

STEPHEN HEATH: *Representation*

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Joyce suddenly asked some such question as, 'How could the idealist Hume write a history?' Beckett replied, 'A history of representation'
- Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (Oxford University Press, 1983, 648)

Beckett's reply says something of the importance of *representation* as a keyword, significant as what Raymond Williams calls a 'form of thought', decisive in its binding of certain activities and their interpretation, and the complex development of which does indeed indicate *inter alia* issues of the understanding and writing of history. The treatment of *representation* as a keyword in what follows moves from notes on that development into brief indications regarding current debates around its use and conceptual value.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* online records several senses for the verb *represent* in use by the late fourteenth century (numbers given in brackets here refer to the *OED*'s listing of the different senses):

(2.a) 'To bring clearly and distinctly before the mind, esp. (to another) by description or (to oneself) by an act of the imagination' (1375: 'Aulde stories that men redys, Representis to thaim the dedys Of stalwart folk that lywyt ar'; the 'to oneself' usage is from 1605: 'representing your Majesty many times unto my mind');

(1.a) 'To bring into presence; esp. to present (oneself or another) *to* or *before* a person' (c.1380: 'So that he may not be delyuerid of his hond til he represente hym in his owen persone in the hondis of his mynystre, and be the mynystre holden sadly . . . til that he represente hym to the cardinal hostiense');

(6.a) 'To symbolize, to serve as a visible or concrete embodiment of (some quality, fact, or other abstract concept)' (c.1380: 'Ymagis that representen pompe and glorie of tho worlde').

As Williams notes in his 1976 *Keywords* entry for *representative* (unchanged in the 1983 revised edition), *represent* then quickly acquired a number of senses related to ideas of making present to the eye, notably in respect of painting (c.1400: '[a painting] where is representid and purtraid') and drama (c.1460: 'y^{is} play that [is] representyd now in yower syght', though this refers not to what is represented in the play but rather the representation of the play).

The noun *representation* appears in the fifteenth century, taking up these initial senses of *represent*:

(2.a) 'An image, likeness, or reproduction in some manner of a thing'

(c.1425: 'Oure lorde Jhesu... schewith the representacyone of his blyssed passyone in the persone of the same virgyne');
 (2.b) 'A material image or figure; a reproduction in some material or tangible form; in later use esp. a drawing or painting (of a person or thing)' (c.1477: 'He swore right solemply tofore the representation of the goddesse pallas');
 (2.c) 'The action or fact of exhibiting in some visible image or form' (1483: 'Thymages of sayntes. . . gyue us memorye and make representation of the sayntes that ben in heuen');
 (1.a) 'Presence, bearing, air', a sense now obsolete (1489: 'ye be a right fayre louencell, and of noble representacion');
 (1.b) 'Appearance; impression on the sight', again obsolete (1489: 'Amonge the colours is a difference of noblesse for cause of the represtacyon that either of hem doon after his nature').

If *represent* and *representation* have a long history in the language from the fourteenth century on, they also have a shorter modern history in which *representation* is established as a specific keyword.

The modern history sees the acquisition of a political sense initially absent, a sense depending on ideas of a process whereby the interests of the governed are represented to those who govern them, especially through parliamentary institutions. Such a sense is absent too in the etymological origins of the word, derived from French twelfth-century *représenter* and thirteenth-century *représentation*, themselves derived from Latin *repræsentare* and used to mean making present, bringing before the mind, embodying (as nobility might be embodied in a piece of sculpture), but lacking the political sense of people being represented by others. Such an idea of representation was also foreign to the Greeks, who indeed had no word corresponding to Latin *repræsentatio*.

