Verisimilitude in the Conclusion of Albert Camus’s *L’étranger*

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In discussing the historical accuracy and verisimilitude of Camus’s *L’étranger*, critics disagree whether the death sentence the court imposes on Meursault for killing an Arab realistically depicts the French-Algerian legal process. Most studies, such as Conor Cruise O’Brien’s brief classic, and works by English Showalter and Patrick McCarthy, consider this aspect of the *roman* the most unrealistic and ahistorical, since racial discrimination against Arabs in the Francophone world was such that no white colon would be convicted for shooting an Arab armed with a knife, and counsel’s demands for a “not guilty” verdict based on self-defense would have convinced a jury. Critics have not sufficiently addressed whether the novel itself indicates that Meursault/Camus regarded the death sentence for killing an Arab as uncommon or not in accord with verisimilitude. That Meursault shows no remorse for killing an Arab in cold blood suggests he shares the racial prejudices of his people. Moreover, in the course of his arrest and trial the legal authorities initially pay little attention to his case. Apparently believing that he will be released, perhaps even without trial, he thinks he does not need a lawyer. After he is imprisoned, his conduct toward the Arab prisoners, the legal authorities, his defense attorney, and his paramour, Marie, indicate that he expects to be found “not guilty.” Even the Arabs in jail with him find the presence of a white pied-noir in prison anomalous. In these ways, Camus subtly suggests cognizance of the racist historical context in which *L’étranger* takes place. Indeed, the judicial system turns on Meursault only after he admits to the examining magistrate that he is an atheist and the authorities learn that he had not wept at his mother’s funeral and was in other ways seemingly indifferent to her death. Thus, Camus attempts to preserve some semblance of historical authenticity.

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Many studies of Albert Camus’s great work *L’étranger* complain that the plot lacks verisimilitude. Perhaps their most salient criticism, first introduced to an English-speaking audience in Conor Cruise O’Brien’s brief but influential study of Camus, is that in Algeria in the 1930s and 1940s racial discrimination against Arabs was so commonplace that a white *colon* would not, as a rule, be convicted or sentenced to death for killing an armed Arab. O’Brien considers this essential aspect of the novel’s conclusion (Meursault’s death sentence and impending execution) “not rooted in reality” (O’Brien 1970, 27). Recent scholars who make the argument that under ordinary circumstances a *pied-noir* (the term for a white inhabitant of Algeria of French origin) would be exonerated for killing an Arab central to their discussion are Mary Ann and Eric Witt (2004) and Robert R. Brock (1993). After concluding that Meursault is a sadomasochistic narcissist who displaces his aggression toward his mother by killing the Arab, a prominent psychoanalyst nonetheless finds his conviction in Francophone Algeria antithetical to reality, asserting, “Meursault’s trial and punishment are fantastic anti-historical devices employed to further the reader’s pity for the narrator” (Makari 1988, 372).

By contrast, shortly after O’Brien’s book appeared, Jean Gassin wrote an article ridiculing its view of *L’étranger*. He derided what he considered O’Brien’s self-contradictory argument that Meursault’s execution for killing an Arab revealed that Camus intended to deny *pied-noir* racism by having the Arabs receive justice, while O’Brien simultaneously argued that the dead Arab was “oublié” (“forgotten by”) by the court, which convicted Meursault for not crying at his mother’s funeral – thus violating French bourgeois norms – not for shooting an Arab (Gassin 1972, 275–278).

In an excellent study of *The Stranger*, English Showalter observes numerous ways that the conduct of the trial “is not a credible judicial proceeding” (Showalter 1989, 47): the witnesses that are called (and not called); the questions they are asked; the defense attorney’s failure to point out that the Arabs had been following Meursault and his friends, or to make a strong argument for self-defense; and the extreme (death) penalty imposed on Meursault. For Meursault to receive a lesser penalty, or to be acquitted, Showalter argues, was an outcome that, “in the reality of preindependence Algeria … would have been far more probable. But
Camus was less interested in a social or political analysis than in the spiritual problems raised by the scapegoat” (p. 56).

Patrick McCarthy’s monograph, in a variation on this thesis, aptly notes capital punishment’s implausibility, both because the Arab had a weapon and because, in arguing its case before the jury, the prosecution depicted the murder as an ongoing dispute among criminals (McCarthy 1988, 59). Moreover, McCarthy believes that Camus’s sympathy for the Arabs was manifested in his implied criticism of the government’s mistreatment of them in a newspaper series he wrote on the impoverished Kabylia Arabs published in Alger Républicain in 1939. During this period, he wrote L’étranger. McCarthy argues that, because of Algerian censorship, Camus, believing he could not speak out bluntly against injustices to the Muslims, did so covertly by means of Meursault’s senseless murder of an Arab (pp. 11–12). Thus McCarthy, too, implies that Meursault’s death penalty was not legally realistic.

