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FROM LANDSCAPE TO LANGUAGE: TRAUMA IN TRENCH POETRY

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This article explores the ecopoetics of trauma in World War I trench poetry. The analysis demonstrates how references to destroyed landscapes, fields, trees, and weather phenomena function not only as descriptive background but as linguistic vehicles for articulating psychological devastation. Particular attention is given to semantic shifts in traditional natural symbols (sun, rain, river, earth), which acquire connotations of death, sterility, and despair. Drawing on works by Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg, and others, the study shows that metaphor, syntactic fragmentation, and disrupted temporal structures serve as cognitive mechanisms of trauma verbalisation. The findings suggest that trench poetry constitutes a linguistic archive of trauma, in which nature itself is reconfigured as a medium of memory and collective mourning.

Keywords: trench poetry, World War I, ecopoetics, trauma studies, ecological metaphor, cultural memory, cognitive linguistics

Буравенко А.С. Від ландшафту до мови: травма в окопній поезії.

У цій статті досліджується екопоетика травми в окопній поезії Першої світової війни. Аналіз показує, що зображення зруйнованих ландшафтів — полів, дерев і погодних явищ — виконують не лише описову функцію, а є мовними засобами вербалізації психологічного спустошення. Особлива увага приділяється семантичним змінам традиційних природних символів (сонце, дощ, річка, земля), які набувають конотацій смерті, безпліддя та відчаю. На прикладі творів Вільфреда Оуена, Сігфріда Сассона, Айзека Розенберга та інших показано, що метафора, синтаксична фрагментація та порушення часових структур виступають когнітивними механізмами вербалізації травми. Дослідження свідчить, що поезія траншеї є мовним архівом травми, у якому сама природа перетворюється на засіб пам'яті та колективного скорботного досвіду.

Ключові слова: окопна поезія, Перша світова війна, екопоетика, травма-студії, екологічна метафора, культурна пам'ять, когнітивна лінгвістика

Introduction

In recent decades, humanities studies have applied interdisciplinary approaches, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of complex phenomena, particularly traumatic experiences in military discourse. In this research, ecopoetics is understood not in the purely literary sense, but as the study of linguistic representations of natural elements as semiotic signs and cognitive models that verbalise trauma. Combining ecopoetics with trauma studies and linguistic analysis (semantic, stylistic, and cognitive-metaphor approaches to the nomination of natural imagery) opens new perspectives for interpreting the "trench poetry" of the early 20th century.

As Jonathan Bate observes, poetry both records ecological destruction and offers a means to process loss. Drawing from Fritjof Capra's systems theory framework, this study reconceptualizes "ecological consciousness" as a dynamic network of open systems operating across multiple interconnected levels. The prefix "eco" is understood not merely as an environmental reference, but as Capra's conception of living systems—self-organising, self-regulating networks that maintain themselves through continuous interaction with their environment.

Textual-Linguistic Level: Poetry functions as an autopoietic system where natural imagery becomes verbalised through a self-generating network of signs. Words, metaphors, and symbols create emergent patterns that both reflect and transform ecological meaning through their systemic relationships.

Authorial-Cognitive Level: The poet operates as what Capra terms a "cognitive system"—an open system processing environmental information, emotional responses, and cultural codes. The author's consciousness becomes a living system that metabolises ecological experience, transforming external environmental data into internal psychic structures and expressive forms. In trench poetry, nature functions as both a silent witness to war [Skjærstad & Munden, 2022] and a reflection of soldiers' internal trauma [Walton, 2021]. Ecological metaphors thus serve not only as stylistic devices but also as psycholinguistic mechanisms for coping with trauma. Poetic symbols thus act as semiotic triggers of self-regulation, making ecopoetics a form of auto-therapeutic verbal modelling of traumatic experience.

