

## The Unconscious of Representation ("Death and the Compass")

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### *Representation*

In the ordinary interaction between man and the world, in perception and communication for instance, the conceptual structure stabilizes the relation between objects and events and their representation in a linguistic or logical form. Contrary to this stable situation, we can say that the fictions of Borges are dealing with singular circumstances in which the relation between representation and the represented dissolves, that is, situations in which representation as such becomes impossible. We then have the following two possibilities. Either the fictions are splendid constructions, and yet they belong to the fantastic in the sense of the impossible and therefore have no bearing on the reality of human cognition. Or they are fantastic and yet they are realistic, but not on the macrolevel of reality where cognition and representation works. On a fine-grained level of representation, on a microlevel so to speak, a reality appears which is not subjected to the linguistic and logical form of everyday life. If this reality appears on the macrolevel it causes a destabilization.

In the following we will work under the latter assumption. As the microlevel-reality can not be represented through the conceptual structure of language (it can only be represented mathematically), we could call this reality the unconscious. The fictions of Borges can then be called realistic in the sense that they are analytical descriptions of the effects of the unconscious.

## 1. Representation and sensation.

Every sensation, for example the taste of an orange, consists of an infinite web of details. In the daily use of language this infinite web is put in brackets. The word has a lexical and even schematic meaning which ensures the stable relation between the signifier and the signified. However, in fiction and in poetry it is possible to restore what Borges calls "the magic of the word". Liberated from the necessities imposed by communication and instead subjected to the formal requirements of a style, it is possible for the word to evoke the in principle infinite variations of a feeling, a sensation or an image, in much the same way as in the work of Proust where a sense impression evokes a whole narrative.

When a word is *representing*, it does so in an inexact way to make communication possible. Under certain singular circumstances the word can attain the same formal properties as a singular sensation. In this situation the word is merging with the signified, it becomes *exact* in the same way as the taste of an orange is exact, but then the word is no longer representing, it is no longer a lexematic unit. This is the theme of the fiction "Undr", in which one word contains the whole universe. But this is not a representation, the word *contains* the universe in the same sense as one can say that the smell of a cake or the perception of a tree contains the universe.

## 2. Representation and the event.

*"Then I reflected that everything happens to a man precisely, precisely now. Centuries of centuries and only in the present do things happen; countless men in the air, on the face of the earth and the sea, and all that really is happening to me."*  
("The Garden of Forking Paths").<sup>1</sup>

The quotation shows that *the act is precise* and that its precision stems from its co-existence with the sensation of the *now*. This is in contradiction with any representation of the event, which either is before, as an imaginary representation of the future (e.g. Damian imagines himself as a hero in the future battle), or it is after, as a symbolic representation of the past.

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<sup>1</sup>All quotations are from Borges (1962) if nothing else is mentioned.

The insuperable conflict between the acting-now and the representation-after reveals itself as a symptom in the narration of Borges. Around the central event the narrator is filled with hesitations, he laments that at this point his story gets confused, or that others may tell other versions, or that the order of the events might be reversed. However, the imprecision of the representation is due to the fact that the event itself is precise as stressed in the quotation, that is, the singular event has the same formal property as the singular sensation (acting is a sensation). An examination of the event (if that was possible) would reveal an infinity of details, feelings, causal factors etc. which escape the representation. The problem is that the event is unique, irrevocable, irreproducible, whereas the representation is not. Representation selects a certain subset of the innumerable circumstances, another selection will change the meaning of the event. Therefore, in the course of time this meaning is a precarious entity. It might change because of the internal dynamics of the symbolic representation which is due to unconscious omissions and rearrangements of the details. This is for example the theme of the following quotation from the preface to *Dream-tigers*

“...tomorrow I too will have died, and our times will intermingle and chronology will be lost in a sphere of symbols. And then in some way it will be right to claim that I have brought you this book, and that you have accepted it.”