Williams comments on the difficulties in tracing the emergence in English of the separable sense of 'standing for others'. The *OED* has *represent* from the beginning of the 1430s with a sense (7.a): 'To stand for or in place of (a person or thing); to be the figure or image of (something)'. But the standing-for here is a matter of *things* not persons, as illustrated by a c.1432 quotation that talks of *images* in which people honour 'noo thyng . . . but God, or for God and for seyntes, whiche they represente to us'. From 1509 there is the recorded sense (8.a), 'To take or fill the place of (another) in some respect or for some purpose; to be a substitute in some capacity for (a person or body); to act for (another) by a deputed right' ('Albeit she dyd not receyue in to her house our sauour in his owne persone . . . she neuertheles receyued them that dothe represent his persone'); followed, from 1655, by (8.b) 'To be accredited deputy or substitute for (a number of persons) in a legislative or deliberative assembly; to be member of Parliament for (a certain constituency); hence in pass[ive], to be acted for in this respect by some one; to have a representative or representatives', with a quotation from Cromwell: 'I have been careful of your safety, and the safety of those that you represented'.

As the *OED* definitions themselves make evident, the sense of *representation* as a

standing-for a number or class of persons goes with the development in the seventeenth century of a quite different conception of parliament as a representative body. If parliament could previously have been seen as a representation of the King, this was inasmuch as it was his representation *symbolically*. The modern parliamentary sense – and the English Civil War is crucial here – involves movement away from such symbolisation. A representative parliament is not the symbolic representation of a pre-given authority that it embodies; on the contrary, it derives authority *from* the process of representation: the authority to govern on behalf of those represented, an authority that is *produced* by some or other form of electing or choosing *representatives*. Debates today about the nature and limits of such political representation take this sense for granted and as linked with conceptions and practices of democracy; for a significant period of its history, however, *representation* came with no such meaning.

Further senses can be noted: that (4.a) of ‘The action of placing a fact, etc., before another or others by means of discourse in order to influence opinion or action; a statement or account, esp. one intended to convey a particular view or impression of a matter’ (1553, ‘When Darius had spoken theis wordes, the representacion of the present perill so amased them all, that they were not able to shew there aduise’); closely related to which is that (5.a) of ‘A formal and serious statement of facts, reasons or arguments, made with a view to effecting some change, preventing some action, etc.; hence a remonstrance, protest, expostulation’ (1679 ‘The King too day, in answer to their Representation (that’s y^e word now), told them that too much time had already been lost’; which explicitly suggests that this usage had recently come into fashion). There are then the theatrical senses. For *represent*: (5.a) ‘To exhibit or reproduce in action or show; to perform or produce (a play, etc.) upon the stage’ (c.1460); (5.b) ‘To exhibit or personate (a character) on the stage; to act the part or character of (some one)’ (1662); (5.c) ‘To appear on the stage; to act, perform’ (1547); for *representation*: (3.a) ‘The exhibition of character and action upon the stage; the (or a) performance of a play’ (1589).

When Johnson comes to *represent* and *representation* in his *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), he reduces them to a small number of senses, with the parliamentary reference now naturally present: for *represent*, 1. ‘To exhibit, as if the thing exhibited were present’; 2. ‘To describe, to show in any particular character’ (‘the managers [of a bank] have been *represented* as a second kind of senate’); 3. ‘To fill the place of another by a vicarious character; to personate: as, *the parliament* represents *the people*’; 4. ‘To exhibit, to show’ (‘*representing* to him, that no reformation could be made, which would not notably diminish the rents of the church’); for *representation*, 1. ‘Image; likeness’ (‘If images are worshipped, it must be as gods, which Celsus denied, or as *representations* of God; which cannot be, because God is invisible and incorporeal’); 2. ‘Act of supporting a vicarious character’; 3. ‘Respectful declaration’ (this covering something of his sense 4 of *represent* and a little of his sense 2).

