The “I” and the Voice: Interpreting the Narrator’s Anonym in Ernest Hemingway’s “The Light of the World”

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1 Hemingway’s “The Light of the World” tells the story of two teenage boys, the enunciator and his companion, Tom, passing through a town.1 They first stop in a bar from which they are expelled because of Tom’s provocative behavior. They then go to a train station where they meet with a number of characters: a homosexual cook, prostitutes, white lumberjacks, and Indians. The discussion prompted by their arrival eventually centers on the figure of a dead prizefighter, Steve Ketchel, whom two of the prostitutes, Alice and Peroxide, claim to have known and loved. The two protagonists depart when Tom notices the enunciator’s attraction to Alice.

2 The story is told in the first person by a narrator who remains unidentified all through the text, either by name or psychological features, though most critics assume that he is Nick Adams, a recurrent character in Hemingway’s short stories. This was prompted by Philip Young’s rearrangement of the stories in a collection entitled The Nick Adams Stories. In it Philip Young assembled the short stories that allegedly had Nick as their protagonist and sometimes narrator, and presented them in a chronological order – going from childhood to adulthood – that was originally absent. As reflected in the collection he created, his conception of the dispersed stories as the quest narrative of a hero struggling through initiatory experiences to achieve maturity,2 has influenced subsequent readings of the stories. Most papers have thus concentrated on a psychological reading of Nick’s character or discussed Alice’s and Peroxide’s claims to truth in terms of psychological verisimilitude.3

3 No critic has ever questioned the enunciator’s unknown identity, as most commentators have simply assumed him to be Nick Adams, and on the few occasions when they have acknowledged the fact that his name never appears in the text, they have dismissed the problem as irrelevant in a brief sentence between brackets or in a footnote, which makes
explicit the little importance they have attached to it (Martine 196, Young, 1975, 31, Hannum, 1990, 321). In a more recent article dedicated to the Nick Adams stories at large, Howard L. Hannum continues assuming that the narrator of the story is Nick Adams (Hannum, 2001). Though Philip Young’s method has since been largely criticized and his chronological rearrangement of the stories is no longer considered valid, his choice to catalogue “The Light of the World” as a Nick Adams story still influences the critics’ approach of the story. The focus on Nick as narrator has elicited the problem of a stripped narration sounding objective in the essentially subjective first person.

The aim of this paper is to present a different approach that will not envisage the narrator as Nick but will focus on his unknown identity as a structural element in the story. By evacuating Nick from the scene of the story, this study proposes to follow in Rédoane Abouddahab’s wake and do away with the psycho-biographical approaches to Hemingway as well as with the approaches focusing on the so-called realism of Hemingway’s stories (Abouddahab 589-591). In keeping with such enunciation theories as Bakhtine’s, I will not focus on the representation of reality but on that of language. I feel comforted in this choice by the bareness of the story itself. As often in Hemingway’s short stories, the reader has trouble deriving a satisfying meaning from the diegesis itself. The stakes are not in the story proper but in the way it is told. In “The Light of the World” the point is all the more important as the narrator is a character. What is more, though it mostly consists in dialogues, the story stages the failure of language in its communicative function. Whether it be the heroic code praised by former critics, or language as a code, they are undermined in “The Light of the World” which repeatedly directs the reader’s attention to the textual workings of the text, the story as text, for which no ready code applies.

My study will focus more particularly on the anonymous first person enunciator and the effects of his bare distinctiveness on the structure of the text, the thematic layers it helps surface and all the more blatant moments of subjectivity it serves to highlight. Indeed it is the very reticence to construct the narrator as ego that makes the text almost read like a third person narration. This reticence in turn contaminates the other characters and accounts for the theatrical aspect of the text in which the protagonists are not psychological entities but actions and bodily presences. The very bare eyewitness account of the enunciator enlightens the theme of testimony that links the title, the central episode of Steve Ketchel, and the problematic first person into a coherent web of echoes. The subjectivity of the speaker is to be located precisely in his eye and his other sensory organs that focus on Alice’s body. The specific use of the first person here serves to make the enunciator appear as a desiring subject reduced to its essentiality, which is consistent with Hemingway’s overall poetics of desire’s processes in the whole of his fiction.

