2013-07-10

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Memory as Ecology in the Poetry of Tomas Tranströmer

Richelle J. Wilson

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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July 2013

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ABSTRACT

Memory as Ecology in the Poetry of Tomas Tranströmér

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The purpose of this study is to explore how memory functions ecologically in the poetry of Tomas Tranströmér. The term *ecology* is useful because of its connotative associations with the natural world as well as its broader definition of being a network of relationships as they function within and relate to their environment. Throughout his oeuvre, Tranströmér positions memory as being an external presence with which he interacts primarily because he honors it as a living being and he feels a poetic responsibility to it. As such, he grapples with the challenges of representation, particularly the limitations of language. Ultimately, he employs an ecopoetic strategy in honoring his duty to memory and creating poems that are themselves ecological *milieux* in which such memories can live on.

Keywords: Tomas Tranströmér, Swedish, poetry, memory, ecology, ecopoetics, *milieux*
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to my committee for their gracious attendance to all the necessary stages of this work, especially to Dr. Christopher Oscarson, who is as patient and helpful a chair as one could ever hope to have. He has been truly kind to me and invested in my progress. I owe much to him and to Dr. Steven Sondrup for nurturing what is now a lifelong love of Scandinavia in me. I am also indebted to Dr. George Handley for introducing me to ecocritical theory and for his infectious devotion to scholarship. A couple illuminating conversations I had with him really revitalized this project at crucial moments. If someone is to blame for my involvement in Comparative Literature in the first place, it is Dr. Larry Peer, and for that I will always be grateful.

There is never enough gratitude for a mother; her faith and prayers have sustained me for as long as I can remember. My father, too, gives me strength from the other side. And of course, my siblings buoy me up with their kindnesses and inspire me every day by being who they are and pursuing their own paths with exemplary courage.

Finally, there are my dear friends: To Jamie for her unflagging enthusiasm for everything I do and for always being just a phone call away. To Patrick, who unfailingly—even stubbornly—believes in my potential as a scholar. And ultimately (always) to Philip, to whom I owe some of my most dazzling revelations and who daily teaches me to see poetry in all things.
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Introduction

My interest in exploring Tomas Tranströmer’s poetry began as a fascination with the way he portrayed the Baltic Sea, particularly in his long poem Östersjöar, directly translated as “Baltic Seas.” There was something so expansive and liberating to be had in tackling an entire sea, especially one with as much multiplicity and depth as Tranströmer elegantly affords the Baltic.

Most existing scholarship on Tranströmer is quick to point out his affinity for the natural world, specifically the landscapes of his native Sweden, because of how liberally he treats subjects of environmental import. His poetry is rich with images that make it readily translatable, which is perhaps in part why he has garnered so much international success. Tranströmer works within “an aesthetics of correspondence” because he has “a will to grasp the connections between the physical and metaphysical, and … an ambition to disclose hidden relations—to collect and concentrate, in order to point to interrelatedness” (Schiöler 327). His poetic stance is one of humility and of peacefully coexisting with the environment as an Other deserving of his attention and respect.

As I began examining his treatment of the Baltic in Östersjöar and across his collected poetry, it became clear to me that the reverence Tranströmer has for the sea, the land, the animals, and the insects is almost always paired with an equal or even greater sense of duty to something less tangible but no less teeming with a life of its own: the voices of the dead. History. Memory. These external forces calling out to the poet from the earth, the grass, the walls, the photographs, the statues, and the chapels throughout his oeuvre are not always called memory; however, the more I read about these undeniable presences that Tranströmer routinely engages in his poetry, the more convinced I became
that these Others could well be conceived of as belonging in the larger purview of memory. Furthermore, because of the unusual nature of memory’s existing prior and external to the poet (rather than solely as a function of his own mind), it was easy to see how Tranströmer’s poetic strategies for depicting a landscape were analogous to how he discussed the landscape of a memory. To call memory a landscape is a bit simplistic, though, if not altogether clichéd. The term ecology soon became apropos because of its connotative associations with the natural world as well as its broader definition of being a network of relationships in an environment.

Timothy Morton’s extended discussion of ecology in *The Ecological Thought* offers a useful theoretical framework. As the title suggests, Morton’s interest is in what he calls “the ecological thought”—not an ecological thought, but an overarching, all-encompassing recognition that “everything is interconnected” (1). Rather than binding ecology to its purely scientific denotation or linking it exclusively to Nature, which he often spells with a capital *N* in order to draw attention to its “unnatural” qualities (3), Morton sees ecology as being “profoundly about coexistence” (4). Such a theoretical stance implicates the significance of the arts, philosophy, culture, and even man-made structures and technologies often dismissed as antithetical to the goals of environmental thinking (4). Regarding the man-made, artificial, or cultural as being significant to an ecological conversation and not always in a position of inferiority to the natural world is something Tranströmer does as well. His poem “Kort paus i orgelkonserten” (“Brief Pause in the Organ Recital”) is one example of his explicit reverence for traffic as being no less than an organ, pillars being no less than trees, and an encyclopedia—a collection of human knowledge using human language—as being something that “växer fram i varje
“själ” (Samlade dikter 221; emphasis added) [“grows out of each soul” (Great Enigma 164)] like something organic. He likens the pages of an encyclopedia to “de dallrande löven i en skog” [“the quivering leaves in a forest”], further emphasizing that he is not interested in creating a binary system of natural/unnatural that unquestioningly favors the former as superior.

Along these lines, Morton clarifies that “[t]hinking ecologically isn’t simply about nonhuman things. Ecology has to do with you and me” (4). As a poet, Tranströmer also acknowledges the importance of both the human and the non-human; if he were exclusively interested in the latter, he would not write poetry. His literary engagement with memory suggests both that he respects the memory as an Other and that he is aware of his mediating (human) presence. Neither the human nor the non-human is diminished in his poetics; his ecological stance simply acknowledges their interdependence.

Such interdependence is the crux of ecological thinking. “The ecological thought is the thinking of interconnectedness,” Morton continues. However, “[t]he ecological thought doesn’t just occur ‘in the mind.’ It’s a practice and a process of becoming fully aware of how human beings are connected with other beings—animal, vegetable, or mineral” (7). Though this ecological awareness extends beyond the machinations of the mind, Morton also asserts that “[t]hinking itself is an ecological event” (8). He does not specifically explain why, but it is not difficult to imagine the firing of synapses as a striking metaphor for how otherwise Other entities bridge gaps and become inextricably enmeshed as something cohesive yet without defined borders. Morton’s ecological view is “a vast, sprawling mesh of interconnection without a definite center or edge” (8). Here
is a truly democratic view of the world and the relationships in it where no one entity has the power to define boundaries.

Writing, of course, is an act that by nature places the author as a central and unifying figure. Tranströmer often subverts his own authorial power by questioning the efficacy of language, which decenters his writing if even momentarily and allows for it to operate more ecologically. In a similar vein, he often undermines his human specialness by elevating memory and eventually even the poem itself as being bigger and greater than himself. At the end of “Morgonfåglar” (“Morning Birds”), he writes:

_Fantastiskt att känna hur min dikt växer_  
_medan jag själv krymper_  
_Den växer, den tar min plats._  
_Den tränger undan mig._  
_Den kastar mig ur boet._  
_Dikten är färdig._ (Samlade dikter 110)

Fantastic to feel how my poem grows  
while I myself shrink.  
It grows, it takes my place.  
It pushes me aside.  
It throws me out of the nest  
The poem is ready. (Great Enigma 79)\(^1\)

No passage more explicitly illustrates Tranströmer’s commitment to letting a poem grow beyond his authorial reach. This “self-effacement of the speaking subject as he or she becomes absorbed in a biocentric position of nonhierarchical interconnectedness” is a feature of ecologically engaged poetry (Scigaj 50). There are many other moments throughout Tranströmer’s work when he minimizes the significance of his own ego as a

\(^1\) Though MLA formatting calls for all text to be double-spaced, I found that it was helpful to single-space the verse poetry because it more clearly delineates line and stanza breaks. All other block quotations, including the prose poems, remain double-spaced per the standard.
way of honoring the Other—nature, memory, the poem itself—as being independent of him. I will examine a few examples in greater detail in Chapter 1.

Tranströmer’s poetic humility, of course, is not intended to completely obliterate any trace of his presence. To do so would be counterproductive to at least one of the aims of ecological thinking, which is to understand the impact of human presence in larger ecosystems. Tranströmer is aware that it is not possible to circumvent his own subjectivity and, in fact, any such attempt would ultimately seem disingenuous and undermine his credibility. The model he seems to favor in consideration of his relationship with the outer world is one of intersubjectivity, which acknowledges a plurality of subjects. In his book *The Spell of the Sensuous*, David Abram offers a penetrating look into intersubjectivity as theorized by Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology. At the heart of the matter is the question: “How does our subjective experience enable us to recognize the reality of other selves, other experiencing beings?” (37). The body, “that mysterious and multifaceted phenomenon that seems always to accompany one’s awareness, and indeed to be the very location of one’s awareness” (37), becomes the site that mediates one’s experiences according to phenomenological thought. Denial of the body and its centralizing function is not at all the interest of phenomenologists or of Tranströmer. But alongside this recognition of the centrality of one’s body in relation to experience comes an understanding that “the phenomenal field also contains many other bodies, other forms that move and gesture in a fashion similar to one’s own” (37). This basic awareness is fundamental both to phenomenological theory and to ecological thought.
The difference between one’s own body and other bodies, of course, is that the former is experienced “from within” while the latter “are experienced from outside” (37). Such a difference creates a chasm between the self and Others that needs to be bridged. Abram goes on to discuss what that bridge might be for an ecologically-minded person:

Despite this difference [in perception between self and Others], Husserl discerned that there was an inescapable affinity, or affiliation, between these other bodies and one’s own. The gestures and expressions of these other bodies, viewed from without, echo and resonate one’s own bodily movements and gestures, experienced from within. By an associative ‘empathy,’ the embodied subject comes to recognize these other bodies as other centers of experience, other subjects…. The field of appearances, while still a thoroughly subjective realm, was now seen to be inhabited by multiple subjectivities; the phenomenal field was no longer the isolate haunt of a solitary ego, but a collective landscape, constituted by other experiencing subjects as well as by oneself. (37)

Similarly, Morton claims that “true sympathy comes from social feeling—the awareness of coexistence” (47). The phenomenological sequence of understanding, then, is to first identify our experiences as being mediated through a body, next to recognize that there are other such experiencing bodies, and then by extension to imagine that those other bodies are themselves subjects in a “collective landscape”² of multiple subjectivities.

² It is interesting to note here that Abram would use the word “landscape” to describe the connection afforded by an understanding of the plurality of subjectivities. That the language of nature pairs well with the language of interconnectedness perhaps comes as no surprise.
Empathy functions as an important ecological gesture because it is not simply an awareness of other beings but of their capacity to experience and to feel. Because it is impossible to know precisely what Others are feeling, empathy is ultimately an awareness that Others feel paired with an imaginative act that strives to understand the content and contours of another’s feelings. One’s ecological responsibility to empathy extends to other humans, of course, but it also requires the even greater imaginative act of assuming empathy for other beings that may not be traditionally regarded as sentient.

Insofar as ecological thinking is also “radical intimacy, coexistence with other beings, sentient and otherwise” (Morton 8), Tranströmer’s poetics readily and sympathetically respond to the ecological thought. Memory in specific is conceived of as potentially sentient throughout Tranströmer’s poetry and, as such, requires empathy and “the ethics of ecological thought,” which is “to regard beings as people even when they aren’t people” (8). For, as Morton argues, “[i]f ecology is about radical coexistence, then we must challenge our sense of what is real and what is unreal, what counts as existent and what counts as nonexistent” (10). Tranströmer identifies memory, typically regarded as formless and abstract, as a real and abiding presence, and in this way his thinking is ecological. Not only does ecology inform the way he interacts with memory, the form of memory itself is conceived as an ecology—a network of profound relationships and interconnectedness.

Here it is important to emphasize that memory is an ecology rather than an environment and that these terms are not interchangeable. Environment is the space and conditions surrounding a given point or thing, while ecology refers to the relationships within that space. Etymologically speaking, environment is a state of being enclosed or
surrounded. As such, it implies a subject-object relationship wherein the subject is centered and all else exists and operates around it in an auxiliary role. Ecology, on the other hand, does not imply a center; it is based on relationships and connections, which challenges the idea of a privileged position in the center by which all else is defined. As Morton argued earlier, ecological thinking attempts to decenter (8, 24), while thinking in terms of environment subtly reinforces subject-object boundaries.

