

Artistic symbols with existential dynamism in Ngo Kha's epic poem *Allegory of an Absent-Minded*

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ABSTRACT

In works belonging to the existentialist tradition, cultural substrata and the semantic dynamism of symbols have long been exploited to depict the ambiguous yet universal dimensions of Dasein—human existence. This tendency is evident in the religious and cultural symbols that permeate the philosophical reflections of Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. This article concentrates on examining and analyzing groups of artistic symbols that embody existential dynamism in *Ngu ngon cua nguoi dang tri (Allegory of an Absent-Minded)*, a surreal epic poem by Ngo Kha. Specifically, it explores three principal symbolic clusters: fire and its variants, freezing, and knowledge. The meanings embedded in cultural history, and the "organizing, dynamic forces" acting upon them, are interpreted through the lens of existential philosophy as fields of Being imbued with existential kinetic energy, whether manifested in movement between existential states, symbolic transformation, or subject–world interaction, thereby evoking impulses, resistance, and the subject's failure in the process of meaning-making. These symbols are simultaneously the consequences of external pressures and manifestations of inner impulses. From this perspective, this article argues that Ngo Kha's poetry engages with both social concerns and literary experimentation.

Key words: Allegory of an Absent-Minded, artistic symbols, Ngo Kha, existentialism, surreal epic (poetry).

INTRODUCTION

Ngo Kha represents a distinctive literary figure within South Vietnamese literature during the period 1954–1975, emerging simultaneously as a valiant soldier amid the flames of war and as a radically innovative poet. The suffocating sociopolitical atmosphere and the psychological traumas inflicted by historical circumstances profoundly shaped his creative trajectory. During the early stage of his poetic career, Ngo Kha moved from works imbued with symbolic solitude in his artistic pursuit, such as *Hoa co doc (The Solitary Flower)* (1961) and *Nhung bai tho roi (Scattered Poems)* (1962–1967), toward the surrealist poetic world of *Ngu ngon cua nguoi dang tri (Allegory of an Absent-Minded)* (1969), in which symbols not only bear the mark of personal invention but also convey a national message.

Ngu ngon cua nguoi dang tri (Allegory of an Absent-Minded) is distinctive not only for its integration of personal trauma with national destiny; it also stands as a potent "symbolic text," in which each image encapsulates the ceaseless movement of a subject constantly experiencing fragmentation, engagement, and the search for existential freedom. In this epic poem, symbolism functions both as an artistic device and as

a structural principle of thought, a dynamic force that generates the existential current flowing through a multilayered poetic architecture. The existential subject exists and undertakes a journey of experience and dialogue at the intersections of symbolic clusters associated with space, time, and being. Within this work, many symbols can be understood as generative structures whose meanings remain open to further interpretation, thereby expanding the cognitive horizons of both the creative and receptive subject.

Notably, research on artistic symbolism in Southern Vietnamese literature from 1954 to 1975 in general, and in Ngo Kha's poetry in particular, remains significantly underexplored, especially in relation to *Ngu ngon cua nguoi dang tri (Allegory of an Absent-Minded)*. Approaching this epic poem from the perspective of artistic symbolism as existential dynamism offers critical insight into its complex and stratified symbolic structure. It also highlights the generative potential of specific symbolic clusters, particularly those related to fire and its metamorphoses, freezing, and knowledge. Through this perspective, this article argues that Ngo Kha was not only a committed activist engaged in the struggle for freedom but also, in the words of Tran Thi My Hien (2015), someone who "aspired toward a truly free world" (¹, p. 148). At

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the same time, he was a gifted poet capable of articulating existential thought through a richly symbolic and evocative artistic language. As Tran Thanh Binh (2023) observes regarding South Vietnamese committed poetry from 1954 to 1975 in general, and Ngo Kha's poetry in particular, such works "laid bare the truths concealed beneath the ornate theoretical veneers of the time; the poetry of committed writers made a significant contribution to awakening the people of South Vietnam to recognize the darker side of war. Committed poetry also forcefully denounced inhumane acts" (², p. 114).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs an integrated methodological framework combining three principal approaches: semiotics and symbolism, literary hermeneutics, and existential hermeneutics, with existential hermeneutics serving as the central methodological axis. This integration does not involve a simple juxtaposition of methods; rather, it is organized hierarchically. Semiotics provides analytical tools for identifying and describing the formal configurations of symbols, literary hermeneutics facilitates interpretation of the text as an organic whole, and existential hermeneutics ensures that all analytical processes ultimately return to the ontological dimension of lived experience.

