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Witnessing and the Gaze in Barbusse's *Hell*

by Rebecca Stobaugh

Stripped down to its most basic plot summary, the premise of Henri Barbusse's 1908 novel *Hell*, or *L'enfer*, sounds like the plot of a cheap porno: a man discovers a peep hole in his hotel room and proceeds to spy on the private lives of the people next door. Indeed, the novel obsesses over the erotic; yet, this obsession is often just as unsensual as it is pleasurable, as descriptions of sex become increasingly disillusioning, and the characters, unsatisfied. Moreover, the narrator does not spy on others for a strictly sexual thrill, but because he believes seeing people as they truly are in their private lives is the only way to come to an understanding of human nature. As the novel progresses, his fixation on discovering the truth increases, and he becomes so consumed with watching others that he eventually loses his job because he cannot tear himself away from his hole in the wall. The narrator frequently describes himself as a truth seeker or a witness, a description that most scholarship takes at face-value. Although this scholarship does explore the concept of witnessing in the novel, it always does so with the assumption that narrator is, in fact, a witness. In this paper, I want to challenge this assumption. I argue that even though the narrator claims to bear witness to the human condition, he never achieves this goal of becoming a true witness.

First it is important to clarify exactly what it means to be a witness. Much of the scholarship that focuses on the idea of the narrator as a witness argues that the narrator is only able to achieve his truth-seeking identity through social isolation. From the beginning, the narrator is positioned as a social outsider. Richard C. Harris notes that the narrator is described as having few social ties.

He has no family, no stable relationships, and as previously mentioned, no job by the novel's end (Harris 110-11). Similarly, Eugene E. Miller calls the narrator "asocial" or even "antisocial" and argues that this asocial positioning is essential for the narrator's development (274). It is only through his distance from society that the narrator is able to bear witness to the truth of human nature and to weave these events into coherency (Miller 274). And, of course, there is the physical separation of the narrator from the other guests via the walls of his hotel room, a bubble of isolation within a populated space. On a related note, Harris suggests that the narrator is also distanced from popular thought. Late in the novel, the narrator listens as a man describes his newest idea for a book, one mimicking the narrator's voyeuristic journey. However, the insights on human nature the man describes are nothing like those the narrator himself reaches, and the narrator is appalled at what he sees as a mockery of his own experience. Rather than seeking actual truth, the writer seeks popular truth, a story to shock and enthrall the masses. Harris argues that it is the writer's interest in popular entertainment that separates him from the narrator, as truth eludes those only interested in amusement (116). While not directly stated, Harris's analysis implies that to better understand humanity individuals and true artists must distance themselves from popular consciousness and the wants of the masses; they cannot seek truth for social gain. In fact, both Harris and Miller conclude that truth in the novel is inarticulable, meaning it could never be completely delivered to the masses. Harris argues that true artists must accept this fact to understand the nature of truth (115-16), while Miller argues that artists languish over this inability to articulate truth (274.) Thus, according to these readings, to be a witness to an event one must exist outside of it; in this case, to bear witness to humanity one can only observe society at a distance, without direct engagement.

The idea that the narrator must be distanced from society to seek the truth conflicts with many modern interpretations of witnessing. These interpretations, largely born from trauma

theory, cast the function of witnessing as directly related to social interaction. It might seem strange to apply trauma theory to *Hell*; however, a great deal of trauma theory is concerned with the nature of truth and issues surrounding what is seen and what is known. Although there have been different theories on witnessing, I will be working with the prominent trauma scholar Kelly Oliver's theories, as explained in her work *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*. Oliver argues that witnessing is the basis of subjectivity and that it possesses a two-fold meaning: to be an *eyewitness* and to *bear witness*, what we might think of as "true witnessing." To be an eyewitness is to merely observe the facts of an event. To bear witness means to see the truth beyond truth, the various social, cultural, personal, and political factors surrounding events. Simply put, Oliver argues that true witnessing is based on a dialogic, two-way answer-response model of communication. In other words, witnessing is based in conversational structures, the ability to recognize and respond to others.

The emphasis Oliver places on communication is especially interesting when applied to *Hell*, as one of the "truths" the narrator discovers is the failure of couples to communicate. Over and over, the narrator laments that the couples he views may be physically together, but are always emotionally separate, that they continuously fail to understand one another. Yet, the narrator himself is entirely disengaged from communication with others. He never attempts to speak to those he watches when he sees them in the hotel's lobby. And while he thinks about recording his experiences to share with others, he soon gives up on the idea. The only time he tries to bridge the gap between himself and those he watches is when observing the last moments of a dying man through his hole in the wall. He only allows for the possibility to become looked at—to be penetrated by the gaze of another through the wall's hole—when this interaction will have no

social consequences. The man dies the instant the narrator makes his presence known (Barbusse 195), but even if he had not, his death would have soon closed their connection.