According to Caruth's theory, trauma is characterised by the impossibility of direct representation and appears in text as fragmentation, silences, and compulsive repetition. Buell, Garrard, and Rigby interpret nature as an active participant in cultural processes [Buell, 1995]. Groves and Walton show that in war poetry the

landscape functions as a trace of trauma, not merely a background of the events [Groves, 2017; Walton, 2021].

At the same time, despite the fundamental works of Fussell and Das, there remains a need for comprehensive research that would combine ecological analysis with the linguistics of trauma. As Parashar notes, "the apocalyptic landscape of 'The Waste Land' is not just an image of nature, but also of a psyche that has undergone destruction." [Parashar, 2015]

Theoretical Background.

"Ecopoetics" is used as an interdisciplinary lens that connects semiotics and linguostylistics. The focus is on how ecological lexemes function as linguistic signs and verbalise a distorted war reality. Within nomination theory, such units reveal how traumatic experience reshapes the semantics of natural concepts. Thus, ecopoetics serves as a conceptual framework for analysing linguistic models of trauma.

As Cheryll Glotfelty and Lawrence Buell note, natural images in poetic discourse function as significant signs whose conceptualisation is distorted by traumatic experience [Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996; Buell, 1995]. In the context of trench poetry, this means that the destroyed landscape not only verbalises the physical consequences of war but also encodes the state of inner human destruction.

The concept of "traumatised landscape," which often appears in trench poetry of the First World War, is based on the notion of an ecological metaphor for trauma—natural objects (destroyed fields, dead trees, murky waters) become symbols of inner pain, loss, and a post-traumatic state. According to Scott Slovic, such poetry transmits an "emotional fusion of the subject with the environment," where landscape transforms into the inner space of memory and suffering.

Interdisciplinary research on the ecopoetics of trauma, therefore, requires a synthesis of several theoretical approaches. From a semiotic perspective, ecological images act as signs (symbols, indices, icons) that embody war trauma. Within nomination theory, their semantics are restructured. Linguostylistics explains how these shifts are realised through metaphor, epithet, and oxymoron, while poetic form intensifies their expressive potential. Placed under the umbrella of cognitive linguistics and system theory, such transformations demonstrate poetry as a sign-oriented creative activity that structures chaotic experience and therefore performs a therapeutic function. At the same time, the analysis integrates

tools from trauma psychology, ecocriticism, environmental history, and cultural geography, ensuring a genuinely interdisciplinary framework for studying trench poetry.

Methodological notes.

The trench poetry of the First World War reflects not only individual psychological trauma but also the collective experience of ecological catastrophe, where natural landscapes became both the subject and object of violence.

Below is an integration of the methodological approaches applied in this research:

Table 1. Methodological “matrix” of the research

<i>Discipline</i>	<i>Object of Analysis</i>	<i>Key Concepts</i>	<i>Methodological Tools</i>
Linguistic Ecopoetics	Verbal representations of nature as lexemes in poetry	Lexicalization of ecological loss, discursive framing of ecological mourning	Semantic-discursive analysis of “pastoral vs. antipastoral” representations
Discourse Analysis of Trauma	Fragmented syntax, repetition, silence	Discursive gaps, textual recurrence	Study of syntactic ruptures, ellipses, pauses, and repetitions as textual/linguistic markers of trauma
Cognitive Linguistics	Conceptual metaphors	EARTH AS WOUNDED BODY	Analysis of metaphorical projections
Linguocultural perspective	Verbalisation of militarised landscapes	Semantic field of destruction	Analysis of spatial lexemes, contextual connotations
Semiotics	Sign systems of nature	Environmental semiosis	Analysis of cultural codes of nature

This methodological synthesis is grounded in the logic of linguistic analysis. A lexical unit first appears in the text as a nominative element; stylistically, it acquires the properties of a trope (e.g., metaphor, oxymoron). This stylistic foregrounding emphasises a particular semantic feature, which in turn transforms the unit into a sign (symbol, icon, or index). As part of a wider cognitive model, such signs structure traumatic experience and transmit it into the cultural-historical dimension of discourse. In this way, each discipline in the table above is not used

“as is,” but reinterpreted through the prism of linguistics, ensuring the consistency of the interdisciplinary framework.

