



Image and Symbol in the Works of Albert Camus

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Abstract:

The present research paper is an attempt to examine aspects of Camus's literary talents: his creation of symbols. The two images- sun and sea- recur in Camus's work and achieve symbolical force. The range of Camus's imagery is fairly narrow and derives almost entirely from the central experience of his life, his encounter with nature and surroundings. Images are concerned with the blinding sun. Algerian landscape is the main character and it is the main surroundings. It is within the context of this particular experience of nature that Camus's references to the sun and the sea need to be set. These images figure prominently in Camus's work because they are obviously the representative images of the type of landscape in which he was born and spent the formative years of his life.

Keywords: *Algeria, Sea, Sun, Landscape*

The present research paper will be confined to tracing the process by which two images Sun and Sea recur in this author's work and achieve symbolical force. The range of Camus's imagery is fairly narrow and derives almost entirely from the central experience of his life his encounter with nature along the North African littoral.

This experience is described directly and personally in his formal essay; "*Betwixt and Between*" 'Noces' and "*Le Minotaure on la Halte d' Oran.*" From these essays a distinct sensibility emerges, born of an essentially pagan experience of Natural Surroundings. One's awareness of this paganism does not have to wait upon an older Camus's confession of emotions "recollected in tranquility" The Algerian child was certainly father to the successful man of letters respectfully approached by the editors of reviews :

I am not a Christian I was born poor beneath a happy sky in
to a nature which inspires a feeling of harmony not hostility I
did not begin I privation but in plenitude. Later....But I feel I
have a Greek heart.¹

For the youthful Camus nature is animated by the ancient divinities He records the fact with an engaging if somewhat self Conscious directness when he refers to the " gods that speaks in the sun" The mark of this paganism naturally enough is the intense life of the senses If the incidence of his imagery is any guide Camus's most sharply attuned senses are those of sight and smell He conveys powerfully the acrid scent of wild herbs that catches at the throat and distinguishes the cargos of the visiting ships by their smell timber in the Norwegian vessels oil in the German, wine in the coasters Auditory images are few and mainly concerned with the cry of birds and the sigh of the wind These sounds usually serve to emphasize the surrounding silence and loneliness It is however visual images that predominate especially those connected with the blinding sun In this Algerian landscape light is crude and exorbitant Camus amasses images of light and the final effect in some passages is to produce that shimmering surface common to Impressionist

painting In the steady accretion of visual images, Camus suggests admirably that slight distortion of vision which intense light sometimes produces in extremely hot and dry climate. He contrives this by including in a series of visual images one image that combines both reflection of light and the sense of motion as the following passage exemplify : the silver plated sea, the raw blue sky the flower covered runs and the great swirls of light upon the heaps of stone. This device is symptomatic of the way in which Camus exploits his verbal resources in order to convey how powerful the impact of natural phenomena is. This is no more than an accurate reflection of his own reaction for he experiences a sort of vertiginous identification with nature. He describes how he feels himself to be assimilated into nature, annihilated by the elements whose vibrating life is everywhere present in Nuptials: The violent bath of sun and wind exhausted my life –strength now spread out to the four corners of the world forgetful, having forgotten myself, I have become the wind and within the wind the columns and arch here the stone slab smelling of the sun and the pale mountains set around the deserted city.

It is within the context of this particular experience of nature that Camus' work references to the sun and the sea need to be set. These images figure prominently in Camus's work because they are obviously the representative images of the type of the formative years of his life, Moreover, in Camus's autobiographical essay "sun" and "sea" are frequently set in contexts which lend them emotional overtones that prefigure the symbolical significance they attain later, in his imaginative writing.

