

Representation

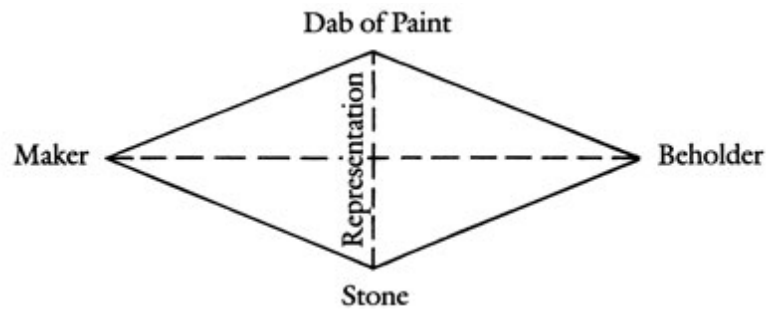
Probably the most common and naive intuition about literature is that it is a “representation of life.” Unlike many of the terms in this collection, “representation” has always played a central role in the understanding of literature. Indeed, one might say that it has played the definitive role insofar as the founding fathers of literary theory, Plato and Aristotle, regarded literature as simply one form of representation. Aristotle defined all the arts—verbal, visual, and musical—as modes of representation, and went even further to make representation the definitively human activity:

From childhood men have an instinct for representation, and in this respect man differs from the other animals that he is far more imitative and learns his first lessons by representing things.

Man, for many philosophers both ancient and modern, is the “representational animal,” *homo symbolicum*, the creature whose distinctive character is the creation and manipulation of signs—things that “stand for” or “take the place of” something else.

Since antiquity, then, representation has been the foundational concept in aesthetics (the general theory of the arts) and semiotics (the general theory of signs). In the modern era (i.e., in the last three hundred years) it has also become a crucial concept in political theory, forming the cornerstone of representational theories of sovereignty, legislative authority, and relations of individuals to the state. We now think of “representative government” and the accountability of representatives to their constituents as fundamental postulates of modern government. One obvious question that comes up in contemporary theories of representation, consequently, is the relationship between aesthetic or semiotic representation (things that “stand for” other things) and political representation (persons who “act for” other persons). And one obvious place where these two forms of representation come together is the theater, where persons (actors) stand for or “impersonate” other (usually fictional) persons. There are vast differences, of course, between Laurence Olivier playing Hamlet and Ronald Reagan playing the role of the president—the difference, say, between playing and real life; between a rigid script and an open, improvised performance; or between an aesthetic contract and a legal one—but these should not blind us to the structural similarities of the two forms of representation or to the complex interaction between playful fantasy and serious reality in all forms of representation. The fact that Ronald Reagan began his career as an actor and has continually exploited the symbolic, theatrical character of the presidency only makes the links between aesthetic/semiotic and political forms of representation more unavoidable.

What is the “structure” that is common to both the political and semiotic forms of representation? One way to think of it is as a triangular relationship: representation is always of something or someone, by something or someone, to someone. It seems that only the third angle of representation need be a person: we can represent stones with dabs of paint or letters or sounds, but we can represent things only to people. The other two angles can be occupied by people but need not be: I can represent a man with a stone, or a stone with a man; but it would seem very odd to speak of representing either a stone or a man to a stone. There also may be a fourth dimension to representation not captured by our triangle, and that would be the “intender” or “maker” of the representation, the one who says, “let this dab of paint stand for this stone to someone.” This more complete picture of representation might be mapped as a quadrilateral with two diagonal axes, one connecting the representational object to that which it represents, the other connecting the maker of the representation to the beholder:



We might call these connecting lines the “axis of representation” (linking the dab of paint to the stone) and the “axis of communication” (linking the persons who understand the relation of paint to stone), respectively. The crossing of these axes suggests, I hope, one of the potential problems that comes up with representations: they present a barrier that “cuts across,” as it were, our lines of communication with others, presenting the possibility of misunderstanding, error, or downright falsehood. As soon as we begin to use representations in any social situation—to claim, for instance, that this dab of paint represents the fact that this stone is in that place and looks like this—then representation begins to play a double role, as a means of communication which is also a potential obstacle to it.

