‘These shirts I borrow from the Finnish’: the *Kanteletar* and the fabric of loss in Peter Sirr’s ‘A Journal’

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‘Poetry translation into English can often be a fairly loosely defined affair’, Peter Sirr has observed. We therefore need a ‘more extensive vocabulary’ to describe the various exchanges, ‘encounters and practices of bringing poetry from one linguistic and cultural sphere into another.’¹ Scholars discussing Sirr’s poetry have also repeatedly addressed the issue of translation in his own work, as well as its significance within the wider context of cross-cultural dialogue. David Wheatley, for example, notes that Sirr is a ‘travel poet’, not simply due to his descriptions of destinations like Italy or Holland, but due to a ‘studied displacement to be found in all of his work’; also an appropriate characterization of Sirr’s engagement with non-English language writing.² Literary translation, geographical mobility and literary creativity are seen as intrinsically linked in what Wheatley calls his sense of ‘linguistic defamiliarisation’.³ Such textual, geographical and cultural ‘displacement’ and ‘defamiliarisation’ extends to the intimate, personal encounters of Sirr’s poetry, and is often examined through spatial and material metaphors: architectural spaces, tropes of water and rain, and physical objects of various kinds. This essay focuses on personal, cultural and linguistic exchanges explored through textile metaphors in Sirr’s 1994 poetic sequence ‘A Journal’, in which poet draws on the *Kanteletar*, a nineteenth-century collection of Finnish folk verse. His adoption of these poems’ textile imagery is closely tied to the complexities of personal and cultural communication. In particular, the focus will be on the multiple functions and manifestations of textiles as metaphors as well as material objects: as personal and cultural references, as devices for formal and structural expression, and as means of addressing personal and emotional crisis.

For the non-initiated reader, the *Kanteletar*, originally published 1840-1841, may not prompt immediate recognition. While at least partially translated into as many as thirty-five languages, it is not the best-known example of Finnish folk literature internationally.⁴ More widely known, however, is the national epic the *Kalevala*, first published by the physician and scholar Elias Lönnrot in 1835. It was the *Kalevala* that helped legitimize the small nation’s claim to sovereignty during the 19th and early 20th century, and established the status of the Finnish language as a medium for sophisticated, indigenous literary expression, at home and abroad. The long epic narrative was based on folk songs that Lönnrot collected during his travels in Karelia, northeastern Finland, and across the border in Russia. The *Kalevala* also brought the Finnish tradition to the attention of a number of major cultural figures in Europe and

¹ Peter Sirr, ‘The Translation Muscle’, *The Poetry Ireland Review* 85 (2006): 71.

² David Wheatley, ‘Irish Poetry into the Twenty-first Century’, *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. Matthew Campbell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 257.

³ *Ibid.*, 257.

⁴ On translations of the *Kanteletar*, see Pirjo Kukkonen, *Tango Nostalgia: The Language of Love and Longing: Finnish Culture in Tango Lyrics Discourses: a Contrastive Semiotic and Cultural Approach to the Tango* (Helsinki, Helsinki University Press, 1996), 93.

beyond. In Ireland, it inspired W. B. Yeats, who adopted (and adapted) elements from folk literatures outside Ireland to build the national culture at home.⁵ Lönnrot's later work on the *Kanteletar* never quite achieved the success of his epic narrative. The collection is largely based on the same material that formed the *Kalevala*, but its emphasis is on the short lyric rather than long narrative verse; the *Kanteletar* has often been considered as 'the feminine companion to the masculine *Kalevala*' as Keith Bosley phrases it.⁶ It wasn't until 1992 that Bosley, who had previously completed an English language translation of the *Kalevala*, published the volume *The Kanteletar: Lyrics and Ballads After Oral Tradition* in English. This, too, is a partial rather than a complete translation, but has nevertheless made at least some of the material of the collection available to English-speaking audiences. While the songs of the *Kanteletar* have inspired a number of Finnish writers, artists and songwriters since publication from the nineteenth century up to the present day, it was only now that they could find a way to the literature and the arts in the anglophone world.⁷ Two years after the publication of Bosley's translation, Gallery Press published Sirr's *The Ledger of Fruitful Exchange*, the collection including 'A Journal', which, as the poet explicitly mentions in a note to the volume, 'adapt[ed] folk poems from the *Kanteletar*, translated by Keith Bosley'.⁸

Like Lönnrot's original volume, Bosley's translation presents individual songs or poems in sections dedicated to material intended for different performers and situations: for men, women, girls, boys, or both sexes. The songs have different emphases in subject matter and tone – from stories of exceptional adventures or brave deeds of individuals to various situations of everyday life. While the emotional range is wide, from love and affection to sorrow and loss, the general tone of the lyrics veers towards the melancholy, not untypically for Finnish cultural expression. The collection's title word consists of the word 'kantele' for the Finnish traditional instrument, a type of zither, and the feminine, postsuffix '-tar', and can be translated as 'zither maiden' or 'zither daughter'. It lacks the narrative coherence of the earlier volume, and is more attuned to the fabric of the everyday life that provided the context for much oral performance, as well as the hopes, concerns, loves and fears of individual singers. The songs occurring in the women's section of Bosley's volume in particular are tied to the domestic sphere, where spinning, stitching and weaving form

⁵ See Yeats's discussion on the *Kalevala* in 'The Celtic Element in Literature', *Essays and Introductions* (London: MacMillan, 1961).

⁶ Keith Bosley, 'Introduction' to *The Kanteletar: Lyrics and Ballads After Oral Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), xvii.

