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Ecopoetic Language And Symbolism In Selected Tomas Transtromer's Poems *The Deleted World*

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Abstract

*While existing scholarship on Tomas Transtromer's poetry has extensively explored his philosophical introspection, psychological depth and lyrical abstraction, less attention has been paid to the ecological dimensions of his symbolic language. This gap is significant, as Transtromer's *The Deleted World* offers a vital rethinking of how language and symbolism function in Poetry - not merely as descriptive tools, but as active participants in constructing ecological consciousness. This paper explores how seven selected poems - "Ostinato", "Fire Graffiti", "Sketch in October", "Face to Face", "A Winter Night", "The Couple, and "Autumnal Archipelago" deploy symbolism and language to establish an intersubjective relationship between human experience and the natural world. Drawing on ecocriticism and symbolic hermeneutics, this study argues that Transtromer's poetic language transcends representation to perform a symbolic ecology that resists anthropocentric literary traditions. The findings suggest that Transtromer's work contributes to a growing body of literature that reimagines the role of poetic language in fostering environmental awareness and spiritual connectivity.*

Keywords: Eco criticism, Symbolism, Ecological Consciousness, Anthropocentrism and Poetic language.

Introduction

The relationship between humans and the natural environment has long been a crucial concern in literature, shaping cultural and philosophical understandings of the world. However, traditional poetic treatments of nature have often centered on romanticized or purely aesthetic depictions, neglecting deeper ecological and metaphysical dimensions. Tomas Transtromer's *The Deleted World* emerges as a significant contribution to ecological poetry by reimagining the role of language and symbolism in

expressing environmental interconnectedness. As environmental crises intensify globally, literary explorations of nature that challenge anthropocentrism and foreground ecological intimacy have become increasingly important.

While much critical attention on Transtromer's poetry highlights his psychological and existential themes, less focus has been placed on how his use of symbol language articulates an ecological consciousness that transcends



representation. This paper investigates how Tranströmer's language and symbolism in selected poems - "Ostinato", "Fire Graffiti", "Sketch in October", "Face to Face", "A Winter Night", "The Couple", and "Autumnal Archipelago" construct a participatory dialogue between human subjectivity and the natural world. Through this, the study reveals how his poetry navigates ecological transformation, spiritual communion and the dissolution of binaries such as human/non-human and mind/matter.

By situating *The Deleted World* within ecocritical and symbolic hermeneutics frameworks, this paper aims to demonstrate the innovative ways Tranströmer's poetics foster an ethical and metaphysical engagement with the environment. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing literary discussions about how poetry can function as a medium for ecological awareness and environmental responsibility.

Theoretical Framework

Ecocriticism offers a critical lens for examining the complex relationships between literature, language and the natural environment. Originating as a response to environmental crises and the increasing awareness of human impact on nature, ecocriticism interrogates how literary texts represent ecological realities and construct environmental ethics (Glotfelty, 1996 & Garrard, 2012). Scholars such as Lawrence Buell (1995),

Timothy Morton (2007), and Cheryl Glotfelty (1996) have developed foundational ideas that extend literary analysis beyond mere description of nature to a critical engagement with ecological interdependence and environmental justice.

Buell (1995) emphasises that ecological literature does not simply depict nature as a backdrop, but highlights the materiality and agency of non-human entities, fostering an ethical awareness of environmental interconnectedness. Morton's (2007) concept of "dark ecology" pushes this further by problematising anthropocentric frameworks and advocating for an understanding of nature that acknowledges complexity, ambiguity and the coexistence of life forms beyond human control. This move away from human-centered narratives aligns with Tranströmer's poetic strategies in *The Deleted World*, where symbolic language mediates between human consciousness and non-human presence.

To deepen this perspective, Jones (2022) concept of ecotones and the middle voice offers a contemporary ecocritical vocabulary for examining literary representation. Drawing on ecological theory, Jones frames Ecotones as traditional zones where boundaries - ecological, rhetorical and ethical - blur and merge. In this sense, poetic spaces such as Tranströmer's become literary ecotones that foster encounters between the human and non-human,



the symbolic and the material. These zones are not only sites of diversity and interaction but also tension and instability, allowing literature to stage complex environmental and existential experiences.

