

Sean Reynolds

Translation for the End Times: Peter O’Leary’s *The Sampo*

What do you do when your world starts to fall apart? I go for a walk, and if I’m really lucky, I find mushrooms.

– Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing

The post-apocalyptic genre has today become the domain of anthropologists. In one of the great post-apocalyptic books of the last decade, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing sets out on a quest to answer the question: “what manages to live in the ruins of the world we have made?”¹ She selects the Japanese wild mushroom matsutake—located in deciduous forests across every continent of the Northern Hemisphere—as a case study for understanding how growth is possible within the wake of anthropogenic global ecological catastrophe.

What makes the mushroom a worthwhile case study subject for post-apocalyptic models of growth? This fungus thrives in forests disturbed and decimated by humans. Like rats and cockroaches, it flourishes within “the environmental messes humans have made.”² By tracing both the folk traditions and global capitalist market surrounding the wild mushroom, she offers us a model of “fungal ecology” that may allow us “to better understand the promise of cohabitation in a time of massive human destruction.”

Tsing warns, though, that the mushroom should not be read as an image of ecological hope. It is categorically different from the symbol of the shoot sprouting up from the stump of Jesse. Rather, the mushroom signals merely how we might live with (or “put up with”) our hopeless propensity toward ecological destruction. The time for hope and optimism has already passed. Tsing characterizes optimism as an attitude proper to the twentieth century. In the prologue to her book, she provides an unflinching assessment of how the predicament of a human in 2015 is irreconcilable with that of a human in the mid-twentieth century. I want to quote from it directly for the reason that she mentions poets specifically as individuals who need to update their outlooks:

1 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 2.

2 Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 4.

The world's climate is going haywire, and industrial progress has proved much more deadly to life on earth than anyone imagined a century ago. The economy is no longer a source of growth or optimism; any of our jobs could disappear with the next economic crisis ... Precarity once seemed the fate of the less fortunate. Now it seems that all our lives are precarious—even when, for the moment, our pockets are lined. *In contrast to the mid-twentieth century, when poets and philosophers of the global north felt caged by too much stability, now many of us, north and south, confront the condition of trouble without end.*³

Are poets confronting “the condition of trouble without end”? Or, are we still rehearsing modernist anxieties?

In his recent collection, *Earth is Best*, poet Peter O’Leary also argues that, amidst ecological crisis, mushrooms may point the way forward, for literature and humanity. The mushroom of O’Leary’s eye is not the matsutake, however, but the *Amanita Muscaria*, “the legendary fly agaric,”⁴ also called “toadstool.” In a series of 33 “Amanita Odes,” O’Leary probes the saprotrophic roots of the fungal life, looking for a pattern that might offer us direction. More directly relevant to Tsing’s concerns, however, O’Leary also provides a remarkable afterword in the form of a manifesto called “Mycopoetics,” that is, a poetics modeled on mushrooms. The manifesto opens with the same urgency and alarm as Tsing’s book:

The Earth is in crisis. Anthropogenic climate change has altered the atmosphere, primarily with the excessive introduction of carbon dioxide ... The evolutionary fact that defines human culture ... is that we burn shit to get its energy. Realistically ... the likelihood of this changing for the better is remote.⁵

The problem this poetics attempts to answer is not how to create, or how to innovate, or how to break off from our inheritance. The question mycopoetics addresses is this: what do we do about all of this toxic waste we have created? Mycopoetics is about getting rid of existing material: “Mycelium is a saprotroph, a devourer of dead matter. Without decay and the breaking down of dead matter, our ecosystem would cease to function. It would become inert.”⁶ The way O’Leary translates this function over to the field of poetry is uncomplicated:

The archetype of the mycelium extends to language. In fact, to me language is the thing that most resembles the communicating properties of mycelium ... poetry is rife with toxins. That sounds like a criticism. It’s not. In fact, it’s as things should be. Like mycelium, poetry

3 Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 1–2.

4 Peter O’Leary, *Earth is Best* (New York: The Cultural Society, 2019), 105.

5 O’Leary, *Earth is Best*, 101.

6 O’Leary, *Earth is Best*, 104.

processes toxins: poisons in language, poisons in thought, poisons in the imagination. Poetry is the noxious, gnostic contagion Robert Duncan conceived it to be.⁷

Similar to Tsing, O'Leary adopts the mushroom as an ambivalent symbol of concerns unique to the twenty-first-century poet. To understand this poetics better, though, we must trace its spore back to a model of translation, specifically back to O'Leary's 2016 imagist epic *The Sampo*, itself a "translation" of the Finnish epic the *Kalevala*.

I hope to argue that the mushroom—or saprotrophic growth more generally—also offers a model for a twenty-first-century response to our inheritance, an inheritance that is replete with humanity's abuse of the natural world. A fungal relationship between past and present is most directly comprehensible within the context of translation, for, there, the roles of dead material and fungal decomposition find direct analogs in the source text and the translation.

Looking at O'Leary's *The Sampo*, I will attempt to tease out two different currents. One is the action of a medieval epic poem. The other is the action of an ecological subplot of catastrophic proportions. This subplot is introduced by the translator—or rather, to use the mycological term, it is "inoculated" by the translator. Following this inoculation, we are able to witness the unfolding of a saprotrophic relationship between source text and translation—wherein the mycelia of the translator eat the original up from the inside out. This fungal relationship will, perforce, confuse any normative model of translational reproduction and, in the end, show itself to be of a very queer nature.

Inoculating the Spores of an Ecological Subplot

As a translator, O'Leary approached the *Kalevala* with no previous knowledge of the Finnish language, a fact he readily attests to in his "Afterword" to *The Sampo*. He explains that he relied on the consultation of three different English language translations with the occasional supplement of a Finnish lexicon. In this sense, O'Leary approaches the *Kalevala* as a stranger. In another way, O'Leary has an intimate familiarity with the source text. The heroic adventures of the epic took purchase in his imagination from adolescence, when the story was adapted and illustrated in Time Life's *Enchanted World* series. It is easy to see how this story could appeal to a young audience. It has everything you could want out of the fantasy/adventure genre. There is Väinämöinen, the grey-bearded

⁷ Ibid., 107.