Results and Discussion.

Trauma as an object of linguocultural analysis

Caruth argues that trauma resists direct representation, instead surfacing in texts through fragmentation, silence, repetition, and metaphor. Herman adds that verbalising trauma is essential for recovery, though it also involves a struggle against forgetting [Herman, 1992].

Linguocultural memory preserves trauma through recurring verbal codes: “dead earth,” “torn trees,” “changed seasons.” These are not mere images but lexico-cultural symbols transmitting collective experience.

Semiotic Landscapes of Trauma

Following Lotman’s cultural semiotics, the poetic landscape can be read as a text composed of lexical and metaphorical codes, which shift in meaning across historical contexts. Thus, landscape functions as a semiotic matrix through which the author conveys the war experience [Lotman, 1990].

Based on World War I trench poetry, one recurrent motif is the semantics of degradation: a field transforms into a swamp, a forest into a pile of black branches, a river into a foul-smelling ditch. These images have a symbolic dimension, and their function is not only descriptive but also psychological—to verbalise inner chaos through the language of nature.

The familiar symbols of nature—sun, rain, earth, sky, water, and fog—are transformed into bearers of psychological distress, their traditional meanings fractured and inverted by the experience of war.

The word “**sun**” traditionally carries positive associations in English—life, warmth, hope. WWI poets deliberately reversed these meanings through specific linguistic strategies. In Owen’s “Spring Offensive,” the sun becomes “like a friend with whom their love is done.” This simile works by comparing the sun to a broken relationship, transferring the emotional pain of loss onto a natural symbol that normally represents comfort.

Rain normally has positive semantic associations in English poetry—cleansing, renewal, growth. The trench poets systematically changed these associations through word choice and context. In “Exposure,” Owen chooses the verb “soaks” rather than neutral alternatives like “falls” or positive ones like

"nourishes." "Soaks" carries negative implications of uncomfortable wetness and penetration.

The poets changed how **"earth"** functions grammatically to alter its meaning. Traditionally, earth appears as a passive noun—things happen to it or on it. Rosenberg's "Dead Man's Dump" makes earth active and aggressive: "waited for them," "fretting for their decay," "now she has them at last!"

By making earth the subject of active verbs, Rosenberg transforms it from a nurturing background into a predatory character. The personification uses female pronouns ("she," "her") to invoke maternal associations, then corrupts them by making this "mother" eager for death rather than life.

The **sky**, traditionally associated with transcendence and release, is reconfigured as oppressive and martial. Owen's "Exposure" militarizes the dawn, with *"her melancholy army"* arrayed *"in ranks on shivering ranks of gray,"* turning the daily renewal of light into a threat rather than a promise. Sassoon's depiction of soldiers who *"turn dulled, sunken faces to the sky / Haggard and hopeless"* reverses the uplifting potential of the heavens, emphasizing exposure, vulnerability, and the absence of relief.

Water imagery gets "contaminated" through word choice. Blunden's *"water's green and greasy in a ditch"* uses alliterative adjectives that create disgust responses. "Green" isn't the natural green of growth but the sickly green of stagnation, while "greasy" adds tactile revulsion.

Fog operates as a metaphor for cognitive and emotional confusion. Owen's "Exposure" locates the descent of fog as rendering structures ghostly and perceptions vague: *"Pale flakes with lingering stealth of fog descend, / And thinly ghost the roofs."* Fog thus brings obscurity and uncertainty, reflecting the psychological state of soldiers caught in the twilight of trauma.

Taken together, these natural elements construct the landscape as a matrix of meanings shaped by collective trauma. Familiar natural spaces that once represented peace, growth, and renewal verbalise trauma, danger, and destruction instead. Landscapes aren't just neutral backgrounds—they actively help create new meaning, and that meaning can be totally transformed by historical events like wars.