The various senses which the *OED* dates and defines attest to the importance and complexity of representation as word and idea. Its range can be brought into

focus through reference to German which lexically distinguishes – though with overlapping uses – the senses that the one English word contains. Thus:

1. *Darstellung* is representation as depiction, showing (when Freud discusses the conditions under which dream-thoughts can be represented in dreams, their ‘representability’ is a matter of *Darstellbarkeit*);
2. *Vorstellung* covers idea, mental image, picture (*Vorstellung* as a placing before the mind in Kant or as the synthesis of interior image with reproduced existence in Hegel); it can also be used for the performance of a play or the showing of a film; and for representation as assertion, remonstrance (*Vorstellungen machen*, to make representations);
3. *Vertretung* gives standing in for, replacement, deputising; used, for example, in respect of legal representation, as of the representation carried out by a commercial traveller or *Handelsvertreter* (compare French *représentant de commerce*); and it has the political sense: so, for instance, *Volksvertretung*, national representation, *Volksvertreter*, representative of the people, member of parliament (when Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* describes the French peasantry in 1851 as unable to represent themselves, it is a matter of *Vertretung*: *Sie können sich nicht vertreten, sie müssen vertreten werden*);
4. *Repräsentation* enters the language in the latter half of the eighteenth century in the modern political context and refers to delegation to representatives; so *Repräsentantenhaus*, House of Representatives (Freud uses *Repräsentanten* for the elements through which drives find expression – are represented – in the psyche; they are ‘ideational representatives’, *Vorstellungsrepräsentanten*). Political theorists have sometimes argued for a *Vertretung/Repräsentation* distinction: private interests can be *vertreten*; whereas *repräsentieren* concerns the state and state institutions.

The conjunction of senses developed in the history of English *representation* is critically useful for the way in which it joins and calls attention to ideas of depiction (this picture represents Big Ben), statement of position (she represented to me that it would be wrong not to pay taxes), and substitution (he represented me at the meeting). *Representation* needs always to be approached with these various senses in mind since they are at stake together in any representation, make up its very hold. The production of what is represented – depicted, imaged – is exactly that: a *production*, which gives the represented in a particular position, represents this to us, and takes our place, stands in our stead as relation to it. A representation, that is, is always *of* and *to* and *for*.

What makes *representation* so centrally a keyword from the later seventeenth century on is at once the range of conjoined senses and the range of epistemological, political and aesthetic concerns it catches up. *Epistemological*: concern with knowledge as a matter of representation, which then raises issues as to the nature and status of representations; *political*: concern with democracy and governance, raising issues as to who is to be represented and on what grounds; *aesthetic*: concern with art as depiction of reality, raising issues as to forms and conventions in the achievement of this. *Representation* as keyword,

that is, names practice and understanding at the same time that it generates questions and difficulties regarding the nature and status of representational endeavour. Right from the start of the shorter history, representation was always also a crisis term: assumptions of representation initiated challenges to those assumptions on the basis of the very claims of representation itself.

The epistemological deployment of *representation* shows this plainly enough. If knowledge is conceived in terms of the accomplishment of representations which represent – accurately correspond to – the material facts of reality, then the problem arises as to the relation of such representations to facts of reality, as to how they can be accurate and how we could know them to be so. As Richard Rorty puts it in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), his account of the modern turn to representation:

To know is to represent accurately what is outside the mind, so to understand the possibility and nature of knowledge is to understand the way in which the mind is able to construct such representations. Philosophy's central concern is to be a general theory of representation, a theory which will divide culture up into the areas which represent reality well, those which represent it less well, and those which do not represent it at all (despite their pretense of doing so).

Epistemology becomes philosophy's essential task: it must seek to adjudicate claims to knowledge with a general theory of representation that can determine the nature of human understanding and its relation to the external world, thereby providing a foundation for knowledge – determining 'the original, certainty and extent of human knowledge', as Locke put it. The mind's faculties – the properties of human understanding – must be ascertained and the enabling of knowledge through representation grounded accordingly, but with such grounding then precisely the crux. Kant's insistence in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that 'our representations of things, as they are given to us, does not conform to those things as they are in themselves; these objects as appearances conform to our mode of representation' sets the problem: if the stability of the knowable-represented as an identity of reality for representation is lost, what is the reality to which our modes of representation can lay claim (that it is a question of modes underlines the problem).