Furthermore, the narrator's mode of witnessing is inherently flawed. Surprisingly, not much scholarship has focused on voyeurism in the novel, and that which does tends to dismiss or downplay its erotic nature, or otherwise regulate it to merely a plot device (Sturrock 123; Harris 112). However, voyeurism is built on notions of dominance and hierarchy, both of which hinder a dialogic mode of witnessing according to Oliver. Oliver argues that hierarchy disrupts witnessing because those with power do not truly see those without it. They filter the experiences of others through their own experiences and can only recognize others via what they can also recognize in themselves. Voyeurism upholds a power hierarchy between the look-er and the look-ee, in which the one who looks holds complete control over the one who is looked at. Likewise, while the narrator may view others in an attempt to gain knowledge for most of the novel, his initial foray into voyeurism is clearly erotic, and easily defined in terms of Laura Mulvey's male gaze. Most notable is when the narrator first watches Aimée undress. The narrator pours over her body, his gaze disassembling her to focus on individual parts. He ignores her face, her mind, and eventually, her personhood until she becomes "no longer anything but her sex" (Barbusse 26). While the narrator's gaze at the end of the novel may no longer fit into a strict reading of Mulvey's male gaze, it does not differ that much from its original intent. Although the narrator gazes to bear witness to a greater truth, he does so for strictly egocentric reasons:

This isn't out of love for mankind...It's for my sake—that I want to reach and obtain that complete truth which is above emotion, above peace, above even life, like a sort of dead creature. I want to derive an aim, a faith from it; I want to use it as my own salvation...I am the centre of the world...I see everything in terms of myself, both the vast and the little

things of the mind and the heart...if I close my eyes, the sky can no longer exist. (Barbusse 200-02)

The narrator may seek truth, but the egocentric focus of his gaze distorts it. Through his gaze the narrator becomes an aggressively active participant in what he sees, claiming to “dominate and possess” the adjacent room, and, by extension, its inhabitants (Barbusse 10). Those he spies on are characterized as willing participants, as evidenced by lines like “this woman has just...*given me*... her naked kiss” and (Barbusse 13) “she *shows me* her dainty feet” (Barbusse 24) (emphasis added). The actions of those being looked at are given false agency, highlighting the element of fantasy present in voyeurism. This false agency allows the voyeur to further cast himself as a participant, *sharing* the experiences rather than simply *viewing* them. Moreover, it objectifies those he gazes upon, as they seemingly perform for him, their actions recast to fit his whims, much like a child might control the actions of toy. Rather than lend to his objectivity, the narrator’s hierarchically dominant position as a voyeur causes him to filter experiences through an egocentric, limited perspective, reframing the truth to suit his own purposes.

Moreover, when it comes to the “truth beyond truth,” the narrator seems ignorant of the any larger historical or cultural influences behind anything he witnesses. The narrator *observes* the separateness of others, their failures to form meaningful human connection, the failings of religion, and how others try to cope with death, but he never reaches any conclusion as to the *hows* or *whys* behind the human condition. For all that the narrator wants to be a bearer of truth, he is merely an eyewitness, one who sees the facts but cannot properly interpret them. This failing is especially significant given the troubling nature of gender hierarchy that can be observed in most of the couples. While a full analysis of gender relations in the novel is not within the scope of this paper,

I do think it is important to note that the most “pure” or “happy” moments in the novel between couples usually occur at the expense of female voice and identity.

For instance, when the narrator observes a boy and girl first discover romantic and sexual love, he notes that the two enter the room holding hands, and frequently makes note of their “sameness.” When the boy announces his love for the girl, he states that he will no longer call her by her name, but “*Her*,” reducing the girl to her gender and stripping her of her identity; a move not unlike the narrator reducing Aimee to “nothing but her sex.” When the two leave, they are no longer holding hands, hinting that they have begun the process of “separateness” the narrator observes in all the other couples. A separateness that, I argue, likely occurs due to the stripping of the girl’s identity, a marker of hierarchy that disrupts effective, dialogic communication and recognition between the pair. The novel has several other moments like this one, moments that hint at larger social structures that lead to the lack of connection the narrator observes between couples; yet, the narrator never seems to note the reasons why such disconnection exists, other than observing its relation to other sites of meaning and meaninglessness, such as death and religion.

The narrator’s increasingly asocial nature, which many scholars link to his position as a witness, is really a consequence of *false* witnessing. If, as Oliver argues, witnessing is the basis of subjectivity, then engaging in a true, dialogic model of witnessing should help strengthen subjectivity. In fact, many trauma scholars look to witnessing as a method of recovering from damaged subjectivity. However, the narrator’s foray into voyeurism leaves him isolated, as he describes himself as an “exile,” a status he relates to the knowledge he now bears (Barbusse 228-29). However, I argue that the narrator becomes an exile not due to the knowledge he has gained but because of his perversion of the witnessing process. Instead of engaging in a form of witnessing

that builds connections with others, the narrator engages in egocentric, isolated witnessing. His ability to enter a dialogic address-response based way of interacting with the world has wilted in the face of his obsession.

Hell shows the delicate balance of witnessing, how it is continuously disturbed by social hierarchy, domination, and egocentrism. While the narrator tries to act as a witness to the truth beyond truth, his own hierarchal entanglements prevent him from fully doing so. He begins his foray into witnessing via the male gaze, and further devolves into a self-motivated, one-sided witnessing model. Although he is able to gain knowledge, he has shut himself off from a true, dialogic mode of witnessing and will likely never be able to put this knowledge to any meaningful use.

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