In spite of this, the concept of an environment remains important to this and other ecological conversations because it offers a way of thinking about a context in which to situate ecological interactions. This is especially important to remember when discussing Pierre Nora’s *milieux de mémoire* in Chapter 1 because, in his conception, the *milieux*, or the environments, are more conducive to ecological thinking than the *lieux de mémoire*, which he defines as more sterile or artificial spaces. In Nora’s model of thinking, environment is a useful concept even if it alone does not adequately encompass Tranströmer’s dedication to creating and sustaining interconnected ecosystems in his poetry. Ultimately, even Morton concedes that it is impossible to live in a world without any edges: “Although there is no absolute, definite ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ of beings, we cannot get along without these concepts either” (39). However, the boundaries that do exist “are not perfectly defined” (39), nor should they be. The uncertainty in delineating hard-and-fast borders is a hallmark of ecological thinking and a recurring topic for Tranströmer.

In considering my specific choice of the word *ecology* for this study, a related literary term, *ecopoetry*, is helpful because of Tranströmer’s “particular concentration on nature as an interrelated series of cyclic feedback systems,” which Leonard Scigaj defines
as the primary preoccupation of ecopoetry (37). He maintains that “environmental poetry,” by contrast, lacks this perspective of nature’s being a system of relations (37). J. Scott Bryson additionally argues that older forms of “nature poetry,” such as that found in romanticism, are more focused on depicting the natural world as a benign extension of our own consciousness (i.e. the pathetic fallacy) than on examining it as a complex network both independent of us and relating to us (2–5). By contrast, many contemporary poets writing about the natural world, Bryson elaborates, offer “a perspective on the human-nonhuman relationship that distinguishes them from their nature poetry ancestors and mark them as ecopoets” (5). Ecopoets could thus be said to perceive and write about the world vis-à-vis Morton’s conception of the ecological thought.

Tranströmer can rightly be grouped among these ecopoets, especially in light of his “sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given,” which Lawrence Buell identifies as one of the primary characteristics of ecologically engaged work (Environmental Imagination 8). Bryson’s definition of ecopoetry’s overarching tenets similarly implicate Tranströmer’s “ecocentric perspective that recognizes the interdependent nature of the world” (5–6) and his “imperative toward humility in relationships with both human and nonhuman nature” (6). Each of these definitions points to the fact that ecopoetry is not necessarily about a poem’s subject matter, but rather its particular engagement of that subject matter. To return to Morton, ecological thinking is “not simply a matter of what you’re thinking about. It’s also a matter of how you think” (4). In other words, it is not enough to simply write about topics traditionally considered “ecological,” such as nature. Ecopoetry must also show “an acutely self-conscious awareness of the limits of language, an emphasis on the process of perception,
and a lively comprehension of how the act of perception welds the subjective human psyche to phenomena in the natural world while respecting the natural world as an equal and separate other” (Scigaj xiv). An ecopoet like Tranströmer also adopts a posture of humility in regard to the natural world, which allows him to recognize its subjectivity, its interdependency, its process\(^3\), its complexity, and its significance. He approaches the non-human world and all else implicated in the ecology of living matter with the same awareness and deference.

Though it is fruitful to consider the relationship between Tranströmer’s treatment of the natural world and his conception of memory as an analogous one, it is important to note that memory is not ecological in a strictly metaphorical sense throughout the poetry. One of the reasons ecological thought and ecopoetry work so well in a discussion of memory in Tranströmer’s writing is because memory is often experienced in a specific geographical location and thus meaningfully bound to a place or environment.

“[G]rönskan … är fullsatt / av minnen” [“[T]he greenery is dense / with memories”], Tranströmer writes in an important poem, “Minnena ser mig” (“Memories Look at Me”). Östersjöar, the long poem I treat most extensively in Chapter 2, is all about how memories are tied to the island of Runmarö and the surrounding Baltic Sea. It is no coincidence that the poems about memory are often situated in these natural spaces.

The intimate connection between memory and place has a long history in Western culture. In her book The Art of Memory, Frances Yates describes how ancient Greek and

\(^3\) Buell uses this term. For more on the idea of process, see John Elder's Imagining the Earth, which offers an extended theoretical engagement with Alfred North Whitehead’s Process and Reality and how it relates to ecopoetry.
Roman orators were able to remember long speeches with perfect accuracy by virtue of a mnemonic device wherein they would “imprint on the memory a series of loci or places” (18). The idea was to create an architectural space in the mind where memories could be stored and recalled. This was achieved by first constructing the details of the memory place: the halls, the rooms, and even statues or decorative ornaments. Next, images connected to the planned speech—for example, an anchor or a weapon—would be imaginatively placed in the rooms already committed to memory. When it was time to deliver the speech, the memories would be retrieved by the orator’s metaphorically taking a walk through the memory palace. “We have to think of the ancient orator as moving in imagination through his memory building whilst he is making his speech, drawing from the memorized places the images he has placed on them” (18). Sequence is important for this strategy to work, so it has some temporal implications as well, but the method largely relies on the intimate relationship shared by place and memory.

“[T]he orator’s trained memory, with its vast and roomy architecture of places on which the images of things and words are stored” (Yates 59) is not the only place where memories are deposited and kept. Ecopoets often write about the memory of a given place—a memory that includes both the human history there and the natural processes that have altered the landscape over time. In Tranströmer’s Östersjöar, it is the titular Baltic Sea that becomes a potential reservoir for the memory of whom Tranströmer is in service and offers a space—literally and metaphorically—for the stories of the past to be preserved in a way that is outside of language or human archival. Biologically speaking, nature is indeed the repository for all human memory because of the interchangeable
nature of cell matter and the fact that our decaying bodies do return to the land and sea to
nourish it and to participate in ecological cycles.

Insofar as imaginative acts of language permit us to recover such memories from
their natural spaces and breathe them back into life, poems, too, can be seen as
participating in the ecological process. “Poetry derives from the living earth as surely as
our human bodies and minds do,” John Elder says. “Poetry itself can manifest the
intricate, adaptive, and evolving balance of an ecosystem. This can be true in the case of
individual poems [or] in the sometimes surprising wholeness of a given poet’s oeuvre”
(“Foreword” ix). Because poetry itself has here been identified as a type of ecosystem, it
becomes a good space in which to explore the ecology of memory. As the poem is
contemplated, written, read, and ultimately experienced, it continually grows, expands,
and allows for ongoing ecological interaction.

Creative literary engagement is thus important in building sustainable
relationships with ecologies, whether in the natural world or the way in which memory
operates ecologically. The relationship between nature and memory is important to note
in building a case for Tranströmer’s ecopoetic treatment of memory, as is ecocritical
theorists’ interest in literature as a fruitful space for engaging ecological matters.
Lawrence Buell argues, “Environmental connectedness requires acts of imagination not
at one stage alone but three: in the bonding, in the telling, in the understanding. And
though it is true that at each stage imagination can easily interfere, break down, or run
amok, imagination remains crucial” (Writing 17). Buell’s tripartite stages of
environmental imagination pretty closely represent the trajectory of this thesis. Chapter 1
discusses Tranströmer’s bonding with the memory, which is to say his awareness of it,
his theoretical conception of it, and his very real sense of duty to it. Chapter 2 focuses on both the telling and understanding, particularly by examining the challenges of representation and some of Tranströmer’s poetic strategies for “telling” something as complex as a memory. The effort here is to come to an understanding if not of the memories themselves at least of the way in which Tranströmer conceives of and poetically situates memory. The poems become acts of imagination that deliberately engage with and respond to memory as part of an interconnected ecology.
In his influential essay “Entre Mémoire et Histoire” [“Between Memory and History”], Pierre Nora makes an important distinction between memory and history. He defines memory as “ce qui restait encore de vécu dans la chaleur de la tradition, dans le mutisme de la coutume, dans la répétition de l’ancestral” (xvii) [“the remnants of experience still lived in the warmth of tradition, in the silence of custom, in the repetition of the ancestral” (7)] while asserting that history is merely a tool of intelligence used to organize and make sense of the past. The crux of this difference is in the phrase “encore de vécu” [“still lived”]: memory is living and ongoing, which is to say open to interpretive possibility, while history is frozen in the past, foreclosed. His lament is that in modern society we resort to lieux de mémoire (sites of memory) wherein meaning is already determined in the absence of more organic milieux de mémoire, which the English translation renders as “real environments of memory” (7) open to ongoing engagement.

By Nora’s definition, the lieux are designated sites of memory such as cemeteries and memorials that exist expressly for the purpose of not being forgotten. Later in the essay, he maintains that some lieux de mémoire are so consciously constructed that they have no referent in reality; they exist to be their own referent. Milieux de mémoire, on the other hand, are spaces of memory more concerned with “realia, with things in themselves and in their immediate reality” (23). Where lieux de mémoire are frozen in time for a commemorative purpose, the milieux remain open to an ongoing relationship between the present and the past as interconnected. Such a space can rightfully be thought of as an
environment (as the English translation makes clear) or even, in broader terms, an ecosystem—not just a space but a network of relationships occurring within that space.

Nora insists that this more environmental memory has been eradicated with the advent of modernity and a society that favors authoritative history. However, this rift has led to the significant revelation that memory and history are not one and the same. This overturns a belief our culture has long held as self-evident, Nora argues. He explains that the French word *histoire* refers both to the lived history itself and the process by which that lived history is described and rendered intelligible. He credits this conflation with delivering a “profonde vérité” [“profound truth”], namely that

> le mouvement qui nous emporte est de même nature que celui qui nous le représente. Habiterions-nous encore notre mémoire, nous n’aurions pas besoin d’y consacrer des lieux. Il n’y aurait pas de lieux, parce qu’il n’y aurait pas de mémoire emportée par l’histoire. Chaque geste, jusqu’au plus quotidien, serait vécu comme la répétition religieuse de ce qui s’est fait depuis toujours, dans une identification charnelle de l’acte et du sens. Dès qu’il y a trace, distance, médiation, on n’est plus dans la mémoire vraie, mais dans l’histoire. (xix)

the process that is carrying us forward and our representations of that process are of the same kind. If we were able to live within memory, we would not have needed to consecrate *lieux de mémoire* in its name. Each gesture, down to the most everyday, would be experienced as the ritual repetition of a timeless practice in the primordial identification of act and
meaning. With the appearance of the trace, of mediation, of distance, we are not in the realm of true memory but of history. (8)

As our representative devices (the describing *histoire*) became more linear, or at least favored a more linear process, so too did the lived *histoire* become something fixed in time, sterile and uninhabitable. Though Nora here doubts our ability to inhabit spaces of “mémoire vraie” [“true memory”], it is because we have supplanted *milieux de mémoire* with the inferior *lieux de mémoire*.

He offers the Jewish community as an example of how this happens: once a “people of memory” devotedly committed to ritual, repetition, and a more cyclical understanding of time (*milieux*), the Jews became more bound to master narratives and linear history after being introduced to modernity. This resulted in the increasing need for *lieux de mémoire* to stand in for what the older culture used to remember as part of an oral tradition steeped in repetition and ritual. Modernity is propelled by change, Nora maintains, which results in an increasingly forgetful culture forced to organize and archive the past quickly and in linear fashion. In so doing, we become bound to a structure of causality that sets up a chain of temporality and thus limits multiplicity. A *milieu*, on the other hand, structures memory spatially, which allows us to live within memory and engage it in the way Nora is promoting.

Nora’s assertion is that because culture has so long equated memory and history, memory has lost some of its vitality. The *lieux de mémoire* that he decries as being lifeless, archival, and devoid of meaningful ritual are now mistaken to be legitimate spaces (*milieux*) of memory even though their whole purpose is to serve the constraints of history. “Les lieux de mémoire naissent et vivent du sentiment qu’il n’y a pas de mémoire
spontanée, qu’il faut créer des archives, qu’il faut maintenir des anniversaires, organiser des célébrations, prononcer des éloges funèbres, notarier des actes, parce que ces opérations ne sont pas naturelles” (xxiv) [“Lieux de mémoire originate with the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills because such activities no longer occur naturally” (12)]. He creates a striking image in defining these lieux de mémoire as “moments d’histoire arrachés au mouvement de l’histoire, mais qui lui sont rendus. Plus tout à fait la vie, pas tout à fait la mort, comme ces coquilles sur le rivage quand se retire la mer de la mémoire vivante” (xxiv) [“moments of history, torn away from the movement of history, then returned; no longer quite life, not yet death, like shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded” (12)]. The lieux have the form of memory but are isolated and empty. Living memory, by contrast, is a sea of life and movement. That Nora should here choose the sea as a metaphor for living memory is significant because it suggests the importance of not only the abstract concept of an environment as it relates to memory but an actual ecological space—a landscape—in which memory can operate.

