

# Nature as Thought — Symbolic Landscapes and Philosophical Echoes in Eastern and Western Literature: Take Ten Authors as an Example

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**Abstract**—This study investigates how natural imagery functions as a symbolic structure of thought in modern Eastern and Western poetry. Rather than treating nature as a mere backdrop, it repositions elements such as wind, cloud, forest, sea, moon, and autumn as metaphysical symbols that encode cognitive, emotional, and philosophical meaning. Employing an interdisciplinary framework that integrates semiotics (Peirce, Kristeva), phenomenological aesthetics (Bachelard, Heidegger), and Eastern philosophy (Laozi, Zen), the research offers close comparative readings of selected poets, including Bùi Giáng, Lữ Trọng Lữ, Xuân Diệu, Matsuo Bashō, Rainer Maria Rilke, Saint-John Perse, Henry David Thoreau, and Haruki Murakami. The findings reveal that natural imagery in poetry is not decorative but operates as a dynamic symbolic system—where thought moves like wind, identity dissolves like cloud, and memory sinks into the sea of language. These motifs articulate a shared philosophical architecture across cultures: from impermanence to interior depth, from silence to spiritual resonance. Water, though not always foregrounded, emerges as a latent metaphorical principle that connects all other symbols. The study concludes that nature is not external to poetic thought but constitutes the very space in which thought breathes, dwells, and becomes form. Practically, the research offers interdisciplinary and pedagogical applications for literary studies, aesthetics, and symbolic cognition.

**Index Terms**—nature symbolism, poetic cognition, Eastern philosophy, phenomenology, cross-cultural poetics

## I. INTRODUCTION

From ancient chants echoing across desolate plains to the surreal architectures of modern literature, nature has remained a central axis of poetic imagination. Yet in aesthetic and philosophical discourse, nature is not merely a scenic backdrop or decorative element—it is thought itself: a symbolic space where memory condenses into mist, consciousness resonates with landscape, and the self reverberates as an echo of inner being. Nature does not exist outside of thought; it is thought—articulated through symbolic structures, spatial sensibilities, and the aesthetic language of culture.

This study investigates nature as a symbolic and existential architecture of cognition through selected literary works from both Eastern and Western traditions. Rather than reducing nature to a descriptive setting, it approaches the natural world as a philosophical system—a cartography of perception in which emotion, identity, and thought are co-constructed and mutually informing.

To decode this symbolic structure, the research adopts an interdisciplinary framework that integrates semiotics (Peirce, Lotman), phenomenological aesthetics (Bachelard, Heidegger), and Eastern philosophy (Laozi, Suzuki). Within Peirce's triadic model, nature becomes more than an icon or index—it functions as a dynamic, high-order symbol, where a falling leaf may signify transformation and a drifting cloud serves as a poetic utterance of impermanence. Bachelard views natural environments as affective geographies, while Heidegger posits that "to dwell is to think," emphasizing the inextricable link between being and place. Eastern philosophy, particularly Daoist and Zen traditions, rejects the dualism of subject and object, regarding nature not as external matter but as living presence—Dao, or Being—that transcends conceptual binaries.

Based on this theoretical grounding, the paper undertakes a comparative analysis of key literary texts:

- **Eastern tradition:** Matsuo Bashō (nature as distilled presence), Hàn Mặc Tử (nature as ecstatic rupture and mystical yearning), Trịnh Công Sơn (the sea as an abyss of memory), Bùi Giáng (nature as metaphysical drift and paradox), Xuân Diệu (nature as fleeting sensuality), Lữ Trọng Lữ (autumn as an echo of the soul), and Haruki Murakami (forests and seas as symbolic labyrinths).

- **Western tradition:** Henry David Thoreau (Walden as a space of philosophical renewal), Rainer Maria Rilke (nature as a threshold of the ineffable), and Saint-John Perse (Anabasis as metaphysical terrain).

Within the Eastern tradition, Bashō distills nature into moments of absolute presence—where a single raindrop or breeze becomes a poetic event. Hàn Mặc Tử renders nature as a space of rapture and spiritual intensity, while Trịnh Công Sơn, in *Sea of Memory*, transforms the sea into a hauntingly unreachable memory. Murakami extends this symbolic logic by casting forests and oceans as metaphysical mazes in which the self dissolves and reconstitutes.

In the Western canon, Thoreau engages nature as a site of solitude and inner reconstruction. Rilke conceives it as the final boundary between being and silence. Saint-John Perse constructs elemental landscapes as philosophical revelations—where thought, sensation, and earth converge.

From East to West, from the compressed clarity of haiku to the vast metaphysical terrain of poetic epics, nature emerges not as passive backdrop but as a symbolic matrix—one in which thought, feeling, and human existence circulate, dissolve, and are continually reimagined through the poetics of the world.

From this literary corpus, the study proposes four interpretive lenses:

1. Nature as philosophical symbol
2. Nature as spatial–temporal memory
3. Nature as mirror of the inner self
4. Nature as threshold between the visible and the unspeakable

Woven together, these threads affirm that nature in literature is not simply described—it is inhabited, enacted, and thought through. It is where poetry thinks, where language reaches toward the ineffable, and where the reader no longer observes but dwells within the world it evokes.

## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The presence of nature in literature is not merely the outcome of scenic description or external visualization. At a deeper aesthetic and philosophical level, nature functions as a cognitive structure—a space where language, philosophy, and perception converge within symbolic frameworks. To illuminate this function, the study draws upon three major theoretical axes: semiotics, phenomenological aesthetics, and Eastern philosophy. Within this triangulated foundation, nature is no longer a peripheral motif but a symbolic epistemic center, where thought permeates imagery and perception crystallizes into concept.