The fundamental unit of analysis is not the isolated image or motif in the traditional sense of poetics, but rather the "symbolic cluster." A symbolic cluster is established when it satisfies three criteria: (i) a significant density of recurrence throughout the text; (ii) morphological variability (e.g., fire, coal, torch, signal flare, and sun); and (iii) the formation of a semantic field capable of articulating existential states such as impulse, resistance, failure, commitment, or alienation. Based on a comprehensive survey of the epic poem *Ngu ngon cua nguoi dang tri* (*Allegory of an Absent-Minded*), three central symbolic clusters were identified: fire and its metamorphic variants, freezing, and knowledge. At the micro level, the analysis focuses on individual lines, image constellations, and intra-textual associative fields. However, each micro-unit is interpreted in relation to the overall symbolic architecture of the work.

The analytical procedure consists of three stages. First, the text is read in its entirety to determine the density and distribution of symbolic fields. Second, each symbolic occurrence is examined within its specific context, including spatial setting, situational framework, and the relationship between subject and circumstance. A symbol is considered to possess "existential dynamism" only when it manifests a

conflict between the subject and the world and produces a transformation in the subject's mode of being. Third, based on these micro-level findings, a dynamic interpretive model is developed in which fire signifies impulse and destruction, freezing signifies failure and petrification, and knowledge signifies destiny and self-imprisonment.

Following the micro-level analysis, the symbols are situated within both intratextual and intertextual relationships. Comparisons with cultural archetypes or philosophical traditions are not undertaken to establish lines of influence, but rather to clarify how Ngo Kha restructures and localizes symbolic forms within the context of war and Vietnamese existential experience. It is precisely through this comparative process that the specificity of the symbolic system becomes discernible.

In summary, the methodological framework operates through a coherent cycle: identification of symbolic clusters, contextual analysis, determination of existential states, intratextual and intertextual comparison, and the construction of a dynamic interpretive model. The concept of "symbols endowed with existential dynamism" is therefore not imposed a priori but emerges from the text's own patterns of recurrence, transformation, and internal tension. This approach ensures methodological consistency, analytical verifiability, and a clearly articulated theoretical foundation, thereby strengthening the overall rigor of the study.

RESULTS/RESEARCH CONTENT

Theoretical Framework on Artistic Symbolism

The concept of the *symbol* has generated a diversity of interpretations across disciplines and fields of inquiry. The definition adopted in this study is not derived from a single source but is synthesized from major theoretical traditions in philosophy, semiotics, and literary criticism. From literary and philosophical perspectives, the symbol may be understood as a mediating and expressive form through which reality is both revealed and constituted, "driven even beyond the natural world view of experience and observation, when the mythical world disclosed relationships which, though not reducible to the laws of empirical thinking, are by no means without their laws, and reveal a structural form of specific and independent character" (³, p. xiii). The symbol thus functions as an integral structural element within literary works, Cleanth Brooks's notion of organic unity (1947), and may be understood as inherently open to

multiple interpretations, generating layers of meaning in accordance with Umberto Eco's concept of "unlimited semiosis" (1976).

In this article, the artistic symbol is not treated as a unit within a system of signs that can be analyzed through the signifier-signified relationship as formulated by Ferdinand de Saussure (2005), nor is it reduced to Charles Sanders Peirce's icon-index-symbol classification (1998). Rather, the symbol is approached as an event of existence in which the subject not only decodes meaning but is also situated within circumstances that require self-positioning in the world. At precisely this juncture, the theoretical foundation of this study is located within an existential-hermeneutic paradigm grounded in the ontological perspectives of Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger.

Jean-Paul Sartre's proposition that "existence precedes essence" (⁴, p. 28) is invoked not just as a philosophical slogan but as a methodological principle. If existence precedes essence, then the symbol, as a product of consciousness, does not reflect a predetermined essence but instead inscribes the subject's process of self-constitution within limiting circumstances. The concepts of *être-en-soi* and *être-pour-soi* in *Being and Nothingness* (1956) clarify the distinction between existence as inert and self-contained being and existence as consciousness that perpetually transcends itself. From this perspective, the symbol can be understood as an intermediary space in which the *in-itself* is disrupted by the movement of consciousness *for-itself*. The symbol therefore constitutes not a static structure but an existential dynamic in which freedom and limitation collide, and in which the subject is at once conditioned and self-transcending.