⁷ On the uses of folk verse in contemporary Finnish cultural production, see for example Kertu Koronen, *Kalevalan vaikutus suomalaiseen rock- ja metallimusiikkiin* ('The influence of the *Kalevala* on Finnish rock and metal music'), University of Tartu, 2013, <https://dspace.ut.ee/bitstream/handle/10062/33826/Koronen_Kertu_BA2013.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y>, accessed 7 August 2017.; Kati Lappeteläinen, *Kalevalaista Jazzia: Intertekstuaalisuus, akkulturaatio ja autenttisuus kalevalaisen musiikin ja suomalaisen jazzin fuusiotyylissä* ('Kalevala and Jazz: Intertextuality, acculturation and authenticity in Finnish fusion jazz'), University of Jyväskylä, <https://jyx.jyu.fi/dspace/bitstream/handle/123456789/9992/URN_NBN_fi_jyu-200595.pdf?sequence=1>, accessed 7 August 2017).

⁸ Peter Sirr, *The Ledger of Fruitful Exchange* (Oldcastle, Co. Meath: Gallery Press, 1994), 93.

a part of the quotidian routine, and also assume a symbolic significance to reflect various life experiences.

'A Journal', similarly to the *Kanteletar*, is also a lyric sequence rather than a narrative long poem. It has no coherent narrative frame, despite offering fragments of a discernible story: the somewhat anguished aftermath of a love affair between an Irishman and his Finnish lover, now returned to her 'far dark home'.⁹ The Nordic or northern cultural and geographical contexts of the poem are often implied rather than openly stated in the text. Whereas Irish locations are in several cases specified through the use of proper place names, Finland is mostly evoked through metonymic cultural signifiers or through association: rain versus snow, 'telephone frozen over', 'ice of absence', 'elk steam and blizzard', 'coffee and reindeer'.¹⁰ References to the *Kanteletar* therefore pin down the poem's cultural context as Finland rather than the far north more generally. At the same time, the use of folk verse provides the poet with literary devices that not only help direct language's sonic and metrical patterning, but also thematically addresses the poem's engagement with longing and loss. In 'A Journal', the experience of unrequited desire and hurt is evoked as geographical, linguistic and personal distance, and the textile metaphor reflects the desire to remember the absent lover, and to weave the disparate memories into a meaningful pattern. In addressing the complexities involved in any act of translation, Sirr himself has balanced his faith in the 'importance of the translation of poetry' against his awareness of 'the barriers that obstruct our understanding of the literature of other cultures'.¹¹ In the poem discussed here, the literal and figurative examples of weaving and stitching are brought in to explore the tension between translation and untranslatability, of language as well as personal communication.

The *Kanteletar* is, as Pirjo Kukkonen suggests, a 'text that has been semiotically woven' into Finnish culture: folk poetry '[reflects] the founding culture at a thematic level and in [its] poetic structures'.¹² Framing her own essay with the etymology of the word 'text' as 'something woven', she moves on to discuss the idea of translation, of 'how signs of one national culture can be transformed into the signs and representations of the other'.¹³ Kukkonen stresses the iconic role of the *Kanteletar* in Finnish culture, and emphasizes the signifying role of natural landscapes and phenomena: 'thick forests [...] meadows and glades' provided a setting for encounters with non-human life forms when distances between people were long and sometimes insurmountable.¹⁴ Domestic spaces, however, allow closer encounters with fellow humans, and bring individuals into contact with each other through objects and

⁹ Sirr, *Ledger*, 57. Little if any biographical context is available on the poem, however while the genders of the speaker and the addressee are rarely specified, they are suggested in certain sections of the poem, for example through references to 'her long hair / her body' (my italics), or the Irish language terms 'Fí' and 'Mná', (Sirr, *Ledger*; 60, 67).

¹⁰ Sirr, *Ledger*; 58, 59, 61, 70.

¹¹ David Wheatley, 'Interview with Peter Sirr', *Metre* 17 (Spring 2005): 69, <<http://metre.ff.cuni.cz/article/637>>, accessed 16 February 2017.

¹² Pirjo Kukkonen, 'The *Kanteletar* as poetic text and discourse in the semiotics of culture', *Snow, Forest, Silence: The Finnish Tradition of Semiotics*, ed. Eero Tarasti, Acta Semiotica Fennica VII (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1999), 336.

¹³ Ibid. 336.

¹⁴ Kukkonen, 'The *Kanteletar* as poetic text and discourse', 339.

practices that are a part of the rhythm of everyday life, such as textiles and textile work. Sirr uses the textile imagery and metaphors of Finnish folk poems to address questions of proximity and distance in a manner that recognizes cultural context but is not defined by it. Rather than 'iconic Finnishness', these tropes reflect the speaker's constant attempts to bridge the personal, linguistic and geographical distances between himself and past experience, or himself and the poem's now absent addressee. The imagery and language of weaving, stitching and clothing allows for reconciliation between speech and silence, presence and absence; individual threads and yarns may retain their distinct identities while becoming parts of the same fabric.

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'A Journal' consists of forty poems or sections, separated by asterisks rather than specified date and/or time. The asterisks distinguish between sections in the same manner in which dates would separate journal entries, but mark gaps and absences rather than temporal ordering. If the journal as archived memory conventionally presents the past through temporal organization, it here dissolves into fragments, lacking linear order. Instead, the individual sections connect and unravel through the repetition of images and motifs. Though the *Kanteletar* only makes an explicit appearance in two sections, the significance of the Finnish text and its textile metaphors is to be seen in the context of the entire poem, which repeatedly attempts to entwine fragments into a more lasting pattern. Sirr's engagement with Finnish folk verse is thematic as well as formal, and expresses the desire to inhabit the lost lover's idiom through numerous attempts of linguistic and cultural translation. The *Kanteletar* is one among many 'signs and representations of the other', to use Kukkonen's phrasing, but also suggests a method for incorporating that other's field of experience into the speaker's own language. The sense of 'man's eternal yearning' in the *Kanteletar* is now adapted for exploring the struggles of individual loss and longing in 'A Journal'.