Wizard Poet who battles against Louhi, the hag sorceress from the dark, cold North Country. And what do they fight over? The Sampo: an enigmatic “magic mill,” source of wealth, first forged by the great smith Ilmarinen, friend and comrade of Väinämöinen.

The *Kalevala* is best understood as an attempt to piece together an epic, rather than an epic proper. Organized into 50 “runes” or Cantos, it is “essentially a conflation and concatenation of a considerable number and variety of traditional songs, narrative, lyric, and magic.” It tells the stories of the legendary people known as the Kaleva, who inhabited an area known as Karelia, which extended from Eastern Finland to Russia’s White Sea. In order to create a mostly coherent narrative of the adventures of Väinämöinen, O’Leary extracts parts from across a range of over 30 runes and repackages them into four sequential sections (which I will continue to refer to as “runes”). For the purpose of opening context, I will provide a brief synopsis of the first three runes, which contain the bulk of the action. I will reserve the fourth, epilogistic rune for an in-depth analysis later in the chapter.

- In the first rune, “Forging the Sampo,” the wizard Väinämöinen transports Ilmarinen into the North Country, in the hopes that he will be able to forge a magical mill called the Sampo for Louhi, a villainous sorceress. Ilmarinen agrees to forge the Sampo for Louhi only on the condition that he can marry her beautiful daughter; however, after Ilmarinen successfully forges the mill, the daughter refuses to leave with him.
- In the second rune, “Pike and Harp,” Väinämöinen and Ilmarinen sail back up to the North Country with a plot to recapture the Sampo from Louhi, who has hidden the mill deep within a mountain. Their voyage is impeded by a colossal predatory pike, whom Väinämöinen slays with an astral sword. From an assortment of the pike’s bones, the wizard constructs a harp, which becomes his most beloved possession.
- The third rune, “Stealing the Sampo,” opens with the heroes’ arrival in the North Country and their confrontation with the sorceress Louhi and her army. By means of his new harp, Väinämöinen is able to lull her army to sleep, leaving the heroes free to descend into the center of the mountain from which they extract the Sampo. Making their escape by boat, Väinämöinen’s crew begins to celebrate prematurely with song, offending the ears of a giant crane, whose bellows awaken Louhi and her army. Louhi summons the divinities of air and water whose tempests rattle Väinämöinen’s ship until his beloved pike-bone harp is tossed overboard, never to be recovered. The longest and most fast-paced section of the book concerns the ensuing maritime battle between Väinämöinen and Louhi over the fate of the

Sampo, which culminates in Louhi's fantastic and vindictive dismemberment of the mill. No victor emerges. All is lost.

Into this narrative, O'Leary inoculates a covert ecological plot. At times this plot becomes as large as biomes, at others it as small and hidden as fungal spores. Initially, the ecological—or climatological—preoccupations of *The Sampo's* narration merely bloom ornamentally within the storyline of the main protagonists. For example, in the opening rune, Ilmarinen leads Väinämöinen into the woods to find the perfect spot to construct an oven in which he may forge the Sampo. Note the extent to which O'Leary transfigures this walk into a mushroom hunt:

And with that, setting off
Into the woods.

Crimson flesh. Fleecy remnants on the caps.
Pushing through the pine duff.
Leading Ilmarinen. Deeper into the trees.
Lucid-looking amanitas.
Sifts of light. Bright red dottles.
His attention. Expanded.
Sweet wandering. A day. Then days.

There. Huge. A stone. Streaked with color.
Hematite.
Troop of amanitas. In a circle around it.
Rhizomorphs.

...⁸

Here the reader may merely sense that he or she is being told a story by a narrator who happens to also be a naturalist. At its least invasive, *The Sampo* adds to the *Kalevala* a heightened awareness that the conflict between the heroes of the Kaleva and the North Country is entangled within a larger conflict between two climate zones, each containing a distinctive cast of flora. In the North we have the *Taiga*, the arctic boreal forests, a biome of which our century and the last has witnessed rapidly shrinking. In the South, where Väinämöinen and Ilmarinen reside, we have the subarctic climate. Between them stands a very real dividing line, an ecotone north of which the deciduous can no longer grow and the coniferous (firs, spruces, pines) reign.

At the terminus point between these two climates, the mountain birch tree stands sentinel. The ascendance of the birch tree to the position of major protag-

⁸ Peter O'Leary, *The Sampo* (New York: The Cultural Society, 2016), 16.

onist marks the most radical departure made by O'Leary's adaptation from the *Kalevala*. As a character, it actually both opens and closes the book. The first rune, "Forging the Sampo," opens with the wizard fleeing from the frozen North and reaching, by means of reindeer sleigh, his deciduous homeland:

Absorbed by the snowy fields. Hiss of his sledge.

Cutting birchwood runners.

Deerskins. Elks' antlers. Clean cold he rolls
through

And there: at last. A birch tree.

Stripped of leaves. Mycophoric birch. Branches
witching outward.

This specimen: sorcery's northmost sign. Polished
wedge of wood rubbed smoother still.

Birch. *Koivu*. In his pocket. Talismanic sympathy
of the southerly
woods ...⁹

In this particular scene, the birch tree seems to be an addition entirely unique to O'Leary. He even provides it with the heroic epithet—*Mycophoric*—*fungus-bearing*. In the 1989 translation of Finnish scholar Keith Bosley, we are only told that Väinämöinen rides "by swamps and by lands / by wide open glades," until he reaches "Kalevala's heath."¹⁰ The function of the birch tree is particular to O'Leary's narrative—it is the inoculation of a secondary, translational storyline within the "grounds" of the source text (*Kalevala*). Indeed, we are only introduced to the hero Väinämöinen secondarily through his metonymic relationship to the birch talisman he rubs in his hands. We are further signaled to read the birch tree as a character, or persona, by the fact that it is accompanied with its Finnish name, *Koivu*—the birch, like Väinämöinen, deserves to have its proper name untranslated, and capitalized at that.

