

# Tracks in the Snow: Irony and Betrayal in Camus's "The Guest"

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## Summary

The carefully placed references to the sudden snow and its persistence in Camus's "The Guest" indicate its importance in the story's ironic conclusion. The tracks made by Balducci's horse and his Arab prisoner, and later by the Arab and Daru, will lead the Arab's comrades to Daru's schoolhouse and convince them that Daru has delivered him to the French authorities. Thus both Daru and the prisoner's comrades will be betrayed: Daru will be punished for a crime he did not commit, and the comrades will betray their cause by punishing an innocent man.

## Opsomming

In "The Guest" van Camus dui weldeurdragte verwysings na skielike en aanhoudende sneeuval op die belangrikheid daarvan vir die verhaal se ironiese slot. Die spore wat Balducci se perd, sy Arabiese gevangene, en later die Arabier and Daru in die sneeu agterlaat, lei uiteindelik die Arabier se kamerade na Daru se skoolgebou en oortuig hulle dat Daru hom aan die Franse owerhede uitgelewer het. Beide Daru en die gevangene se kamerade word sodoende verraai: Daru word gestraf vir 'n misdaad wat hy nie gepleeg het nie en die kamerade verloën hul saak deur 'n onskuldige man te laat boet.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, which Albert Camus wrote in 1940 "amid the French and European disaster" (1942: Preface, v) he defines his sense of the absurd and its resistance to reason: "A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger .... This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity" (1942: 6). The absurd is the irrecoverable, incongruous distance between one's life and its setting; between one's desires and the actuality of the world around him: "The world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart" (1942: 21).

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The isolation and predicament of Daru, the French schoolmaster in "The Guest"<sup>1</sup> who is ordered by the gendarme Balducci to take an Arab prisoner to French authorities, superbly exemplifies Camus's elucidation of the absurd.<sup>2</sup> The setting is the North African desert, a vividly evoked host eternally indifferent to its varied guests; the narrator describes the desert as "cruel to live in, even without men", and a place where "nothing had any connection with man" (1957: 92).

The narrator also insists that, despite this harsh environment, Daru is comfortable living here: Daru "had been born here. Everywhere else, he felt exiled" (1957: 88). Later, after Balducci has left and Daru is temporarily alone in his room, the narrator adds that, "No one in this desert, neither he [Daru] nor his guest [the prisoner], mattered. And yet, outside this desert neither of them, Daru knew, could have really lived" (1957: 98). The omniscient narrator clearly establishes Daru's contentment at living in an eternally hostile environment, a bleak desert of stones, that he knows is indifferent to his very existence.

Further, Camus magnifies the "divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting" by emphasizing the unusual, sudden snowfall that isolates Daru in his school and that is yet another example of why the region was "cruel to live in" (1957: 88). The word "snow" occurs twelve times in "The Guest", and "blizzard", which suggests the ferocity of the storm, occurs once. Camus mentions the snow at several significant moments in the narrative, from the initial pages through to its final moments, and these instances demand scrutiny as significant components of this masterful story. I shall focus on Camus's descriptions throughout the story of the remaining snow on the plateau where Daru's school is located; on the tracks that the characters make in the snow as they approach or leave Daru's compound; and on Camus's description of the geographical orientation of Daru's location. These details are carefully integrated and central to the story's essential irony: that despite his humane treatment of the Arab the sudden, freakish snow will betray Daru in the only place where he believed he could live.

The relationship between Daru's locale and the falling snow has received some limited, although quite diverse, commentary. John K. Simon writes that Daru had initially sought a "safe place" rather than being "exposed to the extremes of weather, isolation, and choice ..." (1964: 290). Paul A. Fortier argues that Daru is "between two climatic conditions," the normal

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1. As several commentators have noted, Camus's title in French, "L' Hôte", means both "host" and "guest", and emphasizes the ambiguous relationship between Daru and the Arab prisoner. See especially Michael D. Sollars 2010, Donald Lazere 1989, and David Carroll 2007.
  2. Rob Roy McGregor 1997 examines "The Guest" and "The Silent Men" in the light of Camus's description of the absurd in *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