An important question that students of L’étranger have not sufficiently addressed is whether Camus ever acknowledges an awareness of the disparity between Meursault’s fate in the roman and the more likely result of the legal process in the real world within the pages of the novel itself. Does he ignore the lack of verisimilitude? In fact, at several points he implies that Meursault expects acquittal, most likely because he has killed an Arab rather than a pied-noir.

At the beginning of part II, Meursault alludes to the conundrum of shooting the Arab. He indicates why he never experiences remorse for his act, or even considers it a significant event. Apparently, the reason is that he killed an Arab, rather than a European-descended colon (pied-noir), and he did not expect the legal system to consider this crime to be as severe as the murder of a European. Indeed, Meursault gives some indication of the disparity between the legal treatment of colons and Arabs at the end of part I. Shortly before he returns to the rock where he kills the Arab, Meursault persuades his friend Raymond not to shoot the Arab, and instead to give him his (Raymond’s) revolver for safekeeping. After Raymond complies and solemnly hands it over to him, Meursault ponders killing the Arab, and thinks to himself, “J’ai pensé à ce moment qu’on pouvait tirer ou ne pas tirer” (Camus 1962, 1164; “It was then that I realized that you could either shoot or not shoot,” Camus 1989, 56). Although this réflexion accords with his “absurd,” uncensored mentality
and noncommittal lifestyle, it is difficult to believe that he would have had the same thought had the potential target been a white French colon.

Initially, the police and legal authorities pay little attention to his case and he expects to be exonerated. (This is before the authorities find out about his inappropriate conduct at his mother’s funeral, where he showed insufficient sorrow; and that he attended a Fernandel comedy and had sexual relations with a female acquaintance only two days afterward.) Meursault tersely alludes to the indifference of the police at the beginning:

Tout de suite après mon arrestation, j’ai été interrogé plusieurs fois. Mais il s’agissait d’interrogatoires d’identité qui n’ont pas duré longtemps. (Camus 1962, 1171)

(Right after my arrest I was questioned several times, but it was just so they [the police] could find out who I was, which didn’t take long. The first time, at the police station, nobody seemed very interested in my case.) (Camus 1989, 63; my italics)

In this manner, Camus reveals that, in contrast to the later vendetta of the examining magistrate and the district attorney against Meursault, at the outset he is essentially ignored, because all that is known about him is the sole fact that he killed an Arab on the beach.

Meursault’s circumstances change quickly when more becomes known about his actions in the week before the murder, specifically his passive reaction to his mother’s death, which the authorities surmise reveals a callous, filicidal personality. As Meursault says, “Huit jours après, le juge d’instruction, au contraire, m’a regardé avec curiosité” (Camus 1962, 1171; “A week later, however, the examining magistrate looked me over with curiosity,” Camus 1989, 63). The curiosity is derived, of course, from the report about Meursault’s seeming indifference at his mother’s funeral and his initiation of what the prosecutor later terms “une liaison irrégulière” (Camus 1962, 1192; “a dubious liaison,” Camus 1989, 94) with Marie Cardona. Meursault continues: “Mais pour commencer, il m’a seulement demandé mon nom et mon adresse, ma profession, la date et le lieu de ma naissance” (Camus 1962, 1171; “But to get things started he [the examining magistrate] simply asked my name and address, my occupation, the date and place of my birth,” Camus 1989, 63).

The increasing precariousness of Meursault’s legal situation becomes evident when the magistrate asks him if he has hired an attorney. Although
Camus never indicates Meursault’s actions immediately after the murder, or the details of his arrest (which Showalter regards as a defect of the novel), the judge’s assumption that Meursault has hired a lawyer suggests that he has been “out on bail” during the past week, rather than held in jail in isolation from the outside world. Meursault reacts with surprise at being told that he might require an attorney. He says, “J’ai reconnu que non et je l’ai questionné pour savoir s’il était absolument nécessaire d’en avoir un” (Camus 1962, 1171; “I admitted I hadn’t [hired counsel] and inquired whether it was really necessary to have one,” Camus 1989, 63). Although he is generally imperturbable, Meursault is irked by the prospect of incurring the trouble and expense of finding a lawyer. He explains to the magistrate that “je trouvais mon affaire très simple” (Camus 1962, 1171; “I thought my case was pretty simple,” Camus 1989, 63), too simple to require a lawyer (after all, he had only killed an Arab). Thus, Meursault indirectly acknowledges the prevailing racial climate, and probably expects his case to be dismissed.