The limited information about the narrator available to the reader is that he is a teenage boy of seventeen or nineteen. This lack of information regarding his identity combined with his stark Hemingwayan recording of facts make of the narrator a purely linguistic function, a mere point from which discourse is enunciated. The narration is minimal. The narrator is content with recording the bartender’s moves, the characters’ position in the station, whether they are seated or standing, as well as their attitude, whether they are quiet or “getting ready to say something” (42), and is careful to acknowledge the various speakers, including himself, in the dialogues. This he does again very minimally by using the verb say all through the text, hardly commenting on the dialogues except for scarce indications on the tone used by Peroxide once she has been characterized as a performer.
“who said all this in a high stagey way” (367). The narrator’s account reads almost like stage directions. His narrative is not psychological.  

The characters are described as actions in themselves or triggers to possible actions, what Todorov calls, dealing with Shehrazad’s Arabian Nights, “des hommes-récits.” Tom and the narrator’s entrance in the bar and then in the station starts the action: “When he saw us come in the door the bartender looked up and then reached over and put the glass covers on the two free-lunch bowls” (363), “As we came in nobody was talking and the ticket window was down. ‘Shut the door, can’t you?’ somebody said” (364). Steve Ketchel, though he is absent, gets the prostitute going “as though the name had pulled a trigger in her” (367). Developing Todorov’s idea, Rédouane Abouddahab has described the characters in the text as potential stories, each one of them holding the possibility for a new plot to build up (Abouddahab 601, 609-610). This is what makes “The Light of the World” a particularly unsettling short story as it initiates various potential narratives without developing them. It is relevant then that most of the action should be set in a station where the characters are waiting for their story to continue in some other place. Tom and the narrator are just passing through the town: “We’d come in that town at one end and we were going out the other” (364). If indeed they are on a trip, the text focuses on a suspended moment in a waiting room. The text offers several leads to the reader, which accounts for the studies’ various focuses on one of the characters, either Alice, Steve or the narrator, and the temptation to look for extra-textual clues to produce a coherent narrative out of the various stories, as when some re-contextualize the story in the Nick Adams narratives, or search for the “real” Steve/Stanley Ketchel (Martine 197-198; Hannum, 1990, 325).

The story reads like a sketchy composition on the art of the short story, highlighting, by reducing them to an essentiality, the crucial stakes of narration and enunciation. The theatricality of the text and the non-psychological narrative make of the story a stage on which to dramatize the critical issues in text production: not what to tell in a story but how to tell a story, a question which encompasses those of enunciation, narration and style. “The Light of the World” could thus very well be read as Hemingway’s ars poetica.

The text’s structural embedding is relayed in the arrangement of the characters in groups and groups within groups. Of the six white men, two are Swedes, four are lumberjacks and one is further distinguished as a homosexual. Among the “whores,” three are “very big,” (including Alice) and the other two, (including Peroxide) are “ordinary” blondes. The case of the Indians may strikingly illustrate the potentiality of dormant narratives. Though they are only part of the scenery and never enter the discussion, the narrator repeatedly acknowledges their presence until they depart from the scene and from the text. Before they disappear altogether, one of them has already vanished unaccountably from the text. The narrator first counts four of them but then notes: “Two Indians were sitting down at the end of the bench and one standing up against the wall” (365). One has dropped out of sight in the meantime.

The text precisely consists in the eyewitness account of its enunciator and the narrator seems to discover the scene at the same time as the reader. The speaker is positioned as a spectator recording the elements of the scene as he discovers them, igniting virtual stories as his eye goes, not pursuing them as he records the interactions between the characters. The “I” narration is led by the enunciator’s eye. When he enters the station, the first group he notices is the group of whores. Their size makes them the most conspicuous element in the station. He then records “six white men and four Indians”.

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Rédouane Abouddahab has pointed out the relevance of this perception and presentation, showing how the narrator is not simply describing a scene but logically constructing it (Abouddahab 621). The unidentified almost impersonal first person makes the enunciator into a distant observer and an ideal witness content with recording the facts.

The most developed embedded narrative in the short story concerns Steve Ketchel and precisely interrogates the notion of testimony; it also decidedly echoes the Biblical reference contained in the title. As has already been remarked (Bruccoli, Thomas), “The Light of the World” is a Biblical reference to be found in particular in John 1:1-10 and John 8:12. The first instance is the well-known passage comparing the Word to true light in which John defines his mission to bear witness to the light. In the second instance, the reference directly follows the episode of the adulteress; John records Christ saying “I am the light of the world” and then expanding on the reliability of his own testimony. These underlying references are further relayed in the text in the story of Steve Ketchel, a Christ-like figure, and his mock apostles, the whores Alice and Peroxide.

