



# THE MAKING OF A REPRESENTATIVE

IDENTIFYING WHAT INFORMS AN AUTHORITY TO SPEAK  
WHEN WORKING WITH COUPLES IN MARITAL PSYCHOTHERAPY

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Those of you who are familiar with Doris Lessing's speculative fiction *Canopus in Argos* series of novels will recognise the source of my working title. I am referring to her book: *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8*. It is a striking and insightful piece of writing which I will use in this paper to try and amplify my central theme. Mine will be an argument against the fantasy of 'objective observation'. I will be saying that, as clinicians, whether we are working with individuals, couples, families, or even institutions, our primary therapeutic contributions arise from the practice of allowing ourselves to be conscious of, and use, the way in which we are affected by our clients. Further, that if these contributions are shaped into the form of an interpretation, that interpretation needs to represent what we have seen, felt, experienced and thought with our clients. It is by this means that I will track the way a representative is made.

Jung had this sort of process in mind when he argued that:

'The doctor, by voluntarily taking over the psychic sufferings of the patient, exposes himself to the overpowering contents of the

unconscious and hence also to their inductive action. *An unconscious tie is established.* The patient, by bringing an activated unconscious content to bear upon the doctor, constellates the corresponding unconscious material in him, owing to the inductive effect which always emanates from projections in greater or lesser degree. Doctor and patient thus find themselves in a relationship founded on mutual unconsciousness.’ (Collected Works, Vol. 16, para. 364)  
[Italics added.]

I have included this rather long quote because it is central to my theme. It is from the volume in the Collected Works entitled *The Practice of Psychotherapy*. This ‘practice’ relies on an engagement with the potent unconscious processes that are brought to life in the consulting room. The effects of this unconscious engagement become more apparent, I believe, if we think about what is happening in terms of the therapist being made into, or becoming a representative of the client’s unconscious world. I intend to use Lessing, Jung, and an illustration from some work with a couple, to explore this idea and the questions that arise from it.

In *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8*, Lessing, like Jung, is inviting us to think about the unconscious ties between people and things. She sets her story in another world, Planet 8, which, I think, easily translates into the intersubjective unconscious world that Jung describes. Planet 8 was a developing colony, initiated, supported and watched over by people with an almost archetypal ‘higher being’ quality. These beings were from another, other world - Canopus. We don’t hear much of Canopus, except via the visits to Planet 8 made by the Canopean Agents, whose job was to advise, teach, guide and show those on Planet 8 how to get the best from their world.

First, a little about their history. To begin with, Planet 8 was a sort of Eden. It was warm and abundant, allowing its people to live a healthy vegetarian existence. Killing, with all of its social implications, was unthinkable. Rather, the

social order was characterised by a co-operative interdependence, structured around the functions that people fulfilled for one another. Relationships were not based on power and dominance. This did not mean that there was no relationship to authority; rather authority was functionally vested in certain individuals. Primarily, the Canopean Agents carried the most profound investment of authority, but by modelling themselves on how these Agents managed themselves, the peoples of Planet 8 learned to share the various responsibilities required to maintain their communities and way of life.

As readers, we come in at a point in its history when Planet 8 was in deep trouble and undergoing a process of profound environmental change. A cosmic shift had disrupted the planet's orbit such that it was beginning to freeze and, of course, this was having a catastrophic effect on the people. Survival depended increasingly on the functioning of the Representatives.

To flesh this out a bit I will say a little about these Representatives. In Lessing's book they were individuals who took up different roles. Each role had a name and the individual was known by this name. So individual and role were one, and both role and name were transferable between individuals. For example there were the roles of: teacher of children; guardian of the waters; maker and creator of grains and fruit and plants; storyteller; healer, who was also the discoverer of medicines and remedies; and so on. The people who carried these roles emerged seemingly naturally, out of their communities, although Canopus did offer some training and instruction to those who were self-selected. Because the practices informed by this system of Representatives were being sorely tested, we get a thought-provoking glimpse into what it is that really makes a Representative. Hence my interest in Lessing's thinking.