Peircean semiotics provides an interpretive lens through which nature can be approached as a dynamic sign system. According to Peirce (1931–1958), a sign comprises three interrelated elements: the representamen, the object, and the interpretant. Within this triadic framework, a natural symbol such as a “falling leaf” signifies more than just the object “autumn”—it triggers a series of interpretants such as impermanence, death, or nostalgia (Peirce, CP 2.228). When such symbols are embedded in literary texts—for instance, “drifting clouds” in Búi Giáng or “autumn mist” in Lưu Trọng Lư—they activate not merely literal meanings but an open-ended network of associations, inviting readers into a co-creative interpretive process.

Lotman’s cultural semiotics complements this model with the concept of the *semiosphere*—a symbolic space where natural and cultural signs interact within semiotic structures. Lotman (1990) contends that nature in literature does not exist outside of language; rather, it becomes language—a secondary text shaped by cultural consciousness. Thus, a poetic image such as “the sea” in Saint-John Perse or “the autumn field” in Xuân Diệu can be read as an informational unit—a site where personal memory intersects with collective symbolic knowledge.

On the interior plane of symbolic space, Gaston Bachelard, in *The Poetics of Space* (1994), argues that nature is not simply an object of cognition but a space of interiority, where emotions and memory dwell. He writes, “There are no purely external images; every image is first internalized before being contemplated” (p. 12). Accordingly, “autumn” in Lưu Trọng Lư’s poetry is no longer a seasonal marker—it becomes a spiritual sedimentation, where “dry leaves” echo the stirring of the soul. Similarly, in Bashō’s haiku, moonlight does not illuminate a physical landscape but rather reveals an existential void, where moment and impermanence converge.

Martin Heidegger, in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (1971), explores the intimate relationship between language, landscape, and Being. For Heidegger, nature is not simply present—it is the very space in which thinking dwells: “We do not dwell on the earth, but in poetry—where Being is disclosed” (p. 213). Nature is no longer an external object but an ontological realm in which human existence reflects upon itself through the mirror of the world. This vision resonates with Lao-Zhuang philosophy: nature is *Dao*—the nameless, formless mode of Being, where the human self dissolves through stillness and surrender. As Laozi writes in the *Dao De Jing*, “大形無外，大音希聲，大象無形” (*The greatest form has no shape, the greatest sound is silence, the greatest image is formless*, Chapter 41).

Zen Buddhist philosophy, particularly as expressed in the haiku of Bashō, further affirms that nature is not a passive object of observation but a field of pure existence—where “a single falling leaf” can embody the totality of Being. The concept of *satori*—instant enlightenment through an encounter with nature—renders haiku a convergence of poetics and ontology. When Bashō writes:

古池や  
蛙飛びこむ  
水の音  
(*Furu ike ya / kawazu tobikomu / mizu no oto*)  
(*An old pond / A frog jumps in / The sound of water*)

This is not merely an image, but a distilled existential event where perception and being collapse into poetic immediacy.

In modern Western literature, Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) presents nature as a space of moral and epistemological autonomy: "I went to the woods not to escape society, but to converse with myself in the silence of the trees" (p. 87). Saint-John Perse constructs metaphysical topographies—deserts, oceans, winds—where thought dissolves into poetic rhythm. Rainer Maria Rilke, especially in *Duino Elegies*, portrays nature as the embodiment of the ineffable—a domain in which "angels see us" through the light of flowers and mist.

Collectively, these philosophical, semiotic, and poetic perspectives converge to portray nature as a multilayered symbolic system of thought. Yet, a critical gap remains in connecting the symbolic articulations of nature in modern Eastern literature with the metaphysical frameworks of contemporary Western thought. This study aims to bridge that gap through a cross-cultural comparative approach, wherein nature is no longer an object of description, but a subject of reflection.

### III. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DATA

#### A. Research Methodology

This study adopts a close reading approach within an interdisciplinary framework that integrates semiotics, phenomenological aesthetics, and comparative Eastern–Western philosophy. Its objective is to examine nature symbols as cognitive structures operating within literary space, articulated through three analytical axes.

First, Peircean semiotics frames nature not as a descriptive object but as a "third-order sign" (Peirce, CP 2.228), where symbols such as "cloud," "leaf," and "moon" possess open-ended, culturally embedded meanings. The triadic relationship—representamen, object, interpretant—reveals how nature mediates philosophical reflection.

Second, the phenomenological aesthetics of Bachelard and Heidegger investigate nature's inner spatiality as a site of memory, intuition, and ontological depth. For Bachelard, natural imagery evokes affective reverberations; for Heidegger, poetic language is the space in which thinking dwells.

Third, Eastern philosophy—especially Lao-Zhuang thought and Zen Buddhism—provides a non-dualistic lens through which nature is read as a symbol of emptiness and transformation. Laozi's Dao represents nature as a fluid, formless force that transcends conceptual boundaries.

Based on these foundations, each literary text is analyzed through:

- Identifying dominant nature symbols
- Tracing the philosophical–aesthetic frameworks in which they are embedded
- Comparing symbolic function across Eastern and Western systems
- Interpreting multilayered meanings—from affect to transcendence

#### B. Corpus

The study selects ten representative authors from Eastern and Western traditions to construct a coherent symbolic dialogue.