desert weather and the sudden snow: “The snow changes the nature of the countryside ... mutes the sharp sound of boots on the rocky ground as it attenuates the harshness of the stone ... [and] neutralizes the countryside’s mineral hardness, a fundamental element of the universe of the desert” (1973: 209). Susan Tarrow observes that, “The snowfall represents a brief reprieve, a temporary truce before hostility is renewed. When the sun shines again, Daru feels a kind of exaltation, but it is as if the sun were in league with the rocks against him, quickly drying out the puddles of melting snow and returning the landscape to its former rockiness” (1985: 179). Conversely, Edwin P. Grobe terms the sudden snow “brutal” (1966: 358); and, perhaps most surprisingly, given the last line of the story, Rob Roy McGregor claims that, “The snow has only interrupted [Daru’s] commerce with others ... and, after the snow melts, his life will return to normal” (1997: 311). On the contrary; Daru’s life will never return to normal. None of these critiques consider where Camus interjects the persistent snow nor how the tracks that the characters make affect Daru’s fate.

Camus’s narrator mentions the sudden, unusual snow six times within the first four pages of the story:

The schoolmaster was watching the two men climb toward him.  
... They were toiling onward, making slow progress in the snow, among the  
stones on the vast, deserted plateau .... They were following the trail although  
it had disappeared days ago under a layer of dirty white snow.  
(1957: 85)

Snow had suddenly fallen in mid-October after eight months of drought without the transition of rain, and the twenty pupils, more or less, who lived in the villages scattered over the plateau had stopped coming .... The sky was not so dark, for the snow had stopped falling during the night (1957: 86).

At two in the afternoon it seemed as if the day were merely beginning. But still this was better than those three days when the thick snow was falling amidst unbroken darkness with little gusts of wind that rattled the double door of the classroom (1957: 87).

And suddenly this snow, without warning, without the foretaste of rain. This is the way the region was, cruel to live in, even without men – who didn’t help matters either. But Daru had been born here. Everywhere else, he felt exiled (1957: 88).

The storm has isolated Daru. His students have stopped coming, and the delivery truck from Tadjid will not return for forty-eight hours. In the fourth reference the narrator specifically identifies Daru as content in, and accepting of, his environment; elsewhere he feels exiled. Despite the cruelty of the desert, emphasized initially by the severe, freakish blizzard, Daru accepts it as the only place he could have lived.

Equally important in these initial pages are the geography and orientation of Daru's schoolhouse and lodging. During the snowstorm Daru has heated "only the single room that was his lodging, adjoining the classroom and giving also onto the plateau to the east. Like the class windows, his window looked to the south too. On that side the school was a few kilometers from the point where the plateau began to slope toward the south" (1957: 86). East and south: Daru's lodging faces east, and since Daru looks south as "the two men climb toward him," they are moving north toward the "abrupt rise leading to the schoolhouse built on the hillside" (1957: 85). The Corsican Gendarme Balducci, on horseback, brings with him, on foot, an anonymous Arab prisoner who has killed his cousin, possibly in a desperate dispute about food amid the devastating drought.<sup>3</sup> The initial tracks in the snow occur here: those of Balducci's horse and the prisoner's footsteps as they ascend the "abrupt rise" heading toward Daru's compound covered in snow from the three-day blizzard.

Shortly after Balducci and the prisoner arrive at Daru's school they move into the classroom, where Camus creates an emotionally complex scene. Balducci, referring to police orders and papers that Daru must sign, insists that Daru must take the prisoner to the French police headquarters in Tinguit the following day. In this colonial setting the Arab is a prisoner in his own land; as David Carroll explains, "Colonialism reverses the situation of host and guest, because those who should in theory be at home in their homeland and in the position of hosts offering or refusing to strangers are precisely those who are treated as strangers in a homeland no longer theirs. They are thus at the mercy of their foreign hosts, the occupiers and usurpers of their homeland" (2007: 74). Suddenly burdened with an unwanted guest, Daru faces a choice that he desperately tries to avoid making. However, his initial actions toward the prisoner are kind. Realizing how cold the Arab is, Daru offers to make tea for both him and Balducci. "When he held out the glass of tea to the prisoner, Daru hesitated at the sight of his bound hands" (1957: 90). Daru asks if the prisoner's hands might be untied, Balducci consents, and Daru kneels beside the prisoner and unties his hands. As Daru symbolically "lowers" himself to the Arab's level, this literal "untying" of him within Daru's abode symbolically frees the prisoner from French control and anticipates Daru's refusal to hand him over to the French authorities. In the presence of the militaristic Balducci, Daru momentarily reverses the colonial guest/host dichotomy by voluntarily acting not only as the prisoner's humane, respectful host, but also as his servant, *as if* Daru's classroom were the Arab's home and Daru were obliged to serve him. Camus concludes this scene with Balducci again ordering Daru to take the

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3. Grobe (1966) and Hurley (1993) examine the likely social, political, and psychological factors affecting the life of the Arab as Camus presents him in the story's setting during the early years of the Algerian revolt.

prisoner to Tinguit, and ironically telling Daru that after he has fulfilled the orders, “You’ll come back to your pupils and your comfortable life” (1957: 92). Balducci’s remark is starkly ironic: Daru’s life will be neither normal nor comfortable.