At a deeper level, Martin Heidegger's assertion that "Dasein is being-in-the-world" in *Being and Time* (1962) provides the ontological grounding for this interpretive approach. A human being does not stand outside the world to observe symbols as objects but is always already a *being-in-the-world*. The condition of *thrownness* ensures that every symbol emerges as a response to circumstances not chosen by the subject. Hence, the artistic symbol does not merely signify but also discloses a world of meaning; it constitutes a mode through which existence reveals itself within finite conditions. This perspective may also enter into dialogue with Hans-Georg Gadamer's notion of the "fusion of horizons" (⁵, p. 370), according to which meaning does not exist as a fixed entity but takes shape through the interplay between the historical horizon of the text and the experiential horizon of the reader.

Especially within lyric poetry, artistic symbolism constitutes an essential element in determining the effectiveness of poetic expression. Mikhail Bakhtin asserts that "The very movement of the poetic symbol presupposes a unified language, one that directly corresponds to its object" (⁶, p. 54). Through symbols, the creative subject encodes meanings, while the receptive subject, operating within an individual cognitive framework, decodes these symbols according to personal interpretive perspectives.

"The symbol can be understood as a special type of sign in which the signified (an image, object, or event) evokes in the reader a meaning beyond its immediately apparent or literal sense" (⁷, p. 25). Although a symbol bears the nature of a sign, it differs from ordinary signs by virtue of its layered semantic structure, its acceptance within communities, cultures, or humanity at large, and its tendency toward conventionally determined meanings. However, the artistic symbol retains an open character that continually generates multiple interpretive possibilities during the reception process. Furthermore, the symbol functions as an aesthetic medium and a conduit for expressing both thought and emotion. It may therefore be regarded as a distinct type of sign within the broader system of signification.

Due to these characteristics, artistic symbolism becomes particularly effective in expressing existential dimensions that resist direct conceptual articulation. Through its intrinsic openness and multi-layered structure, the artistic symbol enables the creative subject to encode fractures of the inner self while simultaneously allowing the receptive subject to reconstruct meaning under varying interpretive conditions, thereby resisting reductive forms of rational explanation. Within lyric texts, artistic symbolism fulfills not only a descriptive function but also contains an inherent reservoir of semantic energy.

Accordingly, the theoretical foundation of this study is not structural semiotics but an existential hermeneutics. The symbol is understood as the site where existence both expresses and interrogates itself, as an aesthetic structure that inscribes experiences of freedom, absurdity, and transcendence. The explicit establishment of this ontological orientation ensures methodological coherence and clarifies that every analytical process ultimately returns to a central question: how does the symbol function in constructing and revealing the subject's existential experience?

Particularly in *Ngu ngon cua nguoi dang tri* (*Allegory of an Absent-Minded*) by Ngo Kha, artistic symbols do not appear as fragmented or linear signs, but instead converge at intersections where subject, world,

and semantic possibility meet. Hence, artistic symbols are not limited to depiction or presentation; they also constitute worlds and construct meaning amid unstable states of existence. Through this symbolic system, *Allegory of an Absent-Minded* creates an artistic space imbued with existential depth that cannot be conveyed through direct articulation alone. Readers enter the text as participants in a journey of personal meaning-making, interpreting the work through the uniqueness of their own subjectivity, a foundational condition of existential experience in art.

Symbolic Constellations as Vectors of Existential Energetics

The Symbolic Complex of Fire and Its Metamorphic Variants

In *Ngu ngon cua nguoi dang tri* (*Allegory of an Absent-Minded*), the cluster of fire-related symbols and their variations is employed by Ngo Kha across a full spectrum of morphological manifestations, ranging from primordial forms such as the sun to artificial forms such as flames and lights. Each symbol appears in a multitude of configurations; for instance, fire takes the form of embers, signal flares, and related manifestations. This symbolic cluster may be regarded as the most densely recurring motif in the epic poem, as its forms and variants appear throughout nearly every episode. Owing to this density of recurrence, its meaning remains fluid rather than fixed, functioning as a representation of diverse dimensions of the existential world and the subject's shifting existential conditions.

The primordial manifestation of fire is its ultimate form: the sun. The significance of the sun across cultures, from East to West, cannot be overlooked. In many cultural contexts, the sun represents the masculine principle and life itself: "[...] the moon is always yin, while the sun is yang, because the sun directly emits light" (8, p. 578). In *Ngu ngon cua nguoi dang tri* (*Allegory of an Absent-Minded*), Ngo Kha draws upon this longstanding cultural association with life and continuity. Rather than functioning merely as a conventional cultural symbol, the sun appears in the poem as a pre-reflective presence that precedes the subject's attempts to assign meaning to the world. Existing independently of human interpretation, it signifies an a priori mode of existence and thereby foregrounds the primacy of existence over essence. In this respect, the image of the sun resonates with the existential proposition that "existence precedes essence" (4, p. 28), according to which the world exists prior to the meanings subsequently attributed to it.

