"Nothing Had Eaten Any Breakfast"

Hemingway's Canary for None

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Structural approaches to Ernest Hemingway's "A Canary for One" usually focus on binary oppositions which include, but are not limited to, physical settings and patterns of chiaroscuro. As Scott Donaldson points out, these contrasts are articulated in such tableaux as a farmhouse burning brightly in a darkened field, a sunset on the sparkling Mediterranean Sea, and black soldiers and their caucasian sergeant waiting for a train on the platform at Avignon. To be sure, this pattern of lights and darks contributes to the story's overall design, but, like the symbolic canary itself, they are only part of a carefully orchestrated *metapattern* of oppositions *and* doublings. This complementary system[1] is comprised of an ontological numbers game in which all the characters participate, and from which they all emerge as losers, as it were, with an aggregate "score" of zero.

In the opening sequence of "A Canary for One", we are told that the *rapide* "passed very quickly a long, red stone house with a garden", a pleasant prospect which includes the blue Mediterranean and which, as Donaldson suggests, constitutes one half of a binary opposition with "the stifling atmosphere of the train" (231). But in fact the narrator subverts such a binary reading by noticing that the "cutting" which bifurcates the two settings is *also* made of "red stone", like the house, thus blurring any possible "bottom line" to an either/or interpretation (337). Such *under*cuttings of strict oppositions are typical of the narrator's complementary habit of mind in "A Canary for One".

The tall negro soldiers and their short white sergeant at Avignon also comprise a binary opposition. A closer reading, however, yields the key

addendum: the white sergeant was "with them", a phrase which denotes that the soldiers and their sergeant *also* constitute *one* complementary group or entity (338). In like manner, the husband and wife who pass them in the train are "with" each other *and* will soon be legally separated; the American lady and her daughter are "with" each other *and* are emotionally distanced; the Swiss engineer and the unhappy daughter will "go on long walks together" in loving memory *and* will remain forever apart, thanks to the American lady's intervention in their lives.

Although they appear strictly oppositional, the details concerning the maison de coutoure in Paris are, in fact, complementary as well:

> Altogether there had only been these two [vendeuses] in twenty years. It had always been the same couturier. Prices, however, had gone up. The exchange, though, equalized that. (340)

Note that the equation here is *not* one *versus* one = two entities, but rather one *minus* one = zero entities. Except for the meaningless substitution of one vendeuse by another, nothing of significance happens in the "same" maison de coutoure. What is "equalized" is the symbolic connection between its changeless past and the frozen futures of the American lady and her daughter.

The world of "A Canary for One" is "ruled" by this zero-based math and the complementary patterns of ones, twos, and threes which recur throughout the story.[2] Taking these patterns in reverse order, we may begin by noting the matching sets of loveless triangles: the American lady, the wife, and the husband on the train; and the American lady, her daughter, and the Swiss engineer in Vevey. Complementing these triangles are "the three beds from inside the wall" of the sleeping compartment; the three cars in the wreck which confirms the American lady's fears of traveling by *rapide* ; the three billboard ads for Belle Jardiniere, Pernot, and Dubonnet near Paris; the Trois Couronnes Hotel in Vevey, where the husband and wife spent their honeymoon; and the three men from Cook's who appear at the Gare de Lyons in Paris.

The narrative is composed of diadic patternings also. There are, of course, the unhappy pairs of the American husband and wife and the American lady's daughter and the Swiss engineer; the time that has passed ("two years ago this fall") since the American lady took her daughter away from Vevey; "switch-yards and the factory smoke" and "the harbor with stone hills...

and the last of the sun on the water" in and near Marseilles; the two vendeuses from the maison de coutoure; the brown wooden restaurant-cars and brown wooden sleeping-cars on the outskirts of Paris; and the narrator's uncertain "ifs" ("... if that were the way it were still done"; "... if that train still left at five") (340). The diadic movements of travelers and trains are also noteworthy: ("People got on and off"; "the cars... went back and forth"; "... people in all the seats and the roofs") (338, 340).

