

A SHORT ANALYSIS OF ALBERT CAMUS IMAGERY AND METAPHOR

Joe Carvalko

"The greatest thing by far is to have a command of metaphor. This alone cannot be imparted by another; it is the mark of genius, for to make good metaphors implies an eye for resemblance." Aristotle in the Poetics (330 BC)

I do not intend to write a thesis on metaphor or imagery since that has been done countless times in the past 2500 years, and, I could not presume to do so in the limited space of this essay. But, I am nonetheless fascinated with the associative genius that is apparent when you read the best writers. Particularly, with Camus and I find myself drawn not solely by the plot or characters in his stories, but the poetic images and poignant metaphors the author drafts, the ones that the writer uses as links in a chain of ideas that move his stories forward. In reading Camus' *A Happy Death* I found myself speculating on the origin for the metaphors in the margins trying to determine if there was some kind of observable mental process of association that a writer might tap into.

For example, Camus' writes:

"Rose and Claire arrived. They shouldered their knapsacks. The path still followed the mountainside, keeping them in a zone of dense vegetation, prickly pears, olive trees, and jujubes. They passed Arabs on donkeys. Then they climbed again. At noon, crushed by the heat, drunk on fragrance and fatigue, they flung down their knapsacks and gave up reaching the top. The slopes were sheer and full of sharp flints. A wizened oak sheltered them in its circle of shade. The whole mountain quivered under the light. The cicadas were deafening as the heat assailed them under their oak. Patrice threw himself on the ground and pressed his chest against the stones, inhaling the scorched aroma. Under his belly he could feel the faint throbs of the mountain that seemed to be in labor. This regular pulse and the unremitting song of the insects between the hot stones finally put him to sleep (pgs. 129-130)."

Several sensory images are evoked by this paragraph by the repeated use of language related to *heat*. Let me begin with: "At noon..." where Camus follows the experience "...crushed by the *heat*, drunk on fragrance and fatigue..." Later in the same paragraph, he describes the "...whole mountain quivered *under the light*." Then he attributes the deafening sound of cicadas to "the *heat* (that) assailed them under their oak." In the next sentence he writes, "... inhaling the *scorched* aroma." And, finally writes, "...the unremitting song of the insects between the *hot stones* finally put him to sleep."

Note how the author invokes the word “heat” and then keeps returning to its influence on the life clustered on the mountain. He employs the technique of introducing a property, such as “heat” and then exhausting it in the context of the surrounding circumstances. And, Camus does not end in evoking the sensation of *heat*, he might have perceived, (for something was at work here), other connections in the idea of the word “fatigue”.

He writes, “...drunk on fragrance and *fatigue*, they flung down their knapsacks...” He follows this as he writes, “Patrice threw himself on the ground ...finally *put him to sleep*.”

The last point in the context relates to the mountain itself. Camus writes, “The whole *mountain quivered* under the light...Patrice threw himself on the ground and pressed his chest against the stones... *Under his belly* he could feel the *faint throbs of the mountain that seemed to be in labor*.”

He anthropomorphizes the mountain. It is alive, it “quivers”. He falls on it as he might fall on a woman, *chest against the stones*. And under his belly he feels the *mountain throbbing as it seemed to be in labor*. The associations are his *chest* and *belly* in intimate contact with a *mountain*, one that undoubtedly could look like the belly of a pregnant woman from a distance, a woman with the *faint throbs of labor*.

A second example from Camus’ *A Happy Death* makes associations with a rain storm and his mood, not an uncommon association or image when one thinks about sadness or despair. He begins with “...He had come during a light rain and, not wanting to arrive too early, had spent an hour wandering around the countryside. The day was dark, and even without hearing the wind Mersault could see the trees and branches writhing silently in the little valley. The silence was broken by a milk wagon, which trundled down the street past the villa in a tremendous racket of metal cans. Almost immediately the rain turned into a downpour, flooding the windowpanes. All the water like some thick oil on the panes, the faint hollow noise of the horse’s hoofs- more audible now the cart’s uproar-the persistent hiss of the rain, this basket case beside the fire, and the silence of the room-everything seemed to have happened before, a dim melancholy past that flooded Mersault’s heart the way the rain had soaked his shoes and the wind had pierced the thin material of his trousers. A few moments before, the falling vapor—neither a mist nor a rain-had washed his face like a light hand and laid bare his dark-circled eyes. Now he stared at the black clouds that kept pouring our of the sky, no sooner blurred than replaced. The creases in his trousers had vanished, and with them the warmth and confidence of a world made for ordinary men...(pgs. 35-36)”

The writer skillfully makes rain the literary figure to the senses of sight, touch, and hearing. He uses a combination of the metaphor, similes, and personification related to the rain.