Metaphor and semantics of ecological trauma

Cognitive linguistics, particularly the theory of conceptual metaphor [Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2010], provides a productive methodological foundation for analysing transformations of metaphorical models of nature that

occur under the influence of traumatic experience. At the same time, ecopsychology [Roszak, 2001; Albrecht, 2019] and trauma studies [Caruth, 1996; Kaplan, 2005] allow us to understand the impact of ecological destruction on mental health and cognitive processes.

The dominant metaphorical model "EARTH—TRAUMATIZED BODY" is systematically realised through a variety of linguistic representations. In Wilfred Owen's work, the earth appears as a subject of bodily suffering: *"The torn fields groaned with blood"* ["Strange Meeting", 1918], where the field is not simply compared to a body, but is conceptualised as a living being capable of feeling pain. A similar mechanism is observed in Robert Graves: *"The land is torn, as if the plough had rage"* ["A Dead Boche", 1917], where the concept of trauma is transferred from the human body to the natural landscape. Analysis of the corpus of trench poetry reveals the systematic nature of this metaphorical model: *"wounded earth"* (Siegfried Sassoon), *"soil that bleeds"* (Isaac Rosenberg), *"the fields scarred by shell holes"* (Edmund Blunden).

This metaphorical model reflects a fundamental change in the perception of the relationship between humans and nature, where technological warfare erases the boundary between the human body and the body of the earth. Studies of military geography and cultural representation of war show that the landscapes of the First World War formed an unprecedented form of "somatic space," where human flesh and soil mixed in both literal and metaphorical senses.

The metaphorical model "NATURE—WITNESS OF TRAUMA" reflects a cognitive strategy of understanding traumatic experience through personification of natural objects. In Sassoon's poetry, *"Only the earth remembered where they fell"* ["Aftermath", 1919], nature not only records but preserves the memory of victims, taking on the function of collective memory. This metaphorical model correlates with the cultural concept of "landscapes of memory" [Schama, 1995], where the physical landscape transforms into a mental memory space. Analysis of the frequency of lexical units in the corpus of trench poetry demonstrates a high rate of combination of lexemes denoting natural objects (earth, sky, trees) with verbs of cognitive processes (remember, witness, know): *"the trees have seen too much"* [Edmund Blunden, "Report on Experience"], *"these hills remember death"* [Isaac Rosenberg].

The metaphorical model "NATURAL ELEMENTS—AGENTS OF VIOLENCE" demonstrates the transformation of the traditional romantic perception of nature as a source of harmony. In Owen's poem "Mental Cases", sun and wind are conceptualised as instruments of violence: *"The sun is blood / The*

wind is knifing through the bones of trees". The blending of concepts "sun" and "blood," "wind" and "knife" creates a cognitive structure where natural elements are integrated with military images. Similar metaphorical projections are observed in other texts of the corpus: *"murderous rain"* [Siegfried Sassoon, "Attack"], *"the cruel dawn"* [Wilfred Owen, "Exposure"], *"merciless skies"* [Isaac Rosenberg].

In Owen's poem "Dulce et Decorum Est", the process of death from gas attack is verbalised through ecological metaphors: *"He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning."* Linguistic analysis of the metaphor "drowning" reveals conceptual blending GAS→WATER, which, from an ecopsychological perspective, reflects the phenomenon of "solastalgia" [Albrecht, 2019]—distress from the inability to find solace in a natural environment that has become hostile. Such metaphorization corresponds to the cognitive mechanism of "ontological metaphor" [Lakoff & Johnson, 1980], where the abstract concept of death is understood through the concrete experience of interaction with the physical environment.

Metaphors of "dark nature" in trench poetry anticipate Timothy Morton's concept of "dark ecology" [Morton, 2007], which rejects romantic notions of a harmonious environment in favour of recognising the "strange," sometimes eerie coexistence with nature. Images of *"bloody sun"*, *"murderous rain"*, and *"poisoned earth"* demonstrate ecological nihilism that foreshadows contemporary ecocritical discourses.