It is the number one which, like the *rapide's* "one track" threading through "many others" in the central railyard of Marseilles, serves as a terminal point for the converging affective destinies of the characters (337). It appears, of course, in the title, where it is significant that a number is substituted for the name of a person. Most commentators assume that the *One* in "A Canary for One" refers *solely* to the American lady's unhappy daughter in Paris and no one else. If Hemingway intends for this to be the case, however, why not give the girl a name and title the story, say, "A Canary for Susan?" Why does the girl's mother refer to a nameless "very close friend" who castigates foreign men as "some one" in the same breath? (339). Why, for that matter, do most of the "many others" in the story, both present and absent, share the one common characteristic of namelessness?

A closer look at the two triangles of "A Canary for One" will help to answer these questions. To begin with, in certain respects all three Americans sitting and sleeping on the Paris-bound *rapide* are counterparts. The doubling of husband and wife is obvious: they have fallen out of love with each other and they are traveling to Paris to set up separate residences. At no time during the story do they exchange words. Even their farewells to the American lady at the train station in Paris — "my wife said good-by and I said good-by"— are separate but equal[3] (341). Less obvious is the fact that, in spite of his contempt for her, the narrator and the American lady are also doubles. She is described as being partially deaf, while he reveals at one point that "for several minutes, I had not listened to the American lady" (339). Like her, he is party to a deception involving clothing: he says he wears braces, as opposed to suspenders, to keep up the joking false impression that he is English, not American. For her part, the lady is in the habit of ordering deceptively simple fashions from the expensive maison de coutoure in Paris in order to avoid a luxury tax charged by the post office in America. Finally, the narrator and the lady both show themselves to be past masters of the techniques, both subtle and not so subtle,

of eternal sadism. When, knowing full well the lady's pathological fear of derailment, the narrator says, "Look... There's been a wreck", he proves himself to be a match for her in cruelty, at least for the moment (341). The wreckage of the daughter's derailed love affair in Vevey, of course, speaks for itself.

The wife too functions as the American lady's counterpart. They both agree that foreign men make poor husbands for American women, and they both identify with memories of the Swiss resort town of Vevey. The American lady, whose fondness for fashion typifies her superficial nature, compliments the wife on her traveling-coat, as if recognizing a kindred spirit. In the second of Hemingway's three typewritten drafts of "A Canary for One", in fact, it is the *wife* who compliments the American lady on what *she* is wearing (Donaldson 233). Hemingway switched things around at the last minute, fearful, perhaps, that too much of the story's lexical iceberg was showing above water. In any event, like her husband, the wife appears to be cut from the same ontological cloth as the American lady.

Best evidence for this may be found in their bittersweet nostalgia for Vevey. According to Joseph DeFalco,

> The word 'love' is a signification of the conflicting elements within the thematic content, and [the] exchange between the wife of the narrator and the American woman points out the irony of the term to those who are themselves estranged from love. (175)

This exchange consists of two sets of complementarities, one "positive", the other "negative". The positive side of the complementary coin is represented by the noun *love* ("Was the man your daughter was in love with a Swiss?"); the negative side is represented by the adjective *lovely* ("It was a very lovely place") (341). Because an adjective is, in a sense, grammatically "estranged from" the thing it describes, it is fitting that both women should parrot the word "lovely" with reckless and uncaring abandon.

Put another way, in giving the "ly" to the noun form, the contra*pun*tal adjective introduces a brittle, cynical tone into the story. Suddenly the women are discussing the pleasures and days of Vevey in the fall and the opulent comforts of the "fine old" Trois Couronnes Hotel (339-341). Because they designate roughly the same amount of lexical space for the lush tranquilities of *weather and things* as they do for *people and feelings*, it is clear that they

have both become, as Joseph M. Flora says of the narrator's own waning of affect, "numb" to the emotional demands placed upon them by motherhood and marriage over the years (39). *See Appendix A.*

Complementarity also governs the relationships in the story's second triangle. Emotionally distanced as they are, the daughter is a budding double for her mother. Like the mother, who is described as "not having slept", the daughter, we are told, "wouldn't sleep at all" following the breakup of her love affair (338, 339). When the lady adds, "She doesn't care", she may as well be referring to herself as to her daughter (339). The fact that the maison de coutoure in Paris "had [the daughter's] measurements" (340) along with those of the mother reinforces the notion that the distanced women function simultaneously as complementary opposites *and* counterparts in the story. As for the young suitor from Vevey, the American lady never indicates whether his plans "to be an engineer" ever came to fruition following the end of the affair. Presumably he was interested in building things (bridges?), whereas the meddlesome mother clearly prefers to tear things down, namely human relationships. On the other hand, the suitor and the mother are both distanced from the ill-starred daughter, one physically, the other emotionally. And, like the married American couple traveling to Paris to set up separate residences, all three are nameless. *See Appendix B.*