Immediately after Balducci’s statement, Camus again mentions the snow as an element of the harsh, indifferent desert:

Decidedly, the weather was clearing and the light was increasing over the snowy plateau. When all the snow was melted, the sun would take over again and once more would burn the fields of stone .... where nothing had any connection with man.

(1957: 92)

Recall that, “Like the class windows, Daru’s window looked to the south too” (1957: 86). As Daru looks south from the classroom the light is increasing, and this brief description of the changing weather also describes Daru’s anticipation of the sun that will again “burn the fields of stone.” During the ensuing conversation between Daru and Balducci about whether or not Daru will turn over the prisoner to the French authorities, the snow lingers on the plateau. Balducci describes the Arab’s brutal killing of his cousin “like a sheep” (1957: 93), and despite Daru’s having “served” tea to the Arab moments before, Daru “felt a sudden wrath against the man, against all men with their rotten spite, their tireless hates, their blood lust” (1957: 93). Daru resists Balducci’s impulse to re-tie the prisoner, and ironically insists that he will “have time to see them coming” if, as Balducci speculates, there “is an uprising” (1957: 94). Although he does sign Balducci’s order, Daru, wishing to remain above men’s hates and blood lust, insists that he will not turn over the prisoner, and angers Balducci, who, claiming that Daru has “insulted” him, leaves abruptly:

He looked at the Arab, motionless in the same spot, sniffed peevishly, and turned away toward the door. “Good-by, son,” he said. The door shut behind him. Balducci appeared suddenly outside the window and then disappeared. His footsteps were muffled by the snow.

(1957: 96)

Camus frames this testy scene with references to snow; it lingers on the plateau, and it muffles Balducci’s footsteps. When Balducci leaves, heading south, his horse will leave tracks in the snow as they head downhill toward the base of the foothills. This second set of tracks will reveal that the Arab prisoner has been left with Daru. Whether one assumes that the prisoner’s comrades begin walking north toward Daru’s compound later that night or early the following morning, nonetheless because in the morning the snow still lingers on the plateau we can surmise that fairly high up the trail both

the earlier tracks of Balducci's horse and the prisoner and the later tracks of just Balducci's horse would still be visible.

After Balducci leaves, Daru retreats to his room. The following paragraph, which Camus places at the centre of his story,<sup>4</sup> describes precisely Daru's geographical location relative to the lingering snow and his willing embrace of this harsh locale:

[Daru] had requested a post in the little town at the base of the foothills separating the upper plateaus from the desert. There, rocky walls, green and black to the north, pink and lavender to the south, marked the frontier of eternal summer. He had been named to a post farther north, on the plateau itself. In the beginning, the solitude and the silence had been hard for him on these wastelands peopled only by stones .... No one in this desert, neither he nor his guest, mattered. Any yet, outside this desert neither of them, Daru knew, could have really lived.

(1957: 97-98)

Had Daru been assigned the post he initially requested further south, at the "frontier of eternal summer", the snow that has suddenly fallen at the higher elevations on the plateau presumably would not have fallen at all; or, most likely, would have melted much faster in the drier, hotter climate of the southern foothills. I do not argue that one can predict the vagaries of weather in the North African desert. However, I do argue that Camus's inclusion of the difference between Daru's initial wish and his actual assignment is crucial when considered with Camus's repeated references to the snow around Daru's compound and his references to it in the story's final moments. The stones will reappear, but not before Daru and his prisoner set out the following morning, heading east, walking in snow.