### 3 The event and time.

The remarks concerning event and time can be separated in two. Firstly, the event itself has a double meaning both as something which is experienced and which consists of acts, and as something which is told and represented. Secondly, this double determination of the event has a bearing on the interpretation of the event as something which symbolizes the subject.

a) The event is a bifurcation-point in time, or to be more precise, in the event two different temporal forms bifurcate. On the one hand, we have the symbolic representation of the event which follows its own development (cf. the quotation above). The event-as-told can of course be totally separated from any experience. On the other hand, we have what we can call the reality of the event, the event-as-experienced, which is a causal factor for an innumerable amount of other events, feelings, acts etc. This reality-effect of the event is a temporal process which is disjoint from the temporal development of the symbolic repre-

sentation. We have a real-time effect which is not accessible to the consciousness of the subject, but which gives rise to new events and new bifurcations into symbolic representations. Besides, we have a symbolic effect of the event which *is* accessible to the consciousness. When different individuals' symbolic representations converge, we get social symbolizations in the form of mythical and religious representations.

Similarly, the event is a converging point for a secrete chain of causal factors on the one hand, and on the other, an imaginary representation which is disjoint from the causal chain. The narrator of "Deutsches Requiem" remarks for example:

"Arminius, when he cut down the legions of Varus in a marsh, did not realize that he was the precursor of the German Empire."

This real-time effect does not (necessarily) intervene in the imaginary representations, preceding the emergence of the empire.

b) The crossing of two temporal forms in the event E has a specific interpretation from the point of view of the subject. The event separates the imaginary of the subject from his symbolicity. This is very clearly demonstrated in the fiction called "The Other Death". Before the battle, Damian lived in his imaginary representations. After the battle, the outcome of the event becomes an index or a symbol for his subjectivity. During the battle, representation and imagination is suspended. Something very simple takes over, the acting, which then afterwards makes the symbolization of the subject possible. Symbolic representation, whether individually or collectively, is thus dependent on the exactness and irrepresentableness of the event.

The remarks in a) and b) are subsumed by the following figure:

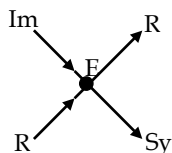


Figure 1

E is the bifurcation-point. Remark, that this bifurcation has a very direct interpretation, as the quotation from *Dreamtigers* shows. Also in "The Other Death", the symbolic representation diverges from the real-

time effect, because we have a total revision of the event on the symbolic level (Damian acted as a coward, but was later remembered as a hero). However, the change of the meaning of the act does not influence the causal effects of the event which continue to proliferate into the future.

#### 4. Representation and chance.

It is not just the event itself which is a labyrinth of possibilities. It is also the causal chain, the segment R in fig.1, leading to the event E. This chain is in fact an infinite web of forking chains, whose internal order can not be represented on the symbolic level. What is a secret order in the string R appears from the point of view of representation to be chaotic, the result of pure chance. As an example of the working of chance we can take "The Garden of Forking Paths", in which the sinologist Albert was killed so that Yu Tsun thereby could send a secret message to the Germans (the message was the name Albert). However, on some other level, which is not the level of representation but belongs to the segment R in fig.1, this murder is part of a symmetrical pattern. The forefather of Yu Tsun who wrote the novel "The Garden of Forking Paths" was killed by a stranger. Now Yu Tsun as a stranger kills the one who has discovered the secret of this novel and thereby made it possible to reconstruct it.

The impossible objects which appear in the work of Borges, "The Aleph", "The Book of Sand", "The Garden of Forking Paths" etc. are in fact symbolic representations of the infinite bifurcations of the causal string of events. They are representations of the crossing-point E so to speak. They are representations of *chance*. But as such they are chaotic, impossible, and therefore they forebode the death of their possessors. By their fantastic character they impose a realistic flavour to the fictions. In a sort of indirect way they show the ontological split between the act and its symbolic representation.

Suppose that the string R consists of the infinite web of anxieties emerging from love-relations. To represent this would abound in two possible procedures: either an (in principle) infinite novel, whose internal order stems from the aesthetic requirements imposed on writing, as in the case of Proust, or a very short poetic expression, which abstains from any sequential representation, as in the case of Borges ("The threatened one", a poem which have a composition that is formally equivalent to the fiction named "The Book of Sand").