For example allusions to the sun constantly evoke a tonality of violence. Camus is assaulted and dazed by the sun, stunned by the sun, he is permeated by it, a porous vessel receptive to its heat. The same sense of violence is suggested by Camus's use of the images, [swirls of sun] an image that recalls the characteristic whirling suns which dominate many of van Gogh's paintings and refract something of the intensity of that artist's vision. Again, the author writes of "his head reverberating from the symbol of the sun" and thus fuses in to one striking image the idea of a blinding reflection of light, and the same sense of a violent physical reaction like the pounding of blood in the ears, implied by the notion of "cymbals" as instruments of percussion. The area and significance of such an experience is extended by a comment that Camus makes in one of the essays Nuptials: But to be pure was to find once more that homeland of the soul where one link with the world becomes perceptible, where the beating of the blood overtakes the violent pulsations of the two – O'clock sun. Nor are the images that define the sun restricted to those which suggest simple violence, occasionally, they reflect the sense of destruction. Hence when the sun rains down its light on to the stony fields near Oran, it is described in a destructive image: The incendiary sun sets blinding fires. Then again, the sun is not infrequently associated with silence, that is to say, the absence or negation of specifically human activity. This is the case when Camus depicts the deserted sea off Algiers at Midday, or the ruins at Djemila where the presence of sun and the brooding silence of Nature- intensified rather than broken by the passing wind- confirm the transience of man's achievement. The sun and the silence in a sort of elemental union, preside over the empire of things where man figures almost as an accident. The sea features in these personal records as the constant solace, the source of refreshment in a burning climate. It is the arena of youth and hence, of life, in so far as life can be equated with youthful vigor and the beginning of the sexual cycle. Each summer the sea welcomes "a fresh harvest of flower like girls"; it is the scene of easy, animal joy, of the arrogant play of muscles. Even the fall of waves upon the shore evokes an erotic image, "the first rocks that the sea sucks with a kissing sound" and so, though more obliquely and remotely, suggests the sense of renewal. The waters of the sea, glimpsed at the turn of each street in Algiers, are a reminder of relief from the dust and the hot stone. The mineral landscape at Oran conveys the senses of each

street in Algiers are a reminder of relief from the dust and the hot stone. The Mineral landscape at Oran conveys the sense of the permanence of nature in its massive inertness “a stony paste”, but this permanence suggest death, as if evidence in the image (the earth’s bony remains), whereas the sea [an unchanged sea] also conveys the notion of permanence but in the context of perpetual renewal.

In his personal narratives of his life in Algeria, therefore, Albert Camus gives to ‘sun’ and ‘sea’ respectively a distinct tonality and if we now turn to his imaginative writing. We can examine the process by which they acquire a symbolical sense; achieve another dimension, in a word, while retaining marked affinities with that emotional experience with which they are associated in the essays. The importance that “sun” and “sea” achieve in this way can best be gauged, not from any mechanical count of the frequency with which they recur, but rather from the context in which they appear. Indeed both images tend to emerge fully as symbols only in passages of great significance in the novels and plays. Situated in such passages, they represent the focal point of a symbolical event or situation. The overriding metaphysical intention of the author may also supply, in certain instances, a relevant criterion by which to judge the force of his imagery. In general, one may say that physical relaxation and mental serenity are associated with evening and moonlight in Camus’s work, while violent sensation and the impulse to destroy are related to the intense heat and light of a Mediterranean day.