Nora does not explore the sea metaphor any further in the course of the essay, nor does he spend much time discussing what a milieu de mémoire might look like in a real-world setting. This is where literature comes to bear. Tomas Tranströmer is invested in this “mer de la mémoire vivante” [“sea of living memory”] and in cultivating an ecopoetics for environments of memory. In his poetry, he identifies, responds to, and seeks to describe his experiences in milieux de mémoire, ultimately allowing memories to take the form of complex and living ecologies. Though Nora does not directly talk about
memory in ecological terms, *ecology* is here a helpful extension of the term *environment* (which Nora does invoke by speaking of *milieux*) because it has to do with both place and the complex system of relationships that operate within a given space or context.

To this end, Tranströmer’s poems confirm Nora’s assertion that “la mémoire est la vie…. elle est en évolution permanente, ouverte à la dialectique du souvenir et de l’amnésie…. La mémoire est un phénomène toujours actuel, un lien vécu au présent éternel” (xix) [“memory is life…. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting…. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present” (8)]. Part of the ecology of memory is the complex interaction of past and present. In other words, returning to Nora’s argument, it is memory rather than history that truly reconciles the dialectic between the past and the present because its purpose is to illuminate something of the past by way of a dynamic interaction with the present. It is precisely at these crucial and vibrant moments of exchange that Tranströmer often situates his poems. In doing so, he frees memory from a purely historical definition and allows for the spontaneity and inhabitability that Nora defends as true memory’s noblest characteristics.

Tranströmer’s strategy is not, however, to commemorate such memories, for that would constitute a surrender to the carelessness and forgetfulness that require the existence of self-referential *lieux de mémoire* in the first place. Rather, he is aware of and responds to *milieux de mémoire* as he encounters them and then creates a poetic milieu for the reader to inhabit so that the memory can speak anew for itself rather than being explained and thus historicized. The poems are apt *milieux* because they, too, resist linear or narrative ordering. Poems are very spatial in their own right, and Tranströmer in
particular creates poems that are “spare and clear so [they] can pierce the layers, or leave room for the Memory” (Bly 573). Because the poetic milieux are open to multiple voices and perspectives, Tranströmer makes a point of departure from Nora’s theoretical framework as it relates to the existence of “la mémoire vraie” [“true memory”].

While Tranströmer is indeed invested in observing and representing memories carefully, it is not with the purpose of discovering one true memory. To do so would imply that there is an essential truth or an objective reality to uncover, which is at best counterproductive and at worst impossible to believe for someone as invested in the possibilities of intersubjectivity as Tranströmer. His interest lies more in the unique contact between one’s own subjectivity and the undeniable presences (here defined as memory) in his immediate environment, whether that environment is a place where the poet is walking or the space of the poem itself. As such, Tranströmer is keenly aware that “la mémoire s’enracine dans le concret, dans l’espace, le geste, l’image et l’objet” (xix) [“memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects” (9)], so he creates a new, poetic space for the memory to inhabit so that the reader can encounter it herself. He uses highly imagistic language to give memory a concrete space in which to take root. Literary memory of this kind expands the definition of memory beyond its temporal associations and conceives of it as existing in space and animated by the engagements we have with it. Again, this allows for ecological multiplicity rather than a singular authorial meaning or interpretation.

Nora does not speak much of literary memory, though he offers it as an alternative to historical memory. His lament at the end of the essay is for what he calls “le deuil éclatant de la littérature” (xlii) [“the spectacular bereavement of literature” (24)],
namely that memory has been reclassified as being entirely within the purview of history. “L’histoire est notre imaginaire de remplacement” (xlii) [“History has become our replaceable imagination” (24)], he argues, and though he does not explicitly proffer literature as a way of re-thinking memory, the implicit suggestion here is that memory properly belongs in a literary context because it provides an imaginative space open to possibility. There seems to be a parallel between historical memory and lieux de mémoire, leaving the more desirable milieux de mémoire to make an analogous pairing with literary memory.

This affinity is precisely the one Tranströmer draws upon in creating poems that treat memory as a dynamic ecology. Such poems are ecosystems unto themselves, as John Elder suggests, because they function as imaginative meeting places (milieux) for man and nature, the past and the present, the self and the Other. The importance of literature here is not only that Tranströmer is writing poems but that the initial experiences with memory that prompt the poems’ creation seem to themselves be literary in nature—that is to say, they are characterized by the creative, playful, and imaginative dimensions proper to literature. Thus, the literary aspects of a Tranströmerian memory are three-fold: the memory comes as a sort of literary presence, is communicated by way of poetry, and is re-animated as readers engage it in a literary way.

None of that, of course, is to say that the memories Tranströmer encounters are only literary in nature. To assume that they are entirely imagined or simply fashioned as artistic metaphors would belie their significance and undermine the ethics of coexistence Tranströmer is building for memories as real presences. The difference here between memory and imagination—even if the memory is engaged imaginatively—is that
memory has referents in the real world, where imagination by itself may be a bit solipsistic. Memory is necessarily connected to reality. But because it is ecological, open, growing, and unfinished, memory also becomes an important space of negotiation with the present; thus, it functions ecologically. Memory can be fruitfully thought of in literary terms, however, because the language of literature is likewise ecological: its rhetoric, metaphors, symbols, and images are continuously open to interpretation and engagement with the present.

Nora’s essay does not give concrete potential solutions to the problem of memory’s being reduced to commemorative pageantry (a sign without a referent, to borrow from de Saussurean theory), but he remains committed to the idea that there is indeed something to be done: “Il y a un réseau articulé de ces identités différentes, une organisation inconsciente de la mémoire … qu’il nous appartient de rendre consciente d’elle-même” (xli) [“There is a differentiated network to which all of these separate identities belong, an unconscious organization of … memory that it is our responsibility to bring to consciousness” (23)]. Tranströmer’s poems testify to his own commitment to fulfilling this responsibility to memory: to bring it into consciousness, to draw attention to its existence, and ultimately to dignify it as a real presence in the ecology of living things.

A Sense of Memory

In a short collection of poems called Stigar (Paths), Tranströmer writes about driving past an old churchyard. The poem begins:
Here I come, the invisible man, perhaps employed by a Great Memory to live right now. (Great Enigma 121)

This passage from “December kväll -72” [“December Evening ’72”] captures a moment when the poet feels that he has a poetic responsibility to something outside of himself—here described as “ett stort Minne” [a Great Memory]—and serves to illustrate one of Tranströmer’s literary projects at large. This sense of poetic responsibility in response to a particularly vivid scene or occasion is not unprecedented in Tranströmer; in fact, much of his poetic oeuvre is characterized by such encounters with moments or memories, to which his response is humble while he remains keenly aware of his unique role as a mediating consciousness. As an artist, he conceives of himself as the servant of such an exterior reality, which he has described as “det stora okända som jag är en del av och som säkert är viktigare än jag” (Samlade dikter 244) [“the great unknown that I am a part of and which is certainly more important than me” (Great Enigma 177)]. In another poem he confesses, “Det är någon som hugger tag i min arm varje gång jag försöker skriva” (Samlade dikter 196) [“Someone catches at my arm each time I try to write” (Great Enigma 146)], and translator Robert Bly suggests that this “someone” is memory (572).

In a letter to Bly from 1973, Tranströmer admits, “I sometimes have the feeling that I have a duty to do for some hidden Consciousness. Why do I have to live through this constant confusion, to see and hear all these things, what does it mean? I sometimes get a little comfort from the feeling that Someone, or rather Something, wants me to do it.
‘Stay where you are my dear Tomas, don’t run away, you have a function even if you
don’t know what it is’” (Smith 245).45

This particular conception of memory as an exterior consciousness is interesting
because it situates memory outside its traditional locus: the mind. The Great Memory of
“Decemberkväll” exists outside of Tranströmer, caught somehow in time or space and
begging the poet’s involvement. Many of his other poems are likewise charged with both
an awareness of and a perceived responsibility to an Other that often manifests itself as a
memory, be it a “Great Memory” of history, a personal memory of one who is dead, the
ongoing memory of a landscape, or virtually any other undeniable presence that the poet
encounters. However, this does not mean the memory remains altogether Other. As Pierre
Nora elaborates, memory is “par nature, multiple et démultipliée, collective, plurielle et
individualisée” (xix; emphasis added) [“by nature multiple and yet specific; collective,
plural, and yet individual” (9; emphasis added)]. Tranströmer describes the process of
how a memory can begin as something external and grow into something personal in the
fifth stanza of “Om Historien” (“About History”) with the metaphor of a discarded
newspaper deteriorating over a course of months, “på väg att förenas med marken. / 
Liksom ett minne långsamt förvandlas till dig själv” (Samlade dikter 112) [“on the way to

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4 Though Tranströmer’s native language is Swedish and his correspondence with Bly was first published in Swedish in 2001 (Air mail: Brev, ed. Torbjörn Schmidt), all of his letters to Bly after April 18, 1971 were originally written in English (see Smith xxiii). I have thus deemed it appropriate to use the 2013 English-language publication of their collected correspondence, Airmail: The Letters of Robert Bly and Tomas Tranströmer, as the most authoritative source for the letters written after 1971.

5 He continues by saying “(The same idea is in the idle of the guard duty poem),” which I will discuss later in this chapter.
being united with the earth. / Just as a memory is slowly transmuted into your own self” (Great Enigma 81]). While the memory begins as something Other, it is eventually—inevitably—internalized. This is a model Tranströmer returns to frequently as he senses an external memory and eventually makes it his own by virtue of writing the poem that creates a scaffolding for his lived experience. This is not to say that Tranströmer seeks sole ownership of the memory; in many ways, the memories resist complete appropriation and maintain their otherness by growing into the poems which, as Tranströmer attests to in “Morganfåglar,” themselves grow into something bigger than the poet.

Another significant component of Tranströmer’s conception of memory is revealed in this passage from “Om Historien.” By invoking the presence of the earth at the end of this poem as the final resting place for the newspaper, Tranströmer underscores an important connection between memory and the natural world. His sensitivity to both the presence of memories and the spaces or objects they dwell in is in many ways an ecopoetic sensibility. This additionally relieves memory of its purely temporal constraints and allows for a broader definition that includes spatial dimensions, as the memories to which Tranströmer responds are often inextricably tied to a place. Such a consideration for spatial dimensions “implies a progression from the temporal order of experience, within which objects or words are perceived in a sequence and with high individual definition, toward a spatial wholeness, with all features of a poem or landscape perceived simultaneously, and with relationship replacing sequence as the organizing principle” (Elder, Imagining 195). Temporality, then, orders things by
sequence and emphasizes discrete entities while spatiality structures things by virtue of relationships and focuses more on interconnectedness.

Given the poet’s relationship to memories as external forces with which he interacts and the memories’ additional connection to place, *ecology* becomes a useful term for conceptualizing how memory operates at large within Tranströmer’s poetic framework. Ecology, in a broad sense, deals with the relationship of living things to their environment. Here, it could refer to memory as it relates to its *milieu* or Tranströmer as he relates to the memories as *milieux* unto themselves. Context, of course, is an important facet of ecology as is the idea of relationships among constituent parts. The poem “Några minuter” (“A Few Minutes”) offers the image of a root system as an unseen network of connections and significations:

_Den låga tallen på myren håller upp sin krona: en mörk trasa._
_Men det man ser är ingenting mot rötterna, det utspärrade, dolt krypande, odödliga eller halvdödliga rotsystemet._
_Jag du hon han förgrenar sig också._
_Utanför det man vill._

... 

_Det känns som om mina fem sinnen var kopplade till en annan varelse som rör sig lika halsstarrigt._ (Samlade dikter 136)

The squat pine in the swamp holds up its crown: a dark rag. But what you see is nothing compared to the roots, the widespread, secretly creeping, immortal or half-mortal root system.
I you she he also branch out
Outside what one wills
...
It feels as if my five senses were linked to another creature that moves stubbornly (Great Enigma 99)

The importance of relationships is poetically manifested in the unpunctuated cluster “[j]ag du hon han” (“I you she he”), who “rörgrenar sig också” (“also branch out”).

Those human subjects in the poem are likened to the tree that is linked to an unseen yet powerful root system, or an ecosystem of living forces, “odödliga” (“immortal”) or “halvdödliga” (“half-mortal”). The idea of the root system’s being half-mortal may suggest that it is comprised of both natural, regenerative elements of the earth and the fallible, decaying human body, subject to (and always returned to the ground upon) death.