The "sun" first and foremost symbolizes being-in-itself, existing independently of human consciousness. It signifies an eternal and immutable existence that has persisted since the dawn of nothingness: "only the void and the sun existed" (9, p. 6), at a moment replete with "what is not yet": "I have not seen her wear the bird dress / [...] / the roads bearing your name are not yet born" (9, p. 6). The sun already exists, but the lyrical subject still "does not see" it, while those elements imbued with meaning for the subject, such as "the roads bearing your name," are still "not yet born" (9, p. 6). The world therefore exists before humanity can assign it any meaning. Through its association with a priori existence, the "sun" consequently conveys a foreboding anxiety arising from a harsh and absurd world.

The "sun" also appears within the subject's dreamscape as an enduring curse imposed upon the prison of existence, an absurd prison. The "orange bag" of "summer" (9, p. 14) revives vivid dreamlike worlds and awakens forgotten dreamscapes: "the goatherd girl awakens" (9, p. 13), a realm filled with vibrant color, "the girl tilting her neck white as a bamboo shoot" (9, p. 14). Yet it is this same "sun" that bears witness and reveals "the withering girl" (9, p. 16). The sun silently observes the journey: "I carry the crystal lute / to visit memories" (9, p. 13), tracing the movement from "the girl laughing like flying sand" (9, p. 14) to "the girl seducing me away from the camel / the scorched sand festering my feet" (9, p. 14). It silently watches a world dull and insensitive to the subject: "now only the desert remains / and the invisible space stares at me eternally / a cheer rises / a cheer roaring like a herd of stone beasts" (9, pp. 15–16). The sun thus becomes an observer of all absurd forms of existence, from dream and phantasm to waking reality: "...the grassless land of Asia / the eternal sun in Africa" (9, p. 23).

Standing outside all meanings constructed by humankind, the sun becomes associated with the annihilation of human projections. The dream world concludes in the obliteration of all things: "the camels depart endlessly / the sugarcane forest reduced to reeds / the golden crows are the corpses of two friends" (9, p. 18). The subject experiences a continual existential death through the "sun," or more precisely, through the absurd existence that it represents: "every day the sun kills me / with the suicide blade of sunset" (9, p. 51).

In contrast to the sun as an eternal flame, finite forms of fire possess temporal limits. Fire itself appears in multiple variants, ranging from "coal" as a latent form, to "flame" and "candle" as eruptive forms,

and ultimately to “signal flare” as a destructive form. Whereas the sun symbolizes being-in-itself in all its absurdity, these finite manifestations of flames represent the inherent absurdity of human existence or, more specifically, humanity’s existential stance toward an absurd world.

Fire has long functioned as a primordial archetype in human culture. Through its upward movement, it traditionally symbolizes connection with the divine: “Fire is the primary divine symbol of Mazdeism” (8, p. 545). Fire also marks the origins of civilization itself; humanity became truly human through its mastery of fire. Prometheus suffered punishment for stealing fire for humankind. Likewise, Nietzsche chose Zarathustra, the prophet of Zoroastrianism, a fire-worshipping religion, to be the prophet who proclaimed his philosophy of the *Übermensch*. In the opening pages of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche presents Zarathustra as a “fervent flame”: “You once carried your ashes to the mountains; now do you want to carry your fire down into the valleys?” (10, p. 27). For Nietzsche, the “flame” symbolizes the vitality of human existence and the life-force of the *Übermensch*.

The fire symbol first appears in the text in its latent form as coal: “And the coal awakened / hearing the agarwood whisper” (9, p. 7). “Coal” awakens “the drunken man” from his dream of primordial spring, from an original world of divine order, propelling him toward desire and longing, that is, toward the existential world: “the coal nourishes the drunken man / as I have always nourished my solitude / [...] / the drunken man drinks signal flares / wears the royal crown” (9, p. 7). This “royal crown” may initially be understood as the *Wille zur Macht* (the will to power) through which the individual asserts authority over himself, rejecting powers imposed by God or morality. Under the provocation of fire, “the drunken man” moves toward self-mastery and claims the “ardent flame” of solitude. Fire enables the individual to pursue personal projections and aspirations and, through this process, confront the absurd: “the drunken man enters the Sisyphean park” (9, p. 7). Fire therefore symbolizes existential resistance in the face of absurd reality: “the grass withers and the forest complies / with a pale species / we set the sky on fire to escape the city” (9, p. 27). This is a brave yet hopeless act of will, for standing before the subject is only “the Sisyphean park,” an absurd reality: “there is nothing left / the sea drifts away in the bloodshot eyes of the pilot” (9, p. 27).