Albert Camus’s first novel, *The Stranger* (1942) crystallizes this tendency more precisely in a series of related acts and offers a striking example of the process by which the sun is transformed into a symbol. The decisive series of events in this novel begins when the central character, Meursault, accompanied by two acquaintances, Raymond and Masson, takes a walk along a beach near Algiers, after enjoying an early lunch. It is not quite midday but already the glare of the sun off the sea is described as unbearable. The three men walk steadily until they sight in the distance two Arabs with whom Raymond has already been involved on account of his maltreatment of a former Arab mistress. Raymond instructs his two companions on the roles they are to play in the event of an affray. The Arab draw nearer, and it is this point that Meursault observe (The overheated sand now seems red to me). In this phrase, an obvious physical reference to the intense light of the sun on the sand foreshadows, in a figurative sense, the violence that is to follow. The color of the sun under the sun’s rays suggests the shedding of blood. A scuffle ensues with the Arabs in which Raymond and Masson are involved. Blows are exchanged and then Raymond’s opponent produces a knife, wounding him in the arm and the mouth. Both Arabs then retreat cautiously behind the brandished knife, and, finally, take to their heels. While they retreat, the three Frenchmen remains stock still (nailed to the spot by the sun). Masson and Meursault assist Raymond to return to the hut and Meursault agrees to explain what has happened to Masson’s wife and his own mistress, Marie, both of whom had been left behind in the hut. In the meantime Masson accompanies Raymond to a neighboring doctor where he receives treatment, returning to the hut shortly afterwards. On his return, Raymond insists upon “taking the air” and when Masson and Meursault alarmed at the prospect of another fight, offer to accompany him, he flies into a rage. In spite of his outbursts, Meursault does in fact join him. They walk for sometime along the beach, Meursault becoming increasingly aware of the overpowering sun which is reflected off the sand in dazzling splinters of light. The two men reach a tiny rivulet at the edge of the beach and find the two Arabs lying there, one absorbed in playing a monotonous tune on a reed pipe. The oppressiveness and fatality of the situations are suggested by reference to the sun and the silence, while the faint sound of the stream and the notes of the pipe seem to express the potentialities, or at least the possibility, of life. Raymond, wishing to tackle his Arab scuttles away suddenly and a fight is averted. Raymond and Meursault

return to the hut but Meursault, reluctant as ever to communicate with other human being and dazed by the sun, does not enter the hut and returns along the beach for solitary walk. In course of this walk, the sun is described in terms of a hostile presence. It is as though the weight of the obstructs Meursault's progress, and the heat that emanates from it makes his body tense aggressively, as against a powerful assailant. The images employed here by Camus to describe the reflections of light, (each rapier of light) suggest precisely the hostile nature of the sun. Meursault longs for shade and sees ahead of him the rock behind which the Arabs had disappeared. Striding towards it, he realizes with surprise that Raymond's attacker is lying there alone. The encounter between these two men now becomes a central point of a complex image of light, so that the sun and the impulse to violence are invariably associated. The destructive act takes place under the aegis of the sun and seems to be a simple extension of its influence. The shape of the Arab dances before Meursault's eyes in the flaming air and the sea is like molten metal. It is at this point that the possibility of human initiative is suggested, but the sun overwhelms the human will:

"I realized that I only had to turn round and it would all be over. But the whole beach was reverberating in the sun and pressing against me from behind. I took a few steps towards the spring.I shook off the sweat and the sun. I realized that I'd destroyed the balance of the day and the perfect silence of the beach where I'd been happy. And I fired four more times at a lifeless body and the bullets sank in without leaving a mark. And it was like giving four sharp knocks at the door of unhappiness."²

Such a sun recalls to Meursault the heat on the day of his mother's funeral and this allusion further emphasizes the association between death and the sun. The foci of light multiply; first, a flash from the blade of the knife which the Arab has drawn, "[The light splashed out on the steel and it was like a long glittering blade striking me on the forehead]; next the blur of light through the beads of sweat that tremble on Meursault's eyelashes and fall across his vision like a mist, and then again, the glitter of the blade, the reflection from which painfully probes the eyes. The world spins; fire seems to rain out of the sky.

It will be seen how the sun, in its direct and indirect manifestations, provides a sort of baleful focus for these three related episodes and how the incidence of image of light increases as the events reach their destructive climax. The sun, experienced with such pagan receptivity in the early essays, again dominates these passages of "The Stranger" and unifies them in so far as its symbological use of the sun lies in the metaphysical intention that animates Camus's work the entire novel is an allegory of that absurd universe which Camus had described elsewhere –The Myth of Sisyphus (1942)-in philosophical terms. Meursault is the symbol of man perpetually estranged in the world and this conception is reinforced when Camus, lending the sun this point destructive influence, absolves man from responsibility- hence from guilt- by reducing him to something less than man, to the status of an irresponsible element in nature. In this way, the notion of the absurdity of life, which is the central and governing irony of so much of what Camus has written, is underlined and given dramatic colour.