That Steve is a mock Christ is made apparent in Peroxide’s pagan worship of him and the text’s playful debasement of the sacred into coarse materiality. Peroxide’s first description of Steve is overloaded with superlative forms equating him with perfection, and she compares him quite irreligiously both to God and to a god. Her speech is saturated with curses invoking God, thus the word god recurs in the text in the form of swearing. She tells the story of his death which obviously refers to Christ’s story, as Steve Ketchel was killed by his father, but then she specifies: “His own father shot him down like a dog” (367). The anagrammatic inversion of god into dog playfully makes explicit the satiric transformation of Steve into a Christ-like figure. Peroxide herself is turned into a mock apostle as her testimony is eventually contradicted by Alice and the cook. She is first interrupted by the cook when he remarks that she has mistaken Steve’s name, who, according to him, is not Steve but Stanley. Then Alice accuses her of lying and gives her own testimony.

Both “apostles,” Alice and Peroxide, claim their story to be true and both insist, to prove their point, on a faithful record of his words, which clearly affiliates them to the apostles. Alice reports what Steve told her and three times swears to the truth of it, she insists on the exactness of her transcription: “I know exactly what he said to me” (368), “‘That’s truly what he said’” (368). She is contradicted by Peroxide who claims that the words used by Alice cannot have been Steve’s: “‘Steve couldn’t have said that. It wasn’t the way he talked’” (369), “‘It would be impossible for Steve to have said that’” (369). What this possibly goes to show is that the sacred Word to be equated to truth as an absolute is beyond human reach and that there is but the truth of the speaking subject. It is not only impossible but also irrelevant to try and decide which one of them if any says the truth. The end of the story shows them both satisfied with their own version of Steve.

The theme of testimony in the title and Steve’s story problematize the question of enunciation and again turns the reader’s attention to the enunciator of the story. Indeed, the reader is presented with the “I”/eye-witness account of a first person narrator. The question is not whether the narrator is reliable or not (in which case we would reproduce the afore-mentioned critical debate on Alice and Peroxide), whether he is Nick or not, it is to try and locate his subjectivity that will account for Hemingway’s choice to use the first person. The subjectivity inherent to the first person is not to be located in any psychological characteristic of the narrator, but in what the “I”/eye focuses upon. The
bare narration of the succession of events serves to contrast the few occasions when the speaker’s subjective point of view makes itself heard.

When he describes the big whores, the narrator is struck by their size as his excited and unrestrained use of superlatives shows: “She was the biggest whore I ever saw in my life and the biggest woman. [...] There were two other whores that were nearly as big but the big one must have weighed three hundred and fifty pounds. You couldn’t believe she was real when you looked at her” (365). The mention of an impersonal addressee in the second person is unique in the text but then again brings enunciation into the limelight. As Bakhtine has demonstrated, utterance is a drama involving three agents: the speaker, the addressee, and language (Todorov, Mikhail Bakhtine, 75, 83). The uniqueness of the addressee’s mention in the text makes it all the more striking. Though in the impersonal form, it makes the reader party to the narrator’s excitement and draws him into the text as one more potential story in it. In keeping with Bakhtine’s theory of utterance as a dialogue between speaker and addressee but also between texts, it is worth mentioning here the numerous inter-textual references in the text. In addition to the Bible which has been discussed already as an inter-text, the typically American roaming context of the two boys on the road is reminiscent of Mark Twain. Tom’s name may thus evoke Tom Sawyer. Alice’s name may remind the reader of Alice in Wonderland. Hemingway himself distinguished Maupassant’s short story “La Maison Tellier” as an inter-text to his story. These are but a few possible parodic references; they underline the crucial issue of utterance as a dialogical drama that the short story quite literally stages.

The narrator pays particular attention to Alice and more specifically to her body. The unidentified first person stripped to the bone makes the enunciator into sensitive organs bent on sensuality. He observes Alice’s size and her body shaking:

- The whore laughed again and shook all over. (365)
- The big whore shook with laughing. (ibid.)
- She just keep on laughing and shaking. (ibid.)
- She began to shake again. (366)
- Alice commenced to laugh again and to shake all over. (ibid.)