Conceptual metaphors in trench poetry function as cognitive mechanisms for processing trauma. They structure chaotic war experience by projecting it onto familiar conceptual domains of the natural environment. Destroyed landscape reflects a deep transformation of existential categories in the consciousness of the traumatised subject.

Table 2. Semantic Transformations of Natural Symbols in Trench Poetry:

Natural Element	Traditional Semantics	Semantics in Trench Poetry	Example
Sun	life, growth, warmth	blood, ruthlessness, death	<i>"The sun, like a friend with whom one has quarrelled"</i> (Sassoon)
Rain	Purification, fertility	Endless suffering, tears	<i>"Rain soaks, and clouds sag stormy"</i> (Owen)
Earth	Motherhood, home, stability	Grave, wound, mutilated body	<i>"Earth has waited for them... poured them into moulds"</i> (Rosenberg)

Trees	growth, protection, longevity	witnesses to horrors, mutilation, death	<i>"The broken trees / Are all my grief declares"</i> (Blunden)
Sky	freedom, transcendence	threat, exposure, emptiness	<i>"Under a sky of mockery"</i> (Rosenberg)

The semantic analysis of lexemes denoting natural objects in war poetry shows a systematic shift in their meaning. Poetic conventional semantic features of "rebirth," "cyclicity," and "fruitfulness" are replaced by the semes of "destruction," "barrenness," and "death." In Owen's poem "Futility", the sun—a traditional symbol of life—loses its life-giving power: *"Move him into the sun... / It woke him once... / Until this morning and this snow."* The seme of "awakening" associated with the lexeme "sun" is neutralised through its opposition to "snow," which activates the semantic field of cold and death. A cognitive dissonance arises from the disruption of the established semantic opposition "sun (life) — snow (death)", as the sun proves incapable of overcoming death.

Such a transformation of natural semantics reflects a fundamental crisis in Western epistemology, in which nature ceases to be a source of renewal and rebirth.

The semantic inversion of culturally conventional natural features is a systemic trait of trench poetry. In Siegfried Sassoon's line: *"The darkness crumbles away--- / It is the same old druid Time as ever"* ["Attack," 1918], dawn brings no renewal, just "crumbles the darkness", leaving the cyclical time of suffering unchanged. An analysis of binary semantic oppositions in the trench poetry corpus — such as "light/darkness", "warmth/cold", "life/death" — shows a systematic disruption of meaning, as the first elements lose their traditional positive value.

In Owen's poetry, rain undergoes a semantic shift: from a conventional symbol of cleansing and fertility, it becomes a hostile force: *"Rain soaks, and clouds sag stormy"* ["Exposure," 1917]. The seme of "moisture" is transformed from a sign of life into a factor of discomfort and threat. It can be observed frequently that the lexeme "rain" often collocates with adjectives of negative evaluation: "bitter," "cruel," "merciless," and "ceaseless." The study of semantic transformations of natural concepts in various authors demonstrates a shared mechanism of reinterpretation: the use of lexemes denoting atmospheric phenomena in the trench poetry corpus is consistently accompanied by negative connotations.

In Rupert Brooke's poem "The Dead", the earth is conceptualised through the model earth as a grave/repository of memory: *"Blow out, you bugles, over the rich*

Dead! / There's none of these so lonely and poor of old, / But, dying, has made us rarer gifts than gold. / These laid the world away." The semantic component "world" is transformed from a space of life into something to be relinquished ("laid away"). The earth acquires ambivalent semantics—both a grave and a repository of memory. This semantic duality reflects a cognitive mechanism for processing traumatic experience through the transformation of the concept of earth.

Cognitive mapping of trauma in natural imagery

An analysis of the trench poetry discovers consistent conceptual links between natural imagery and psychological states. These links form a cognitive map of the traumatised subject, wherein specific environmental features are metaphorically projected onto internal states of disorientation, despair, and existential rupture. The repeated use of such metaphorical mappings suggests a shared semantic structure that poets used to articulate the experience of trauma.