The use of textile tropes may not be that infrequent in contemporary poetry (or contemporary Irish poetry), but what is slightly less common is the adoption of these tropes and the literal imagery of stitching, weaving or sowing by a lyric male persona that allows his own voice to be taken over by the voice of a feminine other. In 'A Journal', however, the sections referring to the *Kanteletar* focus specifically on songs for women and girls. But this, too, has its historical precedent.¹⁵ In Finnish folk culture, actual performance did not necessarily follow established social and gender

¹⁵ It should be noted here that Lönnrot edited his material to emphasise certain gender characteristics that would suit his (admittedly progressive) views on the ideal Finnish mother or daughter; he favoured skills in literature, music and various crafts in lieu of servitude. As Niina Hämäläinen has noted, he would rather see a woman 'at the spinning wheel than serving ale to a drunken farmers'. Thus, if Lönnrot's own publications already sought to present the folk songs in a manner in line with the ideals of the time, subsequent editions and translations have faced the challenge of choosing songs or poems that meet the requirements of an even more concise format of a single volume (like the selection of poems in Bosley's volume). See Niina Hämäläinen, 'Parempi syntymättä: *Kalevala*, Elias Lönnrot ja käsityksiä perheestä' ('Better not born: the *Kalevala*, Elias Lönnrot and views on family life'), *Regilaulu müüdid ja ideoloogiad* (Eesti rahvaluule arhiivi toimetused 29), (Tartu: Eesti Kirjandusmuuseumi Teaduskirjastus, 2012), 41.
<www.folklore.ee/regilaul/kogumik2012/hamalainen.pdf>, accessed 7 August 2017.

divisions. As both Bosley and Kukkonen have highlighted, 'sexual roles in life [...] were not always reflected in art. Men would sing "women's" songs if they wanted to express tender feelings, and women used "men's" narrative style to sing of shocking events'.¹⁶ The lack of grammatical gender in the Finnish language also makes the adoption of a voice across established gender borders less complicated ('hän' is used for both 'he' and 'she'). Thus, the intertwining of different gendered voices made possible by Finnish tradition and grammar enables Sirr to blend feminine and masculine registers – adopting a 'women's' song follows a borrowed cultural practice of expressing emotions through what may be perceived as feminine verse. When the speaker of 'A Journal' says 'these shirts I borrow from the Finnish', he refers not only to the text of the *Kanteletar* but also to a language and practice where gender boundaries have been permeable in performance. Importantly, Sirr does not assume the voice of a speaker or persona specified as female, but allows the borrowed texture to redefine the margins of the speaker's gendered self.

Kathy Sullivan Kruger has commented on how 'weaving [often] becomes, in the hands of women, a tool for signifying', and the resulting 'textiles represent a text inscribed with a personal and/or political message'.¹⁷ While not openly political, 'A Journal' embodies a 'personal message' in its use of Finnish folk material: its texture is at once, a *record* of communication, and a *method* of working through personal crisis and loss. The poem's references to the acts of weaving and sewing assume a function similar to the songs in the girls' and women's sections of the *Kanteletar*: they are both literal descriptions of domestic work and expressions of emotional experiences. In oral folk literature, textiles are closely connected to rituals at key moments in a person's life: they mark birth, falling in love, marriage and death, or can designate social status. The acts of spinning and weaving have long been seen as symbols of 'life, death and fate', and this also applies to the *Kanteletar*.¹⁸ In 'The Three Suitors', the singer tells how 'sorrow has given me rings, / lamentation big kerchiefs'.¹⁹ The girl in 'Daydreams' dreams of a suitor who has 'a woven hilt, a silk scarf', and how, should she be able to have him, she would have 'a little boy / and my hand would spin the wheel / and my foot would rock the child'.²⁰ In 'Depression' the singer imagines her pain as an object to be controlled: 'with a cord I'd fasten it / with a silk ribbon bind it', 'with shoelaces I'd tie it / with my stockings block it up'.²¹ In 'The Poor Man's Child', we hear how 'the poor man's child works / spinning all the threads / weaving all the cloth', while 'the rich man's girl toils / at getting herself dressed up'.²² In short, textiles are objects of symbolic significance, but weaving, spinning or stitching are also

¹⁶ Bosley, 'Introduction', xvii; Kukkonen, 'The *Kanteletar* as poetic text and discourse', 346.

¹⁷ Kathryn Sullivan Kruger, *Weaving the Word: The Metaphorics of Weaving and Female Textual Production* (Selingsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2001), 23.

¹⁸ Nina Katriina Talvela: *Kerä vieri, keträ vieri: Naisten tekstiilityöt Etelä-Savon ja Etelä-Karjalan uskomus- ja runonlauluperinteessä*, master's dissertation (Department of Philosophy, History, Culture and Art Studies, University of Helsinki, 2013).
<<https://helda.helsinki.fi/bitstream/handle/10138/42849/keravier.pdf?sequence=1>>, accessed 7 August 2017, 42.

¹⁹ Bosley, *Kanteletar*, 49.

²⁰ Bosley, *Kanteletar*, 49-50.

²¹ Bosley, *Kanteletar*, 56.