He also feels her body shaking: “Alice was beginning to shake again. I felt it, sitting by her” (367). The insistence on her body shaking hints at her spectacular size, the “‘mountain of flesh’” (365) of her body as the cook puts it, whereas her voice to which the narrator listens intently, contrasts with her corpulence: “‘Ho! Ho! Ho!’ the big whore shook with laughing. She had a really pretty voice” (365). The onomatopoeic rendering of her voice is rather more consistent with her size than with the description of her voice.

The adjective used to qualify her voice replaces the superlatives as a sure sign of subjectivity. The narrator will then qualify it using other adjectives, making Alice’s voice her characteristic feature and signaling his attraction to it:

- She said in that low voice. (368)
- Alice said in her nice voice. (369)
- Alice said in that sweet lovely voice. (ibid.)
- She certainly had a nice voice. (ibid.)

His last description of her combines the three senses of sight, touch, and hearing, and again makes the narrator’s subjectivity blatantly apparent: “She had about the prettiest face I ever saw. She had a pretty face and a nice smooth skin and a lovely voice [...]. But, my God, she was big. She was as big as three women” (369). The bare first person serves to make the enunciator into a bodily presence whose subjectivity makes itself heard in the sensory description of Alice.
This is consistent with the highly erotic energy of the text overloaded with sexual innuendoes. The very presence of the whores is suggestive of sex. One of the men jokes bawdily about them. The cook is also laughed at because of his homosexuality, and his sexual interest in the two teenage boys is obvious. Tom titillates the cook when he answers his question on their age with “‘I’m sixty-nine and he is ninety-six’” (365), the 69 figure alluding to a sex position. The sensual and sexual tension in the text is all the more palpable as the enunciator is defined in terms of bodily perceptions.

Some characters, like the narrator, are not bodies as wholes but rather as metonymic bodies. The cook’s characteristic feature is his clean white hands. Peroxide comes to be named after the color of her hair. Alice is in turn an amount of flesh, a face, and a voice. Such focus on particular body parts that the text, as in a close-up, seems to enlarge so much that the cook becomes a pair of hands and Peroxide a hair color, makes the characters into grotesque figures, again undermining the so-called realism of Hemingway’s text. Their grotesque aspect is consistent with their fight over truth about Steve. Again truth as an absolute is undermined. Instead, the fictional “lies” like the whore’s fictions about Steve function as signs of some truth about the subject, which is that he is subjected to the desire of the Other. The subject only emerges through alienation. He needs the other to exist, which is also what Bakhtine’s enunciation theory tries to show. It is only logical then that the subjectivity of the narrator in the story should appear when he becomes interested in Alice.

The epitomized bodies also read like metonymies of desire which, according to Lacan, shapes itself in various “objects,” including gaze and voice, that act as triggers to the drives. The bare first person could thus be interpreted as a representation of the desiring subject in its essentiality: a problematic, elusive “I”/eye attracted to a voice. What makes the human being a desiring subject is language which brings division in the subject. As he or she is cut off from the thing itself that words replace, the subject is forever searching for the thing which is truth, forever electing substitutes for it, forever recovering from or covering absence which is a gap at his or her core.

Absence is repeatedly inscribed in the text in the dead figure of Steve Ketchel, in the disappearance of the fourth Indian, in the satiric version of Christ that may well stand for the absence of God. The subjectivity of the first person that the nakedness of the narration serves to enhance, constructs a subject, not a character endowed with psychological features. What the reader is presented with is an enunciator whose very speech act problematizes his relationship to the other, to desire, absence, and truth as mediated by language. “The Light of the World” tells the story of the complex interactions that make the speaker’s subjectivity a product of his confrontation with the other, at the same time as he is the producer of the text we are reading, not forgetting that he is also the product of the writer’s decision.

The anonymity of the first person narrator is a decisive clue to the reading of the short story as Hemingway’s *ars poetica*. It is because he is anonymous that the first person narrator is put into the limelight. The style used in the short story is characteristic of Hemingway using short simple sentences and a matter-of-fact narration that reads more like an account. It serves to contrast the subjectivity that the reader cannot but expect in a first person narrative. This subjectivity in turn highlights the problematic issue of enunciation as a dialogue with language and with the other that characterizes the human being as a speaking subject and therefore a desiring subject. “The Light of the World” is
an enactment of Hemingway’s poetics that envisage writing as a powerful and complex act.

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NOTES

1. The linguistic term *enunciator* will be specifically used in this paper to insist on the grammatical function of the first person pronoun as a *shifter*. Émile Benveniste has demonstrated both the characteristic uniqueness of the first person as it can only refer to one being while it is used and its versatility as a shifter as everybody can appropriate the first person (Benveniste 251-257).