Fire does not only symbolize the will to power exercised by the individual over the self but also the will imposed upon the individual by the Other and

by the surrounding world. This symbolism reaches its most concentrated expression in the image of war. Throughout the text, war is inseparable from “balls of fire,” from “signal flares,” and “rosy rains”: “there is no girl, no boy, no drunkard / only the crimson gac fruit blazing with the fire of war” (9, p. 10); “oh smog and tracer rounds / the rosy rain upon human flesh” (9, p. 23); “only the signal flare / blinds my eyes” (9, p. 27). War contains neither justice nor injustice; it is nothing but an act of brutal imposition upon the human condition, most directly expressed through violence inflicted upon the body itself: “blinds my eyes” (9, p. 27), “rosy rain upon human flesh” (9, p. 23). This fire becomes a force of annihilation, destroying the most fundamental substratum of humanity, the body, and thereby serving as a metaphor for the existential destruction wrought by war: the destruction of the individual as an autonomous being. Before the fire of war, human beings become “death row convoys” of the era, marching one another toward complete obliteration: “the death row convoy walks within limits / the death row convoy sings endlessly / in the mist / in the wind / in the fire / in compassion” (9, p. 43).

Beyond the destruction of the world, fire also symbolizes the will imposed upon the individual by the Other, a destructive force personified in the figure of “you.” Beyond signifying an uncommunicable world, fire also stands for an irreconcilable Other. The figure of “you” becomes a requiem for all hopes of communion and harmony between self and other. “You” wield “signal flares” to annihilate “me,” no differently than war and history wield “signal flares” to annihilate the self, even though “you” remain the one with whom resonance is sought: “you are the signal flare that burns me to ashes” (9, p. 56). Left with no alternative, the subject embraces the ashes and, in solitude, enters the absurd world and continues the Sisyphean journey of suffering indefinitely.

The Symbolic Cluster of Freezing

If fire and the sun symbolize an absurd existence and the individual’s existential struggle against that absurdity, then symbols associated with freezing serve as the starkest testimony to the catastrophic failure of absurd life and to the futility of resisting it. These symbols signify the absorption of life into an absurd reality, the loss of autonomy in individual will. They represent individuals imprisoned within bad faith, those who have regressed into *being-in-itself* (*être-en-soi*), or, in other words, the dead (11, p. 299). However, these symbols also suggest the possibility of transcending *being-in-itself*. This duality is expressed

through depictions of freezing-related imagery both as material entities and as objects imbued with spiritual or metaphysical significance, such as inscriptions, ancient words, and states of “concern” (*Sorge*).

According to the present interpretation, symbols of “freezing” in the epic poem are conveyed through imagery emphasizing stasis and the suspension of living movement. Such imagery frequently takes the form of statues or materials associated with sculpture, such as plaster and clay. By extension, these symbols also encompass static structures such as walls, stairways, and the ground itself. Within the poem, these symbols function not merely as background elements or “present-at-hand” objects; rather, they are haunted by unrealized existential will, voices unable to speak, unfulfilled longing, and freedoms that never materialize. This perspective forms the basis for interpreting a symbolic “frozen state” within these images, viewing them as solidified remnants of wills and lives denied the opportunity to find their voice.

What distinguishes human beings from objects and phenomena is that the human being, as *being-for-itself*, possesses consciousness. It is consciousness that grants meaning to the world and projects purposes onto the self. However, as long as individuals remain unaware of their existential freedom and fail to actualize their projections through action, they become indistinguishable from a *being-in-itself*: inert and nauseating, much like the world itself. One circumstance in which human existence truly becomes *being-in-itself* is death, because death marks the termination of all projection.

The loss of existential dynamism, together with the loss of individuality and uniqueness in human existence (of *Dasein* itself) is manifested primarily through the loss of voice. In losing their voice, humans lose their existential essence, becoming forms of existence that are inert, dense, and overfilled. In *Ngu ngon cua nguoi dang tri* (*Allegory of an Absent-Minded*), Ngo Kha skillfully employs symbols of freezing to depict individuals who have lost their voice and undergone an “existential death” in the face of overwhelming and cruel forces of assimilation during periods of chaos. These individuals emerge in images such as “the pale white walls of ghostly tales / the actor faces of a forgotten history” (⁹, p. 19), or “the invisible interrogations of the staircase” (⁹, p. 19). The individual voice is consistently positioned beneath oppressive forces, while above lies the burden of bad faith and the historical moment itself: “the gaze from space descends / mute and ignorant” (⁹, p. 19); “concern” now “lies silent in the heart of the stone” (⁹, p. 20).