The story's two loveless triangles, then, really constitute parallel systems of numbers, wherein, ultimately, 3 = 2 =1= 0. This equation is determined as follows: Three = the three characters in each triangle; two = the doublings of all three characters in each triangle; one = the "lump sum" of the doublings in each triangle. Complementarity *also* dictates, however, that as long as all three persons are, ontologically speaking, one, the "one" is literally *no one* person. Whether one happens to be a victim, like the American lady's daughter, or a perpetrator, like the mother herself, to suffer the consequences of the denial of love in "A Canary for One" is to become an ontological zero.[4]

It is the canary which, as its central signifier, connects the human angles of the story's two loveless triangles. Most critics agree with Julian Smith that the canary's entrapment is symbolically mirrored in the walls within walls of the *rapide* and in the American lady's daughter's emotional isolation (359). Like the canary, the characters — both present and absent — are walled off from each other in different ways. What has gone unnoticed by commentators, however, is the canary's putative self-destructive behavior which,

like its imprisoned status, adds a rich symbolic dimension to the story.

The canary's chirping in the morning sunshine is, of course, normal, healthy behavior in domesticated birds. On two occasions, however, the canary *also* pecks into its feathers. This activity is significant if only because Hemingway, the dedicated practitioner of the art of omission in fiction, chooses nonetheless to show it to the reader twice: "The canary shook its feathers and pecked into them". And: "... then he dropped his bill and pecked into his feathers again" (339). Feather pecking or picking, far from constituting healthy behavior in caged birds, may be a sign of acute distress. According to the authoritative *The Pet Bird Report* , it occurs in birds which

> have been overprotected and poorly socialized, [and which] may not react well to any new situation, especially if it happens suddenly. If the change directly threatens the bird's sense of security, phobic behavior may result in feather mutilation.

The author goes on to caution that "It is important to protect any young bird from any threatening experience". Symptoms of eating disorders in young birds, she adds, may also include feather pecking (Blanchard 12).

These descriptions of the causes of pathological behavior in domesticated birds apply with uncanny accuracy to the daughter's psychological profile. Like a distressed bird (and in true complementary fashion) she is at once *over* protected and *under* protected; she, too, is poorly socialized; she, too, has failed to react well to a new situation, namely the sudden destruction of her love affair; she, too, refuses to eat. It is, therefore, the self-mutilating behavior of the canary, not simply its caged status, which mirrors the mutilated psyche of the American lady's daughter.

In lavishing much attention on the controversial last line of "A Canary for One", critics have overlooked what is, in my estimation, a more significant item: the narrator's inclusion of "one of three men from Cook's" in his account of the journey to Paris. This functionary at the Gare de Lyons also serves as the narrator's double. Like him, the narrator is an anonymous one of three; like him, the narrator does not divulge the American lady's name. Most noteworthy of all, the narrator is, like the man from Cook's, *the caretaker of a text*:

The porter brought a truck and piled on the baggage, and my wife said good-by and I said good-by to the American lady, whose name had been found by the man from Cook's on a typewritten page in a sheaf of typewritten pages which he replaced in his pocket. (341)

The American lady's name is printed on a typewritten page, only to be stuffed unceremoniously into the pocket of the man from Cook's; we are never permitted to "read" what is written on his travel manifest, namely, the lady's identity.

This omission is consistent with the narrator's own approach to the "typewritten pages" of "A Canary for One". Like the Cook's employee, he is in possession of *and* is possessed by — e.g., is a character in — a text. Both texts are, as we have seen, characterized by the subtractions of their characters to nameless ontological zeroes. Even their tickets, which are taken by yet another cipher "at the end" of the cement platform and of the story, are consigned to textual oblivion (342).

Note, Notes, Anmerkungen

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I wish to thank Lorna Clymer for her generous and helpful technical advice.

1) Complementarity describes a system or systems — physical, epistemological, or otherwise — of mutually interdependent *and* irreconcilable relations. As a scientific way of knowing, it denies strictly classical notions of contradiction, either-or, and binary (or digital) oppositions. According to H.H. Pattee,

> [Complementarity] requires the simultaneous articulation of two, formally incompatible, modes of description. The source of this requirement lies in the subject-object duality, or in the distinction between the image and the event, the knower and the known ... however one may choose to express this basic distinction. The essence of the concept of complementarity is *not* in the recognition of this subject-object distinction, which is common to almost all epistemologies, but in the apparently paradoxical articulation of the two modes of knowing. (Italics added).