2. Philip Young exposes clearly his vision in his Preface to *The Nick Adams Stories*: “Arranged in chronological sequence, the events of Nick’s life make up a meaningful narrative in which a memorable character grows from child to adolescent to soldier, veteran, writer, and parent – a sequence closely paralleling the events of Hemingway’s own life” (5-6).

3. For Joseph Flora, Alice says “the truth” because she talks with her heart (82). Carlos Baker considers Alice as the symbol of love and as the representation of the light announced in the title of the story (140). James F. Barbour contends that Alice says “the truth” because she represents realism while Peroxide invents it because she is romantic (20-21).

4. See in particular Rédouane Abouddahab or Nancy Comley and Robert Scholes.

5. "It is not the image of man as such that characterizes the novelistic genre but precisely the image of language" (in Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtine*, 103; my translation). Though Bakhtine in his various studies concentrates on the novel, I feel justified in applying his remarks to the short story as he mainly distinguishes between prose and poetry.

6. Most critics have considered Tom to be the eldest acting as a mentor for the narrator, as they have followed the lead suggested by Young who viewed “The Light of the World” as a story about Nick’s adolescence and his apprenticeship of adulthood, and who enclosed it in a chapter entitled “On His Own.” However the enunciator’s answer to the cook: “‘We’re seventeen and nineteen’” (366), makes it impossible for the reader to decide which one of them is seventeen, which nineteen. He can only conjecture or he can leave the question open.

7. “A psychological narrative considers the action as a way to get to the personality of the character, as an expression or else as a symptom. The action is not considered for what it is but for its transitive value providing information on the subject. Conversely, an a-psychological narrative is characterized by intransitive actions. The action is to be taken at face value, not as a clue to a particular trait of character” (Todorov, *Poétique de la prose*, 79; my translation).

8. “[In *The Arabian Nights*] a character is a potential story that corresponds to his or her life story. A new character introduces a new plot. This is the realm of the narrative-men” (*ibid.*, 82; my translation).

9. Interestingly enough, the cited British edition of *The First Forty-Nine Stories* “corrected” what the editor(s) must have deemed to be an error, by mentioning only three Indians from the beginning (364).

10. “12. Then spake Jesus unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life./ 13. The Pharisees therefore said unto him, Thou bearest record of thyself, thy record is not true./ 14. Jesus answered and said unto them, Though I bear record of myself, yet my record is true: for I know whence I came, and whither I go; but ye cannot tell whence I come, and whither I go.”

11. Sherwood Anderson’s understanding of the grotesque contends that people who are infatuated with a truth of their own become “pregnant” with it; it fills them so much as to deform their bodies: “It was the truths that made the people grotesques. The old man had quite an elaborate theory concerning the matter. It was his notion that the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood” (24).
12. In Lacan’s theory, the object of desire, which he calls objet petit a, is what causes desire, an object that can never be attained. It is a sort of fictional substitute for the constitutive gap in the subject, that triggers the drives and allows them to circulate forever by never reaching it.

13. “What is dramatized in ‘The Light of the World’ is this peculiar posture of enunciation – the apex of artistic creation – that makes one at the same time a producer, a product, and a production” (Abouddahab 625, my translation).

ABSTRACTS

While the first person narrator in Hemingway’s “The Light of the World” remains unidentified, most studies following in Philip Young’s wake have assumed him to be Nick Adams. The anonymity of the first person and the text’s reticence to construct the speaker as an ego endowed with psychological characteristics has been largely ignored. This study proposes to focus on the bareness of the “I” narrating the story, leaving aside the character of Nick Adams, as a crucial structural element of the text. The very bareness of the unidentified first person accounts for the text’s structure that reads like a play, as well as for its major theme of testimony suggested by the title and developed in the embedded story of Steve Ketchel. It is a relevant clue to an interpretation of the story drawing on the notion of desire that matches Hemingway’s overall poetics in the short stories as well as in the novels.

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Émilie Walezak is a junior lecturer at the University of Lyon III, France. She is a doctoral candidate at the University of Lyon II. Her dissertation deals with contemporary British fiction. Twentieth century fiction is her particular field, novels and short stories alike. Her work centers especially on problems surrounding the question of enunciation and her methodology draws mainly on the psychoanalytic works of Jacques Lacan and the linguistics of enunciation.