

HASSLE:

NADA IN HEMINGWAY'S
"A CLEAN, WELL-LIGHTED
PLACE"

ELY STOCK

The brief article and rebuttal which follow were accepted not merely because critical controversy is entertaining, but also because the issues raised are of considerable significance. The New Criticism is a movement large enough to get into intellectual history courses these days; moreover, some of the specific points being debated are of interest to others than literary critics.

For example, Mr. Stock's awareness of the extent to which occult conceptions are floating around in the art-world of our century can only be commended: the somehow unwholesome connotations of occultism and the seductive clarity of the rather pragmatic modern critical definition of the term "symbol" tend to blind even very sensitive critics to occult influence even when it is very clearly there, as it is in the lines by T. S. Eliot which Mr. Stock quotes. [See the brilliant discussion of Eliot's flirtation with the occult in John Senior's The Way Down and Out: The Occult in Symbolist Literature (Ithaca, 1959).] It is certainly possible that the occult conception of Nothing could have been in Hemingway's mind, though I personally prefer the reading of this story which says that it is about the death of values: the plot tells us plainly that love, religion and patriotism are dead for the old man, and that the older waiter is carrying on bravely, with compassion and discipline, in terms of the usual Hemingway code. But it is only fair to note that Mr. Stock's suggestion (and he merely "suggests") is not incompatible with this reading.

Then too, Mr. Campbell's comments on the manner in which the New Criticism has betrayed its original promise seem well-taken. In the hands of pedants it becomes academic in the worst sense; in the hands of that group of critics sometimes snidely referred to as The Original Sinners it tends to become a New Moralism. But both close analysis and religious interpretation remain valid when handled with conscience and sensitivity. Among Mr. Stock's

mentors are no doubt both mechanical systematizers and scrupulous critics--both are present at most universities--though the mentor most intimately concerned with this paper seems to me (if my guess at his identity is correct) clearly one of the latter.

--SGL

Ernest Hemingway's use of the term nada in "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" has generally been read by critics as an effective evocation of the older waiter's awareness of the meaninglessness of the world.¹ I should like to point out that the word nada may be understood in another sense, which Hemingway may have been aware of when he wrote the story. In The Varieties of Religious Experience, William James quotes H.P. Blavatsky, founder of the theosophist school in the United States, on the nada concept. He cites this paragraph in his text:

He who would hear the voice of Nada, 'the Soundless Sound,' and comprehend it, has to learn the nature of Dharana When to himself his form appears unreal, as do on waking all the forms he sees in dreams; when he has ceased to hear the many, he may discern the ONE--the inner sound which kills the outer For then the soul will hear, and will remember. And then to the inner ear will speak THE VOICE OF THE SILENCE. . . . And now thy Self is lost in SELF, thyself unto THYSELF, merged in that SELF from which thou first didst radiate. . . . Behold! thou hast become the Light, thou hast become the Sound, thou art thy Master and thy God. Thou art THYSELF the object of thy search: the VOICE unbroken, that resounds throughout eternities, exempt from change, from sin exempt, the seven sounds in one, the VOICE OF THE SILENCE. Om Tat Sat.²

This paragraph suggests that nada bears two connotations, each of which is very different from the conventional English translation of the Spanish word nada as "nothing." In the first place, the term may be used as a mystical concept, uniting what William James called the quality of ineffability (" . . . it defies expression . . . its quality must be directly experienced. . . more like states of feeling than like states of intellect") and the noetic quality (" . . . state of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. . . illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate. . .").³ Secondly, the implication is that the one who experiences nada, by virtue of this experience, becomes identified, in a transcendental manner, with all of the mysteries of the universe, need no longer search for the meaning of existence, and, indeed, becomes his own master and God.

Perhaps this double meaning of the term helps to account for the evocative qualities it possesses in this story. The older waiter can use the word nada because, unlike the young waiter who thinks only in materialistic terms, he is aware of the importance of non-rationalistic, mystical, experience. But this awareness defies expression in spiritual terms. Instead, it is expressed in terms which ordinarily have no spiritual significance and can be comprehended in a religious sense only if the auditor, too, has had the felt experience. Thus, the best way he can express himself to the young waiter is by saying, "You do not understand. This is a clean and pleasant cafe. It is well lighted. The light is very good and also, now, there are shadows of the leaves."⁴

The older waiter's concern for cleanliness and order, his sense of the importance of place, and his gratefulness for the light and the shadows of the leaves which fall upon it are evidences of his religious awareness that value is imbedded in the nature of things. But this awareness is tempered by a stoical reluctance to commit himself to the dangers of religious excess implicit in the nada concept. He is aware of the importance of "light," but the shadows make the light even better. In the same sense, he very carefully asserts that, unlike the young waiter, he "never had confidence."⁵ Both he and the old man retain their "dignity" because they have not lost that kind of humility which is the import of Ecclesiastes.⁶

The concept of nada and that of the "clean, well-lighted place" need not necessarily be read, then, as antagonistic and mutually exclusive terms.⁷ Rather, they may be taken as complementary ways of asserting the relevance of values inherent in awareness of religious experience. At the same time, the implication is that man, like Frost's oven-bird, is a "diminished thing." The use of the nada concept in The Lord's Prayer, furthermore, need not necessarily be taken only as an anti-religious tour-de-force (although it certainly is blasphemous in Christian terms). The very use of the form of the traditional prayer can be said to reinforce the religious overtones implicit in the nada concept.⁸ In this sense the use of nada is similar to the assertion which Santiago makes in The Old Man and the Sea after having endured his magnificent battle. "And what beat you, he thought. 'Nothing,' he said aloud. 'I went out too far.'⁹ Unlike the old fisherman, however, the old waiter is unwilling to go "too far" along the road to commitment towards a meaningful life.

