissolution.

The poetry of Pentti Saarikoski has not been critiqued from such a perspective. Most interpretations of Saarikoski's work have been from a modern and

postmodern lens and have served to orient him in relation to those traditions, specifically comparing him to the language experimentation of James Joyce (Kantola). While I agree with Kantola's assertion of many Joycean aspects in Saarikoski's work--namely those of shifts in perspective and fluidity with regards to linear time--my argument takes this reading a step further, exploring these characteristics in relation to ecology. I do not mean to suggest that by merely reading a book one can save the planet, but that the outlook presented in *The Dark One's Dances* offers an alternative to the anthropocentrism that dominates technological civilization. Such a perspective is in line with ecologist Neil Evernden's description of the "genuine *intermingling* of parts of the ecosystem" (93) that defines ecology and is, thus, *natural*.

Pentti Saarikoski is not a well-known poet in the English-speaking world, so a brief introduction is necessary to place his work in a larger context. An iconoclastic radical, he was a key figure in the Finnish literary scene from the late 1950s through the early 1970s, rising to prominence in part because of his own work and because of his translations. The latter are noteworthy for introducing Finnish vernacular to the world of literature (Hollo 9-10). Despite his subversive role in Finland, when placed within the larger European context, his work reflects clear ties to literary tradition from the Greeks to postmodernism (Simonsuuri 41). For the purposes of this paper, the influence of Greek philosopher Heraclitus and that of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*--and their connectedness to the idea of fluidity--are discussed as they relate to ecology. A direct link can be drawn between the two and the style and content of Saarikoski's final collection, *The Dark One's Dances*,

as evident in the way the poet uses language to present the fluidity of both time and perspective. In doing so, the poet presents an alternative to the ecologically destructive anthropocentric view of human existence.

Given that a critique of this sort hinges on a close reading of the poet’s language, it is important to note that I am reading Saarikoski’s work translated into English. Despite this, a valid analysis can still be conducted given the quality of the translation and its translator. Researcher Maria R. Pinheiro differentiates between literal and cultural translations, identifying the latter as a more natural reflection of the original. Since poetry is designed to have an effect on readers, she notes that a quality translation must “adapt things to provoke the same feelings in the heart, mind, and perhaps even the soul of the target readers” (15). In other words, readers of a translated work should be affected the same way as readers of the original text. As a native Finnish speaker, a fellow poet, and a professor at several American universities, Anselm Hollo, the primary translator of Saarikoski’s work, is well-suited to produce a culturally proficient representation, one that bridges the gap between English readers and the spirit of the original Finnish.

Central to an ecocritical reading of *The Dark One’s Dances* is the concept of fluidity. In this collection, Saarikoski offers a portrait of an existence in which nothing is static, a reality in which subjects and perspectives are in constant flux. By frequently blurring the lines between human subjects and natural objects in *The Dark One’s Dances*, he effectively engages in a critique of anthropocentrism and the human-nature binary. Simonsuuri has described how even the most trivial objects serve as sources

of inspiration (42), and others have written about the poet’s “unpretentious look at some of the ‘thousand things’ previously sidestepped or unnoticed” (Hollo 17). While I agree with these assertions, neither scholar takes the next step of viewing this focus on the everyday from an ecological perspective. In fact, a significant portion of *The Dark One’s Dances* reflects what ecocritic Lawrence Buell calls a “human groundedness in environment” (48). The following excerpt from *The Dark One’s Dances* depicts this groundedness by drawing attention to the absurdity of separation and hierarchy. In it, Saarikoski describes a conversation between two mushroom hunters who fall to arguing over the behavior of rabbits, with one criticizing why it has to “raise its rump that way with the hind legs / longer than those in front” (184). The other hunter counters: “well it’s the same with people / we just don’t call them paws but hands” (184). Here Saarikoski subtly critiques the anthropocentric view that humans are separate from and dominant over nature; whereas the first speaker looks down on and does not understand the behavior of rabbits, the second points out the fallacy of this separation by drawing a humorous comparison to humans. This sets the stage for what ecologist Neil Evernden sees as the subversive nature of ecology--that of inter-relatedness.

Contrary to the Western notion of causal connectedness, in which inter-relatedness simply means that things affect other things, from an ecological standpoint, the term inter-relatedness refers to an intermingling to the point that there are no discrete entities. This undermines the subject-object dichotomy and makes it nonsensical to deal only with the fragment of reality we call “human” (Evernden 93-5). The

poem in question continues to dissect the absurdity of hierarchy in the primary speaker’s analysis of the differences between mushroomers and berry-pickers. The latter, who can only determine status through the quantity of the foods they gather, is lower on the imagined social ladder than the former, whose worth is judged by the quality of harvest. As such, they do not see eye to eye and refuse to acknowledge one another when meeting in the forest. Saarikoski then contrasts this human tendency toward schism and hierarchy with a sudden shift to a description of the place itself:

consider the moose, they too have traffic rules
and whatever else they say
picking at the moss, smelling fall
gently feeling each other out maybe
they could become buddies
One hopes this has been understood
now the wind rises, blows up a storm
see how differently
branches of pine and spruce behave
in a storm, there’s a lesson here (Saarikoski 185)