Yet another confessional moment emerges from this poem to highlight Tranströmer’s pervasive intuition that he is being pulled along by “en annan varelse” (“another creature”), which could well be memory or at least the “hidden Consciousness” he described in the letter to Bly—concepts that seem nearly interchangeable to the poet.

Another layer is here added by his invocation of the five senses as being the part of him that links him to this other creature. Though all five are mentioned, it seems that seeing is the weakest of the senses in the poem. Tranströmer says at the very beginning, “det man ser är ingenting” (“what you see is nothing”) because the roots are hidden underground. Seeing may well be the most empirical and dominant of the senses, so perhaps Tranströmer’s point is to underscore the possibilities afforded by other sensuous experiences: hearing, smelling, tasting, touching. The results may be more ambiguous than those afforded by sight, and this ambiguity creates more ecological possibilities. He is already somewhat ambiguous in his stance, as he “feels as if” his five senses were attached to this other creature; he does not claim to “know” it. This likely has less to do
with how potently he feels than the fact that, for Tranströmer, feeling is a kind of knowing, and the senses are the access to that kind of knowledge.

In an earlier poem called “Palatset” ("The Palace"), Tranströmer talks about the five senses in a similar fashion: “Också nåt annat. Något mörkt / ställde sig vid våra sinnens fem / trösklar utan att gå over dem” (Samlade dikter 83) [“Also something else. Something darkly / set itself at our senses’ five / thresholds without stepping over them” (Great Enigma 60)]. The titular palace of the poem is reminiscent of the memory palaces described by Yates as mnemonic devices for the ancient orators. The building is abandoned by human presence; all that remains is a sculpture and a horse in an otherwise empty hall. At the end of the poem, the horse claims to be living in the palace as a stable as he “äter tystnaden” [eats the silence] and “växer sakta” [grows quietly]. The horse symbolizes memory; the “vi” [“we”] of the poem do not even notice the horse at first until his dark presence tugs at their senses. Again, vision alone seems insufficient to the task of recognizing memory. Tranströmer’s emphasis on the broader spectrum of senses as being uniquely able to perceive otherwise hidden presences invites a phenomenological discussion of memory as well.

In his book The Spell of the Sensuous, David Abram develops a phenomenological framework for arguing that human reciprocity with the natural world has its locus in sensuous perception, which ultimately is facilitated by the body. “Far from restricting my access to things and to the world,” he says, “the body is my very means of entering into relation with all things” (47). Earlier, he even uses the word “presences”—already familiar to this discussion—to describe the kinds of interactions made possible through the mediation of the body (45). Abram contends that in order to
achieve the kind of valuable exchange between oneself and other presences he advocates as being essential to a healthy relationship with one’s environment, we must be willing to consider the ability of the Other to engage our senses. He says,

Our most immediate experience of things, according to Merleau-Ponty, is necessarily an experience of reciprocal encounter—of tension, communication, and commingling. From within the depths of this encounter, we know the thing or phenomenon only as our interlocutor—as a dynamic presence that confronts us and draws us into relation. We conceptually immobilize or objectify the phenomenon only by mentally absenting ourselves from this relation, by forgetting or repressing our sensuous involvement. To define another being as an inert or passive object is to deny its ability to actively engage us and to provoke our senses; we thus block our perceptual reciprocity with that being…. To the sensing body, no thing presents itself as utterly passive or inert. Only by affirming the animateness of perceived things do we allow our words to emerge directly from the depths of our ongoing reciprocity with the world. (56; author’s emphasis)

One reason that Tranströmer has the capacity to sense memory is simply because he believes in its ability to engage his senses as a kind of living thing, as seen in the two “five senses” excerpts. In his article about the cosmic image in Tranströmer’s poetry, Eric Sellin maintains that “the expansion [of the cosmic image] takes place less in the mind of the poet than in his vision and other senses, outside of the mind yet within reach, as it were. The egoism of the poems is, therefore, less mental than sensuous” (247). Here
again, a consideration of ecology is fruitful because it implies the kind of dynamism inherent in the real presence of memories as Tranströmer perceives them. His is what Abram would call a “sensing body” because he perceives even abstract concepts such as memory to be animate, and thus he maintains a relationship of mutual reciprocity with memory as a real, dynamic presence.

“Employed By a Great Memory”: Tranströmer’s Poetic Responsibility

It is important to understand the way in which Tranströmer identifies and responds to memory throughout his poetry. His perceived role as a servant of memory is often indistinguishable from his role as a poet. Such a responsibility would behoove him not only to allow the memory “att leva just nu” (Samlade dikter 165) [“to live right now” (Great Enigma 121)], but to himself heed the call to live, possibly for the purpose of re-animating the memory and giving it voice. The significance of this imperative to live is reinforced by the presence of the “helgon av trä” [“wooden saint”] in “Decemberkväll” who “står … leende, hjälplös, som om man tagit ifrån honom glasögonen” [“stands … smiling, helpless, as if they had taken away his glasses”]. The wooden saint is frozen in space and time, incapable of communicating, unlike the living and speaking narrator of the poem, who “kör förbi / den igenbommade vita kyrkan” [“is driving past / the locked-up white church”]. Though it is the speaker’s privilege not to be inanimate and trapped in history, he too faces a burden: that of moving too quickly through time and past history, past even the beckoning “nu, nu, nu” [“now, now, now”], whose insistent repetition in the poem suggests the frantic pace of the fragile and fleeting present—a present that will soon enough be itself a memory. Tranströmer’s responsibility, then, is
not merely to a memory of the past but additionally to the vivid reality of the lived moment as the two interact in a veritable *milieu de mémoire*.

That Tranströmer acts as a poetic conduit in negotiating the past and the present is seen most clearly in his poem “Posteringen” (“The Outpost”), in which he describes his experience being on guard duty in a defense unit:


> Uppdrag: att vara där man är. Också i den löjliga gravallvarliga rollen—jag är just den plats där skapelsen arbetar på sig själv.

> Men att vara där man är. Och vänta. Jag är ängslig, envis, förvirrad. Kommande händelser, de finns redan! Jag känner det. De finns utanför:


I flit over warm moments but can’t stop for long. They’re whistling me back through space— I crawl out from the stones. Here and now.

Mission: to be where I am. Even in that ridiculous, deadly serious role—I am the place where creation is working itself out.

But to be where I am. And to wait. I am anxious, stubborn, confused. Coming events, they’re there already! I know it. They’re outside:
a murmuring crowd outside the gate.
They can pass only one by one.
They want in. Why? They’re coming
one by one. I am the turnstile. (Great Enigma 116–17)

His perceived “uppdrag” [“mission”] is to be present, which for Tranströmer means both
to occupy the “nu, nu, nu” [“now, now, now”] mentioned in “Decemberkväll” and
additionally to be aware of what is going on around him—to be actively engaged in the
present. Bly maintains that “Tranströmer has the odd sense that the Great Memory can
only come in when the artist is alert to it” (572). A poet’s responsibility, then, is to be
poised and waiting for the memory to arrive—a posture that inherently suggests a certain
reverence for whatever memories may come. Tranströmer’s awareness in this particular
poem that he is the locus of an unfinished creation is simultaneously a willingness to
allow this creation not only to exist but to “arbetar på sig själv” [work itself out] rather
than to be artistically manipulated. Translator Robin Fulton maintains that for
Tranströmer, “the ‘I’ is not so much an object of interest in itself but is rather something
like a point of entry (a door, a turnstile), which the world outside or within can use as it
works out its own purposes” (“Review” 387). The creation is thus an autonomous entity,
unfinished and open, though it necessarily passes through Tranströmer’s mediating
presence. The image of the turnstile is particularly striking in that it does not regard the
poet as a vessel but rather as occupying a liminal space between outside and inside—
here, past and present—and, in this case, indiscriminately allowing admittance. The
turnstile, then, might be read as a poetic symbol of Nora’s présent éternel.

In regards to the idea of an eternal present, “Posteringen” introduces an
interesting conflation of temporal elements: the “varma ögonblick” [“warm moments”]
are representative of past events, the poet speaks of a “här och nu” [“here and now”] that he is charged to occupy in the present moment, and the “kommande händelser” [“coming events”] that await their entrance outside the gate make a clear reference to the future. Niklas Schiöler observes the following in Tranströmer’s poetry: “The past lives on in the present, and from this ensues a disintegration of established chronological distinctions. Certain illuminated moments create a strong sense of compression, of the moment harbouring different ages. Paradoxically, perhaps, this means that all elements gather around a point of timelessness, of eternity” (327). From a temporal standpoint as from a spatial one, Tranströmer is more interested in the liminal than in defining concrete boundaries between past, present, and future.

John Elder argues that liminal space, which he calls “the edge,” invites a consideration of ecology: “To think about edge is to think about principles of relationship and thus to move toward a perspective of greater complexity. A given edge divides into its component environments: it proliferates new edges, both between itself and each of the two environments by which it was originally defined and within itself” (Imagining 195). He goes on to claim that “[p]oetry is in ecological terms the edge between mankind and non-human nature” (210). Poetry not only delineates the edge, it ultimately creates space for the edge to be expanded and transcended: “[T]he poem is at first perceived as the edge between the poet and the outer landscape. But as the poem achieves its own ‘fulsomeness,’ it grows into a counterpart landscape, with the poet at the edge between the page and its facing terrain. The marginal field grows into a heavily wooded tract, its edges so interwoven in a web of life that each relationship entangles all the rest” (195). Though it seems somewhat antithetical to Morton’s position to demarcate an edge at all,
it remains a useful point of distinction as long as we are willing to continually expand, redefine, and retrace such borders to discover new dimensions and relations. Not to mention, Elder’s “interwoven … web of life” comprised of entangled relationships sounds a lot like Morton’s concept of the mesh.

The liminality with which Tranströmer is so preoccupied is a useful space of tension and negotiation because it is somewhat amorphous, liable to being recalibrated, and it more or less exists to play with the idea of a boundary before transcending itself or being lost entirely. Throughout the poetry, the liminal spaces are generally only occupied in unrecoverable moments of clarity. However fleeting, they offer a “between-ness” that remains democratic; in liminal space, there is “this side” and “that side” surrounding the edge rather than the inside/outside dichotomy that creates a hierarchical subject/object relationship. In other words, liminality is still a way of thinking spatially—that is to say, relationally—rather than in a temporal sequence. For Tranströmer, just as the poet is the turnstile, the present is also a turnstile: a meeting ground for past and future as they relate to one another and to the moment at hand. Memories, too, seem to inhabit this border between past and present and thus create and sustain a dialogue between them.

“Meeting Places”

Just as Tranströmer refers to himself as being “den plats” [“the place”] of creation in “Posteringen,” he likewise described his poems as meeting places in a letter to Hungarian poets published in a 1977 edition of the magazine Uj Iras: “Mina dikter är mötesplatser. De vill etablera en plötslig förbindelse mellan delar av verkligheten som de konventionella språken och synsättens brukar hålla isär. Små och stora detaljer i
landskapet möts, skilda kulturer och människor strömmar samman i ett konstverk, 
naturen möter industrin osv. Det som ser ut som en konfrontation avslöjar ett samband”
[My poems are meeting places. They want to establish a sudden connection between parts 
of reality that conventional languages and cultures tend to keep apart. Small and large 
details in the landscape come together, different cultures and people flow together in a 
work of art, nature encounters industry, and so on. That which looks like a confrontation 
reveals a connection]. It is telling to note that the poems are not meeting times, nor is 
memory strictly defined as a temporal phenomenon or bound to a particular chronology.

To return to “Decemberkväll,” the image of the boarded-up white church suggests 
that memory is also somehow attached to the place where the narrator is traversing, 
situated as much in space as it is in time. Tranströmer plays with this idea more explicitly 
in his poem “Minnena ser mig” (“Memories Look at Me”):

En jümimorgen då det är för tidigt
att vakna men för sent att somna om.

Jag måste ut i grönskan som är fullsatt
av minnen, och de följer mig med blicken.

De syns inte, de småler helt ihop
med bakgrunden, perfekta kameleonter.