²² Bosley, *Kanteletar*, 48.

an inseparable part of the rhythm and routine of an individual's life. In Sirr's long sequence, they also moderate the fragmented processes of memory.

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'A Journal' opens with a quotation in Italian, from Eugenio Montale: '*Lo sai: debbo riperderti e non posso...*' translating into English approximately as 'you know this: I must lose you again and I cannot'.²³ This is the only foreign language phrase in the poem apart from a Finnish couplet in the first section drawing on the *Kanteletar* (though there are a few individual words or names in Latin and Irish). The choice of Italian rather than Finnish, or some other language with a clearer connection to the cultural and geographical settings of the poem, widens the poem's context to literary memory that extends beyond the borders of specific personal experience. What follows can thus be read against the epigraph's quotation: a refusal to lose all trace of the loved one and the relationship, even if she is now only present in disjointed memories, accessed via various objects and locations of personal and cultural significance. Consequently, the literal and figurative textures and textures in 'A Journal' appear in contrast to the slipperiness of language, expressed through the repeated images of water's fluidity and constant shifting from one form to another. The texture of fabric offers a degree of permanence when 'language slips like water through our hands'.²⁴

The two sections incorporating material from the *Kanteletar* in 'A Journal' are, like much of the rest of the sequence, markedly somber and melancholy in tone. They address lost desire, unfulfilled longing, and yearning for lost love. The generally melancholy mood of the *Kanteletar*, set in its opening poem, matches the atmosphere of Sirr's poem: 'music was made from grief, / moulded from sorrow // its soundboard from endless woes / its strings gathered from torments'.²⁵ Befittingly for 'A Journal', the central theme of the *Kanteletar* is 'man's loneliness, solitude and melancholy', as Kukkonen observes. However, now these characteristics lose their role as markers of 'iconic Finnishness' and become, instead, a part of a record of 'a punctual, private ache'.²⁶ Paradoxically, the melancholy *Kanteletar* acts both as a sign of the lost lover's absence, or the remoteness of her 'far dark home', and as a psychological reference point, an object of recognition for the speaker's own grief in the folk singer's voice. It reflects proximity as well as distance.

Of the two sections that explicitly quote from the *Kanteletar*, the first one incorporates and modifies lines from Bosley's English translation, titled 'Missing Him' (song number 2:43). The Finnish addressee 'kultani' would literally translate as 'my darling', and could grammatically be male or female. According to Bosley, this is the first Finnish folk song known outside Finland, and was translated into German by no

²³ Sirr, *Ledger*, 57.

²⁴ Sirr, *Ledger*, 71.

²⁵ Bosley, *Kanteletar*, 9.

²⁶ Kukkonen, 'The *Kanteletar* as poetic text and discourse', 340, 339 and Sirr, *Ledger*, 58.

lesser a figure than Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.²⁷ The lines inspired by the *Kanteletar* are distinguished from the rest of the poem's text by italics:

*though you were a mile off
or two miles away, I'd known your step*

*and fly out, lips like the wind to your eyes
your neck like a heather stalk...*²⁸

The use of italics suggests the use of another's voice, yet Sirr does not offer a verbatim quotation of his source poem. Importantly, he changes the third person 'he'/'him' of Bosley's translation into second person 'you', continuing to direct his words at the poem's addressee, while also refraining from gender-specific wording (the Finnish song uses a gender neutral third person 'tuon'). Comparing the above lines with first lines of the song in Bosley's translation demonstrates how Sirr combines phrases freely, and distills the folk song's lines to suit his own verse:

Should my treasure come,
my darling step by,
I'd know him by his coming
recognize him by *his step*
though he were still a mile off
or two miles away.

As mist I'd go out
as smoke I would reach the yard
as sparks I would speed
as flame *I would fly*

[...]

his mouth is of melted fat
his lips are of honey
his hands golden, fair,
*his neck like a heather stalk*²⁹

A more extensive quotation would become too overwhelming a presence in Sirr's own poem, but his two couplets achieve much in their brevity. This is, as the section states, 'where two languages come together', not simply in the sense of the two native languages of the speaker and the addressee, Finnish and English, but also as the personal voice of the speaker and the anonymous singer of the folk song. Sirr tightly

²⁷ Goethe was inspired by Lönnrot's *Kalevala* to produce his own translated collection of Finnish folk poetry, titled *Finnisches Lied*. See Bosley, 'Introduction' to *The Kalevala* (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 1989), xvi

²⁸ Sirr, *Ledger*, 77. In the original Finnish *Kanteletar*, these lines go as follows: 'Tuntisin ma tuon tulosta, /Arvoaisin astunnasta, /Jos ois vielä virstan päässä, / Tahikka kahen takana. / Utuna ulos menisin // Supostellen suun etehen. // Kaula kuin kanervan varsi'. '*Kanteletar: Suomen kansan wanhoja lauluja ja wirsiä*'. iBooks.
<<https://itunes.apple.com/WebObjects/MZStore.woa/wa/viewBook?id=5BC75213B7E1F1DFA1BB95E1A137D221>>, accessed 6 March 2017.

²⁹ Bosley, *Kanteletar*, 41. My emphases.

weaves the sense and sentiment of the song into his own text, presents his voice alongside both the Finnish original and Bosley's translation.