So far I am speaking of simple, almost “atomistic” cases of representation, in which one thing stands for one other thing. But clearly the business of representation is much more complex than this. Representation is an extremely elastic notion which extends all the way from a stone representing a man to a novel representing a day in the life of several Dubliners. Sometimes one thing can stand for a whole group of things, as when the word “tree” stands for a concept that “covers” a multitude of individual things, or a political representative stands for a people, or a stick figure stands for the general concept of man, or a narrative represents a whole series of events. And the representational sign never seems to occur in isolation from a whole network of other signs: the dab of paint that stands for a stone will probably do so only in the context of a whole field of dabs of paint that represent other things adjacent to the stone—grass, earth, trees, sky, other stones. Take the dab of paint out of that context, and it ceases to represent, becomes merely a dab of paint. In a similar way, the word “tree” represents a certain class of objects only in the context of a language, just as a note or a musical phrase has meaning only in relation to a larger piece and familiar systems of tonality. These “systems” (tonality, language, representational schemes in painting) may be called “codes,” by which I simply mean a body of rules for combining and deciphering representational signs. When something stands for something to somebody, it does so by virtue of a kind of social agreement—“let us agree that this will stand for that”—which, once understood, need not be restated on every occasion. In fact, the decision to let A stand for B may (and usually does) open up a whole new realm of possibilities for representation: B becomes a likely candidate to stand for C, and so on.

Aristotle says that representations differ from one another in three ways: in object, manner, and means. The “object” is that which is represented; the “manner” is the way in which it is represented; the “means” is the material that is used. What I am calling “codes” here are basically the same thing as Aristotle’s “means”—that is, language, musical forms, paint. But the “manner” suggests yet another feature of representation, and that is the particular way a representational code is employed. The “means” of literary representation is language, but there are many ways of employing that means (dramatic recitation, narration, description) to achieve all sorts of effects (pity, admiration, laughter, scorn) and represent all sorts of things. Similarly, all paintings may employ shapes, shades, and colors on a two-dimensional surface (and this may be called the painter’s “code”), but there are many ways of depicting a tree, many ways of applying paint to a surface. Some of them may become institutionalized as styles or genres, and these, like codes, are social agreements (“let us agree to represent this with that used in this way”), only of a more specialized nature. These “mini-codes” associated with styles of representation are usually called “conventions.” The difference between a code and a convention may be illustrated by thinking of the difference between a medium and a genre: film is a medium, a material means of representation with a complex set of rules for combining and deciphering its signs; whereas the Hollywood Western is a particular kind of film, a genre that is recognized by the persistence of certain conventional elements (shoot-outs, wide open spaces, cowboys,

Indians) from one example to another. In a similar way, we might think of language as one medium of representation, “literature” as the name of the aesthetic use of that medium, and things like poetry, the novel, and drama as very large genres within that medium.

One crucial consideration that enters into any analysis of representation is the relationship between the representational material and that which it represents. A stone may stand for a man, but how? By virtue of what “agreement” or understanding does representation occur? Semioticians generally differentiate three types of representational relationships under the names of icon, symbol, and index. An iconic account of the relation “stone-represents-man” would stress resemblance: a certain stone might stand for a man because it is upright, or because it is hard, or because its shape resembles that of a man. (“Mimesis” and “imitation” are thus iconic forms of representation that transcend the differences between media: I can imitate—i.e., mimic or produce a resemblance of—a sound, speech act, gesture, or facial expression and, thus, iconically reproduce it; icons are not just pictures.) Symbolic representations, by contrast, are not based on the resemblance of the sign to what it signifies but on arbitrary stipulation: the stone stands for a man because “we say so,” because we have agreed to regard it this way. Representation in language is “symbolic,” in that letters, words, and whole texts represent sounds and states of affairs without in the least resembling what they represent. Indexical representation, finally, explains “standing for” in terms of cause and effect or some “existential” relation like physical proximity or connectedness: the stone represents a man because a man set it up as a marker, to indicate (like a trace or footprint) the fact that he was here; a glove, a strand of hair, or a fingerprint are, to the skillful detective, all representations by “indication” of the person who left them behind. There is nothing, of course, to prevent any particular representation from employing more than one of these relationships: a written text may symbolically represent (describe or narrate or dramatize) an action, and it may also indexically represent (indicate the presence of) its author as the “cause” of which it is an “effect.” Photographs are commonly thought to combine iconic and indexical representation, standing for visual objects by virtue of both resemblance and cause and effect.

Now it is important to realize that the long tradition of explaining literature and the other arts in terms of representation is matched by an equally long tradition of discomfort with this notion. Plato accepted the common view that literature is a representation of life, but for that very reason he thought it should be banished from the ideal state. Representations, Plato reasoned, are mere substitutes for the things themselves; even worse, they may be false or illusory substitutes that stir up antisocial emotions (violence or weakness), and they may represent bad persons and actions, encouraging imitation of evil. Only certain kinds of representations, carefully controlled by the state, were to be permitted into Plato's republic of rational virtue.