##### Eastern Literature:

**1. Xuân Diệu:** Nature embodies the fragility of beauty and the finitude of time in poems such as *Vội vàng (In Haste)* and *Đây mùa thu tới (Here Comes Autumn)*, where transience becomes both an aesthetic imperative and an existential urgency. His vision of nature is sensuous, fleeting, and deeply human.

**2. Lưu Trọng Lư:** In *Tiếng thu (The Sound of Autumn)* and *Chiều thu ấy (That Autumn Afternoon)*, nature emerges as an affective landscape where memory and temporality converge. Autumn becomes an extension of consciousness—delicate, melancholic, and reflective of inner rhythm.

**3. Hàn Mặc Tử:** Through visionary poems such as *Đây thôn Vĩ Dạ (This is Vĩ Dạ Village)* and *Đau thương (Sorrow)*, nature is transformed into a metaphysical threshold—simultaneously luminous and anguished—where the sacred and the sensual intertwine. His landscapes pulse with spiritual rupture, ecstasy, and transcendental yearning.

**4. Trịnh Công Sơn:** Songs like *Biển nhớ (Sea of Memory)* and *Dấu chân địa đàng (Footprints in Paradise)* reimagine nature as a mnemonic and emotional terrain. The sea, the wind, and the passing sky are imbued with longing and loss, turning the natural world into a lyrical archive of love, memory, and impermanence.

**5. Bùi Giáng:** In works such as *Mưa nguồn (Primordial Rain)* and *Thi ca tư tưởng (The Poetics of Thought)*, nature becomes a metaphysical mirror of the self. Language, landscape, and being interweave in paradoxical motion—simultaneously poetic, errant, and ontologically fluid.

**6. Matsuo Bashō (Japan):** In seasonal haiku, especially from *Oku no Hosomichi (The Narrow Road to the Interior)*, Bashō distills nature into elemental flashes of presence. Each falling leaf, silent frog, or drifting cloud is rendered with Zen precision—capturing the sublime in the fleeting.

**7. Haruki Murakami (Japan):** In *Kafka on the Shore* and *Norwegian Wood*, forests and seas are portrayed as symbolic labyrinths—spaces of disintegration and metamorphosis. Nature becomes a psychic terrain where identity unravels and dreams leak into reality, echoing both surrealism and Eastern metaphysics.

##### Western Literature:

**8. Henry David Thoreau:** *Walden* presents nature as a mode of philosophical and moral life.

**9. Rainer Maria Rilke:** *Duineser Elegien (Duino Elegies)* treats nature as a threshold of transcendence.

10. Saint-John Perse: *Anabasis* employs metaphysical imagery—deserts, oceans, and winds as poetic language for the ineffable.

#### IV. RESULTS

##### A. *Wind – A Symbol of Journey, Dissolution, and Existential Freedom*

In literary symbolism, wind often represents motion and indeterminacy—a force in constant flux that unsettles fixed structures of thought. It frequently signifies invisible, existential impulses: the longing for freedom, metaphysical disorientation, and the dissolution of selfhood. As Ricoeur (1976) observes, a living symbol is one in which “language transcends its referential function to become the depth of thought” (p. 56). Wind operates in precisely this way: it speaks not through articulation, but through breath; it manifests not in stillness, but in movement.

- *Wind in Bùí Giáng – Thought as a Wandering Gust*

In Bùí Giáng’s poetry, wind becomes a symbol of errant consciousness—poetic thought detaches from logic and dissolves into metaphysical drift. In *Mưa nguồn (Primordial Rain)*, he writes:

“Một chiều gió lộng chân mây /  
Ta đi lạc cõi đời này thật xa...”  
(*One windy afternoon beneath the edge of sky /  
I wandered far from this world’s domain...*)

Here, wind is more than atmosphere—it is a centrifugal force that displaces the self into estrangement. Bùí Giáng refers to thought as “con gió lạ” (*a strange gust*), a force that belongs nowhere and settles nowhere. This aligns with the Daoist perspective in the *Dao De Jing*, where wind embodies the movement of Dao: invisible, unnamed, and ever-present (Laozi, 2001, Chapter 42). Through the lens of Kristeva’s (1982) *semiotic chora*, wind in Bùí Giáng’s poetry functions as a site of symbolic instability. The poetic subject is unmoored—it drifts, dissipates, and reshapes through the rhythm of language. Wind here is not a place—it is a becoming.

- *Wind in Bashō – The Flicker of Pure Being*

In contrast, Bashō’s haiku captures wind not as a force of chaos, but as a flash of existential purity. He writes:

笹の葉に  
風一すぢや  
命あり  
(*Beneath the bamboo leaves /  
A single breeze blows through—  
Life is present.*)

Through the Zen Buddhist lens of *satori*—a sudden flash of enlightenment—wind here is not a metaphor but a moment of Being. As Bachelard (1994) affirms, “the subtle movement of wind is a symbol of spiritual stillness becoming aware of itself” (p. 67). In Bashō’s poetic space, the breeze does not point beyond itself—it *is* presence.

- *Wind in Xuân Diệu – A Thirst for Life Amid Finite Dissolution*

For Xuân Diệu, wind is urgent, impassioned—a force that evokes the ephemerality of beauty and the irreversibility of time. In *Vội vàng (In Haste)*, he writes:

“Này đây lá của cành tơ phơ phất...”  
(*Here are the leaves of tender branches fluttering...*)

The word *phơ phất* (*fluttering*) is wind made visible—but it is not liberating. It gestures toward the imminent loss of life and form. As Kövecses (2002) explains, the metaphor *time is motion* underlies much of modern poetic imagery. Wind in Xuân Diệu’s verse is not a gentle presence; it traverses the human body as a temporal force, transforming existence into transience.