Once Väinämöinen has returned home, he begins to sing a song of joy. In Bosley's translation, we are told simply that "he sang a spruce topped with flowers / topped with flowers and leaves with gold."¹¹ In contrast, O'Leary inserts a section of trochaic tetramer about the birch trees:

Väinämöinen. Singing spruces.

Into life. And birches crowned in

⁹ O'Leary, *The Sampo*, 3–4.

¹⁰ Elias Lönnrot, *The Kalevala*, trans. Keith Bosley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 104.

¹¹ Lönnrot, *The Kalevala*, 105.

golden leaves all shining. Birches
 lords of evening's shadow brighter.¹²

I bring attention to the trochaic tetrameter because this is, in fact, the meter in which the Finnish *Kalevala* was composed. (The popularity of the *Kalevala* in the nineteenth century was such that Longfellow was inspired to bring the meter into English for his epic *The Song of Hiawatha*.) These four lines are the only entrance of the meter in *The Sampo*—leading to an irony in which O'Leary departs from the source material (by adding more birches) for a stanza that uniquely signals back to the source material.

My comparisons of *The Sampo* against other, traditional translations are in no way intended to be evaluative—my goal is only to establish that the ecological and climatological preoccupations of *The Sampo* are a subplot inoculated by the twenty-first-century translator.

These ecological preoccupations in the narration bloom larger as the narrator turns to describing the magic mill. The irony of transfiguring the story of the Sampo into an imagist epic is that the Sampo itself is an unimaginable object. We are not quite sure what it looks like, or what the entirety of its powers entails. Its name remains untranslated, as it has no other iteration. Here is what O'Leary says in his afterword about the identity of the Sampo:

The Sampo itself is a deeply coveted object of mysterious power and provenance. Typically, it is described as a magic mill, grinding out salt, corn, and even coins. But that description doesn't quite suffice. Over the years, some have speculated that it is a treasure chest, or the ritual replica of an arctic world pillar that carries the sky on top of which is the Pole Star itself. The Finnish poet Paavo Haavikko even proposed that it was a fabulously wrought mint stolen by the Vikings from Byzantium.¹³

The most important function of the Sampo within the plot is that it sets characters into motion—the action it's actually performing is of little consequence to the story. In O'Leary's hands, though, the cryptic mill assumes a much more tangible imagining. He goes on to explain:

And yet these explanations feel insufficient too, because the Sampo has obviously organic features—including great roots it extends deep into the earth—behaving at times as esoterically and as plenteously as a mushroom, a theory that R Gordon Wasson ventures in *Soma: the Divine Mushroom of Immortality*. Whatever the Sampo is, everybody wants it.

¹² O'Leary, *The Sampo*, 5.

¹³ Peter O'Leary, "Afterword," in *The Sampo*, 106–7.

O'Leary approaches the Sampo with the precision of a taxonomist. From the morphological descriptions provided by the *Kalevala*, this is not a far leap to make. The Sampo is said to have a domed lid, beneath which grows a network of roots that could easily call to mind the mycelium of a mushroom. Let's examine O'Leary's first description of the Sampo, which comes immediately after the mill has been forged by Ilmarinen:

There. After three days. In the bottom of the
furnace.

The Sampo. Forming. Like a pyromantic morel.
In the ashes.

Its many-colored cap. Lustrous and waxy. Fuse of
force pushing it from the flame
Into life.

And Ilmarinen. Flexing his fist on the shaft of his
hammer.

And with his tongs pulling the Sampo. From the
heart of the fire.

Shaping for the maiden this vivid form
Its intricate interlocking lid. Its image of the
starry sphere.

Its mirror of the underworld channels.

Its forest of root systems

Its agarical jewels.¹⁴

Any comparison of this passage against that of a translation source text would be pointless. The taxonomic and mycologic nomenclature, this is entirely original to *The Sampo*. First, the Sampo's emergence is compared to that of the morel—a mushroom known for thriving in the wake of forest fires—with multi-colored “cap” or *pileus*, the bloom. It proceeds to establish a deep and complex root system analogous to the mycelium “root” structure of fungi. Finally, it sprouts jewels that are “agarical,” or agaric, a term referring to “the fleshy or fruiting part of various fungi.”¹⁵ O'Leary then turns nomenclature up a notch in the closing of the stanza:

From the Sampo
An energy emerges

¹⁴ O'Leary, *The Sampo*, 21.

¹⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “agaric (n. and adj.),” accessed June 3, 2021, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/3796?redirectedFrom=agaric#eid>.

Whose radiolarian saprophytes
Nourish the earth they suture.¹⁶

From the first emergence, O'Leary identifies the Sampo as having fungal "saprophytes"—that is, an organism that feeds off of decay (*sapro-* from the Greek for *rotten*)—piercing and expanding below the earth's surface.

Väinämöinen, the shaman poet, and Ilmarinen, the smith, gift the Sampo to Louhi, the sorceress hag of the North Country, on the condition that Väinämöinen can marry Louhi's beautiful daughter. When Louhi places the great mill at the center of the Copper Mountain, O'Leary again makes special note of the mycelium roots and their rhizomatic structure:

Nine fathoms deep she quests. Into the
mountain's heart.
Where the Sampo's reef-like salamandrine roots
begin their tapping.¹⁷

The climax of the narrative action in *The Sampo* comes in the third rune, "Stealing the Sampo," as Väinämöinen recaptures the Sampo and is hunted by Louhi and her army, who ultimately destroy the Sampo in the sea. Immediately after wresting it from the earth and taking it aboard his ship, Väinämöinen reaffirms its mycological features as he tells Ilmarinen: "This Sampo. With its sacronymic amanite lid. / To the Misty Island / To its headland."¹⁸

Much in O'Leary's description of the aftermath of the final sea battle with Louhi suggests that something akin to an anthropogenic natural disaster has occurred. Here is O'Leary's description of the scene in which Väinämöinen gathers together the ruins of the Sampo:

Väinämöinen. Earth's ward. Feeling it. Earth's ancient aura ...
Morning mist perfuming him. In an aerosol
Of light. Shaking the seeds of the Sampo like spores of
Dusky weather over the patterns of trenches in the open earth
he's made. Everywhere plumes of shook dust.¹⁹

After positioning Väinämöinen as the "ward" of the Earth, O'Leary then provides a pretty grim picture of how he has treated it. The atmosphere around him is

¹⁶ O'Leary, *The Sampo*, 22.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 86–87.