Table 3. Conceptual premises of natural imagery in trench poetry

Natural image	Psychological state	Example in poetry
Mud	Disorientation, depression	<i>"He sat in the mud like a cold-stone thing, / No word, no sound, no movement at all"</i> – Wilfred Owen, <i>The Dead-Beat</i> .
Poisoned water	Loss of purity / innocence	<i>"The water's green and greasy in a ditch"</i> [Blunden]
Burned land	Loss of hope	<i>"This land, cut off from the green countryside, / Where nothing ever grows"</i> [Rosenberg]
Fog	Cognitive uncertainty	<i>"Pale flakes with lingering stealth of fog descend, / And thinly ghost the roofs"</i> [Owen]
No birdsong/silence	Emptiness, emotional numbness	<i>"No birds sing. / Not one bird... but the soaked dead"</i> [Rosenberg]

These examples demonstrate that natural images in trench poetry systematically function as vehicles for metaphorical projections of trauma. Mud, poisoned water, burned land, fog, and silence are not isolated motifs but elements of shared cognitive models. Collectively, they instantiate the conceptual metaphors landscape as mind (mud - depression; fog - uncertainty), earth as body (burned land - mutilated body, poisoned water - corrupted lifeblood), and nature as witness (silence and absence of birds - memory of death). Thus, the cognitive mapping of

trauma reveals a consistent mechanism: the external destruction of the environment is conceptualised as a projection of inner psychological collapse.

Time and narrative in traumatised landscapes

In Owen's "Spring Offensive", the lexemes 'summer' and 'buttercups', which in traditional semantics index fertility and renewal, appear in collocation with the lexical field of death and destruction. This semantic shift illustrates a disruption of the conceptual model nature as a cycle of life, replacing it with nature as repetition of trauma: *"The summer oozed into their veins... / And the far valley behind, where the buttercups / Had blessed with gold their slow boots coming up."*

Disruption of conceptual opposition arises from the collision of images of summer bloom ("summer oozed", "buttercups... blessed with gold") with the narrative of a military offensive leading to death.

Metaphors of "dark nature" in trench poetry anticipate Timothy Morton's concept of "dark ecology" [Morton, 2007], which rejects romantic notions of harmonious environments in favour of acknowledging the "strange", sometimes eerie coexistence with nature. Images such as Owen's "blood-shod" soldiers, Sassoon's "murderous rain", and Rosenberg's "poisoned earth" exemplify ecological nihilism, foreshadowing contemporary ecocritical discourses of the Anthropocene.

A notable aspect of narrativising traumatised space is the transformation of the traditional pastoral tradition. Edmund Blunden, in his poetry, creates an "anti-pastoral" where idyllic images of nature are constantly disrupted by the intrusion of war's reality:

"The green peace of the country spread out / Till the sudden shells tore it" ["Third Ypres", 1917]. The narrative is constructed as a constant clash between the semantic fields of "peaceful nature" and "wartime violence".

Conclusions and perspectives.

The linguistic analysis of World War I trench poetry shows that natural imagery is systematically reinterpreted under the pressure of traumatic experience. Lexemes denoting earth, water, trees, rain, and sky undergo semantic inversion: elements traditionally associated with fertility, stability, and protection acquire meanings of destruction, sterility, and death. These shifts are realised through stable conceptual metaphors such as earth as body, landscape as mind, and nature as which structure the articulation of trauma in poetic discourse. The analysis demonstrates that fragmentation of natural semantics parallels the fragmentation of

the traumatised subject's perception. The referential background of this discourse is a set of war scenarios that destroy space and ecosystems at multiple levels. The corpus-based selection of nominative units highlights their semantic inversions together with stylistic and semiotic roles. The network of cognitive models demonstrates their interconnections and produces a consistent mapping of the damaged world. Thus, trench poetry can be read as a linguistic map of "damaged ecosystems," both external (environmental) and internal (psychological).

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