- *Wind in Hàn Mặc Tử – A Wind Dividing Flesh and Spirit*

Hàn Mặc Tử approaches wind with mystic melancholy. In *Đây thôn Vĩ Dạ (In this place, Vi Da village)*, he writes:

“Gió theo lối gió, mây đường mây...”  
(*The wind follows its path, the clouds theirs...*)

Here, wind and cloud—once in harmony—now part ways. Wind becomes the symbol of irrevocable separation. Through Tuan’s (1977) framework of *topophilia*, in which space reflects inner emotional terrain, wind in this poem registers the self’s fragmentation—cut off from the world, lost within itself.

- *Wind in Saint-John Perse – Wind as the Voice of Metaphysics*

In Perse’s metaphysical poetics, wind takes on the quality of a sacred voice. In *Anabase*, he writes:

“Le vent venait du désert, avec un silence qui pouvait hurler.”  
(*The wind came from the desert, bearing a silence that could scream.*)

According to Bachelard (1994), “wind in Perse’s poetry is the principle of metaphysical movement, where language collapses under the pressure of the spirit” (p. 84). Unlike Bashō’s presence or Xuân Diệu’s urgency, Perse’s wind is transcendental—it comes from the unnameable and carries the unsayable.

##### B. *Cloud – A Symbol of Dreamlike Thought, Egolessness, and Floating Awareness*

Among natural symbols, the cloud occupies a singular position: it is neither as grounded as earth, as forceful as wind, nor as profound as the sea. Instead, clouds hover—dissolving, shapeless, and weightless. Precisely because of this “non-abiding, non-grasping” quality, the cloud becomes an ideal symbol for impersonal modes of perception, egoless awareness, and dreamlike ontology. As Ricoeur (1976) notes, “The symbol is where knowledge is hidden in image, rather than in concept” (p. 54). In poetic discourse, knowledge does not appear as a proposition but as the lingering resonance of an unawakened dream.

• *Cloud in Bùi Giáng – Lost Between Dream and Wordlessness*

Few poets capture the spectral quality of clouds like Bùi Giáng. In *Ngàn thu rớt hột (Eternity scattered)*, he writes:

“Mây bay về núi chiêm bao /  
Gió trôi ngoài nghĩa lý nào nữa đâu.”  
(*Clouds drift toward the mountain of dreams /  
The wind flows beyond all meaning.*)

These verses evoke a mist that cannot be grasped or explained—only passed through. The cloud, here, is not a symbol of anything fixed, but of a dissolving thought suspended in silence. According to Kristeva (1982), when language returns to a *pre-symbolic* state, it enters a choral space where signs “hover without definition or naming, vibrating within a sea of affect” (p. 133). Bùi Giáng’s cloud thus embodies a poetic *chora*, a dreamspace where philosophy and poetry dissolve into vapor.

In the poem *Mây (Cloud)*, he writes:

“Ta là ai? Là mây? Hay là người mất bóng?”  
(*Who am I? A cloud? Or one who has lost their shadow?*)

This metaphysical question resists any final answer—for the cloud is not something to be known, but the site of unknowing. As Laozi (2001, Chapter 1) expresses: “道可道，非常道” (*The Dao that can be spoken is not the eternal Dao*). The cloud becomes the Dao in passage through emptiness.

• *Cloud in Lưu Trọng Lư – Autumnal Soul and Quiet Spirituality*

In *Chiều thu ấy (That autumn afternoon)*, Lưu Trọng Lư writes:

“Chiều thu ấy có một làn mây trắng /  
Bay lững lờ như áng hương thầm.”  
(*That autumn afternoon, a white cloud drifted /  
Hovering like a silent scent.*)

This cloud is so subtle it carries no meaning, only spirit. It does not signify but rather suggests—a soft, deep emotional landscape. Bachelard (1994) affirms that “great poetry does not speak, it suggests; it does not define, it lets you feel” (p. 17). Here, the cloud becomes a residue of memory, an unnamed longing, a spiritual presence that can only exist in disappearance.

More than atmospheric, Lưu Trọng Lư’s cloud signals a *psychological autumn*—not of season, but of internal fragility and loss.

• *Cloud in Haruki Murakami – Labyrinth of the Subconscious*

In *Kafka on the Shore*, Murakami frequently uses clouds to construct a liminal space between the conscious and unconscious. Mist-shrouded forests, grey skies, and boundless clouds symbolize fractured identity. According to Kövecses (2002), metaphors of the mind often draw from weather: the mind is the sky, emotions are rain, and clouds are the haze of unformed thought.

Clouds emerge at moments when Murakami’s characters embrace disorientation. Kafka Tamura gazes at the sky, sees the clouds, and realizes he is no longer a unified self, but a mist layered across unresolved selves.

In *Kafka on the Shore*, Murakami writes:

空はどこまでも曇っていて、雲の境目さえ見えなかった。  
(*The sky was overcast as far as the eye could see, and not even the edges of the clouds were visible*)  
(Murakami, 2005, p. 72)

Here, the cloud is no longer atmospheric—it becomes the surface of a fragmented psyche.

• *Cloud in Rainer Maria Rilke – Trace of the Sacred in the Sky of Language*

In *Duineser Elegien*, Rilke writes:

“Wer schaut so die Wolke / und löst sich nicht selber im Winde ein wenig?”  
(*Who gazes at the cloud / without dissolving a part of themselves into the wind?*) (Rilke, 2005, Elegy I)

Here, the cloud is no longer nature—it is the trace of the divine, the shimmer of presence within absence. For Heidegger (1971), the cloud becomes a *Ding*—a poetic object through which language reaches toward the ineffable (p. 213). When Rilke looks at clouds, he is not merely composing verse but witnessing the threshold of Being itself.