“aerosol”; fungal spores flutter in grim weather patterns; below them are the gaping wounds of the earth, aftermath of war.

The mushroom is literally and symbolically crucial right here, as fungal growth flourishes in the wake of this mass destruction. Tsing seizes on this in her study of disturbance-based ecologies:

When Hiroshima was destroyed by an atomic bomb in 1945, it is said, the first living thing to emerge from the blasted landscape was a matsutake mushroom ... Grasping the atom was the culmination of human dreams of controlling nature. It was also the beginning of those dreams' undoing. The bomb at Hiroshima changed things. Suddenly, we became aware that humans could destroy the livability of the planet—whether intentionally or otherwise. This awareness only increased as we learned about pollution, mass extinction, and climate change.²⁰

O'Leary's translation takes the narrative culmination of the *Kalevala* and transposes it onto this “culmination of human dreams of controlling nature.” The dismemberment of the amanitic Sampo (a mushroom cloud in the sky, of sorts) and its scattering into the aerosol winds brings to its fullness the action of the heroes—this is the ultimate, horrific climax of their power. What sorts of fungal spores will blossom in the fourth and final rune?

The Breaking of the Mill as Anthropogenic Climate Change

To fully appreciate the ecological ramifications (and ecological catastrophe) of the destruction of the Sampo in O'Leary's translation, we may need to forage deeper into the coding of this mechanism—namely in its participation of the archaeo-astronomical mytheme of the “Heavenly Mill.” If the Sampo-as-mushroom overinvests ecological imagery into the narrative conflict, the mytheme of the quern-stone imports a climatological catastrophe. Such a reading of the *Kalevala* was controversially put forth by Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend in their 1969 study *Hamlet's Mill: An Essay Investigating the Origins of Human Knowledge and Its Transmission Through Myth*. Here de Santillana and Dechend trace the recurrent narrative unit of a heavenly mill across Indo-European and Uralic mythology, concluding that it offered a “coded” prehistoric knowledge of astronomy. The identity of this knowledge is the most controversial part of their argument: that the heavenly mill—and its repeated destruction—displays

²⁰ Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 3.

an ancient understanding of axial precession. "Axial precession" need only, for our purposes, be given this reductive definition: the change of the orientation of the Earth's axis, or a wobble at its pole, that takes approximately 26,000 years to perform one full rotation. This polar wobble is the reason Earth's equatorial plane moves in relation to the sun, but it also implicates greater climatological shifts. The precession "alters the strength of summer sunlight in the high Arctic, causing great ice sheets to shrink or grow and affecting global climate as a result."²¹ This wobble, for de Santillana and Dechend, mythologized a primeval catastrophe—"a kind of cosmogonic 'original sin' whereby the circle of the ecliptic (with the zodiac) was tilted up at an angle with respect to the equator, and the cycles of change came into being."

The study enters in through the Old Norse predecessor of the Danish "Hamlet," the Old Icelandic "Amlóðhi," a melancholy young boy of "high intellect" who was "dedicated to avenge his father," but whose narrative centered on the turning of a millstone:

Amlóðhi was identified, in the crude and vivid imagery of the Norse, by the ownership of a fabled mill which, in his own time, ground out peace and plenty. Later, in decaying times, it ground out salt; and now finally, having landed at the bottom of the sea, it is grinding rock and sand, creating a vast whirlpool, the Maelstrom (i.e., the grinding stream, from the verb mala, "to grind"), which is supposed to be a way to the land of the dead.

This template reappears in the character of Frodhi from the Prose Edda, who owned a magic millstone called Grotte, "the crusher," which was able "to grind out gold, peace and happiness." Like the Sampo and the mill of Amlóðhi, the Grotte met with catastrophe. In greed Frodhi indentured two Maidens to grind out gold for him day and night until the point when the mill was stolen aboard a ship by the sea-king, Mysingr. He commanded the Maidens to grind him out salt through the night until it sunk the boat, together with the mill, to the bottom of the sea.

The recurrent damage of the magic millstone is more important to de Santillana and Dechend than any property of the mill itself. Given the "starry inscriptions" reported on the lid of the Sampo, it is difficult not to indulge their claim that the destruction of the mill represents a primeval incongruity of the earth and sky—that the spinning of the world is off-kilter. O'Leary's translation not only betrays his knowledge of this astronomical mytheme, but also unpacks it more explicitly to and for his source text. Immediately following the destruction

21 "Earth's Orbit Cannot Explain Modern Climate Change," Climate Feedback, <https://climatefeedback.org/claimreview/earths-orbit-cannot-explain-modern-climate-change/>.

of the mill and its disappearance into the sea, Louhi explains the climatological ruin that will befall the Finns:

Whatever you grow,
 whatever you plow,
 whatever you sow,
 whatever this broken Sampo's magic emplenishes,
 I'll ruin
 I'll devise endless, recurrent ruination for it—²²

The response Väinämöinen then gives in *The Sampo* is interesting to compare against that of the traditional translation by Bosley. *The Kalevala* introduces Väinämöinen's response with a simple tag:

Then the old Väinämöinen
 put this into words:
 No Lapp sings at me, no man
 of Turja shoves me around!

He proceeds to conclude his dismissal of Louhi's threat with the following lines:

raise a bear from the heath
 from a thicket a fierce cat
 from the wilds a hollow-hand
 and from beneath a sprig a gap-tooth
 for Northland's furthest lane, for
 where the North's herd treads!