This difficulty in representation is no less evident in the aesthetic and political spheres. Concerns with art's status and the endeavour to produce truthful representations ('a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind', as George Eliot put it) were inevitably accompanied by similar questions about how this might be carried through, about conformity of 'men and things' to given modes of representation and so about the truthfulness of artistic representations. All of which urged the need for forms and conventions constantly to be overthrown in order to come nearer to reality, to represent it.

When Woolf announces in 1913 that 'We want to be rid of realism', she is expressing such a programme: inherited representations and their petrified

reality must go. At the same time, she stands at a moment when, more than that, it is the very idea of representation itself that is being challenged, one keyword for which was *abstraction*, a drawing away from representation; and Woolf herself can talk precisely of the cinema as offering the possibility of getting to 'some residue of visual emotion . . . something abstract', or of setting herself in *To the Lighthouse* (1927) to 'the most difficult abstract piece of writing'. For Pound in 1915, and despite his admonitory fear of abstractions, a painting can be defined as 'an arrangement of colour patches on a canvas', to be judged good or bad on the arrangement of the patches of colour, not with reference to some represented, which is of no matter and indeed has no necessity – 'the painting need not represent at all'. Equally, concerns with and demands for political representation brought problems of what such representation might and should be, as to who is represented, as to the identities that can be identified for representation and the entitlement to the latter, as to the grounds for such identifications and the limits of representation in respect of them.

Underlying all this is the way in which the evidence and stability that representation seems to demand of what is represented – that it be there for representation – carries with it uncertainty as to how representation could accord with any such thing and what it would be to do so, since what is represented is by definition always bound up in representation, is, exactly, *represented*.

The strong critique of representation in recent years stresses that there is no external *identity* of the represented since any identity as such is made and achieved through representation. Radically, representation can then be regarded as a central component in a falsely objectifying mode of thinking that is no more than the function of a particular historical moment. This is the account given in Foucault's *Les Mots et les choses* (1966), which describes the shift from an episteme of resemblance or correspondence between things to a 'classical episteme' of representation and concern with the separate identity of things that representation is to represent. As it is Heidegger's account of 'modern representing', *neuzeitliche Vorstellen*, with its representation-production of entities as alienating foundation of knowledge. Whatever differences there are in the ways in which they specify the period of the domination and authority of representation, both Heidegger and Foucault are examples – Rorty, self-declared 'anti-representationalist', is another – of the urge to break with *representation*, word and concept, no longer of relevance other than critically and with reference to its historical moment.

Something of the complexity and present difficulty of representation can be focused through consideration of Edward Said's important and highly influential *Orientalism* (1978). It should be stressed that the book is used here in only a very limited way as a source for the discussion of representation, this at the expense of the richness of its achievement.

The 'Orientalism' of the title refers to a *representation* of the Orient, a mass of statements, descriptions and teachings produced externally in terms of a systematic distinction between Orient and Occident that functions as a mode of

colonialist control. It is, therefore, a profound misrepresentation*, negating the Orient 'as it is', which 'we are never directly *given*'. The representation from outside entails a divorce from the reality, refuses that it speak. Indeed, Orientalism depends on a self-authenticating belief that the Orient itself cannot speak and therefore demands this exteriority of representation. In which connection Said thrice quotes Marx's statement regarding the French peasantry cited above as epitomising the Orientalist credo: 'They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented'. At the same time, however, representation is also presented rather differently. Orientalism is a negation of the Orient but the latter is also said to have been an *invention* of Orientalism; the Orient – 'as it is' – is exterior to the representation that negates it and simultaneously interior to that representation, 'invented' by it. Moreover, Said appeals to the overall contemporary account and critique of representation, which leaves no space for a distinction between real Orient and invented 'Orient'; there is no as-it-is 'delivered presence', 'only a re-presence, or a representation'. Never 'just *there*', the Orient is *always already* a matter of presence/representation.