Rilke’s image resonates with the aesthetic of *penumbra*—a light that is neither luminous nor dark, just enough to remind us of our finitude beneath the infinite drift.

### C. Forest – A Symbol of Ontological Depth, Memory Labyrinth, and Wild Freedom

Throughout literary history, the forest has never functioned merely as a setting. It stands as a complex symbol: a space of refuge and rebirth, a wilderness opposing civilization, and a metaphysical labyrinth where the self sheds social

identity and confronts its own ontology. As Bachelard (1994) notes, “the forest is a space where the mind returns to its primordial subconscious” (p. 183). In modern literature, the forest becomes a semiotic field where language nears the ineffable.

• *Murakami – The Forest as a Liminal Zone Between Consciousness and the Unconscious*

In *Kafka on the Shore*, Haruki Murakami constructs an unmapped forest—a psychic terrain into which the protagonist descends as part of an internal odyssey. When Kafka Tamura enters the forest, he does not merely traverse trees; he walks through a fractured, non-linear self, where time slows and the boundary between dream and reality disintegrates:

“一度森に入ると、君はもう君ではなくなる。世界も世界ではなくなる。”

(*Once you enter the forest, you are no longer yourself. The world is no longer the world.*) (Murakami, 2005, p. 183)

According to Kövecses (2002), spatial metaphors frequently reflect cognitive states—“the mind is a space.” In Murakami’s work, the forest becomes the mental representation of disorientation, a symbolic field not of resolution but of inner remapping.

• *Thoreau – The Forest as Ethical Rebirth and Existential Clarity*

In contrast, Henry David Thoreau’s retreat into the forest in *Walden* represents a deliberate act of philosophical resistance. It is an ethical stance: to withdraw from societal constructs in order to encounter the essential truths of life. He writes:

“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life...”

(*Walden*, 1854, p. 87)

For Thoreau, the forest is not ambiguous or dreamlike—it is a symbol of inner freedom and moral recalibration. Interpreted through the lens of transcendentalism, it becomes the gateway to the divine self. Bachelard (1994) reinforces this reading, interpreting the forest in *Walden* as a space of existential design and linguistic purification (p. 198).

• *Bùi Giáng – The Forest as Lucid Madness and Pre-symbolic Flux*

In *Mưa nguồn (Primordial Rain)*, Bùi Giáng offers a radically different image: the forest as a zone of “mad clarity,” where logic dissolves into pure poetics. He writes:

“Rừng tôi ở không tên. Lá tôi lượm không tuổi. Gió tôi chạm không hình.”

(*The forest I live in has no name. The leaves I gather have no age. The wind I touch has no form.*)

This is not a forest one enters to understand—it is a linguistic wilderness where language no longer communicates but *resonates*. Kristeva (1982) refers to this as the *semiotic chora*, a pre-symbolic space where meaning is not constructed but felt. Bùi Giáng’s forest is precisely this—an uncharted terrain where syntax drifts, identity unravels, and thought spirals without anchorage.

• *Saint-John Perse – The Forest as Symbolic Absence and Poetic Origin*

In Saint-John Perse’s long-form poetic vision, the forest does not appear directly. Instead, it emerges as a symbolic void, a space of absence from which poetic language is gestated. As Bachelard (1994) states, Perse uses the forest as “a space capable of generating symbol” (p. 211).

In *Anabase*, the forest manifests through indirect, sensory metaphors—dust, breath, and glimmering light. It is never named, only felt. He writes:

“Et la poussière des forêts viendra jusqu’aux fontaines...”

(*And the dust of forests will reach the fountains.*)

This is the forest as trace, as residue. It is not represented; it surrounds meaning, functioning as poetic dark matter. Perse later deepens this vision:

“Et nos pensées s’étendent comme la rumeur des bois morts.”

(*And our thoughts extend like the murmur of dead woods.*)

Here, the forest is a cognitive landscape—silent, residual, yet generative. It is the murmur at the threshold of speech. Rather than being a physical setting, the forest becomes *negative space*—that which envelops the poem, gives it rhythm, and allows meaning to emerge from the unsaid.

#### D. *The Sea – A Symbol of Infinity, Spiritual Depth, and Metaphysical Resonance*

Among natural symbols, the sea holds a singular position: unlike the stability of the earth, the stillness of the forest, or the wayward drift of wind, the sea rises, surges, and dives into depth. From Homer to Trịnh Công Sơn, from Pascal to Bùi Giáng, the sea has been imagined as the energy field of the infinite—where the soul dissolves into tidal rhythm, and knowledge dissolves before immensity. As Bachelard (1994) asserts, “the sea is the self extended—interiority in its infinite form” (p. 148).

• *Saint-John Perse – The Sea as the Language of the Metaphysical*

In *Anabase*, Saint-John Perse does not depict the sea as a physical landscape but evokes it as a metaphysical entity—a liminal threshold between cognition and the sacred:

“Et la mer parla dans un grand silence.”

(*And the sea spoke in a great silence.*)

This is not a physical sea, but language unmoored from structure. As Bachelard (1994) notes, “the sea in Perse is not merely spatial—it is language in its purest state, where symbol no longer demands definition” (p. 149). The sea becomes metaphysical matter, a voice from beyond being, a wave that resonates without articulation.