Human beings live within bad faith, become absorbed within it, and are transformed into statues: “oh the plaster in the vase / now already reconciled with its fate” (⁹, p. 31); “... the lime-stone hand” (⁹, p. 32). These stone statues represent both the attempt and ultimate failure of the individual to resist the absurd. The “pale white walls of ghostly tales” (⁹, p. 19) appear after the failed voyage into the dream-desert, while the “arid land cracking with the sorrow of Eastern flesh” (⁹, p. 43) becomes the collective conclusion for countless lives entering a battle against the masses as a transgressive, overwhelming reality. The final destiny of every song of freedom sung by the “death row convoy” is the “stone mountain” (⁹, p. 44), becoming one with it, offering flesh and blood as a sacrifice to bad faith, and ultimately returning to the arid soil, forever deprived of projection through death and fully reduced to *being-in-itself*.

At the same time, these symbols of freezing also contain a powerful projective will embedded within personal consciousness. In contrast to the “walls,” “steps,” and pebbles that obscure and devour existential sensation, transforming “the boy, the girl, and the drunken man” into a “death row convoy” speaking in unison and marching in the same rhythm, the “stone slabs” in the poem bear the “pain-etched trace of an ancient word” (⁹, p. 32). This “ancient word” may be understood as the crystallization of humanity’s enduring anguish before existence itself.

The stone slabs in the poem simultaneously suppress and project existential sensation. They are no longer inert things-in-themselves transformed by the projections of human consciousness. They appear in nightmares as “coconut skulls” (⁹, p. 15); they dream, or more accurately, they carry the dreams of humankind: “now even stone dreams” (⁹, p. 31). They transcend the binary opposition of just and unjust: “now the wooden horses have crossed the river” (⁹, p. 31), and they embrace ambiguity: “the stone lion rises at midnight, donning the robe of five elements” (⁹, p. 31). “The pain-etched trace of an ancient word upon the stone slab” (⁹, p. 32) may ultimately represent the human desire to leave an imprint upon the world, to inscribe their existential suffering onto reality itself. Through this act of inscription, human beings interpret, explain, and confer meaning upon an otherwise insensate world.

The Symbolic Cluster of Knowledge

“A book is essentially a symbol of the universe [...]. A closed book represents pristine matter; open, it becomes fecundated matter. Closed, the book keeps the

secret to itself. Open, it offers its contents to the attentive reader" (⁸, pp. 791–792).

In *Ngu ngon cua nguoi dang tri* (*Allegory of an Absent-Minded*), knowledge is rendered through multiple forms, ranging from simple "lines of text" to the "testament," the "pages," and ultimately the "allegory." This symbolic cluster of knowledge simultaneously-imposed fate, humanity's will to transcend that fate, and the descent into bad faith.

The "lines of text" and "pages" first signify a cosmic cryptograph, a preordained destiny imposed upon the human race. This appears as the "love testament," a fate already inscribed for the irredeemable desire for communion, introduced in the primordial dream sequence: "I count the deer tracks on the love testament" (⁹, p. 6). Likewise, it appears in the "allegory" that "the drunken man and I sang aloud" (⁹, p. 6), and in the same "allegory" that has haunted the speaker since youth: "I often spoke of the allegorical lines" (⁹, p.12). This is the "allegory" that foretells humanity's annihilation. Although represented as pages of a book, this symbolism inevitably recalls the Biblical narrative of the tree of knowledge, the source of humankind's banishment from paradise. The "pages" in *Ngu ngon cua nguoi dang tri* (*Allegory of an Absent-Minded*) no longer retain the subversive and defiant nature of the Biblical fruit of knowledge, but they preserve the sorrowful fate of the human condition: continual suffering before an existence that remains permanently unsatisfied.

The "pages" therefore symbolize a destiny already inscribed. Yet who is the author? Not heaven. Within existential thought, human beings write their own destinies and create their own fate. The book symbolizes creative will and the cosmos itself, not the cosmos of God, but the cosmos of man. The "lines of text" are consistently imbued with existential will and vitality: "lines of text flowing through each row of living neurons" (⁹, p. 12). They emerge from a spiritual *will to power* and a longing for autonomy, at least within the realm of thought.