The brief conversation between Meursault and the examining judge reveals the novel’s attempt to recognize the reality of pied-noir racial prejudice against Arabs. When Meursault suggests that his case is too inconsequential to require a defense attorney, the magistrate, in an abrupt volte-face from the week before, tells him that it is not “très simple,” remarking, “C’est un avis. Pourtant, la loi est là. Si vous ne choisissez pas d’avocat, nous en désignerons un d’office” (Camus 1962, 1171; “That’s your opinion. But the law is the law. If you don’t hire an attorney yourself, the court will appoint one,” Camus 1989, 63).

When told that the judge will appoint a lawyer (which is what occurs) if he does not take the initiative and hire one, Meursault, somewhat apathetically, bizarrely asserts, “J’ai trouvé qu’il était très commode que la justice se chargeât de ces détails. Je le lui ai dit” (Camus 1962, 1171; “I thought it was very convenient that the court should take care of those details. I told him so,” Camus 1989, 63). Such a remark, reflecting either naïveté or ironic wit, may be considered either vapid or sarcastic. Although critics generally regard Meursault as simple-minded, it is possible that his comment, based on an apparent impossibly abysmal ignorance of the basics of the judicial process, which any citizen would know, is intended as back-handed derision of the magistrate rather than as a show of respect for him or for the legal system. Strangely, the pompous judge seems to take
Meursault’s response literally, as a tribute to the law, which he represents, and thus as a compliment to him. Meursault writes, “Il m’a approuvé et a conclu que la loi était bien faite” (Camus 1962, 1171; “He agreed with me [that it was convenient] and concluded that it was a good law,” Camus 1989, 63).

Although the magistrate accepts Meursault’s words at face value, it is unlikely that he meant them as such. Even an office clerk like Meursault would not be so naive as to be ignorant of the basic fact that all European-derived legal systems provide attorneys for defendants, especially in capital cases. Indeed, Meursault’s aside to the reader suggests that he was being sarcastic and disrespectful of the judge:

Au début, je ne l’ai pas pris au sérieux. Il m’a reçu dans une pièce tendue de rideaux, il avait sur son bureau une seule lampe qui éclairait le fauteuil où il m’a fait asseoir pendant que lui-même restait dans l’ombre. (Camus 1962, 1171) (At first, I didn’t take him seriously. I was led into a curtained room; there was a single lamp on his desk which was shining on a chair where he had me sit while he remained standing in the shadows.) (Camus 1989, 63)

By this time, he must have been aware that he was charged with murder.

The day after this initial interrogation, which is not described except for a depiction of the examining magistrate’s physical features, the court-appointed defense attorney, a short, chubby, pretentious young man, visits Meursault at the prison. Although he believes Meursault’s case is “délicate,” he thinks they will win if he follows his instructions. The lawyer acknowledges that the prosecution, having learned of Meursault’s “insensibilité” at his mother’s funeral, might exploit the incident to its advantage. As Meursault describes it:

Il s’est assis sur le lit et m’a expliqué qu’on avait pris des renseignements sur ma vie privée. On avait su que ma mère était morte récemment à l’asile. On avait alors fait une enquête à Marengo [site of the nursing home]. Les instructeurs avaient appris que “j’avais fait preuve d’insensibilité” le jour de l’enterrement de maman. (Camus 1962, 1172) (He sat down on the bed and explained to me that there had been some investigations into my private life. It had been learned that my mother had died recently at the home. Inquiries had then been made in Marengo. The investigators had learned that I had “shown insensitivity” the day of Maman’s funeral.) (Camus 1989, 64)
When, after repeated rehearsed questioning by the defense attorney, Meursault admits that he had been too fatigued to be very emotional at the funeral but refuses to be apologetic, or to protest his superlative love for his mother, his lawyer becomes angry and abruptly departs. He fails to appear with Meursault at a hearing before the examining magistrate a few days later, where the judge irrelevantly berates Meursault about his atheism and waves a crucifix in his face. Meursault makes such “incriminating” statements as admitting his atheism and asserting that he feels no remorse for his crime. By not appearing at the interrogation in a capital case, the defense attorney, who probably expects to lose, indicates his abandonment of Meursault. He was disgruntled by Meursault’s refusal to agree to a fulsome display of grief when mention of his mother’s death occurred during the trial.