• *Bùi Giáng – The Sea as Linguistic Drift and Poetic Freedom*

For Bùi Giáng, the sea is where language dissolves, where poetry no longer requires the shorelines of thought. In *Mưa nguồn (Primordial Rain)*, he writes:

“Biển ru ta thoát mọi bờ / Chỉ còn sóng gọi ơ hồ trăm năm.”

(*The sea lulls me away from all shores / Only waves calling vaguely for a hundred years.*)

The sea here is not realism—it is anti-institutional thought. It is where the self releases syntax and lets meaning drift. Kristeva (1982) terms this the *semiotic chora*—a pre-symbolic state where language flows as rhythmic, preverbal motion. The sea for Bùi Giáng does not need to be explained. It is to be experienced through its drifting cognition.

• *Haruki Murakami – The Sea as Liminal Unconscious and Inner Memory*

In *Kafka on the Shore*, the sea recurs as a symbol of nameless, collective memory. Kafka Tamura sits before it in silence, but in this stillness he comes closest to his truest self. Murakami writes:

少年は泣かず、何も考えず、ただ海を見ていた。そしてその沈黙の中で、海が語った。

(*The boy didn't cry, didn't think. He just looked at the sea. And in that silence, the sea spoke.*) (Murakami, 2005, p. 467)

Here, the sea is not narrative—it is affect. It becomes the lowest layer of the mind, where emotion precedes reflection. According to Tuan (1977), the sea is a *liminal zone* between “the land of the known” and “the water of the unnameable.” Murakami’s sea does not speak in reason—it murmurs in presence.

• *Trịnh Công Sơn – The Sea as Emotional Breath and Ontology of Love*

Trịnh Công Sơn composed the sea not through concept, but through feeling. In *Biển nhớ (Sea of memory)*, he writes:

“Biển nhớ tên em gọi về”

(*The sea remembers and calls your name.*)

Here, the sea cannot be measured or traversed—it is mood incarnate. As Ricoeur (1976) explains, symbols in love poetry do not transmit meaning—they unfold as “existential experiences” (p. 62). Trịnh continues:

“Ngày mai em đi / biển nhớ / tên em gọi về”

(*Tomorrow you leave / the sea misses you / and calls your name.*)

The sea, in Trịnh’s verse, becomes the very breath of separation, a soul that loves and remembers through rhythm. It is not the sea that speaks—it is the self longing through the sea.

### E. *The Moon: A Symbol of Stillness, Reflective Light, and the Sacred Beyond Language*

If the sun represents presence, reason, and the clarity of day, the moon signifies the hidden side of consciousness—silent, elusive, oriented toward memory, reflection, and the sacred that defies articulation. The moon illuminates without burning, appears without grasping. This very quality of non-imposition makes the moon a singular symbol in poetry—a form of light that touches what reason cannot say. Heidegger (1971) calls this *das schweigende Licht (silent light)*, where Being reveals itself in the interplay of concealment and disclosure.

• *Lưu Trọng Lư – The Moon as Seasonal Soul and Stirring Memory*

In *Tiếng Thu (Autumn Sounds)*, Lưu Trọng Lư does not directly invoke the moon, yet its presence permeates the mist, leaves, and gentle winds. In *That Autumn Afternoon*, however, he writes:

“Em không nghe mùa thu / Dưới trăng mờ thỏ thức?”

(*Don't you hear the autumn / Whispering beneath the dim moonlight?*)

Here, the moon is not a physical luminary but a spiritual veil draped over the world. Autumn—symbol of nostalgia and impermanence—becomes so delicate it can only be sensed intuitively. As Bachelard (1994) notes, “dim light is the backdrop for memory, the threshold between reality and dream” (p. 198). In Lưu Trọng Lư’s poetics, the moon is a form of interior light—a rhythm of perception that captures what is fragile and fleeting: autumn, love, poetry.

• *Bùi Giáng – The Moon as a Metaphysical Echo of Egolessness*

In *Ngàn thu rớt hạt (Eternity scattered)*, the moon appears frequently but never settles into a fixed symbol. He writes:

“Trăng còn không? Hay là tóc đã mọc / Trên một miền vô lý, biết không em?”

(*Is the moon still there? Or has hair already grown / On a realm of absurdity—do you know, love?*)

For Bùi Giáng, the moon does not light the path; it burns through the scaffolding of cognition. This is a moon of absurdity, silence, and detachment. Kristeva (1982) describes such moments as *semiotic ruptures*, when language withdraws and poetry surfaces as the breath of indeterminacy. The moon here is not to be remembered or possessed—it glimmers within a question without a subject.

• *Matsuo Bashō – The Moon as Pure and Silent Presence*

In Japanese haiku, the moon is a classic *kigo* (seasonal symbol) often associated with instant enlightenment. Bashō writes:

“秋の月 / 見る人もなし / それでも照る”

(*Bright autumn moon— / No one looks / Yet it still shines.*)

This verse expresses the Zen concept of *emptiness*: value does not depend on observation. The moon shines simply because it is. In Zen philosophy, the moon is ungraspable—it may only be silently witnessed as it passes through consciousness. In Bashō’s vision, the moon is not an object of interpretation but the very embodiment of *suchness*—pure, unmediated existence.

• *Rainer Maria Rilke – The Moon as Sacred Illumination from a Forgotten Beyond*

Although the word “moon” rarely appears explicitly in *Duineser Elegien*, Rilke’s verse is bathed in moonlight—an unseen light that discloses the sacred beyond the visible. He writes:

“Und das Licht fällt auf uns, / als ob es aus einem großen Abstand kam. / Vielleicht aus einem Himmel, der längst leer ist, / oder aus einem Raum, den die Engel vergessen.”