Informed by the argument of de Santillana and Dechend, we can better understand the additions made in O'Leary's version. Here is how the shaman-poet's response is introduced:

Then Väinämöinen. Feeling weary. But feeling the
 ancient earth moving
 very slowly under him. Saying,
 "Spells from the North Country. Weak little
 whispers to me ..."²³

²² O'Leary, *The Sampo*, 83.

²³ Ibid.

And Väinämöinen concludes by telling Louhi:

A hail of steel. Is all you'll harvest.
 And the bear you weird. From the shadows of the
 pines. Her jaws
 lined with vicious teeth. Menacing. Preying.
 On Sariola's cattle. I've seen it. Up from the
 ancient earth. A vision.
 Revolving around me.²⁴

A distinctive trait of O'Leary's poem is the homogeneity of vocabulary among characters and the narrator. They are all working in the same direction. Above, the narrator and Väinämöinen share a preference for the term "ancient earth"—an epithet more outstanding when a character uses it in reference to his own (futural) prophetic vision. Its implication regarding the originary shift of the earth beneath the stars is clear. However, what O'Leary more subtly suggests is Väinämöinen—after stealing the Sampo—has not merely authored the earth's axial shift, he is also the very center of this shift. The earth moves under him. The celestial vision of the bear and cattle is now revolving around him. Given the vast implications of an axial shift, it is striking that O'Leary should give such an emphasis on the very place and person of Väinämöinen here.

Mushrooms and the Modernist Inheritance

In the "Afterword" to *The Sampo*, O'Leary lays out the lineage for the poetic style of his imagist epic:

I adapted a technique borrowed from the poetry of Thomas Meyer, especially his poem "Rilke," but more generally in his books *Coromandel* and *Kintsugi*. To these models, just as to the *Kalevala* itself, I have made modifications and changes to suit the purposes of my poem. But just so, my poem could not exist without these examples.²⁵

According to O'Leary, he adopted from Meyer's work a style of "rotoscoping,"²⁶ which allows the rapid sequential presentation of static images to become animated. To state the obvious, the central problem of creating an "imagist epic"

²⁴ Ibid., 85.

²⁵ O'Leary, "Afterword," 111.

²⁶ Peter O'Leary, discussion with author, January, 2020.

is how to make activity happen. I want to pursue further the influence of Meyer's "Rilke," which is itself a translation:

Help me! Who would hear. The terrible. Citizens. Angelic.
Orders. And if they did and held me I would die.
To their hearts. In the beauty. At the beginning. The
Terror. Its first twinges.
Takes our breath and we begin. We
survive. Survive because it waits and will
not strike. Every angel. The Terror. Every angel.²⁷

What O'Leary refers to as the "rotoscoping" is the flourish of splices introduced by an exuberantly excessive periodization. Every clause, every word, becomes a hinge point for motion. As O'Leary writes, "From this seemingly limiting mode of expression, Meyer coaxes impressive flexibility. New thoughts act like verbs; full sentences receive rewarding complements after completion. And there's a feeling of movement that pervades."²⁸ The method is somewhat paradoxical: by introducing periods between subject and predicate, between a verb and its object, the momentum intensifies.

The style that O'Leary adopts in *The Sampo*, however, goes much further than Meyer's in the direction of decomposing syntax into a paratactic sequence of discrete parts. O'Leary shows a much stronger aversion to finite verbs, and most especially the paring of subjects and finite verbs. Instead, O'Leary's subjects usually stand in proximity to an assortment of participial phrases. Consider the following passage from "Stealing the Sampo," in which the fragments are scattered by the storming seas before Väinämöinen's eyes:

Billows. Wild, rocking directed movement.
Väinämöinen. Feeling ancient. And purposeful.
Following the floating fragments
of the Sampo. Tossed on the lake waves to the
nearing shore.
Tumbling over the breakers. Onto the sandy
shoreland.²⁹

²⁷ Cited in Peter O'Leary, review of *Kintsugi*, by Thomas Meyer, *The Volta* (2012), www.thevolta.org/fridayfeature-kintsugi.html.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ O'Leary, *The Sampo*, 80.

We do not hear the “Vainämöinen. *Felt* ancient” or the “Sampo. *Tumbled* over the breakers.” The use of participial phrases invests actions with an autonomy that allows them to stand apart from a subject. However, the separation only serves to intensify the momentum of their interactions. As O'Leary describes it, the “cross-cutting” between subject and verb generates an effect akin to “electricity from an exposed wire, the poem begins spraying out this energy as it moves forward, even if [I am using] a seemingly abrupt technique.”³⁰

Just as quickly, though, can O'Leary repurpose this technique toward the solemn or elegiac. For example, he deploys the same splicing in the opening of the fourth and final rune, in order to depict a distraught Vainämöinen in the wake of losing his harp:

Vainämöinen. His Mind.
 Moving at the pace of a driven breeze. Testing the
 branches
 of the birches and oaks on the headland. Music.
 It's time for music. But his smashed kantele—
 sunk in the waters. “My joy. It's gone. To the rock
 caves
 the salmon and lake pike cool in
 shadows and murk
 more deeply obscure.³¹

The rune begins with a doubled subject, in which the Wizard is dissociated even from his own mind. What is “moving”? What is “testing”? All is lost in the gaps. He remembers with a pang his lost harp, and the dash substitutes for a copulative verb: breakage substitutes for being.

The imagist thread—especially in the ascendance of the subjectless verb—obviously enough leads back to Ezra Pound and *The Cantos*. In explaining what can be gained by the cross-cutting of subject and verb, O'Leary points directly to a most prescient passage from foundational Imagist text *The Chinese written character as a medium for poetry*:

A true noun, an isolated thing does not exist in nature. Things are only the terminal points, or rather the meeting points of actions, cross-sections cut through actions, snapshots. Neither can a pure verb, an abstract motion be possible in nature. The eye sees noun and verb as one. Things in motion, motion in things.³²

30 O'Leary, discussion.

31 O'Leary, *The Sampo*, 91.

32 O'Leary, discussion.

O'Leary takes the modernist preoccupation with dangling action and repurposes it toward a rather straightforward, sequential, and easy-to-follow narrative.