“He had come during a *light rain* ... Almost immediately the *rain* turned into a downpour, *flooding* the windowpanes. ... All *the water like some thick oil* on the panes, ... *the persistent hiss of the rain*, ... a dim melancholy past that *flooded* Mersault’s heart *the way the rain had soaked his shoes* ... *the falling vapor*—neither *a mist nor a rain*—had washed his face ... he stared at the *black clouds* that *kept pouring* out of the sky, ...”

The paragraph is long, and necessary for Camus to stretch out the image of a dark uncomfortable day and the gradual inundation from the rain.

In a last example of Camus’ style of introducing a notion and then coming at it from several directions follows from a long paragraph (three pages long) where he writes about the protagonist, his dying mother, and the room that they occupied before her death, the one where he now lives alone. The author describes his pathetic life by taking us into his daily routine both at work and socially. In his private world he lives with his mother and when she dies in solitude, one that will later in the story be contrasted against his search for happiness by recourse to “ill gotten gains” and a life where the surroundings are illuminated by pretty young women and male friends of intellectual substance.

“He slept in what used to be his mother’s room. They had had this little three-room apartment a long time. Now that he was alone, Mersault rented two rooms to a man he knew, a barrelmaker who lived with his sister, and he had kept the best room for himself. His mother had been fifty-six when died... He could have found a more comfortable room, but he clung to this apartment and its smell of poverty. Here, at least, he maintained contact with what he had been, and in a life where he deliberately tried to expunge himself, this patient, sordid confrontation helped him survive his hours of melancholy and regret. ... He wanted to diminish the surface he offered the world, to sleep until everything was consumed. For this purpose, the old room served him well. One window overlooked the street, the other a year always full of laundry, and beyond it a few clumps of orange trees squeezed between high walls. Sometimes, on summer nights, he left the room dark and opened the window overlooking the yard and the dim trees. Out of the fragrance of orange blossoms rose into the darkness, strong and sweet, surrounding him with its delicate shawls. All night during the summer, he and his room were enclosed in that dense yet subtle perfume and if was as if dead for days at a time, he had opened his window on life for the first time (pgs. 14-16).”

The author compresses Mersault’s life by the physical and psychological pressures of his accommodations. After his mother dies he confines him a small room and one-third the space he formerly had. Beyond the physical existence, he begins to speak to the psychological contraction, “... a life where he deliberately tried to *expunge* himself...” And, “... He wanted to *diminish the surface* he offered the world...” At the end of the paragraph he combines the crowded appearance of his neighborhood view and its oppressive perfumes to his physiological confinement, where he writes, “... *One window* overlooked the street, the other a year always *full*

of laundry, and beyond it a few clumps of orange trees squeezed between high walls ... Out of the fragrance of orange blossoms rose into the darkness, strong and sweet, surrounding him... enclosed in that dense yet subtle perfume and it was as if dead..."

In this last line, I speculate that he maybe making the association between the death of his mother and the perfumes one encounters from the flowers laid out in mourning.

In the three examples we see but a small set of the Camus' style of weaving a motif by exhausting the manner in which we employ our senses to experience a world that may seem foreign objectively, but which we know and share universally.

Camus' *A Happy Death* is reportedly his first novel 1936-1938. It remained unfinished and unpublished until nearly eleven years after his death. The reason one scholar gives for it not being published is that it was supplanted by the highly acclaimed work entitled *The Stranger*. Roger Quilliot, preeminent specialist on the works of Camus writes the work is "both clumsily composed and remarkably written". The Afterword in the Vintage International version I read provides a rich essay on the craft aspects of the work. Reading the craft analysis and then work itself provided insights into aspects of the novel, that otherwise would have been only superficially apparent to me.