As Planet 8's environment changes, so the roles of the Representatives must also change. Most notably, they were required (by the circumstances) to become much more conscious of what made them, their task, and exactly what it was that they were representing. That is, the freezing was either going

to send them into unconsciousness, or to challenge them to think. At first the people were told by Canopus that they must find ways to adapt for a time, and that another world was being prepared for them; a world to which they would be transported. Consequently, the Representatives initially understood that they were working to facilitate the survival of the people until the next world was ready for re-location. However, it becomes apparent after a time that Canopus was not omnipotent, and that the catastrophic change which had so affected Planet 8 had, in fact, scuttled the 'rescue' plan. The new world was also beginning to wither. Consequently, Planet 8 and its people were destined to freeze to death.

Rather than just give in to this fate and die, Canopus, through their Agents who went to join the people on Planet 8, entreated the Representatives to actively explore the essence of themselves, their pasts and their trying future. This challenge seemed to rest on the view that there was something to know - an essence in themselves and their life which was intangible, but which was available to perception if they could train themselves to pay minute attention to both themselves and their surrounds, so as to detect what it was that 'makes' a person, a relationship, a people, a planet, a world.

The suggestion was that, in this way, Planet 8's people were not necessarily destined to be completely extinguished. The Representatives were called to make the adjustment from being guardians and commentators, to becoming genuine representatives of that *something vital which was intangible*, but which made them unique. It is made clear that this activity was, by its nature, a collective/collaborative task. It required engagement, rather than objective scrutiny. This fact is established through an interesting but vital element in the story.

In the warmer, easier days, Canopus had brought 'an instrument' to Planet 8. We would call it a microscope. Through this instrument, the people were able to see that their seemingly solid, tangible world (including themselves)

was made up of spaces. ‘Immense spaces’, describes Doeg, the first person narrator of the novel, ‘that lie between electron and electron, proton and its attendants, spaces that cannot be filled with nothing, since nothing is nothing’ (p.115).

So what is happening in the space between elements, between objects? Plainly it could not be ‘nothing’. The Representatives found themselves challenged to come to understand that they were striving to become conscious of a complex system of perpetually moving relationship, whether between very small molecular elements or more complex elements, people. Each element intimately connected with the other.

Through a conversation between Johor, the Canopean Agent, and another of the Representatives, I will illustrate Lessing’s portrayal of the impact of this instrument on the people. She, the Representative, was by now constantly cold, hungry, and bitter. (Bitter because of her inability, due to the cold and the inexorably encasing ice, to do her Representative job of caring for the health and wellbeing of the animals.) She had been asked by the Canopean Agent to recall her life and her memories, including the experience of seeing the world from the perspective of the ‘instrument’. She says in response:

“We saw the substance of our bodies, and found that it vanished as we looked, and knew that we were a dance and a dazzle and a continual vibrating movement, a flowing. Knew that we were mostly space, and that when we touched our hands to our faces and felt flesh there, it was an illusion, and that while our hands felt a warm solidity, in reality an illusion was touching another illusion.”  
(p. 124)

She was being taken to the conclusion that nothing is fixed; movement and negotiation describe the norm. With this realisation a new and irresistible consciousness came: that the essence of life is in the interaction between

tangible and intangible elements. Life was constituted with ‘...more space than substance’ (p. 158). The value of this image of ‘space’, which links each element to another, each person to another, each self to another self, is that it provides us with a key to the essence of the making of a Representative. The Representative’s job is to resonate to, to identify with and thereby amplify, what constitutes something that Doeg had confirmed, i.e., that immense spaces cannot be filled with nothing. The obvious and suggested question is: what are they filled with?

Now, you might be wondering how all this relates to a therapist’s clinical practice? I would suggest that these ‘immense spaces’ look, as it were, for representatives to amplify them. As therapists, we are constantly resonating to and negotiating this role. To my mind, this is what Jung was pointing to when he spoke of the mutual unconsciousness that characterises any (effective) therapeutic engagement.

## **THE ‘SPACE’ OF A THERAPEUTIC ENCOUNTER**

I would now like to employ the images that Lessing has given us to argue the value in being mindful of this representative process in order to track the unconscious elements encountered in a clinical practice. I will fill this out with an example from some work with a couple in marital psychotherapy.