The Rupture in which Translation Itself Is Translated

Having established the style that dominates nearly the entirety of *The Sampo*, I want to address its sudden, cataclysmic interruption in the fourth and final rune. It is a rupture in meter, tone, diction, and subject matter. It is, however, the most moving and important section of the book. It is the climax of the mycological translation, which blossoms in the wake of the narrative climax.

As mentioned above, the fourth rune opens with a grieving Väinämöinen, who is coming to terms with the loss of his harp: his one-of-a-kind, irreplaceable treasure:

Pleasure. Lost to me.
 Pleasure from my harp, my jawbone harp, lost.
 Pleasure from the harp I made. Gone.³³

Then, within the nadir of our hero's despair, a most curious thing happens: the poem switches into ballad meter. We get 17 stanzas of English rhyming ballad meter, beginning:

And Väinämöinen wanders then
 Into the bright-lit woods
 To cross a swollen rivulet
 That marks the springtime floods.

 There is no shadow he would claim.
 The one across his heart
 Suffices to deprive him of
 The workings of his art.

From a traditionalist's standpoint, this is a formally impeccable section. However, more than just meter changes. Grammatically, we begin seeing subjects paired to finite verbs. The startling shift sets the stage for the tender scene to come. Väinämöinen hears, interrupting his own lament, the weeping of the other main protagonist of *The Sampo*: the birch tree.

³³ O'Leary, *The Sampo*, 94.

Then up ahead he hears a groan.
 It is a birch tree weeping.
 Lamenting. Speckled branching tree.
 Whose saps and resins seeping

The wizard Väinämöinen rubs
 along his finger's edge.
 He lifts it up; it smells of life
 And takes him to the verge

Of where a song might still be drawn
 From nature's shining brow.
 "Oh beauteous birch tree shedding tears—
 Wherefore weapest thou ..."³⁴

The reason for the tree's tears is both deeply personal and global in character: the birch has been mistreated by humans. They come and rip off its long white strips of bark. Children, as they are wont to do, carve their names into it with knives. Then adults come and strip off more layers "to make a plate or a cup."³⁵ Then it's the basket-weavers taking their share, followed by the young girls who cut down its branches "to bind them up / to make their summer brooms."³⁶

In the wake of the cataclysmic battle of the elements that closed the third rune, we are now floating in what feels like an elegiac, pathos-heavy afterword. The birch tree laments being overly instrumentalized for human ends. It is unclear why the birch tree offers these laments. Is it requesting a quick death? Is it looking to Väinämöinen for solutions or consolations? Regardless of the

34 Ibid., 95–96.

35 Ibid., 96–97.

36 In Väinämöinen's encounter with the self-pitying birch tree, I cannot escape the sense that O'Leary is also translating Dante's testimonies of the condemned, further signaling the reader that the final rune takes place in some world of the dead. More specifically, I recall Dante's walk through the murky and leafless forest in Canto XIII of the *Inferno*—The Wood of Self-Murderers—where desperate souls neither live on nor die, encased in the trunks of thorn trees. It was here that Dante plucked a twig and heard the plaintive voice ask: "Why manglest thou me? Hast thou no spirit of pity?" This tree (containing the soul of a former advisor to Caesar) goes on to explain the origin of his condition, and the condition of all those who commit suicide:

When the fierce soul leaves the body from which it has uprooted itself ... It falls into the wood, not in a place chosen for it but where fortune flings it. It sprouts there like a grain of spelt and rises to a sapling and a savage tree; then the Harpies feeding on its leaves, cause pain and for the pain an outlet.

tree's wishes, Väinämöinen offers it a solution. He will cut down the tree and craft it into a harp to use. The diction he employs in this proposal is crucial:

Then Väinämöinen says in turn,
 "Oh birch tree, weep no more.
 A joyful future comes for you
 Because you hide the spoor

Another saprophytic life
 Begins to mushroom from.
 To you will come transfigured life
 In everlasting form."³⁷

The mushroom imagery first attached to the Sampo has now reappeared in Väinämöinen's plans for a new wooden harp. O'Leary employs a pun as Väinämöinen says the birch tree hides within it a "spoor"—it is the trail that he can follow, but it is also one of the hidden *spores* inside the substrate of the birch tree that had been scattered in the winds and over the earth following the destruction of the Sampo by Louhi. We hear no reaction from the birch tree. However, this appears to be a perfect solution for Väinämöinen. After all, Väinämöinen will get not only a new harp, but also a new proxy-mushroom, to replace the proxy-mushroom of the Sampo. The problem with the last harp, made of a pike's jawbone, is that it is one-of-a-kind. The wooden harp, on the other hand, can be replicated and mass-produced. The optimism of the ending rests on the hero's assumption that there is an everlasting supply—a position that the translation, with its furtive spores, has eaten away at from the inside out.

If the climax of the epic narrative came with the destruction of the Sampo at the close of rune four, the climax of O'Leary's translational action arrives in Väinämöinen's proposal of a "saprophytic" afterlife to the birch tree. Here is where O'Leary resituates Väinämöinen's magical manipulation of the natural world into the contemporary Anthropocene, where humans do not just manipulate the natural world, but control it; and not just control, but feast off its rotting.

Moving From a Seed-Based to a Spore-Based Translation

At any point when the birch tree appears in *The Sampo*, we are alerted to the poem's translated-ness—that there is an "original" Finnish substrate out from

37 O'Leary, *The Sampo*, 98.

which O'Leary's poem is blooming. In that sense, the birch tree destabilizes the coherence, or self-sufficiency, of the translation. We saw this previously when O'Leary gave the birch tree the Finnish name *Koivu*, and briefly approximated the trochaic tetrameter of the Finnish. This culminates in the introduction of the ballad meter and Väinämöinen's dialogue with the birch tree. The ballad stanzas do not merely provide the poem with a variant rhythm; they break the epic open. They insert an external duration that is foreign to the poem as we have come to know it up until that point.