(*And the light falls on us, / as if it came from a great distance. / Perhaps from a heaven long emptied, / or from a space the angels have forgotten*). (Rilke, 1923, 2005, p. 45)

Here, moonlight is not a source of illumination but a metaphor of the sacred emerging from an unnamed realm. In Heideggerian terms, this is *Lichtung*—a clearing in which Being reveals itself not through words but through silence. Rilke’s moonlight is not visible—it is a metaphysical resonance from a forgotten beyond.

#### F. *Autumn – A Symbol of Waning Time, Finite Beauty, and the Breath of Impermanence*

In poetry, autumn is never merely a season of weather or changing foliage. It is the season of transition, decline, the impending loss of beauty, and the quiet awareness that time cannot preserve anything. As Bachelard (1971) writes in *The Poetics of Reverie*, “autumn is where the mind turns back—not to return, but to touch the depths of loss” (p. 127). In literary symbolism, autumn becomes the aesthetic embodiment of impermanence.

• *Xuân Diệu – Autumn as a Quiet Farewell to Youth and Beauty*

In *Đây mùa thu tới* (*Here Comes Autumn*), Xuân Diệu writes:

“Rặng liễu đìu hiu đứng chịu tang / Tóc buồn buông xuống lệ ngàn hàng”

(*The melancholic willows stand in mourning / Hair of sadness falls down in streams of tears*)

Here, nature is not a passive backdrop but a co-participant in unspoken grief. Autumn is not portrayed as objectively beautiful—it is beautiful precisely because it is fading. The poem concludes with a subdued farewell to youth:

“Đây mùa thu tới, mùa thu tới / Với áo mơ phai dệt lá vàng”

(*This is the coming autumn, the coming autumn / With pale dreams woven from golden leaves*)

As Kövecses (2002) observes, the metaphor “time is backward movement” allows us to experience autumn not just as a season of falling leaves, but as a psychological moment of quiet disintegration.

• *Lưu Trọng Lư – Autumn as a Mist Touching the Soul*

In *Tiếng thu* (*The Sound of Autumn*), Lưu Trọng Lư writes:

“Em không nghe rừng thu / Lá thu kêu xào xạc?”

(*Don’t you hear the autumn forest / Rustling with falling leaves?*)

“Em không nghe mùa thu / Dưới trăng mờ thôn thức?”

(*Don’t you hear the autumn / Whispering beneath the dim moonlight?*)

These rhetorical questions do not seek literal answers. Instead, they evoke a delicate, dreamlike atmosphere—thin as smoke, deep as longing. According to Bachelard (1994), this is the essence of the “psychological season,” when external landscapes mirror a consciousness steeped in nostalgia and emotional subtlety (p. 91). In Lưu Trọng Lư’s vision, falling leaves are not physical objects but silent signals of vanishing presence.

• *Bùi Giáng – Autumn as a Gentle Laugh Between Being and Nothingness*

In *Mưa nguồn* (*Primordial Rain*), Bùi Giáng writes:

“Thu rụng lá như tình rụng tiếng / Ta ngồi mơ nhặt lại hư vô.”

(*Autumn sheds leaves as love sheds its words / I sit dreaming, picking up the void.*)

Here, autumn transcends the natural world and enters a domain of sensuous philosophy. The falling leaves are no longer leaves—they are signs of dissolution so subtle that even the desire to understand dissolves. Bùi Giáng’s autumn is not meant to be interpreted, only inhabited. According to Kristeva (1982), this is a moment of semiotic suspension—when language loses direction and the season becomes a free-floating zone of contemplation.

• *Rainer Maria Rilke – Autumn as the Universe’s Final Breath Before Silence*

In *Herbsttag* (*Autumn Day*), Rainer Maria Rilke opens with:

“Herr, es ist Zeit. Der Sommer war sehr groß.”

(*Lord, it is time. The summer was immense.*)

This line reads as the universe’s quiet exhale—a sacred gesture of closure. All has been lived, and now comes the silence. Heidegger interprets this moment as *Being preparing to withdraw*—autumn as the threshold before unpresence. Rilke does not merely say “autumn arrives”; instead, he evokes the fading pulse of existence, closing one existential cycle to allow another to begin. Thus, autumn becomes a symbol of metaphysical transformation: from fullness to emptiness, from light to shadow, from language to silence.

#### G. *Summary of Symbolic Functions of Six Natural Motifs in Eastern and Western Literature*

This section examines six recurring natural motifs—wind, cloud, forest, sea, moon, and autumn—as symbolic structures that shape the poetic imagination in both Eastern and Western modern literature. Far from serving as

ornamental elements, these motifs encode complex cognitive, emotional, and ontological meanings. As Bachelard (1994) notes, poetic imagery “opens up the space of reverie,” transforming nature into a metaphysical resonance of interior life. Kristeva (1982) similarly conceptualizes poetic language as a semiotic *chora*—a pre-symbolic realm where meaning remains in flux.

Each motif operates as a dynamic metaphorical system: wind disperses consciousness, cloud dissolves ego boundaries, forest leads to inner transformation, sea evokes emotional and metaphysical depth, moon reflects silence and sacred presence, and autumn gestures toward temporal finitude. These recurring images form a kind of intertextual grammar, bridging sensory experience with philosophical abstraction.