The book represents that portion of the world most intimately belonging to humanity. And yet, in turn, it also imposes a *will to power* upon others. To live entirely within the book is to become a prisoner of the ideas it contains: "the pages unfold full of cocoons / threads that bind the dreams of the beloved" (⁹, p. 12). The book also symbolizes the subject's own bad faith. It becomes a world in which one refuses to confront the absurdity of existence. The pages suggest a realm that imprisons consciousness, as consciousness retreats into a domain of its own making and refuses to confront the world beyond. In this light, the desert

landscape of Section II and the parabolic world of Section VII may also be seen as manifestations of the protagonist's internal "spiritual pages." The book becomes a spiritual threshold that the existential subject must either transcend or abandon in order to engage with the world. Ultimately, the lyrical subject chooses the path of wandering: "I have journeyed many years" (⁹, p. 57), leaving behind the poet, who is forever a prisoner of immutable hopes and unchanging ideas, thus eternally in refusal of life as it is: "the poet lies still in the eternal prison" (⁹, p. 58).

The symbolic clusters in *Ngu ngon cua nguoi dang tri* (*Allegory of an Absent-Minded*) reveal a profound interweaving of mythical and secular dimensions, especially within the concrete secular reality of war. For that reason, the existential journey of the lyrical subject is situated within a broader context encompassing both the cosmos and the nation. The existential subject's commitment to action emerges not solely from internal conflict, but rather is framed by profound contemplations on the fate of the nation and of humankind.

The symbols themselves are inherently ambivalent. They may function as forces of worldly pressure exerted upon the existential subject, while also serving as counterforces projected by the subject against the world. This duality lends *Ngu ngon cua nguoi dang tri* (*Allegory of an Absent-Minded*) a distinctly epic sensibility, bearing the imprint of an unceasing struggle between the individual and the totality, between the *will to power* and the *will to servitude*, and between a life lived authentically in creative projection and a life lived in *bad faith*. Thus, the existential subject within the work embodies both the nature of an existential individual and the qualities of an epic hero within the very battlefield of existential choice. This struggle ultimately determines the subject's position within history, as the enduring conflicts of nations and humanity continue through the ages.

DISCUSSION

By analyzing and interpreting three primary groups of symbols: (i) fire and its metamorphic variants, (ii) freezing, and (iii) knowledge - it can be affirmed that *Ngu ngon cua nguoi dang tri* (*Allegory of an Absent-Minded*) is a "dynamic and open" text in terms of meaning-making. In this work, symbols do not remain confined within the rigidity of rhetorical devices; rather, they generate an existential structure governed by dual forces: internal and external.

The Symbolic Complex of Fire and Its Metamorphic Variants reveals a dual nature, encompassing both origin and destruction. Unlike Nietzsche's conception of

“fire” associated with the Übermensch, Ngo Kha’s fire bears the imprint of a wartime period, in which history is marked by upheaval and roaring violence. It crystallizes an existential condition distinctive to Ngo Kha: individual freedom is always entangled with and constrained by the destiny of the collective national community.

The Symbolic Cluster of Freezing, in contrast, expresses another existential condition: failure. Yet this failure ignites the unveiling of transcendental possibilities through traces and inscriptions of memory, such as ancient words carved on surviving stone tablets. In this regard, Ngo Kha differs from Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett: delay and stagnation do not annihilate identity or erase meaning entirely; instead, they become modes of *existential inscription* within the world.

The Symbolic Cluster of Knowledge encapsulates oppositions and antitheses between freedom and destiny. The “pages of books” signify both a sealed oath and a completed destiny, as well as an unceasing creative will. If Albert Camus’ characters often assert an attitude of indifference, “whatever, let it be,” a calm acceptance of the absurd, Ngo Kha reveals a subject who relentlessly negotiates: one who commits himself to life and struggle in order to rewrite his own destiny. From this perspective, clarifying the concept of “existential dynamics” becomes crucial not only within existential philosophy but also for literary analysis. Symbols are not static, but constantly circulating, advancing, and engaging dynamically with meaning. In existential literature, authors consistently “implant” symbols imbued with such dynamics, although current interpretive tools may still be insufficiently refined to fully delineate their significance. Recognizing this opens possibilities for scholarly dialogue and for reconstructing a contemporary existential discourse. In the course of this study, the juxtaposition of the three concepts of *being-in-itself*, *the absurd*, and *the will to power*, reveals that the influence of existential thought on Ngo Kha’s poetry lies in their transformation into artistic dynamics. First, *the absurd*, in the sense articulated by Albert Camus, manifests as an experience of a groundless world in which human beings are thrown into a violent historical reality and left disoriented. In Ngo Kha’s poetry, this world appears as a fractured space in which meaning disintegrates and the subject must independently determine their stance toward existence. Within this context, the concept of *being-in-itself* (*être-en-soi*) articulated by Jean-Paul Sartre illuminates recurring images of freezing, petrification, and stasis in the text. This condition signifies the loss of transcendence, the abandonment of freedom, and the descent into a closed,