In addition to the repurposing of lines from the *Kanteletar*, this section also includes the poem's only phrases in Finnish language, another italicized couplet followed by a now almost-literal English translation (not in italics) at the end of the section. The preceding lines are directed at the poem's addressee, who discards 'impossible English' and speaks in 'the dark tango of [her] own words'.³⁰ The Finnish couplet that follows is not a direct quotation from folk poetry, but reads more like a modern or contemporary poem or, even more likely, lyrics from a popular song:

Tulen kotiin, sinuun
*Tulen kävelen hiljaa*³¹

This passage translates as 'I come home, to you / I come walking slowly', and this translation into English can be found at the end of the same section.³² Like the *Kalevala*, the *Kanteletar* is composed in trochaic tetrameter (also called the '*Kalevala* meter'), whereas the musical tone of the Finnish here (repetition of 'tulen', the slow long vowels of 'kotiin', 'sinuun' and 'hiljaa', and the use of soft consonants), point towards melancholy popular musical tradition, like the 'tango' of the addressee's native background. Much has been written about Finns' strange love affair with the tango, and its distinctively mournful or nostalgic style.³³ The tango also offers a connection between the nineteenth-century folk lyric and twentieth-century popular culture: Kukkonen notes how 'the iconicity of *The Kanteletar* is reflected today [...] in the lyrics of Finnish popular music' and 'is especially evident in the role of nature in traditional Finnish tango lyrics written in the 1950s'.³⁴ The Finnish tango, she suggests, reflects the culture's characteristically melancholy tone 'in the same way as folk poetry does'.³⁵

In the case of the Finnish lines, too, the italicization suggests translation as well as a change of speaking voice, yet the intimacy of first-person, and the idea of silence in the second Finnish language line also implies focalization through the first-person speaker of the poem. Consequently, the voice here is lacking clear identity. In this section, individual voices are intertwined, but not explicitly described through textile metaphors. Instead, the imagery of dancing, walking and stepping suggest another kind of patterning, as an embodied tension between movement, proximity and distance, as a shifting relation between the two figures. The speaker struggles for

³⁰ Ibid., 76.

³¹ Sirr, *Ledger*, 76.

³² The exact translation of 'sinuun' would be 'into' you, not 'to you', but it would be impossible to convey the exact mood of the lines through such a literal version.

³³ See Kukkonen's introduction to *Tango Nostalgia*.

³⁴ Kukkonen, '*The Kanteletar* as poetic text and discourse', 345.

³⁵ Kukkonen, *Tango Nostalgia*, 105.

foothold while faced with the impermanence of water in its different forms: as rain, ice or snow.³⁶

But where water and language are presented as endlessly amorphous and unstable, the poem later proceeds to adapt material from the *Kanteletar* in which the processes of spinning and stitching suggest a way of arranging fragmented and shifting objects of memory into something more permanent. In a section between the two focused on here, the foreign language proves resistant to fluent communication and translation: immediately after the poem's first explicit engagement with the *Kanteletar*, the struggle with language's literal and symbolic foreignness is expressed as the clumsy first steps of a novice learner: 'I learn to count from one to ten, I learn to say my name / and where I'm from', followed by an immediate stumble, 'I need sentimental, I need heartsick / I need the whole vocabulary of hopelessness / stammering it, gagging on it'.³⁷ Language fails as a referential or denotative medium, and it is the textile metaphor that suggests an alternative way forward: like threads in fabric, in poetry sound, meter and rhythm allow for communication that circumvents denotative meaning-making. Through the textile metaphor the poem now aspires to understand the *function* of folk verse in a manner that can be more faithful to its native context, socially as well as culturally. Rather than appropriation through quotation, the poet engages with the poetic texture and the imagery of textiles in the *Kanteletar* literally and figuratively: it weaves Finnish folk verse's metrical and sonic patterns, as well as its themes and motifs, into the speaker's own language and literary tradition. Sirr's engagement with his Finnish source in this section also moves even more forcefully beyond quotation and reference or the incorporation of phrases from the addressee's native language. Instead, Sirr draws on several different aspects of his source simultaneously.

The song informing this section is number 2:119 in the *Kanteletar*, titled 'Spinster' in Bosley's volume. The opening lines of Bosley's translated poem present the context of making clothes for a future spouse and family, and for the present-day reader the lament conveys more than a hint of defeatism and self-pity, building up to the speaker's imagined marriage to Death:

Look at others, the lucky
And the fortunate: they put
Stockings on those meant for them
Shirts upon those made for them.
[...]
If I, luckless, could but die
and, wretched, be broken off
I would make stockings for Death
shirts for the sons of the grave³⁸

³⁶ I have discussed the use of water/snow/ice as a sign of the poem's absent northern connection in 'The border of snow and rain': navigating the elemental north in Peter Sirr's 'A Journal', *The Nordic Journal of English Studies*, Special Issue: 'English in the North', forthcoming December 2017.

³⁷ Sirr, *Ledger*, 77.

³⁸ Bosley, *Kanteletar*, 51.

The singer goes on to lament how ‘on my griefs I’ll put stockings / a shirt on my low spirits’ and finally, before uttering the words borrowed by Sirr, she fantasizes her own death: ‘If I, luckless, could but die’.³⁹ The title word ‘spinster’ is specifically tied to the social context where women’s work assumed a symbolic significance that eventually transcended the original practical meaning of the term: the spinster as a ‘woman (or, rarely, a man) who spins, *esp.* one who practises spinning as a regular occupation’ or a term that ‘originally [denoted] their occupation’ changed, from the seventeenth century onwards, to be used ‘as the proper legal designation of one still unmarried’ or ‘a woman still unmarried; *esp.* one beyond the usual age for marriage, an old maid’.⁴⁰

Interestingly, there is no equivalent Finnish term that would simultaneously refer to the act of spinning and the status of an unmarried woman, and in the Finnish *Kanteletar* the title is ‘Surujani mie sukitan’, literally translating as ‘I weave socks for my sorrows’. However a cultural practice that associates textile work with the rituals of love and marriage also informs the Finnish poem, in which the singer imagines herself as the bride for Death. Unmarried girls would traditionally make clothes and other textiles that would be presented as proof of ability: sowing and weaving were key skills for young women seeking to marry.⁴¹ The idea of an unmarried woman that spins, stitches and weaves clothes for the ‘sons of the grave’ is quite literally a spinster, as she makes clothes for the marriage that will never take place in this world, until death. The singer laments not the loss, but the absence of a potential suitor.