De är så nära att jag hör dem andas
fast fågelsången är bedövande. (Samlade dikter 223)

A June morning, too soon to wake, 
too late to fall asleep again.
I must go out—the greenery is dense 
with memories, they follow me with their gaze
They can’t be seen, they merge completely into 
the background, true chameleons
They are so close that I can hear them breathe

6 All English translations appearing without quotation marks are my own.
though the birdsong is deafening. *Memories Look at Me* 64)

The poet is poised in a moment between the proper time to wake and when he actually awoke, thus emphasizing his interest in liminality yet again. The urgency of his responsibility to memory is revealed in his feeling that he “måste” [“must”] go out to interact with the memories. And where “Decemberkväll” focused on a “stort Minne” [“Great Memory”], this poem depicts multiple memories, which underscores the multiplicity and multivalency of memory; it is not simply an authoritative or master narrative that begs to be understood, but a network of relationships that create layers in any given milieu. Furthermore, rather than being trapped motionless in wooden structures such as the statue or the chapel, the memories here dwell among the living greenery, which gives them a greater sense of being alive, organic, and possessing a power of their own. Though “de syns inte” [“they can’t be seen” or they are not visible], Tranströmer does claim to be able to hear them—loud and clear, in fact, to the point of their being “bedövande” [“deafening”]. The memories are thus undeniable or even inescapable, but Tranströmer must again take recourse to senses beyond that of seeing if he is to perceive them.

This poem appears at the end of Tranströmer’s short autobiography of the same name, *Minnena ser mig* (*Memories Look at Me*). The title alone does much to advance the theory that Tranströmer relates to memory as something, first of all, living and, moreover, dwelling outside his own ego. Yet another layer is here added, though:

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7 I have maintained the poetic lineation of the poems as they appear in their published form. In this case, the original Swedish features two-line stanzas, while the English translation is published as a one-stanza block of text.
memory is animate, external, and *looking at him*. While he cannot see the memories, they possess that faculty of vision to look at him. David Abram elaborates on this idea: “Such deference in the face of natural elements—the clear sense that the animate terrain is not just speaking to us but also *listening* to us—bears out Merleau-Ponty’s thesis of perceptual reciprocity; to listen to the forest is also, primordially, to feel oneself listened to by the forest, just as to gaze at the surrounding forest is to feel oneself exposed and visible, to feel oneself watched by the forest” (153). Nature’s having a memory of its own is a topic that surfaces in Tranströmer’s poetry as well. One particularly illuminating line appears in the poem “Molokai”: “Det är en skog som förlåter allt men ingenting glömmer” (*Samlade dikter* 245) [“These are woods that forgive everything but forget nothing” (*Great Enigma* 178)]. To give the forest this level of consciousness and agency is to pay it a certain respect. Tranströmer “experience[s] [his] own consciousness as simply one form of awareness among many others” (Abram 9). The woods, then, are just as likely to have a memory as the poet is, and he is invested in interacting with these external energies. This creates a kind of reciprocity that is essential to ecological thinking. Given an ecological perspective of memory, it is easy here to extrapolate that just as the forest can be the one doing the watching, so can a memory fix its gaze on the poet. By the end of “Minnena ser mig,” Transömer seems almost haunted by the memories, which press in on him, breathing. He is unable to ignore their overwhelming presence. Implied here is the expectation that because he notices the memories—in fact, he cannot ignore them—he must do something about it.
to be the servant of memory seems to imply a certain obligation not only to noticing the memory, but to communicate and possibly even preserve it—to help it “att leva” [“to live”], as the passage from “Decemberkväll” articulates. One of the problems of representing memory, whether historical or present, has to do with both the untenable nature of reality and the shortcomings of representational devices—in the case of the poet, language—to adequately depict it. The lived moment—the présent éternel, the “nu, nu, nu” of “Decemberkväll”—is fleeting and therefore cannot be grasped with any permanence in the mind, leaving linguistic representations of such a moment incomplete at best and, in some cases, even impossible. Alongside Tranströmer’s sense that there is someone pulling at his arm as he writes (Samlade dikter 196, Great Enigma 146) is his related belief that “[n]ågonting vill bli sagt men orden går inte med på det / Någonting som inte kan sägas” (Samlade dikter 182) [“[s]omething wants to be said but the words don’t agree / Something which can’t be said” (Great Enigma 135)]. Throughout his poetic oeuvre, Tranströmer remains keenly aware of the limitations of language and this is one way in which he maintains an ecopoetic posture in his treatment of memory.

Leonard Scigaj offers some helpful insight into the relationship between ecopoetry and a certain mistrust of language to unambiguously describe reality. Ecopoets, he maintains, are aware that “human language is much more limited than the ecological processes of nature” (11). However, according to Lawrence Buell, environmental texts generally avoid “reductionism at the level of formal representation, such as to compel us
to believe either that the text replicates the object-world or that it creates an entirely distinct linguistic world” (Environmental Imagination 13). The ecopoetic position is a balance between the extremes of either arrogantly believing language to be capable of perfect representation or despondently lamenting its inadequacy to the point that linguistic texts are seen as entities unto themselves without real ties to the outside world they seek to describe.

In sum, ecopoets “recognize the limits of language while referring us in an epiphanic moment to our interdependency and relatedness to the richer planet whose operations created and sustain us” (Scigaj 42). Acknowledging the limitations of language, then, effectively becomes a source of strength in pointing to exterior realities. In fact, it could be said of Tranströmer that “he achieves his at-one-ment with the world only after recognizing the limits of language” (Scigaj 44). His profound sense of interdependency with memories actually (and ironically) depends on his willingness to recognize the rift created by the shortcomings of language and, in so doing, to create a bridge with poetic language.

Communicating the Untranslatable
The first problem in writing about memory is that, for Tranströmer, it is a complex ecological process, so it can never be fully or exactly replicated. Östersjöar [Baltics], a long poem published in a single volume in 1974, deals in great measure with memory and the difficulty of expressing it. The poem is largely autobiographical, deriving in part from real notes left by Tranströmer’s grandfather, who had been a maritime pilot on the island of Runmarö in the Stockholm archipelago, where the narrative events of the poem take
place. The island itself is dear to Tranströmer as are the people whose histories populate the island and whisper their presence through the titular Baltic Sea. As his longest poem and his most extended engagement with memory and personal history, the poem affords a rich opportunity to see how Tranströmer negotiates his overwhelming task to the memory of this place, be it the historical experiences there, the undeniable presence of the dead, or the poet’s own moments of transcendence.

As such, the poem is punctuated with moments of uncertainty about the efficacy of language to communicate such memories or moments of epiphany. In one particular passage in the fifth section, the poet describes a scene wherein one wakes in the night to record a fleeting thought in the margins of a newspaper. Once morning has come, however, whatever clarity and lucidity the language had possessed the night before is lost, the words rendered meaningless.

Det händer att man vaknar om natten
och kastar ner några ord snabbt
på närmaste papper, på kanten av en tidning
(orden strålar av mening!)
men på morgonen: samma ord säger ingenting längre, klotter,
felsägningar.
Eller fragment av den stora nattliga stilen som drog förbi?
(Samlade dikter 182)

You can wake up in the small hours
jot down a few words
on the nearest paper, a newsprint margin
(the words radiate meaning!)
but in the morning: the same words now say nothing, scrawls, slips of the tongue.
Or fragments of the high nocturnal style that drew past?
(Great Enigma 135)

This excerpt describes less an episode than a phenomenon, really, as Tranströmer suggests with “Det händer att man vaknar om natten,” for which the direct translation is,
“It happens that one wakes in the night.” The passage has several interpretive possibilities in regards to a discussion of memory and representation. First of all, it could be that the words only “strålar av mening” [“radiate meaning”] in the nighttime because they were less removed from the immediacy of the thought or experience that provoked their being written. Thus, the simple passage of time may have robbed the language of its significance; without the immediacy of the moment there to illuminate meaning, the language becomes impotent. It may even be said that the writing of such words was an act of clarity and understanding, while reading them later on lacked the performative power of initially transcribing a thought into language.

However, Tranströmer does not seem to suggest that the other words in the newspaper (also fragments of the past waiting to be read rather than written) possess the same fragility as those marginalia scribbled in the middle of the night. In other words, it is not simply a question of the temporal gap that exists between experiencing, writing, and reading. The difference seems to lie in the writer’s state of consciousness and the clarity with which he understands things that are otherwise difficult to perceive, much less comprehend. Hovering above the linguistic and semantic ordering that structures and characterizes waking thought, the half-asleep individual can perhaps understand inexpressible ideas that lose their form and clarity as soon as they are lifted out of immediacy.

This very issue is foregrounded in “Preludium” [“Prelude”], the opening poem of Tranströmer’s first published collection of poetry, 17 Dikter [17 Poems]. “Uppvaknandet är ett fallskärmschopp frå drömmen” [“Waking up is a parachute jump from dreams”], he writes. He goes on to describe the dreamer as “resnären” [“the traveler”], who “sjunker
… mot morgonens gröna zon” [“sinks toward the green zone of morning”]. Here, as in
the dream-writer passage discussed above, Tranströmer uses metaphors that position the
sleeper as someone who hovers above the grounded reality of fully conscious waking
hours and thus has privileged insights into truths lost, forgotten, or even inaccessible in
daylight. “Preludium” continues,

I dagens första timmar kan medvetandet omfatta världen
som handen griper en solvarm sten.
Resenären står under trädet. Skall,
efter störtningen genom dödens virvel,
ett stort ljus vecklas ut över hans huvud? (Samlade dikter 7)

In day’s first hours consciousness can grasp the world
as the hand grips a sun-warmed stone.
The traveler is standing under the tree. After
the crash through death’s turbulence, shall
a great light unfold above his head? (Great Enigma 3)

The poem, historically situated at the very beginning of his career as a poet, establishes
Tranströmer’s preoccupation with moments of heightened awareness made possible in
liminal spaces, in this case between sleep and wake. Robin Fulton elaborates that “this
fascination with the borders between sleep and waking, with the strange areas of access
between an everyday world we seem to know and another world we can’t know in the
same way but whose presence is undeniable—such a fascination has over the decades
been one of Tranströmer’s predominant themes” (“Foreword” xiv). As the experience of
the night-waker in section five of Östersjöar illustrates, it is perhaps within this liminal
space that one can achieve a semblance of clarity about what reality might look like
before it is subjected to the structures—linguistic or otherwise—that our consciousness
unconsciously imposes on all sensory and other information transmitted to the mind.
The hovering moments between wake and sleep are rightly more spatial than they are temporal because they seem to exist outside of the structuring principles of linear time and thus avoid the kind of temporal sequencing that limits meaning. As the servant of memory, the poet would do well to understand the clarity afforded in such spaces because, as Elder clarified earlier, the structuring principle of space is relationships, which are constantly re-inscribing themselves and offering a plurality of interpretation. Thus, it is not only the dreamer or traveler’s state of consciousness that comes into play when seeking to locate what is lost in translating the clarity of immediacy into an incomplete written account; the actual space and context of the memory are just as important.

This is precisely the meaning undergirding a metaphor Tranströmer uses in an earlier stanza of the fifth section in *Östersjöar* just prior to his discussion of the late-night writer. Looking into the Baltic, he sees jellyfish—creatures known for their delicate, yet powerful bodies—and imagines what might happen if they were to be pulled out from their proper space.

30 juli. Fjärden har blivit excentrisk—idag vimlar maneterna för första gången på åratal, de pumpar sig fram lugnt och skonsamt, de hör till samma rederi: AURELIA, de driver som blommor efter en havsbegravning, tar man upp dem ur vattnet försvinner all form hos dem, som när en obeskrivlig sanning lyfts upp ur tystnaden och formuleras till död gelé, ja de är oöversättliga, de måste stanna i sitt element. (Samlade dikter 182)
July 30th. The straight has become eccentric—swarming with jellyfish today for the first time in years, they pump themselves forward calmly and patiently, they belong to the same line: *Aurelia*, they drift like flowers after a sea burial, if you take them out of the water their entire form vanishes, as when indescribable truth is lifted out of silence and formulated into an inert mass, but they are untranslatable, they must stay in their own element. (*Great Enigma* 135)

The jellyfish lose their form, he argues, just as an ineffable memory (likewise potent, yet fragile) becomes indistinguishable once removed from its own context. What that context is or might be is not specifically articulated, although physical place appears to be an important factor in the case of the jellyfish. Just as the words written in a state of half-dreaming “strålar av mening” [shine with meaning], the jellyfish shine, sparkle, and glow in their own way when they are underwater. It is, of course, no coincidence that Tranströmer specifically chose the *Aurelia* genus for the poem, as the Latin meaning is “golden,” further linking the image of the jellyfish to the words that lose their meaning when removed from their elemental *milieux*. Jellyfish, like thoughts or memories, are ultimately “oöversättliga” [“untranslatable”].