This leads inevitably to the question as to 'whether there can be a true representation of anything'. Said's answer is that the distinction between representation and misrepresentation is 'at best a matter of degree' and that 'a representation is *eo ipso* implicated, intertwined, embedded, interwoven with a great many other things besides the "truth," which is itself a representation'. The movement there is indicative: theoretical awareness of the circulation of representations suggests that there is no way out of representation and so no as-it-is grounded way of drawing a line between representation and misrepresentation; at the same time, this is accompanied nevertheless by an appeal to the distinction, now a matter of degree but without clear indication as to the basis with reference to which the estimate of degree might be made.

Confining himself to the particular description of Orientalism, Said is largely able to leave the problem aside. Orientalism is a discourse of misrepresentation but the question of true or (the matter of degree) truer representation may be postponed in the interests of description of the terms of the one Orientalist system. The Orient enters only as that system's construction, its invention, or as the 'brute reality' that lies outside it and is 'obviously greater than anything that could be said about [it] in the West'. Political critique there overrides theoretical awareness, from the standpoint of which the 'greater than anything that could be said about them' pronouncement must apply as well to 'the East' as 'the West'; no more than the latter could the former guarantee the exhaustiveness of a representation or system of representations. Importantly for Said the epigraph from Marx – they must be represented, they cannot represent themselves – serves both to encapsulate a central tenet of Orientalism (it purports to offer the Orient the truth it is regarded as itself unable to express) and to underline his position (against this making up of the Orient into a system that silences its

*The *OED* has *misrepresent* from 1647 as 'To represent improperly or imperfectly; to give a false representation or account of'; and from 1860 as 'To fail to represent correctly or adequately as agent or official representative', with a quotation from J. S. Mill's *Considerations on Representative Government*.

voices); yet this again takes an unacknowledged distance from the theoretical problems of reality, representation, and 'themselves' to which Said occasionally also refers.

Marx's statement comes in the course of an analysis of social forces at a particular historical moment, an analysis that examines the situation of the French peasantry and explains why they were unable to assert their class interest in their own name at that point. Said's study is less historically particular, since its overall purpose is to describe the Orientalist system in its internal schematic consistency; the 'brute reality' of 'lives, histories, and customs' will be acknowledged only 'tacitly': (mis)representation on the one hand, the Orient on the other. The account of 'ideological fictions' to which the book is politically committed allows only for an abstract – merely theoretical – idea of the always everywhere-ness of representation, contradicted by appeals to 'the Orient as such'. The material process of reality in representation – of lives, histories and customs whose reality is loaded with representations – disappears between the two. This elision enables the critical insistence on Orientalism's 'exteriority to what it describes'; representation being 'the principal product of this exteriority', where this as a general statement is a critique of representation as such, not only of its Orientalist version.

Reference to 'exteriority', however, provides no simple basis for censure of any representation as such. What is represented – 'what is described' – cannot just be given in some kind of interiority of itself (Derrida, indeed, stressed the very opposition inner/outer as being a product of *Western* systems of thought). Representation and the represented are bound up together, and representation of oneself is no less the specific production of what is represented, an identification of 'self'. 'Exteriority', to keep the term for the moment, is a fact of representation and the critical-political problem is how and on what terms and with what effects this or that representation is made, not whether it is 'exterior', since all representation is 'exterior', is not the deliverance of some reality present for us in and of itself.

Said's book begins and ends with questions of representation: 'how can one study other cultures and peoples from a libertarian, or a nonrepressive and nonmanipulative, perspective?', 'how does one represent other cultures?' These are issues 'in discussing the problems of human experience' and crucially in representing '*other* cultures'.