Although Plato's hostility to representation may seem extreme, we should recognize that some prohibitions or restrictions on representations have been practiced by every society that has produced them. Taboos against graven images, against writing or uttering the name of God, against the representation of the human form, against the representation of evil or ugly objects, against sex or violence, are an equally important part of the “social agreements” that constitute representation. The formula “let this stand for that to them” is regularly subjected to restrictions on subject matter (“let this stand for anything but that”) or on the audience/spectator (“let this stand for that, but not to them”). Sometimes the prohibition may be directed at particular types of representational relationships: iconic representations, especially pictures and statues, are generally subjected to more stringent restrictions than symbolic or verbal representations. Greek dramatic conventions allowed the narrative, descriptive representation of violence but not its direct, visual portrayal on the stage. Pornography provides the most interesting examples of all these attempts to limit the triangle of representation, either by specifying the kind of persons who may witness the representation (“adults”; “18 and over”; “men only”) or by restricting the kind of things that may be represented (no frontal nudity; no genitals; no actual sex acts), or by restricting the kind of representational signs that may be employed (dirty pictures and movies are usually subjected to more stringent prohibitions than dirty books).

It should be clear that representation, even purely “aesthetic” representation of fictional persons and events, can never be completely divorced from political and ideological questions; one might argue, in fact, that representation is precisely the point where these questions are most likely to enter the literary work. If literature is a “representation of life,” then representation is exactly the place where “life,” in all its social and subjective complexity, gets into the literary work.

There have been many other challenges to the notion of literary representation. Most of them, like prohibitions against idolatry or pornography, accept the

basic model of the representational triangle but try to restrict or modify it in the service of some set of values. Thus, “idealist” theories of the arts will often posit some “higher nature” as the preferred object of representation and consign the representation of ordinary life to “lower” genres, such as caricature or satire, or some nonaesthetic genre, like “documentary” or “history.” Realist theories of the arts tend to consign the idealist genres to the realm of “romance” and to see them as merely imaginary, fanciful representations. Both theories adopt the representational model of art: they simply disagree about what is to be represented (what Aristotle called the “object”).

More strenuous challenges to representation come from the traditions of expressionism and formalism. Expressionism generally posits an unrepresentable essence (God, the soul, the author's intention) that is somehow manifested in a work. The “somehow” is the key: the unrepresentable is often construed as the invisible, the unpicturable, even the unspeakable—but not, generally, as the unwritable. Writing, arbitrary marks, hieroglyphics, and allegory are the signs that “encrypt” representation in a secret code. Thus, the cult of the artistic genius and the aura-laden artifact often accompany the expressive aesthetic. The aesthetic object does not “represent” something, except incidentally; it “is” something, an object with an indwelling spirit, a trace in matter of the activity of the immaterial. The anthropological model for the expressive aesthetic is fetishism, which does not treat its sacred objects as icons (i.e., representations by resemblance; pictures) or, in a sense, as representations at all (though they are frequently describable as indexes). The mimetic aesthetic, by contrast, finds its anthropological counterpart in the notion of idolatry, the worship of graven images that represent by resemblance.

Formalist or “abstract” theories of art have provided the most fundamental challenges to representational models in the modern era. Many of these theories take music (which, for obvious reasons, is hard to describe in representational terms) as the paradigm for all the arts. Formalism emphasizes the representational means and manner—the materiality and organization of the “signifier” or representational object—and de-emphasizes the other two angles of the representational triangle. The represented object may even disappear when the medium turns itself back on its own codes, engaging in self-reflexive play. The potential witnesses to the representational act are reduced finally to an elite of technical experts and connoisseurs who appreciate the ostensibly nonrepresentational object. Modernism frequently presents itself as having “grown out of” representational models of art, language, and mind, and it has, in the modern era, been very unfashionable to talk about literature or the other arts as representations of life. To the formalist, literature is about itself: novels are made out of other novels; all poems are about language. If representation sneaks back in, it is likely to be turned backward: life imitates art, reality (nature, society, the unconscious) is a text, and there is nothing outside the text.

Once this turn is made, then the opposition between “life” and “literature” which animates the traditional notion of literary representation begins to fall apart. But the structure of representation itself, as a relation of standing for, seems to come back with a vengeance. Postmodern culture is often characterized as an era of “hyper-representation,” in which abstract, formalist painting has been replaced by experiments like photorealism, and reality itself begins to be experienced as an endless network of representations. The paradigm for the arts shifts from the pure nonrepresentational formalism of abstract painting and music to mass media and advertising, in which everything is indefinitely reproducible and representable as a commodity. Categories such as “the thing itself,” the “authentic,” and “the real” which were formerly considered the objects of representation (or as the presence achieved by formal purity) now become themselves representations, endlessly reduplicated and distributed.