Because fallible language is what mediates communication and the individual minds (thoughts) that both create and interpret that communication, memories are susceptible to being not only lost or untranslatable but misunderstood. The word *missförstånd* appears in the first section of *Östersjöar* to suggest the communication barriers between passengers aboard the ships his grandfather piloted. In this case, the *missförstånd* is innocent and resulting from “mycket lite av medveten lögn” [“very
little conscious falsehood]. Here again, the inadequacy of language in expression is
brought to bear with the mention of “[s]amtal på felstavad engelska” [“conversations in
misspelled English”]. It is interesting to note that the focus is on misspelled rather than
missspoken English, which suggests there might be something about written language that
is even more susceptible to missförstånd than spoken language.

Certainly this is the position David Abram maintains in The Spell of the Sensuous.
In the three middle chapters of the text (“The Flesh of Language,” “Animism and the
Alphabet,” and “In the Landscape of Language”), Abram discusses how language has
come to be thought of as a uniquely human gift or power—a belief that further
underscores an anthropocentric world-view in which language becomes a symbol of
human superiority and privilege (101). Written language in particular is problematic
because—and here Nora, I think, would join in lamenting this with Abram—it allows for
a kind of forgetting simply not possible in oral cultures. Tranströmer betrays a similar
skepticism of writing culture in his prose poem “Gläntan” [“The Clearing”). The clearing
is an area deep in the forest that can only be found by one “som gått vilse” [“who has lost
his way”]. He describes how the forest is tangled and “kväver sig själv” [“choking
itself”], while the clearing is open to possibility.

Men på den öppna platsen är gräset underligt grönt och levande. Här
ligger stora stenar, liksom ordfade. De måste vara grundstenarna i ett
hus, jag kanske tar fel. Vilka levde här? Ingen kan ge upplysning om det.
Namnen finns någonstans i ett arkiv som ingen öppnar (det är bara
arkiven som håller sig unga). Den muntliga traditionen är död och
därmed minnena. Zigenarstammen minns men de skrivkunniga glömmer.

Anteckna och glöm. (Samlade dikter 193)

But in the open space the grass is unexpectedly green and alive. There are big stones lying here as if they’d been arranged. They must be the foundation stones of a house, but I could be wrong. Who lived here? No one can tell us. The names exist somewhere in an archive that no one opens (only archives stay young). The oral tradition has died and with it the memories. The gypsy people remember but those have learned to write forget. Write down, and forget. (Great Enigma 144)

Because it appears to preserve a more perfect memory that does not need constant tending to, writing actually creates a culture of forgetfulness. The “arkiv som ingen öppnar” [“archive that no one opens”] seems suspiciously like a lieux de mémoire that exists to preserve a memory without any compelling context or ongoing engagement. Such an archive is perhaps no memory at all for Tranströmer, or at least a very feeble one, because it lacks the vital, dynamic qualities of an ecological memory that is continuously interacting with other subjects. An oral culture is much more conducive to keeping milieux de mémoire alive by engaging within them.

Abram argues the same thing about the relationship between writing and forgetfulness. He elaborates on the particular strengths of oral cultures in cultivating a deeper engagement with memory:

When we wish to ponder a particular historical encounter, we simply locate the text wherein that encounter is recorded. Oral cultures, however, lacking the fixed and permanent record that we have come to count on,
can preserve verbal knowledge only by constantly repeating it. Practical knowledge must be embedded in spoken formulas that can be easily recalled—in prayers and proverbs, in continually recited legends and mythic stories. The rhythmic nature of many such spoken formulas is a function of their mnemonic value; such pulsed phrases are much easier for the pulsing, breathing body to assimilate and later recall than the strictly prosaic statements that appear only after the advent of literacy. (106)

Here again, the “fixed and permanent record” afforded by writing is actually a hindrance to cultivating memory. By invoking the “pulsing, breathing body,” Abram begins building his case that oral cultures also have a much better connection to the natural world because of the engagement of the body in vocal utterance and the inherently mimetic quality of spoken speech. The “verbal knowledge” of which Abram speaks is one of repetition, a language with contours that can be shaped, rehearsed, felt. Spoken language is rhythmic and acoustic.

What Abram does not account for—or at least not give enough credence to—in his elegy of lost oral traditions is that poetry, though generally written in the modern day, has the mimetic acoustic qualities, memorable form, and lush onomatopoetic diction that hearkens back to the admirable, earthy qualities he sees in oral cultures. The great hypocrisy is that Abram himself is writing a book as a way of engaging with and transmitting these ideas. The possibilities afforded by writing should be obvious to him, especially when it comes to poetry. He actually begins his chapter “In the Landscape of Language” (137) with a poem of Tranströmer’s entitled “Från mars -79” (“From March 1979”). The poem is, unsurprisingly, relevant to this discussion.
Weary of all who come with words, words but no language
I make my way to the snow-covered island.
The untamed has no words.
The unwritten pages spread out on every side!
I come upon the tracks of deer in the snow.
Language but no words. (Great Enigma 164)

As Abram argues throughout *The Spell of the Sensuous* and later in his book *Being Animal*, language and words are often lumped together as being more or less synonymous when, in fact, there are non-linguistic communicative systems operating in the natural world: language without words. In the poem, this is represented by the deer tracks in the snow. This image offers the possibility of a language that is visual rather than oral/aural, but it still stands outside the ordering impulses of the alphabet. Abram maintains that the alphabet is the symptom of our being cut off from the land, as the Hebrews used written text as “a kind of portable homeland” when they were exiled from “the actual lands where their ancestral stories unfolded” (195). It is interesting to note that Nora used precisely the same example from Jewish history when trying to historically situate the cause for our transition from *milieux de mémoire* to *lieux de mémoire*. Pairing Nora’s perspective with Abram’s reveals that oral cultures think in terms of *milieux*, while written cultures resort more often to hyper-constructed, archival *lieux* because of their forgetfulness. A return to a natural milieu like “den snötäckta ön” [“the snow-covered island”] is precisely what is needed when one is tired of words because, as Tranströmer maintains, the wild has no words; it is unwritten. This points us to the inefficacy not of
language altogether but specifically of human language—a language comprised of words that do not always effectively communicate.

Expressive Possibilities

As a poet, Tranströmer does not fully subscribe to Abram’s notion that the alphabet has violently uprooted us from the land. After all, his artistic medium is language. “Från mars -79,” however, does suggest that he is dissatisfied with how humans use words, and he subsequently returns to nature in order to find a richer language. He experiments with the idea of language without words in Östersjöar as well. Just after the jellyfish and night-writer passages in the fifth section, the narrator tells of a composer who has suffered a stroke and is now the victim of aphasia, the inability to speak or properly use words.

Musiken kommer till en människa, han är tonsättare, spelas, gör karriär, blir chef för konservatoriet

…
Då kommer hjärnblödningen: högersidig förlamning med afasi, kan bara uppfatta korta fraser, säger fel ord
Kan alltså inte nås av upphöjelse eller fördömanden.
Men musiken finns kvar, han komponerar fortfarande i sin egen stil, han blir en medicinsk sensation den tid han har kvar att leva.
Han skrev music till texter han inte längre förstod—
på samma sätt
uttrycker vi något med våra liv
i den nynnande kören av felsägningar (Samlade dikter 183)

Music comes to a man, he’s a composer, he’s played, makes a career, becomes Conservatory Director

…
Then, cerebral hemorrhage: paralysis on the right side with aphasia, can grasp only short phrases, says the wrong words
Beyond the reach of eulogy or execration.
But the music’s left, he keeps composing in his own style,
for the rest of his days he becomes a medical sensation.
He wrote music to texts he no longer understood—
in the same way
we express something through our lives
in the humming chorus full of mistaken words. (Great Enigma 135–36)

Aphasia is an interesting way to think about how an individual could somehow get beyond the structuring principles of human language. The aphasic’s condition is not enviable, to be sure, but it allows for an extended engagement with the possibility that one can, indeed, get outside of language as we know it. It is significant that the composer continues to write music though he does not understand the accompanying texts. This would seem to suggest that we can transcend language. But how? In two of the passages I have heretofore described, Tranströmer specifically uses the word stil [style] to suggest something that can survive and endure beyond linguistic limitations: first in the night-waker passage, which concludes by saying “Eller fragment av den stora nattliga stilen som drog förbi?” [“Or fragments of the high nocturnal style that drew past?”], and now again with the musician’s “egen stil” [“own style”], which is how he continues to compose in spite of his aphasia. In both cases, style stands outside of language as something belonging to the mystery of the night’s lucidity and the music of the aphasiac. Style calls for an alternative manner of doing things or at least suggests the possibility that a different mode of expression is available.

Music is an especially good example of how this stil might work in Tranströmer’s conception: it is form without reference, sound without semantic. Where language often insists on meaning, music only suggests it. Music is not mimetic in the same ways that language is, and therefore opens up expressive possibilities not otherwise afforded to the
aphasiac, who ultimately represents a world of people incapable of expression without missförstånd. He composes music without words “på samma sätt / uttrycker vi något med våra liv / i den nynnande kören av felsägningar” [“in the same way / we express something through our lives / in the humming chorus full of mistaken words”]. The word felsägningar, which Robin Fulton has here chosen to translate as “mistaken words,” is used earlier in the poem with an English translation that is more faithful to the literal meaning of the Swedish word. The words scribbled in the newspaper margins during the night “säger ingenting längre, klotter, felsägningar” [“now say nothing, scrawls, slips of the tongue”]. Fulton’s interpretation here, “slips of the tongue,” more readily matches a standard translation of the word felsägningar. The repetition of this word in Swedish brings these two episodes about the power and limitations of language into dialogue with one another. The double use of felsägningar draws attention to moments when speech falls short—especially those moments when reality seems too big for any language to adequately encompass, which often come in the form of memories for Tranströmer.

What, then, are the expressive alternatives? Music, of course, is one of them. It offers a useful frame of reference for considering what a language without words might look like. The fragility and immediacy of a memory may best be represented in music, which indeed has a shape and a form but is almost just as ineffable as the reality it invokes. In her brief article about what she calls subversion in Tranströmer’s poetry, Joanna Bankier says,

Music becomes one of the means by which the individual can still assert a precarious inwardness. In musical time the confusing mass of sensations
and events in ordinary existence is reshaped, rhythmicized, as it were, and made to reflect a human order and a human time. Thus we would live twice: once in linear time, subject to decay and disintegration, harassed and confused by the welter of phenomena and sensations, carried along with the flux; and then again in spacious musical time, which is “an interweaving not only of moment with moment, but of the transiency of moments with the permanence of that which sustains us in their passage.” (594–95).

Bankier draws our attention back to the difference between the linear and spatial, arguing that time itself can be one or the other. The former leaves us “subject to decay and disintegration” because it is always unforgivingly moving forward. Using music as a way of restructuring our experience, we can abide in a “spacious musical time” that is rhythmic and cyclical in similar ways to the oral cultures that Nora and Abram admire so much. Bankier’s articulation of this issue suggests the possibility that artistic organization and reflection of human experience is not limiting; in fact, it is precisely what allows for us to conceive of time differently so that we can open up instead to the possibility of operating relationally in ecological spaces.

Music, then, may offer just the balance that Tranströmer is seeking. Throughout his work at large, “[t]here is [a] continual talk of balance, not the balance of the scale but rather that of the all-too-narrow boat, a necessary balance that is threatened at every moment. The ideal of this balance is the moment, but its model is music…. One could say that in Tranströmer’s world, music represents the Utopia of poetry, its realized ideal. Music attains what poetry always strives to achieve” (Gustafsson, et al. 597). This is
particularly apropos to a discussion of Östersjöar, a poem that Tranströmer himself has claimed represents his “most consistent attempt to write music” (Fulton, “Foreword” xvii). However, Tranströmer is indeed a skilled musician. Why not simply compose or play music if it is decidedly more efficacious in evoking a reality that lies outside of categorical assurances? In other words, why write a poem in the first place? Is Tranströmer, like Abram, engaging in a specific brand of hypocrisy by writing a poem about why words are inadequate?

Obviously, Tranströmer is not the first writer to grapple with the fallibility of his own craft. To highlight his mistrust in language to unambiguously describe reality is not simply a cutting-down of the power or purpose of literature—it can also be thought of as a maneuver that draws our attention to the ineffable quality of a memory and the humility Tranströmer has for such quiet, fleeting moments of enduring truth. Often, a poet speaking in this register may be describing things that are amorphous or without name, but Eric Sellin argues that the resulting description of a memory—however feeble, however inadequate—is still worth it: “sometimes the entire poem is a scaffolding around a mystical and formless edifice; the poem’s sole purpose is to describe a moment in which the poet’s senses fairly vibrate in awareness of the imponderable” (248–49). This awareness for the unspeakable sacredness of a memory or a moment is perhaps reward enough for the poem’s existence.