Otherness, however, is already a representation and representation itself is always involved in otherness or 'exteriority'. There is no identity given directly to representation; representation *is* the identification of identities. To represent a culture as other – and, again, *all* representation is bound up with otherness – is just such an identification, the truth of which is not to be located in the culture 'itself' but in the knowledge produced in the negotiations of representation and complex cultural reality. Cultures are matters of knowledge and interpretation and representation for those 'inside' as well as for those 'outside'. To grasp them as unity or identity is itself a representation, an identification, that cannot exhaust a culture, not because the latter is a 'brute' or 'raw' reality but because,

on the contrary, it is a complex human reality of experiences, interactions, meanings, values, that are always in process. Representation as production of knowledge – the kind of knowledge that Said describes Orientalism as negating – is neither reflection nor invention but just this *negotiation of reality*, around which latter term there is no need for quotation marks, or rather, a need *simultaneously* to put and not put them.

Said's appeals to bruteness, as-it-is-ness, and inexhaustibility, however, can be read too in another way, indicating a necessary resistance to the turning of recognition of the sway and force of representation into the confounding of reality in representation. History can be more than a history of representations, though representations will be everywhere inescapable, and *a fortiori* is now condemned to idealism. Said's appeals serve to envisage that there is a possibility of human truth or degree of objectivity that depends not on imagining that we can think about – approach – the world without representing it but on recognising that there is a world we seek to represent, within which we are included, and that it can control the success of our representations, not because they can be correlated with something – 'raw reality' – that in itself takes the form of objects representable in discourse, but precisely because representation and the world together make up representation and the world, and it is their interrelation that is originary, not the one or the other (a dichotomy that always ends up in the either/or impasse of the stand-off between realism and anti-realism).

In connection with which, what Said's book then necessarily and powerfully also gives is the insistence and demonstration that there is always too a politics of representation, a struggle in and for meanings and interpretations, that the matter of the success of representations is bound up with political questions of intent, effect, value, and so on, that there are always socio-historical specifications – *situations* – of knowledge.

It is a paradox of the concept of representation – a paradox expressed by the conjunction of the senses of presenting and substituting for – that it depends at once on difference between it and what it intends as there presented, and on reduction of difference, on asserting faithfulness – closeness, likeness – to its represented. This can be seen readily enough in the political sphere where – and increasingly – 'identity politics' challenges available forms of representation on the grounds of difference, the *failure* of these forms to represent specific identities. Such a politics, that is, involves struggles for identification by particular groups and makes demands on representation in respect of such identification, these to-be-acknowledged identities. The demands for representation in social-political life go along with the call for the making of representations that truly depict the recognised identity and so support and sustain the political demands.

Which is to note that representation is importantly linked with identification, another keyword, though absent from both original and revised editions of *Keywords*. It, along with *identity*, would require substantial treatment of a kind that cannot be developed here, but one or two remarks are can be added.

The senses of *identification* move between assumptions of discrete identity and ideas of relations of identity – as can be quickly seen if one compares *identifying* and *identifying with*. Asked to identify someone – the perpetrator of a crime, say – I am expected to certify an identity, the identification is to be external and complete: this *is* the person who attacked me. Of course, I could be mistaken but that is possible only because identifying here is about singularity, about recognising an identity. When Dickens sets out for a nocturnal jaunt with London detectives, he takes ‘for purposes of identification, a photograph likeness of a thief, in the portrait-room at our head police office’ and successful identification will depend on finding *this* person-thief. Identifying with, however, necessarily depends on more than some one identity, depends on a *relation*: if I identify with you, the identification depends on the link I make between us (relation is involved even if I talk of identifying with myself, since this postulates an I and something else – a ‘me’, a ‘myself’ – that is the object and focus of my identification). Identification as *identifying with* finds of course its major commonplace uses in talk of response to books, films, plays, and so on – ‘personal identification with the character’ – and generally of relating oneself to another. ‘What more common than identifying?’, asked Lacan, but stressed too the problem: ‘the word “identification”, left undifferentiated, is useless’; with psychoanalysis undertaking the differentiation of various identifications, consideration of which, along with a full treatment of identification, must wait for another occasion. The phrase ‘personal identification with the character’ is taken from the *OED*’s first quotation, 1857, for *identification* in this sense (1.b) of ‘The becoming or making oneself one with another, in feeling, interest, or action’. The *OED*’s earliest sense, 1644, is that (1.a) of ‘The making, regarding, or treating of a thing as identical *with (to)* another, or of two or more things as identical with one another’. Its sense (2) of ‘The determination of identity; the action or process of determining what a thing is; the recognition of a thing as being what it is’ is given from 1859, with a quotation referring to ‘the identification of a child, who may be heir to a property’. There is also an interesting sense (3), now obsolete, of ‘Exact portraiture; realistic description’; with a quotation from 1812, ‘The several Portrait Pieces are strong identifications of nature’, where it can be seen that this sense of *identification* – ‘the salt of all literature’, 1842 – overlaps with that of *representation* as depiction.