My intention is to focus on one element in our work together, so it is really a clinical fragment that I hope will amplify my theme. What I offer here will neither do justice to the complexity of this couple nor the work of many months, and I acknowledge them for giving me permission to use this material. Obviously, I have changed their names and endeavoured to protect their anonymity.

I will call this couple Max and Cheryl. They were in their early 40s when they first came and a cold and frosty emotional tone was certainly palpable between them. At the outset they described their difficulties in terms of three preoccupations: Max's depression, Cheryl's frustration with the infrequency of any meaningful dialogue between them, and the persistence of ongoing, meaningless arguments, which could flare up over the most trivial of matters. In the early consultations, it was plain fairly quickly that over the 17 or so years that they had been together they had both moved into a defensive position with respect to each other. Whilst it was possible for them to engage thoughtfully with me, they tended to keep away from the more tender areas between them, both in the sessions and at home.

### A little history

Max was a middle child from a family of four. He was born and raised outside Australia with most of the family migrating to Australia when he was a young man. Whilst Max conveyed a sense of lots of activities within and around the family, including cousins, aunts and uncles, he also made it clear that scant attention was paid to feelings in his family. The world of his childhood seemed to be very much an outside reality place. The internal world of any individual was experienced as irrelevant and to be avoided. I got the impression Max was open to attachments as a child but, as he grew up, he learned that he had to fend for himself in every way.

This was illustrated by a poignant story from Max's childhood which became a bit of a touchstone in the marital work. His family had sent him and a sibling to his cousin's house during the summer months. This cousin's family lived near the beach so, on the face of it, it was a good arrangement for Max. On one occasion he was at the beach with a group of his cousins, some of whom were younger than Max. Whilst they were in the water playing, one of the younger ones got into difficulties and drowned. This was plainly a shocking event for everyone, but in the turmoil around the accident and the distressed and distressing reaction of the boy's mother, Max was completely forgotten

by his relatives. They all took off to the hospital, leaving him at the beach on his own. Max described wandering around for several hours, afraid he might have been responsible, and not sure how to get home. He finally found his way there, but to add to the impact of all that had happened, it was only when he turned up, that the adults remembered him. He really had fallen out of their minds. This event had the quality of a defining psychological touchstone for Max and thinking about the experience and its consequences has helped us think about the dynamics in their marital relationship. That is, how difficult it is for Cheryl to convince Max that she does hold him in mind, and how difficult it is for Max to allow himself to expect he will be remembered. Consequently, over time, both had difficulties making themselves available to the other.

Cheryl was born and raised in Australia, being a middle child of three. Her relationship with her mother was the most significant within her family, and it was one that became more central later in her life. Cheryl described her early life as one where she was not heard, or was misunderstood fairly regularly, even by her mother. Her father was a loud and dominating figure in the family and he developed the reputation for being bombastic and at times intimidating. Her relationship with her father was, consequently, distant and cautious, although she was aware of some real/hopeful connection between them. Taking a leaf from her father's book, for example, Cheryl had developed her capacity to shout in order to make herself heard. This was only partially effective because she conveyed the sense that she had come to expect she would not be taken seriously. However, when her father lost his temper with her siblings, Cheryl would often try and intervene on their behalf, mostly because she seemed to be more effective than her mother at getting him to back off and calm down. This sense of agency was certainly apparent in our work, but so was the implied disheartening experience of being misunderstood and misrepresented.

When she was a young woman, Cheryl's mother developed cancer. Cheryl conveyed the sense of a deepening attachment which developed between them at that time as she helped her mother battled her illness, and finally engage with her death. Not surprisingly, Cheryl has remained distressed by the painful loss of her mother and this has been very apparent when she speaks of her mother in the sessions. However, she was also mindful of the fact that this experience of a significant connection followed by loss was not just something she encountered with her mother during that illness.

She spoke of this as a repeating experience in her life, both before this painful event and after. She felt familiar with this pattern, and was conscious that it was being reiterated in their marriage. Both of them found it difficult in their day-to-day lives to find ways to consciously modulate the reiterations between them which echoed these earlier life experiences.