Relatedly, Jones applies Gregory L. Ulmer's notion of the *middle voice* - a grammatical mode that dissolves the binary of active and passive - to frame literary subjectivity as embedded within, rather than above, ecological processes. In Tranströmer's work, such a voice emerges in poems that destabilizes anthropocentric control instead presents the human as acted upon by, as well as acting with, the environment. The middle voice thus offers a symbolic mode of ecological entanglement, in which agency is shared and blurred.

In addition to ecocriticism, symbolic hermeneutics provides a theoretical tool to decode how symbols function as dynamic mediators of meaning in literature. Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's (1976) theory of interpretation, symbols are not fixed signs, but open-ended entities that invite multiple layers of meaning, allowing literature to engage readers in processes of reflection and transformation. This framework is essential for understanding how Tranströmer's symbolism moves beyond aesthetic ornamentation to enact ecological dialogue and spiritual atonement. While previous scholarship on Tranströmer has predominantly focused on his philosophical and

psychological themes (Bjorklund 2008 & Sandlund, 2014), fewer studies have examined his work through the combined lens of ecocriticism and symbolic hermeneutics. This study aims to fill that gap by demonstrating how *The Deleted World* employs language and symbolism to foster a poetic ecology that challenges anthropocentrism and articulates an ethical engagement with the environment.

Through this integrated framework, the study foregrounds the transformative potential of poetic language as a site of ecological consciousness and symbolic mediation. Tranströmer's poetry participates in broader environmental conversations, by presenting nature not as background but as an active, ethical presence - one that shapes and is shaped by human perception, language, and imagination.

Critical Perspectives on Tomas Tranströmer's *The Deleted World*

This section reviews existing scholarship on Tomas Tranströmer's poetry with an emphasis on studies that address form, translation and philosophical inquiry. It critiques these works to identify the specific gaps that the present ecocritical and symbolic study aims to address. Landgren's "The Medium and the Vandal: Translating Tranströmer" (2014) presents a formalist approach that sparked the now-famous "Tranströmer squabbles" in *The Times Literary Supplement*. The paper contrasts two types of



translators - those who preserve the formal structure of the original and those who prioritise readability in the target language. By focusing on syllable count, rhythm and visual appearance in poems such "Paret" and "Svartavykort," the study raises valid concerns about linguistic fidelity and authorial voice. However, this research orbits strictly around questions of translation accuracy, without engaging the symbolic or ecological meanings embedded in the poetry. The present study departs from this textual fidelity debate and instead prioritises the ecological functions of language and symbolism in Tranströmer's poetics.

Richelle Wilson's "Memory as Ecology in the poetry of Tomas Tranströmer" (2013) investigates memory as an ecological force, positioning it as a living presence within Tranströmer's poetic universe. In contrast, this study examines how symbolic language and metaphor function as ecological strategies, emphasising the role of interconnected imagery and poetic symbolism in constructing environmental consciousness beyond personal memory.

Gregeron and Lindqvist's "Tranströmer's Nordic Soundscape" (2015) explores how Scandinavian geography influences the poet's tone and texture. Though attentive to environment, the article remains rooted in descriptive geography and regional aesthetics, stopping short of any sustained ecocritical framework. In contrast, the present study

proposes that Tranströmer's symbolic engagement with storms, forests and seasonal shifts constructs a poetic ecology that challenges anthropocentric literary traditions.

Furthermore, Helena Bodin's essay titled "Nordic Literary Translingualism" (2022) draws from existential phenomenology to examine the poet's emphasis on inner change. While transformation is an apt lens for Tranströmer's work, Bodin's approach treats nature metaphorically rather than ecologically. This current study reorients that promise, arguing that transformation in *The Deleted World* occurs between the self and environment, revealing a mutual, symbolic interdependence.

Similarly, Dan Ringgaard's essay, "The Region as an In-between Space: Tomas Tranströmer's Osterjoar and the Making of an Archipelagic Nordic Literature" (2021), situated Tranströmer's *Baltics* within a regionalist framework, proposing the archipelago as a literary and geographic metaphor for Nordic identity. His analysis foregrounds the spatial politics of literature, emphasising the region's role as a liminal site between national and global narratives. While insightful in its cartographic orientation, Ringgaard's reading is largely invested in questions of place and geopolitical imagination. In contrast, the present study departs from this spatial and regionalist lens by attending to Tranströmer's symbolic ecology - particularly how metaphor,



memory and the natural world converge to contrast an eco-poetic consciousness across multiple poems, not just *Baltics*.