Not only does this excerpt exemplify the inspiration Saarikoski takes from so-called trivial sources, it also reveals a groundedness in the environment as the seemingly petty concerns of humans are set against those of the moose, who potentially have the ability to overcome their differences, and of the trees, whose subtle differences can provide valuable insight. The poet’s engagement with nature does not fall prey to the problem Lawrence Buell sees in *Walden*, in which Thoreau repeatedly envisions the outskirts of Concord as “tantamount to primordial

wilderness” (67). Instead, it suggests a rediscovery of humankind’s indebtedness to the natural world, something environmental scholar Ben Bunting sees as critical if we are to move away from the mistaken notion that the world exists as something outside of ourselves (9). This connection is further explored in the postscript to the collection, a poem fragment which takes the blurring of the subject into the environment even further.

As the closing piece of the larger work, the postscript marks the complete dissolution of the self. In it, the speaker tells of the Dark One, representative of Greek philosopher Heraclitus, whose central philosophical concept is that of constant flux (Kantola 326), and of this same figure dancing as he blends in with and adapts to his surroundings. Of the Dark One, the speaker claims to have “driven him to anguish” (227), but that he continues to dance. Despite the catastrophe wrought on the world, nature--represented in the constant flux of Heraclitus’ philosophy--continues its existence; eventually, in a string of metaphors, the Dark One blends almost entirely into the environment: he is the future, Quetzecoatl, Christ, moose, hair, tree, willow bush and cloud. In fact, even as he is completely submerged in water, the dance carries on:

as the water rises
the sea enters his nostrils
but he dances
salt stings his eyes
he dances
breathing
through his hair (Saarikoski 228)

In this ultimate adaptation to his environment, the Dark One captures a view of existence that is squarely ecological. As Neil Evernden writes, “For once we engage in the extension of the boundary of the self into the ‘environment,’ then of course we imbue it with life and quite properly regard it as animate—it is animate because we are part of it” (101). It is precisely this sort of attitude that Evernden believes can lead to an understanding of nature as “continuous with ourselves” (102). By ending his serial poem with this postscript, Saarikoski is seemingly endorsing such an attitude, one that is counter to the anthropocentric worldview described in the introduction to this paper. In doing so, he is drawing upon traditions, both contemporary and ancient, that do not adhere to the ecologically catastrophic worldview of modern technological societies, thus calling for a change in the way we view ourselves and our relationship with our surroundings. This vision is, in a sense, reflective of what Joseph W. Meeker terms the comic mode of behavior.

Meeker, a scholar in comparative literature and wildlife ecology, argues that anthropocentrism has led to not only the tragic mode of literature, but also of human behavior. Tragedy, in both contexts, assumes humans to be in constant conflict with forces outside themselves, which leads to attempts to dominate these outside forces--one of the primary being an othered natural world (157-8). In contrast to this mode is the vision of adaptation presented by Saarikoski in the postscript, something Meeker terms as the comic mode. This mode is both biological and natural, according to Meeker. "Comedy," he writes, "is the art of accommodation and reconciliation..."

[and] illustrates that survival depends upon man's ability to change himself rather than his environment" (168). Beyond the postscript, which encapsulates this accommodation in the most literal sense of the Dark One changing the way he breathes in order to survive, Saarikoski also captures this comedic mode by shifting the perspectives throughout *The Dark One's Dances*.

Critic Janna Kantola claims that the rapid changes in perspective and point of view present in the text are an effort on the author's part to present a layered view of reality, thus creating a collage of different worlds and possibilities (328). Kantola sees these shifts as a postmodern homage to James Joyce--a writer whose work Saarikoski translated into Finnish--which is an argument I have no qualms with. On the contrary, I am suggesting that this quality of Saarikoski's work also stands as a critique of anthropocentrism. By employing shifting points of view, Saarikoski, in effect, questions the existence of a discrete self. In one of the longer poetic fragments, the perspective shifts between that of the primary speaker and an anonymous girl, who makes several appearances throughout the larger work. The poem begins with the speaker searching for a misplaced bottle of liquor, only to be interrupted by the girl. Though initially her voice is distinct, it becomes blended with that of the primary speaker:

you call
for your dead friends
whom you miss
like a bald man misses his hair,
don't you understand that
She licked her ice cream cone feeling superior
that in the dark

even the reddest of all reds
the red of frost-bitten lingonberries
looks black (Saarikoski 177)

Through a clever bit of wordplay, Saarikoski blurs the boundary between speakers. After the line “She licked her ice cream cone feeling superior,” the reader can interpret the subsequent lines as the primary speaker's assessment of the girl's attitude or as reverting back to the perspective of the girl. Instances of this postmodern ambiguity, pointed out in other excerpts by Kantola, are inherently ecological in that they serve to present the fluidity of nature as envisioned by ecologists like Neil Evernden. The same can be said for Saarikoski's presentation of time as similarly elastic.