However, I argue that this interruption *makes* the entire translation, insofar as it shows how *The Sampo* is being made. In Väinämöinen's dialogue with the birch tree, the *Kalevala* ceases to be represented, and, in its place, the act of translation itself appears. Let's return again to the first words Väinämöinen speaks to the birch tree after hearing its crying: "Oh beauteous birch tree shedding tears—Wherefore weepest thou." Where is that language coming from? It is as though another dimension has cracked open inside an imagist poem. And indeed that is exactly what is happening. O'Leary has taken the line directly from F. W. Kirby's 1907 translation of the *Kalevala*—one of the four translations that O'Leary cites as having "relied on" in his composition of *The Sampo*.³⁸ All the cards are turned—this is how the translator is translating. The scene represented in ballad meter is much more than a hero speaking to a birch tree. It opens up a space in which the relationship between translation and source text can be described—using a mycological model of spores and saprotrophy.

Much of O'Leary's method of translation owes an inheritance to the modernist lineage of the "poet's version," and I want to define this inheritance before I close by arguing for O'Leary's queer mycological revision of the modernist lineage. The greatest indebtedness *The Sampo* owes to the advances in translation undergone during literary modernism is the way in which it capitalizes on the translator's limited knowledge of the source language. O'Leary explained:

I found that the unfamiliarity [of the Finnish language] to almost anyone who would encounter it, including and maybe especially myself, was advantageous in that I didn't feel any obligation to try to be true to it. If I were true to it, nobody would be like, "This is remarkably true."³⁹

In his 1992 article "Theorizing Translation," the Ezra Pound scholar Thomas H. Jackson explains how, during the twentieth century, the difficulties presented by a translator's gaps in knowledge was compensated for by a reconfiguration of

38 O'Leary, *The Sampo*, 111.

39 O'Leary, discussion.

how language performs. In the modernist's confrontation with foreign words, he will immediately "reject the notion that [this foreign] language is a system of signifiers designating some more or less corresponding array of signifieds."⁴⁰ Instead, he reassures himself of "the conviction that language is a mode of energy, is a behavior, is a form of life, and that what counts is not something we clumsily rationalize as 'content' or 'meaning' but the life in it, the potential for energizing human beings."⁴¹ As Steven Yao set out in his book *Translation and the Languages of Modernism*, the twentieth century gave rise to the poet who "repeatedly engaged in translation, and sometimes achieved remarkable results, with partial, imprecise, faulty, and sometimes even no formal understanding of the languages in which the texts they translated were originally written."⁴² Similarly, Ronnie Apter characterizes the trajectory of twentieth-century poetic translation by its increasing willingness to "exaggerate, delete, or sacrifice" the literal sense of the source text in order to carry across an equivalent to the original's "overall impression."⁴³ In place of literal meaning, the primary component to be carried over into the translator's native tongue was the original's "life," "energy," or "living breath."

If W. S. Merwin could translate from over a dozen languages; if his mentor Pound could translate from at least ten; if Robert Hass can go from Czesław Miłosz to Basho to Neruda; if Jerome Rothenberg can translate Navajo, then German and Hebrew. This is only because of a deeply optimistic reorientation of the translator's task, which has eliminated the fear and possibility of loss. With an eye toward what the original could contribute to the contemporary, the creative poet-translator ceases to regret "what is lost in translation" by narrowing in on a doubled gain: 1) the original "nourishes" the contemporary, translating language with the "sustenance" it needs, and 2) the translator brings the original "back to life" in a modernized, new poem.⁴⁴ We can begin with a passage taken from Pound's 1920 essay collection *Instigations*, which reads: "Even though I know the overwhelming importance of technique, technicalities in a foreign tongue cannot have for me the importance they have to a man writing in that tongue; almost the only technique perceptible to a foreigner is the presentation of content as free as possible from the clutteration of dead technicalities ...

⁴⁰ Thomas H. Jackson, "Theorizing Translation," *SubStance* 20, no. 1 (1991): 88.

⁴¹ Jackson, "Theorizing Translation," 88.

⁴² Steven G. Yao, *Translation and the Languages of Modernism: Gender, Politics, Language* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 11–12.

⁴³ Ronnie Apter, *Digging for the Treasure: Translation after Pound* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1984), 12.

⁴⁴ Apter, *Digging for the Treasure*, 133, 160.

and from timidities of workmanship."⁴⁵ Recounting his first encouragement toward translation by Pound, Merwin writes similarly about the guiding principle of liveliness: "I still approach translation as a relatively anonymous activity in which whatever in the result may appear to be mine comes there simply because that is how the language ... sounds most alive to me."⁴⁶

Jackson Mathews writes that, by the end of the twentieth century, "Every saddened reader knows that what a poem is most in danger of losing in translation is its life."⁴⁷ However, as translation turned from the "dead technicalities" of signifiers, to a base principle of spirit or energy, their theories of translation, observes Thomas A. Jackson, "tend to be couched in figuration and metaphor and analogy, whereas ideally, explanations should be definite and straightforward."⁴⁸ The metaphors tended along the following biological tropes: seeds, germination, embryos, offspring, and sexual reproduction. Tony Barnstone, the American poet-translator who studied under Robert Hass, writes:

I came to Chinese poetry originally as an American poet learning how to make the image. Like many other American poets, I was led to China by my interest in Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and other modernist poets who developed and modified their craft in conversation with the Chinese tradition. I came to China, in other words, to learn how to write poetry in English. This is also how I came to translation: as a way of extending the possibilities of poetry written in English ... A translation, after all, is the child of parent authors from different cultures, and however assiduously the translator attempts to remove his or her name from the family tree, the genetic traces will be found in the offspring.⁴⁹

Rosmarie Waldrop, one of the poets that Jackson cites as having most "satisfactorily" theorized creative translation, writes:

Perhaps we can turn the idea of the afterlife of a work of literature toward biology and consider translation as the offspring of the original, less handsome than the parent, but true kin. (This analogy, which also does not bear to be pressed very hard, has curious implications for the time gap that often exists between the original publication and the translation and that compounds the cultural differences.) The first task of the translator would be to find the "genetic code" of the work, to get from the surface to the seed which, in our

⁴⁵ Ezra Pound, *Instigations of Ezra Pound* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1920), 4.