### Beginning of their relationship

Max and Cheryl had met whilst Cheryl was planning to go off and see the world. She had been in a relationship that had not worked and had left her feeling very bruised. She was keen to be independent and make her own way in the world. Max, too, had been in a complicated and unworkable relationship before they met but, interestingly, he seemed to feel that the relationship with Cheryl had real promise and he wanted to make a serious connection with her. She openly warned Max she was just interested in having a good time, and that she was about to go overseas. Max sort of went along with this, but whilst Cheryl was away, he wrote her long and frequent letters, confirming his sense that they had a future together and telling her he wanted her to come home. Finally, she did come home and they set up house together. However, in the work that we did, the question of what sort of a 'home' they had set up became significant particularly given the similar patterns, expectations and defences that their different but resonant experiences had informed.

### Unconscious marital fit

Whilst there is much that is different between Max and Cheryl, there was evidence of a strong unconscious marital fit, suggested by the significant stories they told. He expected no one would come to his aid; on the contrary, he had both a fear and an expectation that he would fall out of the mind of anybody to whom he felt attached. It is not difficult to see how the experience around his cousin's drowning established this fear/expectation in his mind. Consequently, Max has lived his life through the assumption that he must rely on himself exclusively (we have an insight here into his depression) and despite feeling his need to depend on Cheryl, this assumption was being played out in the marriage. As I have observed above, it was very difficult for Cheryl to convince Max that she did and wanted to hold him in mind. However, his conscious investment in his relationship with Cheryl was apparent to me, as was his longing for her to confirm that she did really have him in mind.

Cheryl also conveyed her resolute conviction that she must rely exclusively on herself. For her, it was because she felt that she would be left (i.e., the death of her mother) if she let herself become attached. Getting close was more dangerous because of the tenderness and vulnerability that closeness to another would confirm. Both, therefore, had similar guiding assumptions about their relationships; assumptions powerfully confirmed by painful experiences of death in their earlier lives. It is not difficult to imagine the grip that the resultant unconscious expectations had which made both Max and Cheryl conclude that they had to defend themselves against allowing a dependant intimacy between them. This, despite an obvious and still consciously recognisable need for intimacy.

I found myself taking this apparent need for intimacy as evidence of their intense sensitivity to each other, rather than their incompatibility. Whilst I commented on this regularly within the work, and they were usually both welcoming of and thoughtful about this perspective, they treated it very much

as my perspective. This latter element was the first outward indication that we had of my gradually becoming a representative of one element in their relationship, i.e., the intense sensitivity evident in their marital choice of each other.

This gets us to the point we have been heading towards: that is that a therapeutic process amplifies the unconscious use that clients can make of their therapist. For example, the work with Max and Cheryl can be seen as a process whereby they have been gradually making me into a ‘representative’. Specifically, a representative of the aspects of their marriage which they kept circling around, but were not able to hold in mind securely and long enough to allay their anxieties about being left or forgotten. I felt that although their shared anxieties plainly provoked many difficulties for them, it did confirm the developmental aspect of their marital choice. They had each married their problem in effect. Thereby, they gave each other an opportunity to work on, not just defend against, the reiteration of their guiding assumptions. These were assumptions that ‘insisted’ (so to speak) that they should only rely on themselves, because any significant dependence would leave them vulnerable to ‘another’ painful loss. They kept, figuratively and literally, returning to the conclusion that they should not and had not invested in each other. At least that was the familiar and defensive, shared state of mind in which they lived.

To further illustrate the process whereby Max and Cheryl shaped me into a representative, I will focus on a particular moment in the work. We had over the preceding months, become quite familiar with a reiterating pattern in our interactions. We would engage with the tensions and arguments that they had encountered in the intervening week, with each of them coming to the conclusion that this indicated that their relationship was irretrievable and that it was only the children who kept them living together. Although I could, and did, pay attention to these strong feelings and conflicts, my attention was repeatedly drawn to the specificity of their marital fit (as I have just

described it). I suggested often that they were confirming this fit and that it was an indication of the developmental heart in their choice. They were, as I have mentioned, inclined to welcome this perspective, but again from their subjective vantage point, they were clear that this represented my perspective. My perspective as the developing representative of their relationship. And, for them, it seemed to be a peculiar perspective at that; they often said, warmly, that I was mad. Prominent, from their point of view, was the return to their disappointment with each other and a reliance on a warring that had, as its purpose, the protection of them as individuals. However, from the perspective that I am pursuing, I took the genuine warmth they conveyed, as they called me mad, as an active (if unconscious) effort to ensure the warmth in their marriage found a representative in our work.