That the section drawing on ‘Spinster’ has a key role within Sirr’s sequence is highlighted by its subsequent inclusion in the partial republication of ‘A Journal’ in *Selected Poems* in 2004 – only six sections from the sequence are included in this later volume.⁴² In *Selected Poems*, it is placed immediately after two sections focused on water: a day in rainy Ireland calling for ‘a book of rain, a journal of water’, and another in which ‘language slips like water through our hands’.⁴³ The shift from water and rain as governing metaphors to stitching and weaving is also a turn from melancholy reminiscing and longing as despondent, reactive and passive, to a mode where the speaker seeks to assume agency in the process of mourning; memory and the experience of loss can be woven into a patterned texture. The borrowed elements of a folk song, and its textile metaphor, suggest a process of working through, rather than acting out, memory and pain in the active present.⁴⁴

The use of the Finnish source is made explicit in the section’s opening lines, where the folk verse’s theme is presented as an invitation or beckoning, something

³⁹ Bosley, *Kanteletar*, 52.

⁴⁰ OED,

<<http://www.oed.com.libgate.library.nuigalway.ie/view/Entry/186771?redirectedFrom=spinster#eid>>, accessed 7 August 2017.

⁴¹ See Talvela, 37.

⁴² Peter Sirr, *Selected Poems: 1982-2004* (Oldcastle, Co. Meath: Gallery Press, 2004).

⁴³ Sirr, *Ledger*, 67, 71.

⁴⁴ My phrasing here draws on Freud’s discussion on the processing of traumatic memory through ‘acting out’ or ‘working through’. It was discussed in his ‘Remembering, Repeating and Working Through’, which was based, in the words of Adam Phillips, on ‘the fundamental significance of remembering and repeating’ See Phillips, ‘On ‘Remembering, Repeating and Working Through,’ Again’ *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, 52.3 (June 2016): 377.

the speaker *ought* to do. The use of the auxiliary verb ‘should’ positions the speaker between contemplation and action, while the occurrence the verb at the beginning of each of the first three lines already moves towards the *Kanteletar*’s style, based on alliteration and repetition:

If I should be doing anything now
It should be that mute, folkloric thing
I should be sitting here stitching
a shirt for the loss of you
as the woman in the song I read
almost, but not quite, said [...] ⁴⁵

From these tentative and relatively simple lines, the section moves towards increasingly complex patterning. After the first three lines, the three that follow start with the vowel ‘a’: ‘a shirt’, ‘as the woman’, ‘almost’ – the last word ‘almost’ repeating the ‘a’ vowel of the two preceding lines, though not quite the sound. This is another instance of the implicit addressing of the complexities of translation, not only from one language to another, but also between written and spoken utterance (unlike English, written and spoken Finnish have an almost perfect one-to-one correspondence). But most importantly, from the beginning, stitching is presented as a way of doing, making or creating – as *poiesis*. It is a method of composition, and a means of negotiating a way through emotional crisis.

After the opening, the idea of ‘stitching’ is more elaborately embedded into Sirr’s poem’s own metrical patterning. The singer of the Finnish folk song, the poem explains, is

thinking of her long hours of misery
and solitude, her solitary misery
that set her thinking
of things she could make to dress the loss
the loneliness, making of the night
an infinite closet
to be walked through, full of hems
and rustlings, sleeved with promise
that fell to lace, eloquence, nothing [...] ⁴⁶

Here, language is patterned to incorporate some of the distinguishing features of Finnish folk poetry; the lines are indeed ‘almost, but not quite’ like the songs inspiring them. In the first half of the above quotation, the lines echo the trochaic *Kalevala* metre, based on the predominant intonation of the Finnish language, where stress falls on the first syllable of each word. Rather than end rhyme, this folk verse relies on alliteration, and consists of couplets where the second line repeats the first line’s central idea, theme or action. The theme and verbal pattern of ‘thinking of long hours of misery / and solitude’ are repeated in ‘her solitary misery / that set her thinking’,

⁴⁵ Sirr, *Ledger*, 81.

⁴⁶ Sirr, *Ledger*, 82.

though the lines hint at, rather than copy, the trochaic rhythm of the *Kalevala* line. 'Things' in the following line also connects with 'thinking', and consonance links 'loss', 'solitude' and 'loneliness'. Furthermore, 'Things she could make to dress the loss the loneliness' is coupled with 'making the night / an infinite closet', as both phrases employ the textile and sewing metaphor to evoke the idea of creating a material texture as a means of processing emotional pain. These few extraordinary lines accomplish what Bosley's 'Spinster' quite doesn't, the musical rhythm and sound of the original oral verse in a contemporary context. In lieu of a literal translation from Finnish, Sirr's 'almost, but not quite' phrasing skillfully embeds the verse pattern of his Finnish source into his own native English – for a brief moment, Sirr's poem aligns itself with the sound, voice and momentum of Finnish folk song.