⁴⁶ Ed Folsom, "W. S. Merwin on Ezra Pound," *The Iowa Review* 15, no. 2 (1985): 71.

⁴⁷ Jackson Mathews, "Third Thoughts on Translating Poetry," in *On Translation*, ed. R. Brower (Cambridge, Harvard University Press: 1959), 69.

⁴⁸ Jackson, "Theorizing Translation," 88.

⁴⁹ Tony Barnstone, "The Poem behind the Poem: Literary Translation As American Poetry," *Manoa* 11, no. 2 (1999): 66.

terms, would mean getting close to the nucleus of creative energy that is at the beginning of a poem.⁵⁰

The break O'Leary makes from the modernist lineage of poetic translation hinges on the translation of this very metaphor, moving from the sexualized reproduction of seeds into the catastrophic, reductive, and furtive growth of fungal spores.

Mycological Translation; and What Is so "Queer" about It?

Fungus offers a path forward to speak about translation in a way that destabilizes tropes such as lineage, conception, offspring, reproduction, etc. In O'Leary's *Sampo*, we have seen how his ecological sub-plot constantly threatens to undermine and disrupt the primary epic narrative concerning the adventures of heroes. How do we describe such a relationship between source text and translation? The model of offspring, reproduction, and new life does not quite work here. Would it not be more fitting to say that *The Sampo* has inoculated something inside the Finnish epic that eats it from the inside out?

To return to Anna Tsing, she argues that capitalism has pathologized fungi as a deviant murmur within the consistent "pulse of progress"—particularly as it came to the efforts of commercial logging and the conversion of forests into agricultural plantations. With the rise of the U.S. timber industry and scientific forestry in the mid-twentieth century, the need for scalability and standardization transfigured the landscape. She paints the picture thusly:

Unwanted tree species, and indeed all other species, were sprayed with poison. Fires were absolutely excluded ... Thinning was brutal, regular, and essential. Proper spacing allowed maximum rates of growth as well as mechanical harvesting. Timber trees were a new kind of sugarcane: managed for uniform growth, without multispecies interference, and thinned and harvested by machines and anonymous workers.⁵¹

Fungi were not just the nuisance of the farmer, they were "the enemy of civilization and, later, progress." Tsing later takes this point in an interesting direction, by suggesting that fungi's greatest potential for disruption lies within the fluidity

⁵⁰ Rosmarie Waldrop, *Dissonance (If You Are Interested)* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 139.

⁵¹ Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 41.

and non-normativity of its methods of reproduction. Consider the queerness latent in her description of spores:

Both in forests and in science, spores open our imaginations to another cosmopolitan topology. Spores take off toward unknown destinations, mate across types, and, at least occasionally, give rise to new organisms—a beginning for new kinds. Spores are hard to pin down; that is their grace ... In thinking about science, spores model open-ended communication and excess: the pleasures of speculation.⁵²

The mycologist Patricia Kaishian takes these implications much further in her recent article, “Science Underground: Mycology as Queer Discipline.” For Kaishian, “mycology is queer insofar as it is disruptive, collective, transformative, revolutionary” and its role within taxonomy and horticulture has been, from the beginning, to destabilize binaries such as parent and offspring:

Mycology disrupts our mostly binary conception of plants versus animals, two-sex mating systems, and discrete organismal structure, calling upon non-normative, multimodal methodologies for knowledge acquisition. Mycelium is the web-like network of fungal cells that extends apically through substrate, performing sex, seeking nutrients, building multispecies and multikingdom symbioses. ... *Mycology is queer at the organismal level.* Fungi are nonbinary: they are neither plants nor animals, but possess a mixture of qualities common to both groups, upending the prevailing binary concept of nature. It is rare for a fungus to have only two biological sexes, and some fungi, such as *Schizophyllum commune*, have as many as 23,000 mating types. When two compatible fungi meet, their mycelia will fuse into one body, sexually recombine, then remain somatically as one as they continue to live, grow, and explore in their environment.⁵³

If the language of reproduction is to be so embedded in discussions of translation, might we be able to queer it by introducing destabilizing and saprophytic tropes of mycological reproduction? Could this be the more appropriate model to proceed with in the wake of capitalism and the ruins of climate catastrophe? The distinction would be far more than semantics. If we say, as I have argued, that the relationship between the mushroom and the birch tree is an analogy of the relationship of translation to source text, there are important implications. The crux is that the mushroom does not carry the “genetic code” of the birch tree out from which it grows (to use the language of Waldrop). It also means—in the saprophytic sense—that translation is contributing to the decay of the source text. If passing along genes guarantees legacy in the heteronormative tra-

⁵² Ibid., 227–28.

⁵³ Patricia Kaishian and Hasmik Djoulakian, “The Science Underground: Mycology as a Queer Discipline,” *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 6, no. 2 (2020): 1–26.

dition, the mushroom translation establishes the end of a line. Queer theorist Lee Edelman has pointed out the way in which American consumerism and capitalist growth depends upon an ideology of “reproductive futurism”: a continually deferred promise of healing, which he most often finds invested in the image of the Child or Offspring. Within an ideology of reproductive futurism always looking to affirm a social order hypostasized “in the form of its inner Child,” the most threatening political position an individual can adopt is one which intends no future; Edelman identifies such a position with a “queer politics.”⁵⁴ The offspring represents a symbolic delay—communicating to us that the next generation will solve the effects of all we have dropped into the sea and all the birch trees we have cut down.

⁵⁴ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 3.