On one particular occasion near the end of one session, I was again going to remind them of the evidence which I said confirmed their marital choice, and which I thought was being made apparent in their interaction. Before I said this, I prefaced it with a “I know you think I am mad saying this”, sort of statement. Max interrupted me saying stridently: “Even you have been contaminated by the stuff between us; now you are qualifying what you are about to say, before it even gets out of your mouth!”. He was right! I had been vaguely aware of doing this as the work progressed, but he was bringing it very much into focus. I agreed with him, saying that I thought that through the work we were doing, I had become ‘contaminated’, although I said I preferred to think of it as my being made into a representative of that aspect of their marriage which they had the most difficulty recognising. Namely, that theirs was, and continues to be, a meaningful marital choice, specifically because of the shared ‘stuff’ - this primarily being problems with consciously allowing their dependence on each other. It was certainly not that they were NOT dependent. They just couldn’t bring themselves to acknowledge it because the stakes were too high. Deep down (as it were), both feared but expected abandonment and loss.

This is the sort of experience which helped to make me into a representative of their relationship, and thereby gave what I tried to represent or interpret a different ‘authority’. It was possible then to say that the tensions in the spaces between them were not shit (as they often said), nor, in Lessing’s language ‘nothing’, rather these tensions were intangible evidence of the attachment they had to each other and the ‘contaminating’ fear of loss they faced.

They could now begin to acknowledge and think about the developmental nature of their relationship precisely because of the unconsciously shared quality of this tension. Both began to respond in a palpably different way, in this session and in subsequent interactions. Cheryl reflected on her sense of their need to protect themselves and to prevent any experience of being ‘touched’ (emotionally) by each other. Max experimented (to their shared mirth) with being more direct with his affection. The emotional tone of these discussions was different: more experimental; more playful; more risky and sometimes openly so. Of course, their self-protective defensiveness also continued to be apparent, and their oscillation between a palpable warmth and an often desperate survival-oriented ‘qualifying’ continued.

Working off Lessing’s imagery, this marital work seems to confirm the value of thinking in terms of making oneself, as therapist, available to be ‘contaminated’, as Max called it. To be made, that is, into a representative of what was unconscious in the couple. For Max and Cheryl this meant that they could use the therapy to become conscious of the fact that their belief that there was ‘nothing’ in the ‘immense spaces’ between them was actually not nothing. Rather it was anxiety and powerful, very difficult anxiety at that, to do with loss, annihilation, and death. As Lessing’s character, ‘Doeg’, reminded us, there can not be ‘nothing’.

In summary, what might it be that Max and Cheryl needed to see, via the representations we made in the marital work? I would suggest it was that the essence of their marital choice rested on a shared fantasy about having to be

self-reliant; that in choosing a partner with a known fantasy, they created in their relationship the possibility of being understood by the other, rather than inexorably being forgotten, misrepresented, and thereby reconfirming their conviction that defending their separate individuality was the only way to live. So much was lost in their living in this way, and that had literally been depressing for them.

I'll end, by saying how Lessing ends her story. All the surviving Representatives, with the remaining Canopean Agent, end up huddling together as they and the Planet finally freeze to death. They look into each other's eyes, engage as they die and, as they do so, they see their collective essence released from what we might call their shared 'spaces'. One vital point, from the perspective of this paper, is that it is finally made clear that the Canopean Agent is also a Representative himself. He was the Representative called the 'traveller'. So, in the final analysis, the individual most closely associated with objective observation is revealed to be a participant. In this we have a moral for any therapeutic practice: eventually it will be revealed that therapists are participants, not observers.

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