Pattee elaborates on what is meant by the "paradoxical articulation of ... two modes of knowing":

[T]his duality of descriptive modes and their incompatibility should not be thought of as a contradiction in any sense. In fact, there is none since the two modes of perception are formally disjoint [sic] and contradiction can only occur within a single formal system. (192-193)

In thumbnail terms, complementarity is "[a] recognition of an inescapable duality at the heart of things" (Gleick 40). This is not, however, as simple as it sounds. When the mathematician Arkady Plotnitsky refers to "the double nature of light", where "one must manage classically incompatible systems of representation *without resolving their incompatibility*", he is also describing complementarity (italics added) (6). "The process also produces", Plotnitsky adds, "specifically as writing, new economies of interpretation, history, theory, or literature" (205). One such "economist" is, I wish to suggest, Ernest Hemingway.

2) Perhaps it was this numerical principle Hemingway had in mind when he remarked to the critic Harvey Breit on one occasion that he had been "working in a new mathematics" (qtd. in "Authors and Critics Appraise Works", 7).

3) Complementarity requires, of course, that the situations of the husband and wife be examined from a reverse angle as well. There is evidence in the story which also points to faint but perceptible traces of caring on the part of both. Of the husband, for instance, Joseph DeFalco writes,

A little earlier in the narrative he [notes] a farmhouse burning. It is obvious that [such] details are direct referents to his own situation, but what they also imply is a value judgment on his part. Marital estrangement means a literal wrecking or burning of a relationship and a consequent ruin of the normal course of life. Love-relationships must be cared for in much the same fashion as a canary. (175-76)

As for the wife, Trisha Ingman suggests that she, too, has not wholly succeeded in denying her feelings. What's done is done, but not without a hint of regret:

After [the American woman] tells about having taken her daughter away from the man she loved, the wife's first question is, "Did she get over it?" The American woman's reply is, "I don't think so". The inquiry can be seen as one about her own future as well as about the daughter's past: the wife is still in love

with her husband; it's not likely that she will get over the separation soon (36).

4) At journey's end the narrator comes out with a curious observation: "Nothing had eaten any breakfast" (340). Since he, too, has apparently gone without the morning meal, the remark indicates that he is at least subliminally aware of his ontological status as, literally, a "hollow man".

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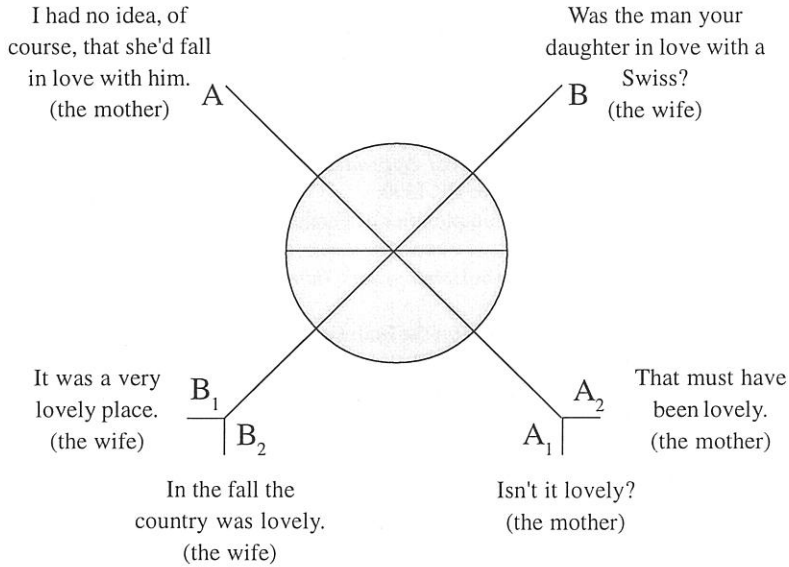
Appendix A: The complementary forms of love

Complementary Positives

My daughter fell in love with a man from Vevey...



Complementary Negatives

Appendix B: *The triangles*

$$3 = 2 = 1 = 0$$