When he hears no noise in the classroom, Daru is "amazed at the unmixed joy he derived from the mere thought that the Arab might have fled and that he would be alone with no decision to make" (1957: 98). The prisoner, however, is still there. Daru must continue to deal with him, and his realization that neither he nor his prisoner could have lived elsewhere establishes the context for the story's ironic conclusion. For the second time Daru acts hospitably toward his Arab "guest": he "set the table for two," baked a cake for them, "went out to the shed to get cheese, eggs, dates, and condensed milk," left him alone, and placed his revolver "in his desk drawer" (1957: 98, 99). When Daru "came back to the room, night was falling. He put on the light and *served* [my italics] the Arab" (1957: 99). As the prisoner does not speak French, we are to imagine their ensuing

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4. In the Vintage edition, tr. O'Brien, "The Guest" covers pages 85 to 109, twenty-four pages. This paragraph occurs on page 97, exactly half way.

conversation occurring in Arabic, itself an acknowledgement of the prisoner's culture.<sup>5</sup>

In this intimate setting, amid the dying light and the remaining snow, the prisoner explains why he killed his cousin, and Daru then asks him if he is sorry. "The Arab stared at him openmouthed. Obviously he did not understand" (1957: 100). Jeanyves Guérin writes that in this brief dialogue, "Daru ... n'a pas trouvé les mots appropriés. L'Hôte reste l' autre" (2004: 148). ["Daru ... has not found the right words. The guest remains 'the other.'"] Guérin's remark is astute; either we are to imagine that Daru's Arabic here is inaccurate or, more likely, that the notion of "being sorry" is not within the prisoner's cultural understanding of his killing his cousin. Regardless of his efforts, Daru remains estranged from the guest whom he has "served" twice.

The Arab then asks Daru if the gendarme will return. Daru says, "I don't know", and the prisoner asks, "Are you coming with us?" (1957: 101). There are two possible meanings of "us". One includes Daru, the prisoner, and Balducci. However, Daru has told the prisoner that he does not know if Balducci is returning, and since Balducci has told Daru that the Arab does not understand French, presumably the Arab has not understood that earlier conversation. The second, and more likely meaning, is that the Arab knows that his comrades will eventually come for him and that because Daru has untied his hands, eaten with him, prepared a bed for him, and left his gun in the classroom Daru is at least sympathetic to the Algerian cause. A moment later the prisoner "stretched out on top of the blankets," and Daru, standing above him, asks "Why?" The Arab "opened his eyes under the blinding light and looked at him, trying not to blink," and then repeats "Come with us" (1957: 101). Events in the latter third of the story strongly suggest that here the prisoner's repeated "Come with us" is his attempt to urge Daru to leave with him, perhaps even to join the Arab cause.<sup>6</sup> The prisoner knows that despite Daru's gentle treatment of him and their shared meal in his secluded quarters, if his comrades come for him Daru will be punished. The tracks

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5. Moishe Black 1989 argues that despite the rituals of desert hospitality that Daru would have learned, Daru and the prisoner remain isolated. Eve Celia Morisi 2007 describes the setting of "The Guest" as a "corrélât objectif d'une stérilité mortifère" ["objective correlative of a deadly sterility"], and argues that "La terre d'Algérie décrite ici constitue le théâtre d'un dénuement qu'aggrave une nouvelle entrave à l'institution de l'hospitalité: une guerre larvée entre les colonisés arabes et les colonisateurs français" (161). ["The land of Algeria described here constitutes a scene of destitution that aggravates a new obstacle to the institution of hospitality: an insidious war between the colonized Arabs and the colonizing French."]

6. On the possible meanings of "us," see especially Showalter (1967: 348); and Hurley (1993: 88-89).

left in the remaining snow around Daru's compound, well above "the little town at the base of the foothills separating the upper plateaus from the desert" (1957: 97), will betray Daru's noble, humane gestures and likely lead to his death.

As Daru and the Arab lie in the small room Daru ponders "a sort of brotherhood he knew well but refused to accept in the present circumstances" (1957: 102). He continues to reject what his generosity has created: an implied, though admittedly tentative, bond between himself and the Arab. When the Arab stirs a second time, Daru remembers that his revolver is still in the drawer of his desk; however, presumably trusting the Arab, he chooses neither to retrieve it nor to move. When the Arab heads out the door "at the end of the room that opened into the shed," Daru thinks, "He is running away .... Good riddance!" (1957: 103) and again mentally rejects the bond that his actions have forged with the Arab since he untied his hands and served him tea. Daru surmises that "the guest" – note the narrator's continued use of this term to designate the Arab's relationship to Daru – "must be on the plateau," and not until after he returns to his bed does Daru fall asleep. The narrator then tells us that, "later [Daru] *seemed*, [my italics] from the depths of his sleep, to hear furtive steps around the schoolhouse" (1957: 103-04); however, convinced that he was dreaming, Daru "went on sleeping." In the final reference to the night's strange events, the narrator states that when Daru awoke the next morning "the Arab was asleep, hunched up under the blankets, his mouth open, utterly relaxed" (1957: 104).