At the end of the trial, while the prosecution unremittingly stresses his alleged cruelty to his mother, Meursault remains convinced that he will be found “not guilty.” His less sanguine attorney merely assures him, “il pensait que tout irait bien et que je m’en tirerais avec quelques années de prison ou de bagne” (Camus 1962, 1200; “he thought that everything would go well and that I would get off with a few years in prison or at hard labor,” Camus 1989, 106). However, Meursault, probably cognizant that under French and Algerian law a European who has killed a Muslim Arab is seldom convicted of any kind of crime, certainly not murder, is appalled by the prospect of any kind of punishment. He asks his attorney, “s’il y avait des chances de cassation en cas de jugement défavorable. Il m’a dit que non” (Camus 1962, 1200; “whether he thought there was any chance of overturning the verdict if it was unfavorable. He said no,” Camus 1989, 106).

Meursault anticipates exoneration, not because of the quality of his lawyer’s defense, which Meursault considers inept, but because he knows that in Francophone Algeria juries do not generally convict whites who kill Arabs. Indeed, as the Witts’ article reveals, France’s Supreme Court overturned most death penalties on appeal. It had the final word in French overseas départements such as Algeria. Meursault does not sufficiently perceive that it is his treatment of his mother that is being scrutinized and judged, not the Arab’s death.

Thus, in the first two pages of chapter 1 of part II of L’étranger, Camus subtly makes three points that help establish the novel’s verisimilitude but which have often been overlooked by critics. First, in accordance with long-standing French racist mores, Meursault considers the Arab’s murder
trifling. He initially fails to take the courtroom procedures seriously, regarding them as a bureaucratic waste of time, since he will not be convicted. Second, cognizant of the general outcome in Algerian criminal trials similar to his, he expects to be exonerated for the murder. Third, from the outset, as far as the judicial authorities are concerned, Meursault’s relationship with his mother and his seemingly apathetic reaction to her death are the most important “facts” in the case. His failure to display grief publicly at his mother’s funeral marks him as an outsider who is ignorant of or, worse, knowingly violates the most basic norms and mores of his society. By not weeping at his mother’s funeral and failing to make elaborate displays of grief, respect, and emotion in the week following her demise, he facilitates the prosecution’s depiction of him as an inhuman monster and a criminal – ironically, somewhat akin to his culture’s view of the Arab he has killed. Meursault’s actual wrongdoing, in murdering the Arab, who posed no real threat, goes virtually unnoticed.

Even the Arab prisoners who share their cell with Meursault for a few days immediately after his arrest seem skeptical of the alleged reason for his imprisonment – he purportedly killed a member of their race. When he is first put in a holding pen with them, “Ils ont ri en me voyant” (Camus 1962, 1175; “They laughed when they saw me,” Camus 1989, 72), finding the anomaly of a white Frenchman in jail amusing. Nevertheless, perhaps their laughter is more a sign of empathy or camaraderie than of contempt.

The Arabs laugh, ostensibly because they regard Meursault as one who has fallen afoul of his community, a reprobate outsider whom white Christian society has rejected, as it rejects Muslim Arabs. They laugh because they suspect he is a “stranger” in his own community, as the novel’s title implies, and is therefore akin to them in their (anti-) relationship with the pieds-noirs. They thus have an affinity with him, even after he admits to killing an Arab:

Puis ils m’ont demandé ce que j’avais fait. J’ai dit que j’avais tué un Arabe et ils sont restés silencieux. Mais un moment après, le soir est tombé. Ils m’ont expliqué comment il fallait arranger la natte où je devais coucher. En roulant une des extrémités, on pouvait en faire un traversin. (Camus 1962, 1175)

(Then they asked me what I was in for. I said I’d killed an Arab and they were all silent. A few minutes later, it got dark. They showed me how to fix the mat I was supposed to sleep on. One end could be rolled up to make a pillow.) (Camus 1989, 71)
After a brief silence to assess the situation, they indicate that they regard him as one, like them, whom his society’s governing powers reject. They conclude that it is for this reason rather than for shooting the Arab that he is jailed, and make friendly overtures, showing him how to make his bed even after he informs them that he has been imprisoned for killing an Arab.

Ostensibly, the Arab prisoners find it difficult to believe that the real reason for the legal system’s chastisement of Meursault, a white European, is the murder of an Arab Muslim. Unlike the reaction one might expect, they show no resentment. Instead, they assist him in making himself more comfortable. Rather than beating him or worse, as the jungle law of the penitentiary dictates, they show him how to prop up his mat at one end to form a pillow.