By adopting the technique of the folk poem's singer, the speaker urges the addressee to witness not only his emotional distress, but also his ability to translate the style and sentiment of her native literature into his own idiom. Similarly to the girls proving their skills as future wives, the speaker demonstrates his mastery of song technique in creating a texture that combines tradition and personal voice. Once again, the language reflects the ambiguity of the gendered voice in 'A Journal'. When the speaker concludes that 'these shirts I borrow from the Finnish / this you left behind', the words draw on the cultural convention of borrowing another's voice in a specific context. Thus they also demonstrate a desire to create a bond with the lost lover through acts of translation – both Bosley's and Sirr's. Rather than 'look at others', speaker now seems to plea to the addressee to 'look at me'; the use of Finnish folk verse allows for an expression of longing while also expressing the speaker's ability to follow a specific pattern.

The lines discussed above are not a quotation from Sirr's source text. However immediately after them he does include a verbatim quotation from 'Spinster': 'a grim manufacture / of "shirts from the sons of the grave – / stockings from great griefs / shirts from evil days"'.⁴⁷ These lines lack the cadence of the earlier passage, and are also embedded among other intertextual references, extending beyond the Finnish context. The rustic textures of the Finnish tradition are presented alongside a passage through C. S. Lewis's wardrobe leading to the land of winter: 'an infinite closet / to be walked through, full of hems / and rustlings'. The allusion to Lewis's Narnia creates a connection between Irish and Nordic traditions, intertwined through an evocation of Lewisian 'northernness', 'not so much a geographical location but rather a very strong aesthetic feeling for an imaginary place', as Daniel Warzecha describes it.⁴⁸ Furthermore, it is Charon of the Greek tradition, not the black swan of the river of Tuonela from the *Kalevala*, that now guards the dark river separating this world and the next, that of the spinster and the realm of Death:⁴⁹ 'a place awash with silk, linen / and Charon rowed fresh to dazzle the dead / to wrap them in shirt and lace'.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Ibid., 82.

⁴⁸ Daniel Warzecha, 'Nordic Mythology in C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*', *Re-Embroidering the Robe: Faith, Myth and Literary Creation since 1850*, ed. Suzanne Bray, Adrienne E. Gavin and Peter Merchant (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 18.

⁴⁹ The black swan of Tuonela, which also gave a name to Jean Sibelius's famous tone poem, is in the I said to swim in the river separating the land of the living and the land of the dead.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Different textures and materials imply different sociocultural contexts, and the ferryman of the dead from Greek mythology points towards the kind of sophistication that would be demonstrated with 'silk' and 'lace'. As Ronald Schwarz notes, the material culture of clothing and adornment should be understood in conjunction with 'verbal behavior' and 'social action', and 'clothing plays a symbolic role in mediating the relationship between nature, man, and his sociocultural environment'.⁵¹ In 'A Journal', the 'verbal behavior' of textile metaphors mediates between the material and the symbolic, and extends to the materiality of language itself. Sirr moves from Finnish to Irish and then to a European context gradually, weaving the different voices together, before returning to the 'borrowed' Finnish again.⁵²

The painful aftermath of a sensual love must find a route through the 'black winter of our love', as it is described in an earlier section of the poem. The elemental changes between rain, snow and ice that fill much of the sequence are implied rather than explicitly mentioned here, in the snow that awaits whoever passes through the wardrobe, but also the expectation of the spring that finally arrives in Lewis's story. Yet the 'desperate thing' drives the abandoned speaker, 'planting the garden of the end of it / rising to a kind of hatred / to come back in, to come on spring / as a room surprised / by silk and linen'.⁵³ Lewis's narrative is reversed as it is voiced through the implied singer of the *Kanteletar*, and the imagined journey towards initiation, melting snow and spring becomes a withdrawal to the past, to personal grief and unreciprocated desire: the imagery of clothes and textiles prompts an association, a 'surprise' that the speaker cannot quite control.

In short, in this key section, the processes of stitching or spinning, following the rhythmic patterning and the imagery of Finnish verse, signify at once a display of skill, a ritual for overcoming pain, and the manner in which personal (and literary) memory is accessed through remembered objects. The 'borrowed' metrical pattern breaks down almost as soon as the voice has found its rhythm: it marks a mastery of style, but is also a sign of the fragility of memory, a reminder of an intimacy lost almost as soon as it began. And while the textile metaphor presented as a process of literal and figurative stitching and weaving suggests a possibility of finding passage through the grief, the section's conclusion also highlights memory as something that ultimately remains out of our control. The textile metaphor is, at once, a cure and a trigger for relapse into lost desire. The threads that constitute a fabric ravel and unravel, entwine and unwind in turns, demonstrating control and confusion simultaneously: the risk of allowing one's voice to be absorbed by the idiom of the other can also lead to loss of self, or a loss of voice within the texture of numerous 'borrowed' voices.

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Sirr's use of Finnish folk song supports Aingeal Clare's observation on the lack of identifiable voice as a characteristic of Sirr's poetry. For Clare, Sirr's 'speaking subject'

⁵¹ Ronald A. Schwarz, 'Uncovering the Secret Vice: Toward an Anthropology of Clothing', *The Fabrics of Culture: The Anthropology of Clothing and Adornment*, ed. Justine M. Cordwell and Ronald A. Schwarz (Hague, Paris and New York: Mouton Publishers, 1979), 30-31.

⁵² Sirr, *Ledger*, 82.