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*Death and the Compass. The unconscious***5. The representation as a part of the represented.**

This refers to a situation in which the interpretation of an event changes the universe in which this event is located. It is the correlation of the principle of complementarity in quantum mechanics which says that it is not possible to separate the observer from the situation which is observed. The prototypical example of this is the fiction called "Death and the Compass". Let us briefly recall the main events in this story.

A rabbi is murdered. Inspector Treviranus surmises that the rabbi has been surprised by a burglar and then accidentally been killed. "Possible, but not interesting" is Lönnrot's answer. In a typewriter a piece of paper is found on which is written the following sentence: "The first letter of the Name has been uttered". From this clue Lönnrot sees the murder as ritual and somehow connected to the *Tetragrammaton*, which is the unutterable name of God. A few days later a journalist who wants to talk about the murder appears at Lönnrot's place. Lönnrot prefers to talk about the diverse names of God, but nevertheless the journalist writes in the newspaper that Lönnrot is studying the names of God in order to find the name of the murder. Scharlach, an enemy of Lönnrot who has sworn revenge, reads about this. He then arranges one real and one fake murder. The circumstances of these "murders" are carefully staged. The rabbi was killed on the fourth of December (according to the Jewish calendar). Scharlach arranges the second murder on the fourth of January and the third one on the fourth of February, leaving certain clues behind, for example the drawings of a rhombus. He then sends an anonymous letter to Treviranus saying that no more murders will take place because the locations of the three constitute "the perfect vertices of a mystic equilateral triangle". However, from the clues left behind, from the time of the murders (the fourth of the month), and from the *Tetragrammaton*, Lönnrot surmises (and Scharlach had predicted this) that a fourth killing will take place, and from the map sent by Scharlach he could find the precise location (of course the four points would make up a perfect rhombus). When Lönnrot appears on the location he himself is the victim of Scharlach.

## 6.

One should carefully examine this sequence of events.

a) The first killing was accidental. A burglar got lost in the hotel and stumbled into the room of the rabbi. At this pure descriptive level the event turns out to be fatal, it just happens, only subjected to the logic of action (it is stressed that the burglar acted instinctively and that in this instinct half a century of violence was hidden). To this level of fatality the fiction contrasts the discourse of Lönnrot. He seeks an argumentative and logical coherence in the circumstances of the event. He seeks a discursive explanation in the sense that he looks for an answer in the discourse of the cabbalism ("*Suddenly (he) become a bibliophile or Hebraist..*"). We can say that we here have two different temporal chains of events converging and bifurcating around the same event. On the one hand, the cause of the killing is submerged into an infinite web of infinitesimal causes. Some of these can not be reconstructed at all, they are immersed into "*half a century of violence*", some can afterwards be reconstructed but appear totally fatal, as for example placing the room of the rabbi on the same floor as the owner of the finest sapphires in the world. These untraceable series of events have a form which we can qualify as the *temporal form of reality*. On the other hand, according to Lönnrot's conjecture, the killing is one definite term in a precisely defined series of events. Moreover, this series is not determined through the immanent logic of the act but through a transcendental logic, which is located in a text. The acts *represent* the logic of the text. The fiction deals with representation, but representation works in a twofold way: The series of killings which Lönnrot predicted were supposed to represent the secrete name of God, moreover, the construction he made is a formal representation of an internal coherence in the circumstances of the events. In this perspective we can say that the series of events have a form which we can qualify as the *temporal form of representation*.<sup>2</sup>

b) Lönnrot's reconstruction did not change the circumstances of the event itself, but it *did* change the effects of the event. That is, the mere

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<sup>2</sup> Lönnrot is a constructivist in the leibnizian sense: given an event a it is possible to reconstruct the event b which is the cause of a. I.e. every term in a sequence of events has a definite logical relation to the other terms. The sequence of events is *controlled* by the logic of language.

fact that he made a formal representation of the real-time causal chain of events emanating from the killing of the rabbi changed this chain. This we could call a *principle of complementarity* between the real-time causal chain and the representation of it.