Significantly, the recurrence of these motifs across diverse literary traditions suggests that symbolic nature functions as a form of trans-cultural cognition. According to Kövecses (2010), metaphor is not merely a feature of language but “a way of thinking and experiencing the world” (p. 3). From this perspective, natural imagery is not simply aesthetically intuitive—it constitutes an epistemological orientation, wherein nature becomes a vehicle for articulating the ineffable. Through the interplay of metaphor and semiotics, these motifs enact what Heidegger (1971) terms *world-disclosure*: the poetic unveiling of Being through elemental resonance.

By drawing upon theoretical frameworks such as Kristeva’s semiotic *chora*, Bachelard’s poetics of space, Heidegger’s ontology of Being, Ricoeur’s theory of symbolic hermeneutics, and Kövecses’s conceptual metaphor theory, this study affirms that natural motifs in literature are not incidental. Rather, they are epistemic instruments through which literary consciousness engages the world—not merely to represent it, but to think through it. Nature, in this light, becomes the architecture of poetic and philosophical insight.

## V. DISCUSSION

Viewed individually, each natural symbol—wind, cloud, forest, sea, moon, and autumn—functions as a distinct aesthetic and conceptual unit. Yet in intercultural and intersemiotic dialogue, these motifs converge to form a cognitive landscape of intersecting perceptions. Meaning does not emerge from isolated imagery but through dynamic and relational interplay.

Wind and cloud introduce themes of movement and impermanence—core tenets of Daoist and Zen thought. The wind never settles; the cloud belongs nowhere. Their transience evokes ontological freedom and egoless perception. In the poetry of Bùí Giáng, Bashō, and Hàn Mặc Tử, these motifs dissolve the ego-bound subject into a state of semiotic flux—what Kristeva (1982) terms the *semiotic chora*.

From this fluid foundation, forest and sea guide readers toward deeper ontological thresholds. In Murakami, the forest becomes a psychic labyrinth; in Saint-John Perse, the sea speaks through silence. These are liminal spaces where intuition overtakes language, and the self is reshaped through affect and non-verbal resonance.

Moon and autumn shift the symbolic register from spatial to temporal and interior dimensions. In Bashō and Rilke, the moon represents quiet illumination—light from a forgotten source. Autumn, in Xuân Diệu, Lữ Trọng Lữ, and Bùí Giáng, becomes an elegy for impermanence, marked not by clocks but by the fading of beauty. It invites surrender and contemplative understanding.

Together, these six motifs trace a symbolic arc:

**wind → cloud → forest → sea → moon → autumn**

This trajectory maps a journey from unstructured drift to reflective stillness. Wind initiates the movement; autumn completes it. Each motif pulses with thought, forming a rhythm that transcends cultural and linguistic boundaries.

Underlying this arc is the subtle but unifying presence of water—not merely as image but as symbolic principle. Wind stirs waves, clouds rise from vapor, forests thrive through hidden currents, the sea is water itself, the moon reflects on its surface, and autumn arrives through mist and rain. As Laozi writes, “Shàng shàn ruò shuǐ”—“The highest good is like water” (Dao De Jing, Chapter 8). In literature, water becomes the fluid matrix through which all symbols flow, dissolve, and reconstitute.

## VI. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

### A. Scholarly Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the six natural motifs function not as decorative elements, but as symbolic structures of thought embedded in poetic language. In both Eastern and Western traditions, nature is not passive scenery—it is a site of being, memory, and the unspeakable movement of consciousness. Each symbol opens a space where subjectivity resonates with the rhythms of the cosmos.

Wind and cloud articulate unstructured movement aligned with Daoist metaphysics, Zen aesthetics, and Kristeva’s *chora*. Forest and sea serve as terrains of transformation: the forest becomes a mnemonic labyrinth; the sea a metaphysical current where language gives way to presence.

Moon and autumn mark a shift from external space to temporal interiority. The moon, in Bashō and Rilke, offers quiet illumination; autumn, in Xuân Diệu and Bùí Giáng, embodies the wisdom of fading. Together, these motifs form a symbolic cartography—an interwoven epistemology where Eastern and Western visions of nature reflect and deepen one another.

Unifying all six is the persistent presence of water: wind stirs it, clouds emerge from it, forests depend on it, the sea contains it, the moon reflects upon it, and autumn arrives with it. Water is not a single image, but the fluid essence through which other symbols circulate.

Thus, nature in poetry is not depiction but dwelling—a symbolic grammar through which being is thought and felt.

### B. Research Recommendations and Applications

Building on these findings, this study proposes several directions for future research and educational development:

*Broaden the literary corpus across traditions.* Future studies may expand to include classical Chinese, postmodern, diasporic, feminist, and postcolonial literatures. Such an expansion would deepen our understanding of how nature functions symbolically across diverse linguistic, cultural, and philosophical contexts.

*Integrate symbolic analysis into literary education.* Symbolism should not remain confined to theoretical discourse. Incorporating symbolic interpretation into literature curricula encourages students to read natural imagery not as mere ornamentation, but as a gateway to philosophical, emotional, and epistemological inquiry.

*Adopt interdisciplinary symbolic frameworks.* The current model can be extended through engagement with depth psychology (e.g., Jung), existential psychoanalysis, or posthumanist theory—positioning nature not as a backdrop to human experience, but as an autonomous structure of meaning.

*Explore symbolic dyads.* Pairings such as cloud–water, moon–sea, or forest–wind offer rich interpretive potential. Analyzing these relational motifs across cultural frameworks may reveal complex layers of cognitive, affective, and metaphysical resonance.

*Develop a digital archive of symbolic motifs.* A curated database of nature symbols—including literary citations, comparative analyses, and theoretical interpretations—would serve as a valuable resource for literary pedagogy, cross-cultural research, and creative practice.

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