The following paragraph is central to my argument. For the third time, Daru and the Arab share a meal: "The coffee was ready. They drank it seated *together* [my italics] on the folding bed as they munched their pieces of the cake" (1957: 104). Then, while the Arab is washing, Daru walks through the classroom and out onto the terrace, and Camus mentions the snow twice: "On the ridge the snow was melting in spots. The stones were about to reappear"; Daru crouches "on the edge of the plateau," thinks of Balducci, and, feeling "empty and vulnerable," throws a pebble that "[sinks] into the snow" (1957: 104-105). Despite just sharing food with the Arab, Daru is now trapped by his own conflicting emotions. He is revolted by the man's crime, but he also curses the authorities who have brought the prisoner to him, as well as the prisoner himself who "had dared to kill and not managed to get away"; yet he persuades himself that "to hand him over was contrary to honor" (1957: 105). During the night Daru had hoped that the Arab was escaping, just as earlier he "was amazed at the unmixed joy he derived from the mere thought that the Arab might have fled and that he would be alone with no decision to make" (1957: 98). Regardless of whether one argues that here Daru errs by refusing to take decisive action in the face of the looming Arab threat about which Balducci had warned him, or by trying to absolve himself from a moral responsibility, the crucial point is the



lingering snow on the plateau. Susan Tarrow observes that, “In ‘The Guest’ ... despite the sympathetic portrayal of characters, it is clear that Daru’s position is untenable. Warm human bonds between individuals are not enough to assure a peaceful settlement of struggle in the political arena” (1985: 181). Yes, Daru’s dilemma is untenable; however, he will be betrayed not by indecision – he does offer the Arab a choice – or by a moral failure, but ironically by his and his guest’s departing tracks in the remaining snow.

Daru prepares a packet of food and money, decides not to take his revolver, and then “start[s] toward the east, followed by the prisoner” (1957: 106). Thinking he has heard “a slight sound behind them”, Daru “retraced his steps and examined the surroundings of the house; there was no one there” (1957: 106). Camus’s narrative here is ambiguous, as is the narrator’s earlier remark that “from the depths of his sleep” Daru “seemed to hear furtive steps around the school-house” (1957: 103-104). Were the furtive steps that Daru *seemed* to hear those of the Arab’s comrades bent on revenge? If others had been outside the schoolhouse during the night, for how long? Camus deliberately does not answer these questions; they are part of readers’ immersion in the mystery of this setting and its unforgiving landscape “where nothing had any connection with man” (1957: 92). However perplexing Camus makes this one evening of his story, as in its opening pages we must not forget the unfathomable snow.

The narrator relates that, “They walked for an hour and rested beside a sharp peak of limestone. The snow [its final appearance] was melting faster and faster and the sun was drinking up the puddles at once, rapidly cleaning the plateau, which gradually dried and vibrated like the air itself” (1957: 106). They are walking east, into the sun that is rapidly erasing the steps that Daru and the Arab make as they walk away from the schoolhouse. For the second time, the prisoner will leave tracks in the snow that his comrades can see. Since after one hour of walking, even in the bright sun, the three day’s snowfall is still “melting” but *not* completely melted, these tracks would have been visible to anyone who came upon them early in the morning. Since the narrator does not mention Daru’s seeing any tracks around the schoolhouse after he turns around shortly after starting, we must assume either that no one was outside at night or, if others had been there, Daru somehow missed seeing their tracks when he returned to the schoolhouse. The more likely scenario, given that Daru examines “the surroundings of the house” (1957: 106), is that the Arabs who scrawl their death threat on the blackboard arrived after Daru had briefly returned to the schoolhouse and he and the Arab have then resumed walking east. The Arabs therefore arrived *before* the sun has melted the tracks that tell them what they want to believe: that Daru has taken their comrade to the French prison at Tinguit.

Daru’s offers the Arab a choice: “At Tinguit you’ll find the administration and the police. They are expecting you”; “That’s the trail across the plateau.