The murder of the rabbi was something which just happened in the world and thereby caused the conjecture of Lönnrot. Similarly, on a superior level we can say that also Lönnrots intervention just happened, because on the discursive level it appears as that *chance* which Scharlach had waited for and which caused him to arrange the subsequent series of events. The murderer acted according to an instinct which was immersed into centuries of violence, but in the same manner Lönnrot reasoned according to an instinct which was immersed into a (unconscious) disposition for symmetries and order ("*A set of callipers and a compass completed his quick intuition*"). In the same way as the murder is the object of Lönnrots investigation, Lönnrots own style of interpretation is the object of Red Scharlachs intervention. Lönnrot wants to expel the element of chance from the level of the act ("*In the hypothesis that you propose chance intervenes copiously*", he says to Treviranus), but he does not see that his own intervention is an element of chance.

The object of the investigation and the investigation itself are connected in a möbius-like manner. Scharlach predicted Lönnrots conjecture and he arranged events in the world that confirmed this conjecture. But this means that the conjecture of Lönnrot was already a part of the universe towards which the conjecture was directed. He was not just investigating the world but also his own (unconscious) style of investigating. Lönnrot forgot that his own style of reasoning was a part of the real-time series of events, and therefore his style of reasoning was a subset of the sequence of events which he reconstructed through a logical interpretation. This of course leads to an infinite regress: *his style of reasoning leads to his interpretation of the events which as a subset contains his style of reasoning which leads to his interpretation which....etc.* It is this fact which appears in the descriptive parts of the fiction, which abound in symmetries, mirrors, reflections, duplications, infinities ("*he was multiplied infinitely in opposing mirrors*").

c) The situation outlined in b) has some bearing on the concept of *truth*. Was Lönnrots prediction true or false? Had Scharlach not learned about Lönnrots interest through the publication of the journalist then the prediction would have been false. In a simplifying manner, we can



say that the interpretation is true if it is made public and false if it is not. This is the same as to say that the interpretation is true if it is a part of the situation which the interpretation is directed against. But this truth is not justified on an argumentative, logical level. The situation S contains among a lot of elements a,b...etc. also Lönnrots prediction X. But this prediction is on the argumentative, formal level a representation of S, so we can formally write  $X = \{X, a, b, \dots\}$ , that is, the representation X contains X. In this case the principle of excluded third fails. To prove that X is true, one has to prove that that the right hand side is true, but that includes proving the truth of X, i.e. an infinite regress. The truth is in this case not determinable on the logical level. The "realisme" of Borges fiction is that this is always the case when the subjective style of interpretation is not clearly separated from the real-time series of events, i.e. when the *form* of the interpretation is not independent of the *content*.

d) Suppose that in a game of chess I fall into a trap. In that case the opponent has some knowledge of the position which I do not have. Relative to the chess situation, we can simply *define the unconscious as this absence of knowledge*. Similarly, in the fiction Scharlach has some knowledge which eludes Lönnrot, but in this case we can identify it with the style of Lönnrot, his *pathology* ("I knew that you would make the conjecture that..."). An observation concerning the names of the two opponents, Lönnrot and **Red** Scharlach, could lead us to the probably too obvious observation that the two antagonists are identical, or at least that Scharlach is the unconscious of Lönnrot, representing a knowledge which eludes him. However, this will be an unconscious which is formally unavoidable. It is not possible to represent the world, and at the same time include in the representation its own style, manner or pathology, its *presentation*.<sup>3</sup> This would lead to an infinite regress and the aporias mentioned in c). Every argumentative, logical representation therefore has to exclude its own presentation. The unconscious is therefore not a question of repression, but stems from a formal property of the relation

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<sup>3</sup>This is exactly the reason why art is not a *representation* of the world, because in art presentation stands out as the dominant pole. However, representation does not disappear, the aesthetic value of art is depending on a dynamic equilibrium between representation and presentation.

between representation and presentation, and its definition can be summarized in the proposition: *presentation is the unconscious of representation*. In short, the unconscious stems from the fact that any doing has to be performed in a certain manner<sup>4</sup>.

In relation to the two temporal series of events, we can say that the presentation of the representation, e.g. Lönnrots disposition for symmetries, becomes an element in the real-time series of fatal circumstances. The representation of the world is as presentation just another “thing” added to the world. If we have a representation of an event in the world, there will always on some sufficiently fine-grained level be some elements from the real-time series which elude the representation. In the fiction “Death and The Compass” these elements can be identified with the pathology of Lönnrot.