Research Methodology

This study adopts an ecocritical and symbolic hermeneutic approach to analyse Tomas Tranströmer's *The Deleted World*, focusing on how language and symbolism construct ecological consciousness. Ecocriticism serves as a lens to investigate the way in which literary texts engage with environmental concerns, emphasising the ethical and epistemological implications of human-nature relationships (Buell, 1995 and Morton, 2007). This framework facilitates a critical examination of how Tranströmer's poetry transcends traditional nature of representation to embody a participatory and interdependent vision of the natural world. In tandem, symbolic hermeneutics, particularly Paul Ricoeur's theory of interpretation (1976), provides the methodological tools to decode the multilayered meanings of symbolic language in the poems. By treating symbols as dynamic mediators rather than static signs, this approach allows for an exploration of how Tranströmer's poetic imagery invites readers to engage in a spiritual and ecological dialogue. By integrating ecocriticism and symbolic hermeneutics, this study seeks not only to reveal the ecological aesthetics in the selected poems of *The Deleted World*, but also to demonstrate how poetic language

can function as an instrument of environmental awareness and ethical reflection. This combined methodology enables a nuanced understanding of Tranströmer's work as a site of ecological imagination and spiritual engagement.

Symbolism and Ecological Language in Tomas Tranströmer's *The Deleted World*

Tomas Tranströmer's *The Deleted World* is a poetic tapestry that intertwines the language of nature with the symbolism of human consciousness. Through a seamless blend of eco-poetic and symbolic expressions, Tranströmer paints a world, where the human and non-human elements are deeply interconnected. This analysis explores how Tranströmer uses symbolism - particularly in the form of natural imagery and metaphor to create a language of ecological awareness. It focuses on seven key poems:

"Ostinato," "Fire Graffiti," "Sketch in October," "Face to Face," "A Winter Night", "The Couple, and "Autumnal Archipelago" - the discussion unpacks how symbolic gestures in his poetry challenge anthropocentric frameworks and evoke what Timothy Morton (2010) calls "the mesh" - a network of interconnectedness that destabilises human-centered hierarchies. In "Ostinato," Tranströmer opens with a vibrant display of symbolic imagery:

Under the buzzard's circling point of stillness



the ocean rolls thundering into the
light; blindly chewing

its straps of seaweed, it snorts up
foam across the beach.

The buzzard symbolises a meditative stillness, while the ocean, personified as a creature, represents the unrelenting forces of nature. These images do not merely depict a landscape, but dramatise the interdependence between climate and consciousness. The buzzard, as a metaphor for cyclical time, reflects the ecological principle of recurrence and balance, while the ocean's chaos evokes the world's ongoing flux. This symbol-laden language moves beyond representation, performing what Wendy Wheller (2006) terms a "bio-semiotic" gesture, where signs in nature carry emotional and spiritual weight. As the stanza evolves:

The earth is covered in darkness,
traced by bats.

The buzzard stops and becomes a
star.

The ocean rolls thundering on...

Natural transitions - day to night, movement to stasis - function as metaphors for both ecological and existential change. Tranströmer's poetic voice engages nature not as a passive setting, but as a symbolic partner in articulating transformation. The transformation of the buzzard into a star connects

earthly motion to cosmic significance, echoing Northrop Frye's assertion that mythic symbolism structures how we understand both nature and consciousness.

Nature as Psychological Landscape

In "Face to Face," Tranströmer collapses distinctions between internal emotion and external climate:

In February life stood still.

The birds refused to fly and the soul
grafted

against the landscape as a boat

chafes against the jetty where it's
moored.

Here, February is both literal winter and metaphorical pause. The refusal of birds to fly mirrors emotional stasis, while the soul is likened to a boat experiencing friction with the land - a powerful metaphor for the psychological tension between self and its environment. Tranströmer suggests that the landscape is a mirror of human interiority, a concept aligned with Lawrence Buell's notion of "environmental imagination", where the inner and outer worlds reflect and influence each other. Tranströmer symbolism here collapses the boundary between internal and external climates, suggesting a spiritual ecology. The subsequent lines:



The trees were turned away. The
snow depth

measured by the stubble poking
through.

The footprints grew old out on the
ice-crust.

Under a tarpaulin, language was
being broken down..

The erosion of landscape parallels
the erosion of language. In this
metaphorical ecology, loss of
ecological integrity correlates with
the crisis of expression. Tranströmer
posits that when nature deteriorates,
language too falters - suggesting a
symbiotic link between ecological
and symbolic systems. The poetic
voice mourns the fragmentation of
both physical and linguistic
environments, implying a deeper
crisis of expression from the face of
environmental decline.