In the same fragment analyzed above, Saarikoski also critiques the anthropocentric conception of linear time. After the ambiguous exchange between the speaker and the girl, there follows a lengthy description of the digestive process of six cows, from rumen to excretion. By following the perspective shift described above with an even further break, this time to a more distant, omniscient voice, Saarikoski dissolves the individual subjects into one cyclical whole, characterized by the cow who, chewing her cud, sits and thinks as the food moves from the rennet bag and back to the earth, back to the beginning of the scene where “seagulls pick worms and other crawlies / out of the dirt” (177). Perspectives are blurred and life is presented as a circle.

Saarikoski's critique of linear time is strongest in an early poem from the collection in which readers are introduced to the character of The Dark One, the figure previously discussed as being representative

of the Greek philosopher Heraclitus and his notion of constant flux. The piece could be called the title poem as it opens with the line “The Dark One dances” (171). In it, this figure embodies cyclical time. He dances alone, forgetting “not only what happened but even his memories” (171). There is a breakdown of linear history here in the figure who cannot remember his past. Paired with the Dark One’s dances is the motif of a spider web, “the spider’s face and fingerprint” (171) that irreparably dissolves each night while the Dark One participates in governmental bureaucracy, noting how wishful thinking and naivete have led to a mismanagement of the nation’s resources. In the midst of these human failings--what Meeker would no doubt deem tragic--life continues to thrive: The Dark one realizes “the spider doesn’t die its web just falls apart” and thinks “the sun / is new every day / like the spider’s web (Saarikoski 172). Not only does this present an image of life in a state of health, it is also clearly cyclical, in stark opposition to the failure of imposed systems of management. Despite the Dark One finding purpose in the sleep of a bear, like in the web of a spider, “His theory did not strike the thinkers as interesting” (Saarikoski 172). Perhaps the most damning critique Saarikoski levels in the entire work is this description of the arrogance of those in power when it comes to considering perspectives outside of the dominant mode of thought, which in this case, is the conception of reality as anything but linear.

In describing the latter stages of his work, Kirsti Simonsuuri points out, “It is as if Saarikoski had ceased to believe that even time, as understood by everyday experience, could be casually organized and grasped” (45). Janna Kantola, as well, has recognized this aspect

of Saarikoski’s work, likening it to Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* (326). What neither scholar does, however, is make the connection between this conception of time’s fluidity and ecology. Such a connection is important because the cultural development of written history “changed humanity’s concept of time from the cyclical experience to one made linear as specific events were preserved beyond their immediate duration in writing” (Bunting 4). This linearity not only gave to the West the idea of progress, which has not only fueled civilizations’ attempts at the domination of nature, but also fueled the resolve to do so, as advocated by the Christian creation story, a text foundational to Western thought (Bunting 5). In essence, then, by presenting time as something fluid as opposed to linear, Saarikoski critiques the anthropocentric worldview of civilization that sees humankind constantly progressing toward greater and greater heights. In doing so, the poet envisions a reality more in tune with the cycles of the natural world--which includes human beings, whether we think so or not.

The vision of Saarikoski, manifested in the way he blurs the boundaries between self and other, shifts between points of view, presents time as cyclical, and presents an ecological vision that is far from new. In fact, it is the reality of life. Joseph Meeker has pointed out that humans have *presumed* their welfare is not dependent on integration with the larger environment (163). In other words, just because some humans may perceive themselves as being something distinct from nature, that doesn’t make it so. It is absolutely possible to alter that perception and conceive of humankind as being “in” nature, a worldview which Ben Bunting describes as being present in some societies today and

has dominated our cultural past (4). This view, found in *The Dark One’s Dances*, can therefore be, if we choose to pay attention, a harbinger of reawakening to a more ecological state of being long obscured by the trappings of anthropocentrism. Joseph Meeker echoes Oscar Wilde’s observation that life imitates art just as much as the other way around, hence the tragic streak in a culture dominated by delusions of separation and conflict. But, as Meeker also notes, “people can choose to some extent the roles they wish to play from among the many models preserved by literature and cultural traditions” (166). This possibility is anticipated in *The Dark One’s Dances* when Saarikoski writes, “One’s world / view / one has to abandon / to see the world” (183). As such, if we can choose to imitate the hubris of tragedy, with all its environmental destruction and separation, we can also choose to imitate the comic spirit, the spirit of reconciliation and survival.

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About the Author
Zachary Boissonneau is pursuing his MAT in English at Bridgewater State University. His essay was written in the fall 2020 under the mentorship of Dr. Kimberly Davis. Zachary teaches eighth grade for the Free-town-Lakeville School District.