A survey of postmodern experiments in literary representation would be outside the scope of this essay, which in any case is intended to raise the issue of representation as a problem that runs throughout the history of literary production. Suffice it to say that concepts such as the identity of the text, the determinacy of meaning, the integrity of the author, and the validity of interpretation all play a role in the representational (or antirepresentational) character of literary texts. The highly self-conscious fictive “labyrinths” of Jorge Luis Borges, with their pastiches of scholarly and historical documentation, deadpan realism, and bizarre fantasy, are often cited as paradigms of postmodern literary representation.

But it may be more useful to take as an example of literary representation a more traditional text, one that initiates a historic shift in conventions of literary representation and that takes the activity of representation itself as a theme. Robert Browning's “My Last Duchess” provides an especially interesting case study because it draws together so many different conventions of literary representation (lyric, dramatic, and narrative), and because it reflects as well on other modes of representation, including the pictorial and the political. Browning's text, to begin with, is a representation of a speech act, and thus of a

speaker, a listener, and a specific setting. The Duke of Ferrara is “presented” to us (represented, that is, as if he were immediately present to us), describing a painting of his late wife (“my last duchess”) to the agent of a certain count whose daughter is engaged to be married to the duke.

My Last Duchess FERRARA

That's my last duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
Will't please you sit and look at her? I said
“Frà Pandolf” by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts by
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps
Frà Pandolf chanced to say “Her mantle laps
“Over my lady's wrist too much,” or “Paint
“Must never hope to reproduce the faint
“Half-flush that dies along her throat”: such stuff
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of joy. She had
A heart-how shall I say?—too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
Sir, 'twas all one! My favor at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace—all and each
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
Or blush, at least. She thanked men—good! but thanked
Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
In speech—which I have not—to make your will
Quite clear to such an one, and say, “Just this
“Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
“Or there exceed the mark”—and if she let
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,
—E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
Never to stoop. Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands

As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet
The company below, then. I repeat,
The Count your master's known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretense
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

The first thing that may strike us about this poem is the way that Browning renounces any direct representation of his own views: the poet does not lyrically describe the painting, or narrate any events in his own voice; he lets his invented character, the duke, do all the talking, as if he were a character in a play. The second thing that may strike us is that this is not a play but something like a fragment or extract—a single speech or “monologue”—presented, however, as a whole poem. Browning has, in other words, deliberately collapsed the distinction between two kinds of literary representation—the brief, self-sufficient lyric utterance of the poet, and the dramatic speech that would conventionally belong in a more extended representation—in order to create a new hybrid genre, the dramatic monologue. This “collapse” of lyric and dramatic conventions is itself an act of representation in which what would have been a part or fragment (a dramatic speech) is allowed to “stand for” or take the place of the whole. And, indeed, one of the pleasures of reading this brief monologue is the unfolding of the whole drama that it represents in miniature. We quickly surmise that the duke is an obsessively jealous husband who had his last duchess killed because she was too free with her affections and approval—“she liked whate’er / She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.”

The truly tantalizing mystery, however, is the meaning of the drama that this speech represents in little. Why is the duke telling this story to the agent of his bride-to-be's father? Is he trying to impress the emissary with his power and ruthlessness? Is he indirectly doing what he was unable to do with his last duchess, “stooping” to warn his next duchess that she had better be more discreet in her behavior? Is his speech better understood as a calculated threat in which signs of spontaneity are disguises for a deep plot or as an unwitting confession of the duke's inability to control the affections of women? What state of affairs (including “state of mind”) does the duke's speech really represent? And (a rather different but related problem) what authorial intention or meaning is conveyed by Browning's presentation of the duke in just this way? What judgment are we being invited to make about the speaker and his words? It would seem clear enough that we are meant to disapprove, but what specific form does this disapproval take?

One way of getting at these questions is to reflect on the role of yet another character in the poem, that of the auditor, whose reactions are represented to us by the duke. The auditor is, of course, a representative of his “master” the count, a go-between who presumably is working out details about the dowry (the duke is evidently confident that the count's “known munificence” guarantees that he will make money on the marriage: “no just pretense / Of mine for dowry will be disallowed”), though the duke protests that he is really marrying for love (“his fair daughter's self, as I avowed / At starting, is my object”). But if the emissary represents the count to the duke in the implied drama of Browning's poem, he also represents the reader in its implied lyric address: like us, he is the auditor of the speech. What does this mean? What role are we, as readers, being coerced into by having ourselves represented within the poem?