The Physical Landscape as Spiritual Terrain

In "A Winter Night," the vulnerability
of the human condition is reflected
through environmental disturbance:

The storm put its mouth to the house
and

blows to get a tone. I toss and turn,
my

closed eyes reading the storm's text.

The storm is personified, evoking a
sacred text or divine message. The

speaker reads the storm as if it were
scripture, signaling the eco-poetic
shift from viewing nature as object to
engaging it as a communicative
subject.

The storm has the hands and wings
of a child

Far away, travelers run for cover.

The house feels its own constellation
of nails

holding the walls together.

Tranströmer's symbolic imagination
attributes innocence to natural
violence and sentience to inanimate
structures. The house, held together
by its "constellation of nails,"
becomes a metaphor for human
fragility amidst ecological upheaval.
This moment illustrates what
Morton calls the "strange stranger"
in ecological thought - elements that
remain familiar yet fundamentally
unknowable.

Decay, Color and the Call of the Earth

"Sketch in October" features
decay without despair:

The tugboat is freckled with rust.

What is it doing so far inland? It's a
heavy

burnt-out lamp, tipped over in the
cold. But

the trees still carry colours- wild
signals to



the other shore as if someone
wanted to be

fetched home.

Rust and decay are rendered as
spiritual markers rather than mere
degradation. The tugboat becomes a
lamp extinguished, a symbol of faded
vitality, while the trees colors serve
as cryptic signals of belonging and
return. These metaphors underscore
ecological endurance in the face of
entropy.

On the way back, I see mushrooms
pushing

up through the grass.

Stretching for help, these white
fingers.

The mushrooms become agents of
regeneration. Their
anthropomorphic "white fingers"
extends a gesture of both
vulnerability and resilience,
embodying the eco-poetic ethic of
recognising life in its smallest forms.
In "Fire Graffiti," intimacy becomes a
natural act:

Throughout dismal months my life
was

only sparked alight when I made love
to you.

As the firefly ignites and fades,
ignites and

fades, we follow the flashes of its
flight in

the dark among the olive trees.

The speaker's desire is framed
within a natural tableau. The firefly's
flicker mirrors both erotic rhythm
and the fleeting illumination of
ecological consciousness. This
intertwining of love and nature
reflects a corporeal ecology, where
the body itself is an ecological site,
experiencing and expressing the
rhythms of the natural world.

They turn out the lamplight, and its
white globe

glimmers for a moment: an aspirin
rising and

falling then dissolving in a glass of
darkness.

Around them, the hotel walls slide
like a back-

drop up into the night sky.

Moving from wilderness to domestic
intimacy, *The Couple* poem presents
the city as a sentient, watching entity:
the extinction of light is not simply
an end to visibility; it becomes a
symbolic dissolution into an
elemental state. The simile of the
light as "an aspirin" evokes healing,
transience and absorption - qualities
tied to both bodily experience and
environmental transformation. This
is a subtle yet profound eco-poetic
gesture, where a mundane moment
of turning off a lamp enacts a
metaphysical and ecological shift.

Love's drama has died down, and
they're sleeping

but their dreams will meet as colours
meet



and bleed into each other

in the dampened pages of a child's painting book.

Here, Tranströmer uses the metaphor of watercolor blending in a child's book to describe dreams merging - again dissolving the boundary between internal (psychic) and external (material) worlds. This is in line with ecocritical concerns about interdependence: even human dreams become part of the ecological continuum. The symbol of "dampened pages" connects directly to moisture, texture and a lived environment that breathes. The poem's final image deepens this symbiosis:

All around is dark, and silent. The city has drawn in,

extinguishing its windows. The houses have approached

They crowd in close, attentive:

this audience of cancelled faces.

Tranströmer personifies the urban landscape. The city "draws in," and houses "approach" as if animated. The "cancelled faces" may be windows or lives that have withdrawn, but their presence still lingers - watchful, ghostly and ecological. The built environment itself becomes conscious and reactive. This fits within a symbolic ecology, where even silence and darkness have agency. "The couple," in their private, intimate moment, are not isolated but watched by the naturalised city - further collapsing

the boundary between human interiority and the world outside.

Tranströmer thus reshapes the symbolic landscape of love, sleep and urban life into an ecological metaphor. Rather than being separate from the environment, the couple is immersed in a shared spatial and psychological ecology. Just as in "*Fire Graffiti*" and "*Face to Face*", intimacy is elemental - anchored in natural rhythms, absorbed into the larger ecological field.