The necessity for the treatment of *identification* alongside that of *representation* can be underlined by looking at *representation* as used in the phrase *the burden of representation*, for which matters of identification are crucial. The phrase occurs from the late nineteenth century with particular regard to the difficulties, duties, and obligations of parliamentary representation, but has come in recent decades to be commonly used in respect of minority representation. Ironically, there is an echo of *the white man’s burden* used by Kipling in his 1899 poem of that title which provides the *OED*’s first recorded appearance: ‘Take up the White Man’s burden/ Send forth the best ye breed’ (the *OED*’s definition, while exact, feels a little too close to the period sentiment: ‘A rhetorical expression for the responsibility of the white man for the coloured races’). For Kipling, the ‘white man’ is to take on the burden of civilising his ‘new-caught, sullen people’; today’s ‘burden of representation shifts the perspective, expressing no longer the

colonising racist directive but the need for the colonised or otherwise oppressed groups to realise – to represent – themselves. *Burden* acknowledges the weight of the task: ‘All the protagonists of this book [*Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man*, 1997]’, writes Henry Louis Gates Jr, ‘confront “the burden of representation”, the homely notion that you represent your race, thus that your actions can betray your race or honor it’.

The confrontation is the more problematic – and burdensome – in that representation in its shorter history is concomitant with the development of ideas of *individual* identity, while itself pulling in a different direction towards the representative and away from stress on, and valuation of, the particularity of individual experience. Chester Himes’s statement to a correspondent in 1955 that he was ‘not at all like any other Negro American writer on earth, or any other writer of whatever nationality or race’ is the forceful statement of a refusal to be identified, to *represent*. The progressive and necessary politicisation of identity through identifications in representation can, that is, also be experienced as a constraint on individual identity, holding a person to one representative function, the burden of that. Some of the critical reactions prompted by the Portuguese village setting of Monica Ali’s second novel, *Alentejo Blue* (2006), were underpinned by the feeling that she had given up on the representative identity that should be hers –that indeed was her obligation, her burden of representation.

Politics is bound up with representation and there is always a politics of representation; politics and representation are bound up with identification and there is a politics of identification – identity politics precisely – in which the struggle for the formulation and recognition of identities goes in the shorter history of *representation* with a strong identification-representation of the *individual* as value, any individual being not one but a multitude of identifications in process, made and remade in interaction with social terms, social definitions; into which process the demand on political representing – ‘to represent your race’, in Gates’s example – cuts in specific conjunctures for specific purposes but which too can be operated as an alienating reduction to some identity to which the individual must be held.

It is something of the complex stakes of *representation* that its brief treatment here as a keyword has been concerned to suggest; this in the context today of postmodern and other announcements of ‘the end of representation’ and the appeal to alternative terms and conceptions, notably indeed in the political sphere, where ‘opinion’ and ‘participation’ increasingly substitute for ‘representation’: opinion through the permanent intervention of polls as political action and validation (French President Sarkozy offered a striking example of politics in these terms); and participation through the opposition of participatory to representative democracy (as proposed by Ségolène Royal standing against Sarkozy in the 2007 French presidential election).