unreflective mode of existence, a form of bad faith. Yet the dense presence of symbols of fire, eruption, and movement signals an attempt to resist this condition. At this juncture, Friedrich Nietzsche’s concept of the *will to power* (*Wille zur Macht*) becomes relevant, as it expresses the desire to recreate values and reconstruct the self amid the ruins of meaning. Read together, these three concepts establish an existential axis in Ngo Kha’s poetry: from awareness of the absurd world (Albert Camus), through the risk of collapsing into *being-in-itself* (*être-en-soi*) (Jean-Paul Sartre), to the attempt at affirmation and transcendence through creative will (Friedrich Nietzsche). Consequently, the poetic subject is not fixed within tragedy but remains in a continual state of oscillation between fall and transcendence. This dynamic shapes both the philosophical depth and aesthetic structure of *Ngu ngon cua nguoi dang tri* (*Allegory of an Absent-Minded*), transforming the poem into a space of existential trial and rebirth.

CONCLUSION

The artistic construction of existentially dynamic symbols in *Ngu ngon cua nguoi dang tri* (*Allegory of an Absent-Minded*) by Ngo Kha is elucidated through three characteristic symbolic clusters: fire and its variations, freezing or stasis, and knowledge. Among these, the symbols of fire and its variations appear most frequently throughout the poem, embodying multiple qualities of the existential world, from primordial and eruptive to destructive forms. These symbols simultaneously represent a variety of existential states and, most importantly, the existential condition of a solitary subject confronting the absurd and boundless world while bearing self-assigned responsibility.

The group of symbols associated with freezing signifies the most tragic failure of absurd existence as well as futile efforts to transcend it. It represents human beings imprisoned in bad faith, individuals who have reverted into *being-in-itself* (*être-en-soi*), that is, the dead. Paradoxically, however, these symbols also express the projected will of the existential subject, who remains conscious of painful existential conditions arising from collective national suffering.

Finally, the symbolic cluster related to knowledge produces multilayered existential meanings: as a predetermined fate imposed on the individual, as the human will to transcend that fate, and as a metaphor for the self-imposed bad faith. The existential subject longs to create their own destiny but ultimately remains exiled within the absurd conditions of lived reality.

The symbols in *Ngu ngon cua nguoi dang tri* (*Allegory of an Absent-Minded*) do not operate within the confines of conventional rationality; rather, they transcend the linguistic and structural boundaries of traditional imagery. In the creative process, the symbol becomes a flexible fragment within an open semantic field, enabling the subject to affirm creative identity and assert artistic subjectivity, in this case, that of the poet Ngo Kha. Hence, the symbol functions as a mode of existential creativity through which the subject continuously constructs, negates, and reconstructs the self. This symbolic mechanism underpins the poem's artistic structure as a process of conscious liberation and ontological renewal. The manifestations of existence are therefore always in motion: unfolding, contingent, and incomplete; they simultaneously open up profound philosophical and unique aesthetic dimensions within Ngo Kha's epic poem. Nevertheless, this study has limitations, as it focuses on a single text. Comparative and cross-national literary approaches may offer a promising path for affirming both the universality and specificity of existential categories as they are internalized and localized within the Vietnamese context. At the same time, this study proposes an interpretive approach to symbolism that differs from conventional symbolic readings, which often treat symbols as relatively stable carriers of cultural meaning. Instead, it conceptualizes symbols as existentially dynamic structures whose meanings emerge through the subject's ongoing engagement with existence. Such an approach may be particularly useful for analyzing surrealist modes of writing.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest upon the publication of the research.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The Authors declare exact each individual responsibility and contribution to the research as explained in the hereafter text.

This article is the result of scholarly collaboration among the authors, with specific contributions as follows:

- Phạm Ngọc Lan conceived the research direction, provided academic supervision, and revised the overall content of the article.
- Trương Quốc Bảo drafted the content framework, and authored the sections "Theoretical Framework on Artistic Symbolism", "The Symbolic Complex of Fire and Its Metamorphic Variants", "Abstract", "
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- Ngô Thảo Tiên was the primary author of the section "The Symbolic Cluster of Knowledge" and "

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