In a day's walk from here you'll find pasturelands and the first nomads. They'll take you in and shelter you according to their law" (1957: 107-108). During their last moment together the Arab, a "sort of panic ... visible in his expression" (1957: 108), frantically tries to get Daru to listen to him. The narrator does not tell us whether the Arab *knows* that his comrades will rescue him, or that they will even try. However, given Daru's respectful treatment of him as his "guest," at this moment he is offering Daru a last chance to become *his* guest, for he obviously believes that his comrades will eventually come for Daru and judge him harshly.

At the top of a little hill, Daru stops: "The rock-fields to the south stood out sharply against the blue sky, but on the plain to the east a steamy heat was already rising. And in that slight haze, Daru, with heavy heart, made out the Arab walking slowly on the road to prison" (1957: 108-109). Each offers the other an escape; neither takes it. The Arab walks toward Tinguit, where the authorities will try him for murder under French law.<sup>7</sup> Daru refuses to go with the Arab, and instead returns to his compound, walking west, in traditional western iconography toward judgment and death. At the hands of the revengeful Arabs, who believe that Daru has "handed over our brother" (1957: 109), Daru will likely find both. To his presumed protest that he gave the prisoner, his guest, a choice, the Arabs will respond that they saw Daru's and their comrade's tracks in the snow heading east, and they will draw the conclusion they desire.

David Carroll poignantly observes: "At the end [Daru and the Arab] are not only alone but also enemy brothers in spite of themselves, condemned to solitude and death. Each is in some sense responsible for the death of the other, without meaning or wanting to be. Each is thus in part also responsible for his own death as well in a cycle of violence from which there is no escape, no neutral ground, no effective position that is also just" (2007: 82-83). No escape indeed; Daru can never prove that he offered the Arab a choice.<sup>8</sup>

Because the Arab chooses prison, his choice ironically fulfils Balducci's order, which Daru tried but failed to contravene. Yet Daru will still suffer.

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7. John Erickson (1988) observes that "The irony of Daru being threatened with retribution for supposedly delivering the Arabs' comrade ... indicat[es] the essential unreason (existential absurdity) of the outcome" (85). Gerald Stacy 2003 writes that the Arab "has deified that which will crush him" (90). Daniel K. Muhlestein (1999) sees Daru as an agent of the French state whose hospitality ironically teaches submission.

8. Griem (1993) writes that both Daru and the Arab "have acted according to the dictates of their different moral codes .... That the French intellectual and the Arab tribesman are aligned in this existentialist dilemma seems to me to add significantly to the poignancy of the story's resolution" (98).

The Arabs who scribble their threat “among the winding French rivers” (1957: 109) believe that Daru has betrayed their comrade, themselves, and their political cause. They know where their comrade had been taken initially because of the tracks that he and Balducci’s horse made as Balducci herded him to Daru’s school. They also know that he spent the night at Daru’s compound, and that he and Daru headed east early in the morning. But they can never know that Daru unbound the Arab and treated him humanely in an effort to calm the systemic animosity of this colonial scene. The tracks they see in the snow lead them to erroneous conclusions and presumably to violence against an innocent man, and their ignorance will betray their claim of just revenge.

As a coda to Camus’s compelling narrative consider two further points. First, just as the Arab’s comrades “track” the prisoner both to and from Daru’s compound, so the reader attempts, not always successfully, to “track” the story’s causes and effects. The reader knows little about the Arab’s motivation for killing his cousin; cannot be certain his comrades were outside Daru’s compound at night; and the Arab’s reason for choosing the French prison remains as mysterious – and perhaps as disheartening – to the reader as it is to Daru. The reader is thus immersed in the maddening circumstances that plague the characters themselves.

Second, does this “unfathomable snow” as I have called it, “without the transition of rain” (1957: 86) minimize Camus’s sense of the absurd because the irony of Daru’s finally being utterly alone and defenceless “In this vast landscape he had loved so well” (1957: 109) seems as much the consequences of the sudden storm as the cruelty of men towards one another? I would argue no. To live in this desert is to accept and endure sudden blizzards that last for three days and make men more vulnerable than they could possibly imagine. The blizzard starkly reifies that “divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting” that Camus asserts is “properly the feeling of absurdity” (1942: 6). In this fearsome desert, no one matters; even when men attempt to reconcile differences, to save one another, the very setting of those efforts conspires to betray them.

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