## 7.

The previous considerations give rise to a reformulation of the ontology of representation. In general a representation will require something we will call the “object” O of representation. It can for example be an event which is the object of investigation. This object, however, is located inside a more global “situation” which we will denote S. For example the event is the ending and starting point for series of causal chains of events. The representation R now consists of a logical coherent view of the relation between O and S. This triple (O, S, R) is the paradigm for any detective story: the relations between a crime (O) and its social circumstances (S) are clarified through the reasoning of the detective (R).

“Death and The Compass” shows that this understanding of representation is not true, because the representation changes the universe in which the object is located. That is, S is transformed into  $FR(S)$ , where  $FR$  is a function depending on the representation. As a minimum the representation adds the presentation to the situation (another “thing” added to the world). In the detective case this is the same as to say that the detective is a part of the situation he is interpreting, but it is well-

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<sup>4</sup>A new concept of the unconscious has been presented in *Brandt*: “Kritik af det ubevidste”. According to Brandt the unconscious is the result of epigenetic encoding of engrams. In this context we can say that the style, the presentation of the subject is the result of these engrams.

know that in certain situations a hypothesis might cause the anger of one of the participants in the situation. Such an anger is also claimed to be an effect of the unconscious by the traditional theory. In the classical and "normal" situation, however, the effect of the function  $FR$  can be neglected, the presentation changes the universe in an infinitesimal way and we can consider the function  $F$  as the identity-function. In our daily life we suppose, and are forced to suppose, that the statements we make about the world do not interfere with the world. Phrased in another way: we suppose that the unconscious do not interfere with the intentionally produced representations. However, if we look at the representation on a sufficiently fine-grained level then this is not necessarily true. The difference between  $S$  and  $FR(S)$  is what we will call the unconscious.

## 8.

Let us finally look at the series of events from the point of view of the bifurcation in time. In 6. a) we defined this bifurcation as a split between the real-time series of events and the represented series. This split takes place in the first discussion between Treviranus and Lönnrot, or we should rather call it a deviation in the sense that Lönnrot has an imaginary but possible representation of the effects of the event, which deviates from the real-time and true effects. The second deviation takes place when Scharlach reads about Lönnrots interest (represented by 2 in fig.2). Lönnrot makes up an imaginary version of the real world, but Scharlach does the same. He constructs in the real world a series of simulacra which are parallel to Lönnrots imaginary constructions. Remark, that once more Treviranus had guessed the true nature of the event (*"And what if all this business tonight were just mock rehearsal"*). The third deviation takes place when Lönnrot reads the map Scharlach had send to Treviranus (point 3 in fig.2). However, this time it is a deviation from the simulacra into the real-time world. When Lönnrot is caught by the final intuition the simulacra disappear and his theory is no longer referring to circumstances in the external world, but it becomes itself as real as if it was part of the world (*"mere circumstances, reality...hardly interested him now"*). The reality of Lönnrot is absorbed by his own pathology and this is the part of the story in which the infinite nature of the villa of Triste-le-Roy is prominent. Finally, the

reality of Lönnrots pathology and the simulacra of Scharlach converge in the meeting of the two (point 4 in fig.2).



Figure 2

Without the simulacra of Scharlach, the imaginations of Lönnrot would just become a dead-end and the real-time series of events would continue according to the upper line. However, the simulacra of Scharlach do intervene as the effect of what we have called the presentation of Lönnrots representation (his pathology). They then cause a union of Lönnrots imaginary representations with the real-time series of events, but on another level so to speak. The difference between the upper and lower series of real-time events is what we have called an effect of the unconscious, or it is an effect of the function FR presented in 7.

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### Litterature:

- Borges, Jorge Luis (1962), *Labyrinths*, New Directions.  
 Borges, Jorge Luis (1964), *Dreamtigers*, University of Texas Press.  
 Borges, Jorge Luis (1972), *The Book of Sand*, Dutton.  
 Brandt, Per Aage, "Kritik af det ubevidste", Manuscript paper from Center for Semiotic Research.