One possibility is that Browning wants to place his reader in a position of weakness and servitude, forced to hear a repugnant, menacing speech but deprived of any voice or power to counteract it. The count's representative, presumably, has the responsibility for seeing that negotiations go smoothly in a marriage that will raise the count's daughter in the sociopolitical order (the difference between a duke and a count, exemplary representatives of feudal hierarchy, is crucial here). Should he warn the count that he's marrying his daughter to a Bluebeard? Should he warn the daughter to watch her step? Neither of these actions really opposes the duke's will; on the contrary, they are ways of carrying out his will, of “stooping” on the duke's behalf to convey warnings the duke would never “stoop” to make in person. If the duke represents the aristocratic, feudal social order, understood here principally as a system giving some men absolute power over others, and particularly over women in a system of exchange, the emissary represents a servant class or (as a representative of the reader) the new bourgeois class of nineteenth-century readers who may hear this speech as the echo of a bygone era, the “bad old days” of absolute power—a power which may be deplored, but which still has a power to fascinate, and which lies beyond our intervention.

The only representation in this poem that seems to have some power to intervene is the portrait of the duchess, which seems still to mock the duke with its free looks from the wall. He may control who can see her by drawing aside or closing the curtain that veils the painting, but he cannot control the way the painting looks. He could, of course, destroy it, just as he destroyed its original, the duchess herself; but he chooses not to. Is that because he wants it as a reminder that now he has her under his power? Or because he is, in some sense, no more capable of destroying the duchess's smiling image than he is of destroying those galling, disgusting memories of her behavior that he pours out on the envoy? If the painting functions as a representation of the duke's power, it also seems to be a continual reminder of his weakness, his inability to “make [his] will / Quite clear” to his wife. In a similar way, the duke's whole performance, his boasting speech to the envoy, is an expression of a wish for absolute power that has just the opposite effect, revealing the duke as someone who is so lacking in confidence about his power that he needs constant reassurance. His final appeal to the envoy to “notice” his statue of Neptune “taming a sea horse” is a transparent invitation to see the duke as a god “taming” nature, much as he “tamed” his duchess by having her painted on his wall. The duke thinks of his power as something that is certified by his control of representations—by his painting of the duchess hidden behind a curtain that only he can draw, by the statue of Neptune “cast in bronze for me,” by his control over the envoy's attention (and those whom the envoy represents) with a strategic display of his gallery of representations. What Browning shows us, however, is the uncontrollability of representations, the way they take on a life of their own that escapes and defies the will to determine their meaning. If the duke truly has his last duchess (or himself) under control, why does he need to veil her image with a curtain? If he is so sure of his choosing “never to stoop” to make his will clear, why is he so conspicuously “stooping” to an underling, seducing a mere representative with this odd mixture of boasting and self-betrayal?

These, at any rate, are some of the questions that arise with respect to the duke's manipulation of representations within the mini-drama that makes up the poem. But what if we raised similar sorts of questions about the poem as itself a representation? Suppose, for instance, we think of this poem as itself a kind of dramatic portrait, a “speaking picture” in the gallery of Robert Browning's poetry? To what extent is Browning himself—or the commentator who claims to speak for Browning's intentions—playing a role like that of the duke, showing off his own power by displaying his mastery over representation? Should we think of Browning's poem, and the readings it evokes, as something we might call “My Last Duke”? Most readers of this poem have registered some version of Robert Langbaum's insight that “condemnation” is “the least interesting response” to the duke's outrageous display of evil. Just as the duke seems to hypnotize the envoy, Browning seems to paralyze the reader's normal moral judgment by his virtuosic representation of villainy. His poem holds us in its grip, condemning in advance all our attempts to control it by interpretation as mere repetitions of the duke's attempt to control his gallery of representations.

Browning's poem should make it clear why there would be a strong impulse in literature, and in literary criticism, to escape from representation and why such an escape can never succeed. Representation is that by which we make our will known and, simultaneously, that which alienates our will from ourselves in both the aesthetic and political spheres. The problem with representation might be summarized by reversing the traditional slogan of the American Revolution: instead of “No taxation without representation,” no representation without taxation. Every representation exacts some cost, in the form of lost immediacy, presence, or truth, in the form of a gap between intention and realization, original and copy (“Paint / Must never hope to reproduce the faint / Half-flush that dies along her throat”). Sometimes the tax imposed by representation is so slight that we scarcely notice, as in the perfect copy provided by a laser disk recording (“Is it real or is it Memorex?”). Sometimes it is as ample as the gap between life and death: “That's my last Duchess painted on the wall, / Looking as if she were alive.” But representation does give us something in return for the tax it demands, the gap it opens. One of the things it gives us is literature.

Suggested Readings

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