It seems to me, then, that Tranströmer’s modesty in offering “solutions” to this age-old problem of representation is what ultimately lends him credibility. It is his very mistrust of language and of other forms of expression as being self-evident or unambiguous that gives the poem life, complete with internal tensions and contradictions
that make it engaging and pay homage to the importance—even sacredness—of the memory that inspires, even insists upon, his poetic creation.

While he early introduces us to the limitations of written language with “[s]amtal på felstavad engelska, samförstånd och missförstånd” [“conversations in misspelled English, understanding and misunderstanding”] in the third stanza of the first section of Östersjöar, he almost just as immediately questions a more organic, nature-based communication that many environmentally-aware writers might praise for its rootedness in the natural world. The second section begins:

Vinden går i tallskogen. Det susar tungt och lätt,
Östersjön susar också mitt inne på ön, långt inne i skogen är man ute på öppna sjön.
Den gamla kvinnan hatade suset i träden.

... 
Det susar ja och nej, missförstånd och samförstånd.
(Samlade dikter 175)

The wind is in the pine forest. Sighing heavily and lightly. The Baltic is also sighing in the middle of the island, far within the forest you are out on the open sea. The old woman hated the sighing in the trees.

... 
There’s sighing, yes and no, understanding and misunderstanding.
(Great Enigma 128)

Once again, Fulton’s translation may require a little clarification for my purposes. “Det susar,” which he translates as “There’s sighing,” could also rightly be translated “It sighs.” The Swedish text has no comma between “Det susar” and “ja och nej,” which implies that the sighing itself communicates both yes’s and no’s. Especially interesting to me is why Fulton switched the order of “missförstånd och samförstånd” to read, in the English, “understanding and misunderstanding.” While this poetically echoes the same ordering of that pair from the first stanza (with “understanding” coming first), it seems to
me that Tranströmer ordered it differently in this second instance to draw our attention to the missförstånd, this time the misunderstanding of the natural elements of the Earth itself. In the passage, there is no precedent to suggest that the humans in the poem (the old woman and the speaker, who is walking alongside her in spite of the fact that “Hon är död sen tretti år” [“She’s been dead for thirty years”]) are sighing. The wind sighs, the Baltic sighs, the trees in the forest sigh. The sighing first suggests the truth that “vi är släkt” [“we are kin”], but the missförstånd almost immediately appears to qualify that truths can be obscured or misunderstood even in a mode of communication as natural as the wind. It may be that for Tranströmer, missförstånd is inevitable and perhaps even necessary. In any case, it is certainly not the sole property of language; Tranströmer does not engage in dualistic thinking that views the nature world as devoid of problems or compromises of its own.

What is building from all this is a sense that language may not have to be relegated to the ever-inferior position of being nothing but a source of disconnect, compromised mediation, and misunderstanding. Tranströmer continues the poem with the opening of frontiers, perhaps the very ones between experience and language: “Man går länge och lyssnar och når då en punkt där gränserna öppnas / eller snarare / där allting blir gräns” [“You go on, listening, and then reach a point where the frontiers open / or rather / where everything becomes a frontier”]. Says Kjell Espmark of this “open frontier”: “It is toward this epiphanously charged point that the movements of the poem strive” (as quoted in “Foreword” xviii). The notion of frontiers once again brings us to liminal space, only now we are thinking of it in terms of what it offers in a discussion of representation. Tranströmer deals with this in his narrative poem “Latin.” He describes
the exercise of translating passages of Horace from Latin into Swedish, the first being lofty and lovely because of its history and purposefulness, the second being much clumsier because of the students’ faltering efforts to translate on the spot. In such a moment,


*(Minnena ser mig 55)*

the luminous Roman text had really been brought down to earth. But in the next moment, in the next stanza, Horace came back in Latin with the miraculous precision of his verse. This alternation between the trivial and decrepit on one hand and the buoyant and sublime on the other taught me a lot. It had to do with the conditions of poetry and of life. That through form something could be raised to another level. The caterpillar feet were gone, the wings unfolded. One should never lose hope!

*(Great Enigma 256)*

Tranströmer here returns to the importance of form, and in this case, it is poetry that offers the “spänstigt sublima” [“buoyant and sublime”] form that has the power to lift something out of its triviality and decrepitude. It is significant that he refers to “det skröpliga” [the decrepit] because the word refers to something that has decayed or
deteriorated in some way because of age, i.e. unforgiving linear time. Horace’s poem, written in a now-dead language, is ripe for decrepitude because of its old age, yet somehow it is elevated as miraculous, precise, buoyant, and sublime in Tranströmer’s articulation. Unlike all the previously discussed examples of Tranströmer’s dissatisfaction with the impotency of language, this is a case when he expressly acknowledges that a poetic use of language can not only transcend its own linguistic limitations but ultimately reach beyond itself to dignify something else.

Perhaps it is no startling conclusion that a poet should be convinced of the power of his own craft. But Tranströmer’s awareness of the potential pitfalls of language is an important rhetorical strategy that reassures the reader that the poet has deliberately chosen his methods, conscious of their inadequacies and thus equally aware of their strengths. That is a poetic strategy unto itself. Scigaj talks about the double-role of language, arguing that it “can either become a vehicle for domination and control, because it erects concepts between the self and reality” à la Abram’s appraisal, “or it can, in the hands of a skillful poet, impede the signifying process until the reader’s gaze is thrust beyond language to perceive objects in their rich, colorful, precognitive suchness” (Scigaj 48). Tranströmer is such a poet who strives to use language to recreate a milieu for an epiphanic experience rather than authoritatively trying to describe such a moment or memory. As Niklas Schöler elegantly summarizes, “feeling is shaped rather than expressed” (327) in Tranströmer’s poetry. To shape a poem is to make it structural, architectural; it creates a space where relationships are the structuring principle: Tranströmer’s relationship to the memory, the memory’s subsequent relationship to the poem, and the way in which the reader connects to the memory through the poem. All of
this can be experienced anew within the *milieu* of the poem, an environment designed to point back to the “precognitive suchness” of memory as a living energy.

*Sin egen stil*: Ecopoetic Strategies

As a poet, Tranströmer’s style is often one of simplicity; his form is free and his prosody takes on rhythmic characteristics reminiscent of the natural world he so often invokes. In spite of his understanding of the limitations of language, his method of honoring the natural world does not often happen at the expense of technology *per se*. Thus, language is not something evil that inherently separates us from nature, but it may at times fail to provide sufficient tools to describe the nature of a moment, or reality itself. If it is true that Tranströmer’s “poetic stance” is to explore “the unique, unprecedented moment as means of restoring lost dignity even to everyday matters” (Gustafsson, et al. 596), the next logical question becomes: how does he achieve this? What poetic strategies does he use to support this ideological position of “restoring lost dignity” to the quotidian?

As we look back to the beginning of *Östersjöar* for examples of how Tranströmer has chosen to try and capture memory, we see first a historical method: snippets taken from his grandfather’s notebook, stark, factual, and certainly not lush poetic language.

*I almanackan skrev han upp de fartyg han lotsade—namn, destinationer, djupgång. Exempel från 1884: Ångf Tiger Capt Rowan 16 fot Hull Gefle Furusund, [etc.] (Samlade dikter 173)

In the almanac he wrote down the vessels he piloted—Names, destinations, drafts. Examples from 1884:
The effect of this sparse, factual language is that it lends to the poem an air of historical authenticity and weight. While in literary circles it is often held that poetic language can be more powerful and evocative than language styles of other discourse systems, here Tranströmer is subverting expectations and giving us something essentially non-poetic to begin his poetic journey into the past. By the next stanza, he has already turned to a more literary—and even musical—language, such as with the repetition of “Hur mycket lärde de känna varann? / Hur mycket lärde de känna varann?” [“How much did they come to know one another? / How much did they come to know each other?”]. Interestingly, once again Fulton has taken some liberties to change the wording slightly, beginning with “one another” and shifting into “each other,” which bears a slightly more intimate connotation. This interplay between history as seen through rigid information and history as seen through a more fluid model of emotion creates and sustains a tension for the remainder of the poem.

Paired with his acute awareness of language, the poet often explores the power of what Sellin calls “the cosmic image,” the primary poetic device of modernists interested in “cutting through linguistic and geographical boundaries” (241). He says, “All objects are loaded with such histories and by use of the sparse image based on generic natural objects and common acts, Tomas Tranströmer permits the fictions to unfurl between the lines and in the margins like an ideal arabesque” (245). The image, particularly the ekphrastic image, is a powerful way of gesturing outside the poem to something that exists in the physical world. Because of this intimate connection between the ekphrastic
image and its referent, Tranströmer uses ekphrasis as a literary device at several key junctures throughout Östersjöar as he builds an ecology of memory.

In the third section of the poem, Tranströmer makes a distinction between “landskap” (landscape) and what he calls “ornament” (ornaments). He begins with a description of an old church in Gotland, a large Swedish island in the Baltic Sea. The passage focuses a “dopfunt av sandsten” (sandstone font) from the twelfth century that sits in a partially illuminated corner of the church:

stenhuggarens namn
är kvar, framlysande
som en tandrad i en massgrav:
HEGWALDR
namnet kvar. Och hans bilder
här och på andra krukors väggar, människomyller, gestalter på väg
ut ur stenen. (Samlade dikter 177)

the mason’s name
is still visible, shines out
like a row of teeth in a mass grave:
HEGWALDR
the name’s left. And his pictures
here and on the sides of other pots, human swarms, figures stepping out of the stone. (Great Enigma 130)

The mason himself long dead, his name continues to be “kvar,” which Fulton translates here as “still visible,” but can also mean simply to “still be there,” “remain,” or “stay.” It is interesting that Fulton chooses to use more defined language that focuses on the name’s visibility, as visual elements play a strong role in the remainder of the section, starting, of course, with the “bilder” [“pictures”] engraved into the font by the mason. The carved “människomyller” [“human swarms”] seem to step right out of the stone as if stepping outside of history and insisting on their own presence in the now. Such
ornaments, then, have a certain staying power; they preserve a little piece of history—or at least a memory of a little piece of history.

Tranströmer returns to the image of stones in the sixth and final section of the poem, referring to them as “tätt, tätt” (Samlade dikter 186) [“packed, packed” (139)] in a crowded Jewish cemetery in Prague, “där de döda lever tätare än livet” [“where the dead live more packed than they were in life”]. In this case, the stones are markers of death, as they are at the end of the poem’s second section, leaning and carved with the pilots’ names (Samlade dikter 176, Great Enigma 129). What, then, is the animating power that gives life to the carvings on the sandstone font? Tranströmer offers two possibilities in the stanza: memory and water.

Of memory, Tranströmer says the following as a parenthetical aside after his description of the pictorial engravings on the font:

(Bilderna starkare i minnet än när man ser dem direkt, starkest när funten snurrar i en långsam mulrande karusell i minnet.)
(Samlade dikter 177)

(The images stronger in memory than when seen direct, strongest when in memory the font turns like a slow rumbling merry-go-round.)
(Great Enigma 130)

Though the power of the image to bring history alive is emphasized earlier in the stanza, Tranströmer here suggests that memory is the stronger of the two forces because it animates the otherwise motionless font. Here, memory has a power of its own in relation to history. The motion of a merry-go-round invokes that of the rotating earth, which Tranströmer discusses in the final stanza of the poem as a force of decay: “Så mycket hopkurat trä. På taket de uråldiga tegelpannorna /som rasat kors och tvärs på varann / (det ursprungliga mönstret rubbat av jordens rotation genom / åren” (Samlade dikter 186)
[“So much wood crouching. On the roof the ancient tiles that have slipped / downways and crossways over each other / (the original pattern deranged over the years by the rotation of the earth)” (Great Enigma 139)]. Striking to note here is the idea of this dual role of motion: on the one hand, it animates and gives life, while on the other it contributes to a process of change and even decay.