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Footnotes:

¹ Robert Penn Warren, "Hemingway," The Kenyon Review, IX (Winter, 1947), 1-28; William B. Bache, "Craftsmanship in 'A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,'" Personalist, XXXVII (Winter, 1956), 60-64; Carlos Baker, Hemingway: The Writer As Artist (Princeton, 1952), 123-124. Bache asserts that

the young waiter and the older waiter both stand for a "nihilistic way of life" while Baker points out that "the great skill displayed in the story is the development, through the most carefully controlled understatement, of the young waiter's mere nothing into the old waiter's Something--a Something called Nothing. . ."

² William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience (1902). My page references are to the Modern Library edition (New York, n.d.), 412. James cites "H.P. Blavatsky: The Voice of the Silence." Blavatsky's text is reproduced as it appeared in The Varieties of Religious Experience. I cannot prove that Hemingway read William James' book, but it seems very possible that he would have read it. It is very possible, too, that some of Hemingway's intellectual friends in Paris knew James' book and/or theosophy and that Hemingway, through conversation, came into contact with this conception of nada. I am not asserting that Hemingway was consciously aware of these connotations of the term when he wrote the story.

³ James, 371.

⁴ Ernest Hemingway, "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway (New York, 1938), 382.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ The verses of Ecclesiastes 11:7,8 seem to be particularly relevant for this story: "Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun: But if a man live many years, and rejoice in them all; yet let him remember the days of darkness; for they shall be many. All that cometh is vanity."

⁷ Carlos Baker writes (p. 125), "sometimes in the day, or for a time at night in a clean, well-lighted place, it [nada] can be held temporarily at bay. . . ." It doesn't seem to me that the old waiter is concerned with holding nada "at bay," although that is a plausible reading of the story. The point of the waiter's asking for a "little cup" of nada at the close of the tale may be, in part, an indication of his awareness of nada and his willingness to accept it in stoical terms.

⁸ It is, perhaps, relevant to quote T.S. Eliot's lines in this connection. "Descend lower, descend only/ Into the world of perpetual solitude,/ World not world, but that which is not world,/ Internal darkness, deprivation/ And destitution of all property,/ Dessication of the world of sense,/ Evacuation of the world of fancy,/ Inoperancy of the world of spirit;/ This is the one way, and the other/ Is the same, not in movement/ But abstention from movement; while the world moves/ In appetency, on its metallated ways/ Of time past and time future." (Burnt Norton, section III) As Helen Gardner has pointed out, this tradition "goes back beyond Christianity to the Neo-Platonists, who turned what had been a method of knowing--the dialectical method of arriving at truth by successive negations of the false--into a method of arriving at experience of the One. This doctrine of ascent or descent into union with reality, by

successively discarding ideas which would limit the one idea of Being, found a natural metaphor in night and darkness. It was a double-edged metaphor, since night expressed both the obliteration of self and all created things, and also the uncharacterized Reality which was the object of contemplation." The Art of T.S. Eliot (New York, 1959), 167. My point is that nada, in the same way as Eliot's "the way down," may be taken to represent a "method of arriving at experience of the One." The same difference obtains, however, between "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" and The Old Man and the Sea as obtains between The Wasteland and The Four Quartets. Like the Fisher King, the old waiter is left only with awareness of the potentiality of living a full life.

⁹ Ernest Hemingway, The Old Man and the Sea (New York, 1952), 133.

COMMENTS ON MR. STOCK'S
 "NADA IN HEMINGWAY'S 'A
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Mr. Stock's argument is carefully developed and persuasive, but I think it fails at a crucial point. His whole case is based on the assumption that the proper translation of "nada" as it is used by the older waiter is not "nothing," the conventional English translation, but "The Soundless Sound" or "The Voice of the Silence," which would indicate a kind of mystical religious experience like that described in Section III of T.S. Eliot's Burnt Norton. But the reflections of the older waiter clearly indicate that he considers "nada" as a very oppressive "nothing"--"a nothing that he knew too well." Here are the most important of these reflections: "What did he fear? It was not fear or dread. It was a nothing that he knew too well. It was all a nothing and a man was nothing too. It was only that and light was all it needed and a certain cleanness and order. Some lived in it and never felt it but he knew it all was nada y pues nada y pues nada." It is hard to see how "nada" is not to be translated as "nothing," when the word "nothing" appears three times just before "nada" begins, and there is no indication that the thought changes in the transition to "nada." When he says that "Some lived in it and never felt it," the "it" clearly refers to "nothing," and then in the same sentence he says that "he knew it [nothing] was nada. . . ." The older waiter makes two assertions about his knowledge