⁵³ Sirr, *Ledger*, 82-83.

is often 'anonymous and unknowable',⁵⁴ lacking in identity – though not in emotional depth. Benjamin Keatinge similarly refers to the 'impersonal feel which undermines any sense of a lyrical I behind [his] verses'.⁵⁵ At the same time, however, the frequent use of translation and quotations from other languages presents a 'multi-linguaged consciousness'.⁵⁶ In most cases, the shifts between voices and perspectives take place in English, through implied shifts in the identity of the speaking voice; inasmuch as the *Kanteletar* is, as Kukkonen notes, 'in a Bakhtinian sense a "polyphonic" collection' of songs for girls, boys, men and women',⁵⁷ Sirr's sequence similarly mixes registers for a polyphonic effect, attained without discarding the sensibility of the first person lyric voice.

Critical responses to Sirr's sequences have been mixed, and reflected a perception of the poet as formally accomplished but occasionally unable to extend the technical control of his medium to his longer pieces. Peter Robinson has commented on how Sirr's 'forms grow by responding to their own leads and suggestions, to their lineation and enjambment', yet 'the risks in his way of proceeding can perhaps be countered in some of the longer sequences'.⁵⁸ Robinson suggests that this is the case in 'A Journal', as the 'space he allows himself doesn't necessarily warrant the discoveries', and the poet 'doesn't bring each individual section to the same degree of focus' that characterizes his shorter pieces.⁵⁹ Aingeal Clare refers to the 'misorchestration of his many sequences',⁶⁰ Justin Quinn to 'Sirr's difficulty with orchestrating single poems into sequences'.⁶¹ Yet the occasional lack of precision and concentration that many have found problematic is also an integral part of 'A Journal', not because of any simplistic equation of a lack of emotional restraint with limited stylistic control, but as counterweight to form and technique, reflecting the repeated attempts at translation and communication across an unbridgeable divide. Robinson's description of how Sirr has '[abandoned] the stanza as a self-contained apartment' in favour of 'blocks of responsively improvised verse' is well demonstrated by 'A Journal': stylistically elaborate passages are in conversation, though not subjected to a single governing pattern.⁶² But despite the repeated exchanges in (and within) interior and exterior spaces, architectural spatial metaphors, too, become a part of the fabric of memory, in 'half streets unstitching their stones', and in the room where 'under the blanket / under the clothes the soft / folds, the veil upon veil upon veil / Lift / all till you get there, the longed for / last layer'.⁶³ As Maria Johnston notes, Sirr's 'weaving movements of a walking, thinking consciousness', the 'varying textures' of his

⁵⁴ Aingeal Clare, 'Nunca Fiz Mais do que Fumar a Vida: The Poetry of Peter Sirr', *Metre* 17 (Spring 2005): 76, <<http://metre.ff.cuni.cz/article/57>>, accessed 16 February 2017.

⁵⁵ Benjamin Keatinge, 'The Language of Globalization in Contemporary Irish Poetry', *Studi Irlandesi: A Journal of Irish Studies* 4 (2014): 82.

⁵⁶ Clare 79.

⁵⁷ Kukkonen, 'The *Kanteletar* as poetic text and discourse', 346.

⁵⁸ Peter Robinson, 'Review of Peter Sirr's *Selected Poems and Nonetheless*', *Times Literary Supplement* 5340 (5 August 2005): 26.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁶⁰ Clare 79.

⁶¹ Justin Quinn, "'O Seasons, O Cities". Review of Peter Sirr's *Bring Everything*', *Metre* 10 (Autumn 2001): 104, <metre.ff.cuni.cz/front.article/download-file/93>, accessed 27 February 2017.

⁶² Robinson, 26.

⁶³ Sirr, *Ledger*, 66, 74.

‘intimate city’ and lines that are ‘mimetic of his physical and metaphysical movement [and] swerve and spin’ characterize his poetry’s perambulatory engagement with material and symbolic spaces.⁶⁴ Within the built environments of the poem, the addressee of ‘A Journal’ is only felt as an absence, and the textile metaphors express a desire to retain at least some kind of connection: in the words of poet of the *Kanteletar*, there is a hope that ‘the sheets will serve us, / the linen will unite us’.⁶⁵

In his borrowing from the *Kanteletar* in particular, the poet intricately connects literal imagery of stitching and spinning, personal, social and cultural reference, and *poiesis* as verbal act of creating. The poem unassumingly ‘borrows’ rather than appropriates, both in its use of cultural reference and in its blurring of gendered voices and experiences. Thus, the frequently observed impersonal quality of the speaking voice (or a voice that Clare describes as ‘anonymous’ and ‘unknowable’) in Sirr’s poems is, in ‘A Journal’, tempered by the intensity of emotion conveyed in the lines expressing unreciprocated desire and loss. The speaker imagines doing ‘that mute, folkloric thing’ of ‘stitching a shirt for the loss of you’, a rather contradictory proclamation of lack of voice in a reference to oral song tradition. The act of ‘stitching’ may be silent, yet the songs in the relevant section of the *Kanteletar* were specifically composed for and performed aloud. The silence of manual craft, as well as the silence of writing, can replicate the rhythm and function of song when its source is no longer present. Rather than any actual ‘muteness’ of the unnamed singer, the line should be understood as addressing the silence that follows the transcription of the songs into writing, first into Finnish, then into the English of Bosley’s translation. The absent voice of the singer is also the absent lover, sharing the singer’s language and idiom; the text alone remains as a material document of the remembered love affair, as do the textiles created by the singers of the *Kanteletar*.

⁶⁴ Maria Johnston, ‘Walking Dublin: Contemporary Irish Poets in the City’, *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry*, eds. Fran Brearton and Alan Gillis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 501, 502.

⁶⁵ Bosley, *Kanteletar*, 45.

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