In many ways, water is a good companion for memory because both are fluid and without borders. Water is the second force that gives vitality to the font:

Bara därinnanför finns frid, i krukans vatten some ingen ser, men på ytterväggarna rasar kampen. Och friden kan komma droppvis, kanske om natten när vi ingenting vet, eller som när man ligger på dropp in en sal på sjukhuset. (Samlade dikter 177)

Only in there is there peace, in the vessel’s water that no one sees, but on the outer walls the battle is raging. And peace can come drop by drop, perhaps at night when we know nothing or when you are lying in a hospital ward on a drip. (Great Enigma 130)

The dichotomy Tranströmer identifies between landscape and ornaments is further developed as the section transitions into an ekphrastic passage describing a photo from 1865. Just prior to this, the poet’s traveling companion—one Mr. B who was recently released from Robben Island, the South African prison best known as the site of Nelson Mandela’s incarceration—has professed that “Jag känner inget för naturen. / Men människor i landskap, det säger mig något” (Samlade dikter 178) [“I feel nothing for nature. / But figures in a landscape, that says something to me” (Great Enigma 130)]. In Mr. B’s conception of things, landscape on its own is no more powerful than ornaments on their own. His affection is for people.
Another ekphrastic passage immediately follows, describing “fem figurer” [“five figures”] that stand “vackra, tveksamma” [“beautiful, irresolute”] and “på väg at suddas ut” [“in the process of being rubbed out”]. The repetition of this image—“de suddas ut” [“they’re being rubbed out”]—in the next line emphasizes the photograph’s fragility as an ornament that can fade and deteriorate over time, which in turn has something to say about the mortality of the figures (people) in the photo. Their described uncertainty points to an awareness of their own moribundity, which seems odd given that the photo was taken in what may have been the prime of their lives.

Here we come to what Roland Barthes argues in his short theoretical book La chambre claire (Camera Lucida) is the inseparability of the photograph and its subjects:

> On dirait que la Photographie emporte toujours son référent avec elle, tous deux frappés de la même immobilité amoureuse ou funèbre, au sein même du monde en mouvement: ils sont collés l’un à l’autre, membre par membre, comme le condamné enchaîné à un cadavre dans certains supplices…. La Photographie appartient à cette classe d’objets feuilletés dont on ne peut séparer les deux feuillets sans les détruire. (17)

It is as if the Photograph always carries its referent with itself, both affected by the same amorous or funereal immobility, at the very heart of the moving world: they are glued together, limb by limb, like the condemned man and the corpse in certain tortures…. The Photograph belongs to that class of laminated objects whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both. (5–6)
Within this framework, photography acts as a preserving agent for the referent because the referent can “live” as long as the photo remains in existence, but it also signals in a sense the brevity of life with its “immobilité … au sein même du monde en mouvement” [“funeral immobility, at the very heart of the moving world”]. Barthes’s choice in image of the condemned man and the corpse likewise points to the inevitability of death. The referent may be the condemned man, destined for death ever since birth, while the photo is the corpse, lifeless from the beginning. If this sounds familiar, it is because that is almost precisely how Pierre Nora described *lieux de mémoire* near the beginning of the previous chapter: “moments d’histoire arrachés au mouvement de l’histoire, mais qui lui sont rendus. Plus tout à fait la vie, pas tout à fait la mort, comme ces coquilles sur le rivage quand se retire la mer de la mémoire vivante” (xxiv) [“moments of history, torn away from the movement of history, then returned; no longer quite life, not yet death, like shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded” (12)]. Photographs hover in that liminal non-place between life and death, at once affirming the subject’s reality and pointing to its death.

Barthes refers to photography as “la figuration de la face immobile et fardée sous laquelle nous voyons les morts” (56) [“a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead” (32)] and goes on to talk about “cette chose un peu terrible qu’il y a dans toute photographie: le retour du mort” (23) [“that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead” (9)]. Though the role of the dead in representing memory within Tranströmer’s poetry deserves pages unto itself, it can here serve briefly to illuminate the broader point that photographs are in many ways *lieux de mémoire*: artifacts that exist for the purpose of memorializing.
That a photograph and its referent(s) are inseparable is not always negative. The photo, so long as it lasts (and generally it has a much longer shelf-life than its referents), can act as a conduit for the dead and an undeniable reaffirmation of their reality and existence. This is specifically because of the medium of photography. Says Barthes,

le Référent de la Photographie n’est pas le même que celui des autres systèmes de représentation. J’appelle “référent photographique,” non pas la chose facultativement réelle à quoi renvoie une image ou un signe, mais la chose nécessairement réelle qui a été placée devant l’objectif, faute de quoi il n’y aurait pas de photographie. La peinture, elle, peut feindre la réalité sans l’avoir vue. Le discours combine des signes qui ont certes des référents, mais ces référents peuvent être et sont le plus souvent des “chimères.” Au contraire de ces imitations, dans la Photographie, je ne puis jamais nier que la chose a été là. Il y a double position conjointe: de réalité et de passé. (119–20)

Photography’s Referent is not the same as the referent of other systems of representation. I call “photographic referent” not the optionally real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the necessarily real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph.

Painting can feign reality without having seen it. Discourse combines signs which have referents, of course, but these referents can be and are most often “chimeras.” Contrary to these imitations, in Photography I can never deny that the thing has been there. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past. (76)
The ecological power of a photograph lies in the fact that it both witnesses and testifies to the reality of a being no longer present. Where a painting has an “optional” subject as its focal point, the photograph always and necessarily implicates a real subject, which is to say a being in-the-world. That being becomes, in a very real sense, undeniable, which re-inscribes him in the ecology of the present.

This is exemplified in the sixth and final section of the poem, which offers an ekphrastic stanza about a man in an old, brown photograph:

*Men på nästa bruna foto*  
*är den okände*—  
*Dateras enligt kläderna till första seklets mitt.*  
*En man omkring trettio: de kraftiga ögonbrynen,*  
*ansiktet som ser mig rätt in i ögonen*  
*och viskar: ‘här är jag’.*  
*Men vem ‘jag’ är*  
*finns det inte längre någon som minns. Ingen. (Samlade dikter 186)*

But in the next brown photo  
the unknown man—  
dated by his clothes to the middle of the last century.  
A man around thirty: the vigorous eyebrows,  
the face looking straight into my eyes  
and whispering: “Here I am.”  
But who “I” am  
there’s no one anymore who remembers. No one. (*Great Enigma* 138)

Here, many of the issues previously discussed come face-to-face with one another. The photograph itself is a representation of a moment, of a singular existence at a particular time in history. While the photograph preserves the image of this man, who “he” is at his essence cannot be fully understood with nothing more than an image frozen in time. His death and the ensuing years of history have obscured this man from memory, and the narrator seems somewhat haunted by the fact that there is no living person to remember.
The kind of memory at stake here is a bit different than what we have thus far encountered. In the poems analyzed in Chapter 1, Tranströmer generally stumbled upon memory as something pre-existing and external that he could feel and interact with even though he had not experienced the memory in its originary form (supposing there is one). Though his own personal experiences may have indeed been brought to bear, the memories do not directly trigger in him something personal from his past in the way that Proust’s petite madeleine does. Here, though, with the word “minns” [“remember”], he points to a different kind of memory: one that requires a personal engagement with the past of the man in question. Tranströmer is encountering this man in a form of memory via the photograph, but he is not capable of “remembering”—and here, the English word serves us well because of the prefix “re-,” which denotes doing something “again.” Though Tranströmer may not subscribe to the idea that one needs to have an originary experience in order to remember something, it bothers him that this man is trapped in the past with no one who remembers him personally. The man interacts with Tranströmer in a similar manner to the memories discussed in Chapter 1 by engaging with him in the present, saying “här är jag” [“here I am”], but this seems sad and even desperate in the face of no corroborating witness from the past outside the photograph.

Tranströmer’s anxiety of inadequacy to the man in the photograph underscores his commitment to affirming and engaging Other presences and to building ever-expanding ecologies. The images in his poetry, too, attest to this. “En bild fogas till en annan bild och till slut till den större enhet som är dikten—och alltid är totaliteten mycket mer än summan av dess delar. Och när allt kommer omkring är det denna helhets inre semantiska vägnät som skapar den mening dikten rymmer, inte det enskilda uttrycket som excerpt.”
(Schiöler 187) [A picture is attached to a different image, and eventually to the larger entity that is the poem—and totality is always much more than the sum of its parts. And after all, it's this whole semantic inner network that creates the sense of the poem holds, not individual expression as an excerpt]. Taken as a larger semantic network, Östersjöar is filled with moments of questioning its own commensurateness to the memories it contains. This, James von der Heydt would argue, is as it should be. “Futility should mark any rigorous attempt to mediate directly between infinite openness and human objects (including poems)…. [W]hen large and small are conceived as incommensurately extreme ideas, no temporal process can link them. There is no way to stage a truly coherent encounter between infinity and handiwork…. Thus instead of time or process, a … paradigm of space governs this distinct … poetics founded on incommensurability” (xiv–xv). The poem is aware of its own futility and it operates spatially, so in spite of its incommensurability, it serves as a poetic “mer de la mémoire vivante” (Nora xxiv) [“sea of living memory” (12)]. It is not only a repository for these memories but a fluid space that allows them to live in it as a veritable milieu.
Conclusion

“When we start looking, we find the ecological thought everywhere,” Morton claims. “This isn’t surprising, since the ecological thought is interconnectedness in the fullest and deepest sense” (7). He goes on to explain, “The ecological thought insists that we’re deeply connected even when we say we’re not” (8). If everything is indeed inextricably bound up in everything else, it would seem that all poetry is ecologically engaged, whether it is aware of it or not. However, ecopoetry is distinct in that it deliberately points to these ecological relationships and employs a spatial kind of democracy wherein all of its component parts are regarded as sensing subjects rather than being inscribed into hierarchical subject-object relations. Tranströmer is an ecopoet because of his vibrant awareness; he recognizes intersubjectivity and comes to only modest or tentative conclusions about where he stands in relation to all other living matter. He sees himself seeing—that is to say, he has a poetic awareness of self. He understands the tensions inherent in his own subjectivity and his own embodiment, which necessarily mediates all of his experiences. He understands that being in the world is being among subjects, and memory is one such subject whose presence has a particularly compelling energy for Tranströmer. He is incapable of denying the presence of memories in the natural world, yet he is equally powerless to fully recover them.

To this end, Tranströmer’s poetic language is self-conscious of what it cannot say, but it does not lament its own inadequacy to the point of surrender. Poetry remains a powerful vehicle for ecological relationships and at least the beginnings of an imaginative recovery of the past because it is structured spatially rather than temporally, and its
metaphors and images open up a creative literary space in which memories can live on and participate in ongoing ecological interaction, much like the lieux de mémoire of oral cultures. When language names, as it does, for example, in the Latin nomenclature of the Linnaean classification system, it asserts a power over the world it seeks to describe and reinforces a subject-object relationship antithetical to ecological thinking. Poetic language, on the other hand, is not interested in merely naming, describing, or otherwise asserting authorial control over reality. Rather, “Poetry intends to recover the denser and more refractory original world which we know loosely through our perceptions and memories. By this supposition it is a kind of knowledge which is radically or ontologically distinct” (Ransom 281). Ecopoetry gestures outside itself to the living world from whence it derived and which is its very life-source. Tranströmer’s poetry decenters itself with its heightened awareness of language and liminality and it offers rich, sensuous images that evoke the outside world.

Tranströmer’s ecopoetic humility additionally invites the reader to posture herself in terms of relationalities. This extends to a kind of praxis wherein poetry inspires real-world engagement of the ideas it so vividly communicates (see Morton 9). Lawrence Buell, among others, believes that good ecopoetry will inspire ecologically-minded action in the real world (Environmental Imagination 2–6). Though Tranströmer has written politically engaged poetry throughout his career, it is usually in the service of social freedom and change. Little, if any, of his ecopoetry is expressly political or explicitly geared toward lamenting our ecological crisis. The praxis offered by Tranströmer’s poetry is more subtle and, I would argue, more powerful; he offers an ecological model of reverence and respect for Others, living or non-living, sentient or non-sentient. He
makes no assumptions about what deserves his attention based on its binomial nomenclature, and in this is a radical and compelling example of what peaceful coexistence might look like.

Morton poses an apropos question: “What would a truly democratic encounter between truly equal beings look like, what would it be—can we even imagine it?” (7). I submit that we can only imagine it, or at least that is where we start, and this is achieved through artistic and literary acts of imagination. Tranströmer offers a model of democracy as he engages Other presences, particularly memory, as deserving his attention, involvement, and respect. The poems, too, act as ecologies: “[T]he structure of his poems guarantees a whole where all parts interact and cooperate” (Schiöler 328). Tranströmer’s poems largely remain compact and sparse to allow for this cooperation among its interconnected parts. Says Bly of his friend’s poetry, “There is evidently a layer of consciousness that runs alongside our life, above or below, but is not it. Perhaps it is older. Certain works of art make it their aim to rise up and pierce this layer, or layers. Or they open to allow in ‘memories’ from this layer.” Tranströmer, Bly claims, “keep[s] the poem spare and clear so it can pierce the layers, or leave room for the Memory” (572–73).
Works Cited