And their inferences are essentially correct – it is primarily for his actions in relation to his mother’s death and his flagrant confession of atheism to the examining magistrate (in chapter 1 of part II) that the judicial authorities vigorously hound him and seek his death, not for killing an Arab, which the prosecution hardly mentions. The Arab convicts doubt that a European would be arrested and convicted by a European jury for such a crime (Arabs were barred from serving on juries). Apparently they expect that in such a case he would not be prosecuted; therefore, when Meursault tells them what he has done they assume that he is either joking or, like them, he is being persecuted by the white judicial system and the society whose rules it enforces. He is therefore, in a sense, one of them.⁴

Although brief, the incident is more significant than it might first appear. By assisting Meursault with his bolster, the Arabs indicate skepticism of the reasons he has given them for his arrest, which suggests that it is not customary for pieds-noirs to be prosecuted for assaulting Arabs. Their lack of anger also indicates that they are willing to help a European, especially one in disrepute with the authorities they consider to be their oppressors.⁵

The episode also implies that Meursault, despite the shooting, does not feel intense racial prejudice or a generalized, annihilatory rage at Arabs (contrary to the interpretations of several early Arab critics, such as Henri Kréa and Ahmed Taleb Ibrahimi). Otherwise, he would have ignored their query or answered them with contempt, violence, or imprecations. Instead, he responds tersely but civilly, as is his custom; and he follows their instructions about making his bed. (Indeed, Camus does not indite any dialogue between them; he depicts the encounter in just four sentences.)
Moreover, Meursault’s lack of angst after his arrest, his failure to recriminate with or vent his wrath upon his Arab fellow prisoners during his brief cohabitation with them, his attorney’s absence at the important initial conference with the judge, his own lack of anxiety or fear while speaking with his paramour, Marie, when she visits him at the jail, also imply that he feels generally confident about his case and does not expect to be guillotined for shooting the Arab.

Therefore, we find several instances in which Camus tacitly observes the historical, legal reality of contemporary French Algeria when *L’Étranger* takes place. He acknowledges the implausibility of a court’s sentencing a French Algerian to the guillotine for shooting a knife-wielding Arab, even one who posed no direct threat. When Meursault says he is “comme tout le monde, absolument comme tout le monde” (Camus 1962, 1171; “like everybody else, just like everybody else,” Camus 1989, 66), he assumes that the jury will exonerate him because, like them, he is a *pied-noir*. Thus, the novel pays more attention to its historical context – notwithstanding Camus’s primary themes of the absurdity of life, the inevitability of death, and the smugness and unjust, conformist norms of bourgeois society and culture – than critics generally assume.

**NOTES**

1. On the other hand, in a recent work Camus scholar David Carroll argues that O’Brien errs in assuming that Meursault would not be convicted under French-Algerian law for killing an Arab. He asserts that he would at least be sentenced for manslaughter, while simultaneously acknowledging, “Numerous critics, including O’Brien, have argued that Meursault’s entire trial is a gross distortion of colonial justice, since they claim that a French citizen in colonial Algeria would never have been accused and convicted of a capital offense in killing an Arab” (Carroll 2007, 30–31, 196 n.13 [quotation]). However, Carroll fails to analyze the Francophone legal system of the time, nor does he cite the Witts’ article noted below (n. 2).

2. For a few among numerous examples, see Amash 1967, 6–8; Gassin 1972, 275–278; Witt & Witt 2004, 1–19, esp. 16; Brock 1993, 92–100.

3. On Camus’s newspaper series on Arab poverty in the Kabylian Mountains, see for example Crowley 2007, 94–96.

4. For a similar reading of this incident, see Carroll 2007, 194 n. 7. Carroll stresses the incident. He argues that the incident establishes Meursault’s affinity and virtual identification with the Arabs, which ends with the death sentence for murder that finalizes his divorce from *pied-noir* society. McCarthy’s excellent analysis (1988, 58), also considers the episode important, although Carroll criticizes his interpretation – that it signifies only a *temporary* camaraderie between Meursault and the oppressed Arab majority – as too limited.
5. For a different interpretation, which makes the unlikely argument that the Arab prisoners befriend Meursault because they have internalized the servility and feeling of inferiority that the colonized enact toward the colonizer, see Grégoire 1994, 223–231. This reasoning defies common sense, if only because these Arabs are convicts who presumably have been jailed for breaking the law, and would hardly be likely to show deference to an imprisoned colon. Grégoire also briefly suggests that Camus may have wanted to interpret the prisoners as “romantic” individuals or that he aimed to demonstrate that there is some good in everyone, even Arab felons. None of these hypotheses is convincing.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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