In Camus's play The Misunderstanding, produced in 1944, the sun is again used, though more obliquely, as a symbol of destruction. The play is another extended allegory on the absurd universe, and its dramatic tension is derived from the same irony. A mother and daughter (Martha) who keep an inn in a remote corner of Czechoslovakia murder rich travelers who lodge with them. The son of the house (Jan), who had left home to seek his fortune, returns many years later as a wealthy man bringing with him his wife(Maria) and their child. He presents himself at

the inn without disclosing his inert body dragged to the river and thrown in, at dead of night. His wife comes in search of him the following day reveals his identity; Marthe discloses the happenings of the night but, instead of offering contrition or consolation to the distraught windows. This is a clear metaphysical irony but the motive which impels the two women to murder- even if intended figuratively- is oddly banal. It is the need to amass enough money, out of the pocket, of their victims, to escape to an easier and more carefree existence close to the sea, in a warmer climate. It is in relation to these aspirations that the sun again emerges as a symbol of fatality and destruction, for the land to which Martha longs to escape is represented only by the sun and the sea. These two symbols recur several times in her thinking and lure her on to new acts of murder. It is, however, significant that the goal of Martha's dreams is symbolized by the sea in as much as it holds out liberty (from toil, from the asperities of her native climate), but by the sun in the degree to which it offers dark oblivion for her past activities. Hence, the mother, when referring to this distant haven, suggests that there "the sun devoured everything." The sun, in a word, burns in Martha's mind, laughing the way to destruction. It is doubly destructive :first in that it can only be enjoyed over the corpses of Martha's victims, and next, in that the coveted power it radiates annihilates conscience and thought and so voids man of his humanity.

There occurs in Camus's work a disparity or at least an unresolved tension, between his literary sensibility and his philosophical ambitions, especially as crystallized in *The Rebel* (1951), a study which integrates and develops a number of themes previously introduced into Camus's work. *The Rebel* attempts to create a sort of classical point of equilibrium to which it will be relevant to refer problems of action and change in the contemporary world. It seems to be dedicated to an aphorism that occurs in the play, "State of Siege" : "There is no justice, but there are limits". In fact, in its injustice upon restraint, limit and moderation, the spirit of *The Rebel* is at variance with Camus's normal mode of feeling, which is impassioned and intensely subjective. Camus's most natural of expression is lyrical, by which I mean highly personal and emotive, and this feeling passes over into his prose technique, creating poetic overtones that derive, partly from the richness of his imagery, partly from his feeling for the rhythm and music of a phrase. It is true that what I conceive of as Camus's authentic manner I sometime deliberately concealed. Thus, the prose style of "The Stranger" which is clipped and laconic to the exigencies of his theme, that of conveying the sense of the absurd. In the same way, much of his novel, "The Plague" is written in a rather dry and meticulous prose, admirably suited to the ironical intention of the author. Even so, in both these novels a distinct lyricism continues to vibrate below the surface, often erupting in passages of genuine poetic force, especially when Camus introduces an elegiac note. The language of the plays, on the other hand, is often unrestrainedly lyrical. Indeed, there are moments particularly in "State of Siege" and "The Just Assassins", where lyricism passes into an inflated rhetoric which weakens the author's achievement. If I have dealt with this at some length, it is to suggest the element of Neo-Romanticism that exists in Camus's writing and which is underlined by the recurrence of the figure of the Romantic rebel in his plays- "Caligula" and "Ivan Kaliayev", For example- and by his tendency to exalt the life of the senses. It is in the light of this literary sensibility that Camus's use of sea symbolism needs to be considered. At this point it will be useful to recall what a distinguished contemporary poet recently wrote about the imagery of the sea and the desert in Romantic literature.