In "*Autumnal Archipelago*", the poet's vision sharpens on a storm-laden, transitional season, where nature is not only alive but deified, guarded and dramatic:

Suddenly the walker comes upon the ancient oak:

a huge / rooted elk whose hardwood antlers, wide/

as this horizon, guard the stone-green walls of the

sea.

Here, the oak tree is symbolically transformed into a mystical elk, whose antlers "guard" the sea's edge. This is not merely personification - it is a symbolic myth-making. The oak is no longer just flora; it becomes a totemic figure, rooted in time and place, simultaneously ecological and metaphysical. The phrase "stone-green walls of the seas" constructs the ocean as a fortress, a living boundary, mirroring the themes of



sublime nature and thresholds found throughout Tranströmer's work.

A storm from the north. It is the time of rowan-

berries. / Awake in the night he hears - far above

the horned tree - / the stars, stamping in their stalls.

The poem shifts from the grounded oak to a celestial image: stars "stamping in their stalls" like restless animals. This cosmic metaphor evokes not just beauty, but unease - a universe in motion, unsettled and potent. The walker, awake at night, is a witness to this ecological theater, where sky, tree and sea exist in mythic tension. This mirrors Tranströmer's motif of humans as contemplative participants within a sentient environment.

In the section titled evening - morning, the tone grows more decayed, haunted:

The mast of the moon has rotted, its sail grey with mildew.

The moon is depicted as a derelictship, its symbolic "mast" and "sail" deteriorating. This imagery of rot and mildew suggests environmental entropy, yet within a mythic frame. Nature itself becomes a vessel, once divine - now decaying - mirroring human vulnerability and time's erosion.

The seagull makes a drunken sweep of the sea, the

charred / chunk of jetty, the heavy undergrowth in

the dark.

Even the seagull, a familiar figure in Tranströmer's coastal poems, is depicted in a compromised, erratic state - underscoring the disorder brought by seasonal change or climate disturbance. The jetty is "charred," perhaps by metaphorical fire or elemental wear and "heavy undergrowth" looms. This is a landscape marked by psychic and ecological density, reinforcing the paper's claim that Tranströmer's poetry resists romanticised nature and instead presents a symbolic ecology of instability, decay and persistence.

Half-smothered, the summer gods fumble in the haar.

"Haar" - a North Sea mist - becomes a symbolic veil through which seasonal deities falter. The fading "summer gods" suggest a loss of control, a divine uncertainty that mirrors human ecological confusion. This single line encapsulates the symbolic power of climate, where seasonal shifts are not just weather events, but spiritual reckoning.

Tranströmer's symbolic ecology evokes what Buell describes as an "ethical orientation to the non-human." From birds refusing to fly, to mushrooms seeking help, to storms that speak, the poet invites the reader into an intersubjective relationship with the earth. These are not passive observations, but



symbolic performances of ecological entanglement.

Returning to "Ostinato," the buzzard becoming a star and the ocean's eternal motion establish a planetary rhythm. The symbolic structure of the poem resists linearity, embracing recurrence, unpredictability and cosmic harmony - central values in eco-poetic philosophy. Through language that both describes and enacts ecological principles, Tranströmer's *The Deleted World* becomes not just a record of environmental awareness, but a ritual of ecological participation. The symbolic gestures in his work move us toward what Wheeler (2006) calls "a poetics of bio-semiotics" - where language is part of nature, not merely about it. Thus, Tranströmer's work stands as a vital contribution to the eco-poetic tradition, urging us to read the world not only as text but as kin.

Conclusion

This paper has examined Tomas Tranströmer's *The Deleted World* through the lens of ecocriticism and symbolic hermeneutics, revealing how his language and symbolism articulate a profound ecological consciousness. The analysis of selected poems has shown how Tranströmer moves beyond traditional nature poetry by creating a participatory relationship between human experience and the natural world. His symbolic language disrupts anthropocentric perspectives and invites readers into a spiritual and environmental

dialogue that redefines human embeddedness within ecological systems. This study highlights the vital role of Tranströmer's poetics in advancing ecological awareness and environmental ethics in contemporary literature. By foregrounding the interconnectedness of mind, matter and nature, *The Deleted World* challenges readers to reconsider the boundaries between self and environment, offering a poetic vision rooted in reverence, interdependence and transformation.

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