As places of freedom and solitude the sea and the desert are symbolically same. In other respects, however, they are opposites, for example , the desert is the dried up place, i.e. the place where life has ended, the Omega of temporal; existence....The sea, on the other hand is the Alpha of existences, the symbol of potentiality.³

Camus therefore approaches conventional Romantic usage of the sea in the symbolism of freedom which he associates with it, but he differs from many of the romantic writers who used it as a literary symbol divorced from their own experience. Camus turns to the sea for a symbol because it is for him an intensely lived experience.

In 'The Stranger' sea-bathing is one of the main delights of the clerk, Meursault. The sea is the scene of his first tentative caresses of Marie; it is a source of intense physical pleasure. As the action of the novel unfolds, however, the sea ceases to be merely a place where physical restraint disappears. To Meursault, awaiting trial in prison, the sea is identified with his longing for freedom. He associates the condition of being free with the sea, and the pleasures it offers the motion of running down to the sea, the sound of the waves, the sensation of his body slipping into the water. The sea thus becomes the symbol of freedom as contrasted with the confining walls of his prison-cell. In *The Plague* one of the consequences of the epidemic is the closing of the beaches and bathing pools of Oran. Maritime ceases completely and the port is deserted, cordoned-off by the military pickets. Hence, although the sea is there, it exists in the background and, as *The Plague* increases in severity, the presence of the sea becomes less and less real in the minds of the inhabitants of the town. In the early weeks, the sea continues to have a real existence for them. Since it serves as a palpable reminder of a link with that outside world with which they are confident of resuming contact in the near future. But, as *The Plague* establishes itself in all its terrifying permanence, the sea recedes from minds that no longer dare to dwell on freedom and are simply concerned to survive within the imprisoning walls of the town. As a symbol of the freedom, the sea diminishes in reality as the action of the novel proceeds. That is why one of the later episodes of *The Plague* seems peculiarly significant. Dr. Rieux, accompanied by one of his voluntary assistants, Tarrou, concludes an exhausting day by a visit to one of his regular patients, an old man suffering from chronic asthma. They pass from the sick-room up to a terrace on the roof. It is November; the evening air is mild, the sky clear and brilliant with stars. In this atmosphere of serenity, Tarrou is moved to give Rieux an explanation of his motives for joining the voluntary organization created to combat the epidemic and, further, to reveal something of his personality, his principal and his aspirations, which he defines as the attempt to become a saint without God. This long personal confession creates new bonds of intimacy, mutual sympathy and respect between the two men and, at this point, Tarrou suggests that a bath in the sea would be a fitting pledge of their friendship. Rieux instantly agrees and they make for the port gaining access to the quayside by virtue of their special passes. Here, for the first time in many months, they become really aware of the shifting presence of the sea. They plunge into the water and strike out together with regular, matching strokes. They feel themselves to be at last: "alone, far from the world, at last free of the city and *The Plague*." The swim ended, they return to the town, full of a strange and secret happiness and ready to resume the fight against the epidemic. It is impossible not to feel that this episode has the character of a symbolical ritual. The plunge into the sea is at once an act of purification from *The Plague* (in so far as the epidemic represents suffering, evil, and death), a rite of friendship and a means of recovering freedom or at least, of being recalled to it. In this last sense, the sea might be said to reassert itself as a symbol of freedom for these two men, to imbue them again with the need to be free. The sea that has been hidden, remote and ineffectual suddenly becomes actual and effective as a symbol of freedom in the heart of a city subjected to the arbitrariness and the brute determinism of *The Plague*.

In conclusion, we may say that when Camus particularizes, when he has his eye fixed on the object with a sort of innocent stare, then his images are fresh and telling- for instance the imagery of fruit he employs to suggest the passing seasons in a choral speech of the play "State

of Siege”! When, however, he reaches beyond the level of sense experience, he is less successful in bringing about that fusion of “disparate elements” which so often distinguishes new and memorable imagery. There is nothing remarkable about the choice of “sun” and “sea” as the respective symbols of destruction and freedom.

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