I think we have a thirst for reality. Which is curious, since we have too much reality, more than we can bear. But that is the lived, experienced reality of the everyday. We thirst for a reality that we can see, hold up to inspection, understand. “Reality TV” is a strange realization of this paradox: the totally banal become fascinating because offered as spectacle rather than experience—offered as what we sometimes call vicarious experience, living in and through the lives of others. That is perhaps the reality that we want.

More simply, we might ask ourselves: Why do we take pleasure in imitations and reproductions of the things of our world? Why do we from childhood on like to play with toys that reproduce in miniature the objects amid which we live? The pleasure that human beings take in scale models of the real—dollhouses, ships in bottles, lead soldiers, model railroads—must have something to do with the sense these provide of being able to play with and therefore to master the real world. The scale model—the modèle réduit, as the French call it—allows us to get both our fingers and our minds around objects otherwise alien and imposing. Models give us a way to bind and organize the complex and at times overwhelming energies of the world outside us. Freud suggests that the infant’s play with a spool on a string—thrown out of its crib and pulled back—presents a basic scenario in mastering reality through play. The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss speculates that the hobbyist’s building of the scale model figures intellectual process in general, a way to understand through making. And Friedrich von Schiller long ago argued that art is the product of a human instinct for play, the Spieltrieb, by which we create our zone of apparent freedom in a world otherwise constricted by laws and necessities.
Let’s suppose, then, that making models of the things of the world is a function of our desire to play, and in playing to assert that we master the world, and therefore have a certain freedom in it. For a child to push around a toy bulldozer is to imitate the work of the adult world, of course, and play with a dollhouse can imitate the child’s entire environment. But the imitation brings with it the mastery the child otherwise doesn’t have. Play is a form of repetition of the world with this difference that the world has become manageable. We are in charge, we control its creatures and things. The mode of “let’s pretend” immediately transports children into a world of their own making. It is a world that can be wholly vivid and “real,” though there can be a coexisting consciousness that it is only pretend. And surely that continues to be true of all forms of adult play, including that form of play we call literature, the creation and consumption of fictions.

Wallace Stevens suggests that fictions arise from the need to build a space or even a shelter for ourselves in an alien world. He writes in Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction:

From this the poem springs: that we live in a place
That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves
And hard it is in spite of blazoned days.

If the world around us is not our own, more specifically if it is not human but rather a world of other species and inanimate objects, then the “poem,” the artwork, becomes our counteraction, our attempt to humanize the world—pursued by an artist as self-aware as Stevens of course in full knowledge that the attempt is only fictional, carried on in a realm of the as-if. Fictions are what we make up in order to make believe: the word in its Latin root, fin-
gere, ficto, means both to make, as in the model builder’s activity, and to make up, to feign. Making in order to make up, to make believe, seems a reason-
able description of literary fictions, and why we write them and read them.

Now, if what I’ve been saying applies to all fictions, in whatever medium, what may be specific to fictions that explicitly claim to represent the real world—“realist” art and literature—is its desire to be maximally reproduc-
tive of that world it is modeling for play purposes. It claims to offer us a kind of reduction—modèle réduit—of the world, compacted into a volume that we know can provide, for the duration of our reading, the sense of a parallel reality that can almost supplant our own. More than most other fictions, the
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A realist novel provides a sense of play very similar to that given by the scale model. There is a novel from early in the tradition, Alain-René Le Sage’s Le Diable boiteux (1707), that offers a striking image of the similarity. The benevolent devil Asmodée takes the novel’s protagonist, Don Cléofas, up to the top of the highest tower in Madrid, then removes all the city’s rooftops, to show what is going on in the rooms exposed (fig. 1). It is very much like playing with a dollhouse or with a toy city. Yet of course it is already a gesture from Honoré de Balzac or Charles Dickens, seeing through the roofs and facades of the real to the private lives behind and beneath.

Removing housetops in order to see the private lives played out beneath them: the gesture also suggests how centrally realist literature is attached to the visual, to looking at things, registering their presence in the world through sight. Certainly realism more than almost any other mode of literature makes sight paramount—makes it the dominant sense in our understanding of and relation to the world. The relative dominance and prestige given to the visual in the human grasp of the world reaches back to Greek philosophy, at least, and after that rarely is challenged in Western culture.

Broadly speaking, Western arts are representational: different styles from the reproductive to the abstract play off the notion of representation. The claim of “realism” in both painting and literature is in large part that our sense of sight is the most reliable guide to the world as it most immediately affects us. The claim clearly owes much to John Locke and the rise of empiricism as a dominant, widely shared kind of thinking about mind and environment. The visual is not necessarily the end of the story—hearing, smell, touch may ultimately be just as or more important—but it almost of necessity seems to be the beginning of the story. Realism tends to deal in “first impressions” of all sorts, and they are impressions on the retina first of all—the way things look. It is not coincidental that photography comes into being along with realism, with the lens imitating the retina to reproduce the world. It is on the basis of first impressions that the greatest realists will go on to far more encompassing and at times visionary visions, ones that attempt to give us not only the world viewed but as well the world comprehended.

Let’s say that realism is a kind of literature and art committed to a form of play that uses carefully wrought and detailed toys, ones that attempt as much as possible to reproduce the look and feel of the real thing. And this kind of fiction becomes in the course of the nineteenth century the standard mode
Fig. 1. Engraving of Asmodée and Don Cléofas from Alain-René Le Sage, *Le Diable boiteux* (Paris, 1707)
of the novels we continue to think of as great, as classics. Once a radical gesture, breaking with tradition, realism becomes so much the expected mode of the novel that even today we tend to think of it as the norm from which other modes—magical realism, science fiction, fantasy, metafictions—are variants or deviants. That is, we eventually came to regard the styles of representing the world pioneered by such as Balzac, Dickens, Gustave Flaubert, George Eliot as standard, what we expected fiction to be. The novel in the airport newsstand will tend to be written from a repertory of narrative and descriptive tools that come from the nineteenth-century realists. What they are doing, and their radical pioneering in the novel, has ceased to astonish us. And yet when you go back to them, they are in fact astonishing, innovators seeking and finding new and radical ways to come to terms with and convey a reality that itself was constantly presenting radical new challenges.

Playing with the world seriously—in a form of play governed by rules of modeling, one might say—is a bold new enterprise for these novelists. They invent the rules as they go along and then refine them to the point that subsequent generations of novelists can find them codified in writing manuals. One premise of this serious play is that it includes dolls that are supposed to look and act like people—characters who ought to be recognizable in terms of not only dress and appearance but also social function and, beyond that, motive, psychology. Marcel Proust remarks on the genius of the first writer to understand that readers can be made to experience life through the eyes and mind of a fictional being. Whoever that originating writer may have been, the realist writers had the genius to understand the importance of making characters comparable to their supposed readers—situating them in ordinariness, as tokens of our own experience, though perhaps then moving them through more than ordinary experience, in order to make their adventures significant, even exemplary. Emma Bovary and Dorothea Brooke, Old Goriot and Nana—such characters have taken on an imaginative reality in their cultures, they are referred to as if they were real, or rather, more significant than the merely real, since they sum up and represent more fully certain choices of ways of being. They offer, in the best possible sense, criticisms of life: instances that lend themselves to discussion and debate, that pose important questions about our being in the world.

The difference of literary play from play with toys lies in the sign system used for modeling in literature: that is, language. Imitation in litera-
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*ture cannot, in the manner of painting or sculpture or film, present visual images that are immediately apprehended and decoded by the eye. Its representations are mediated through language. Language can itself be a thing or event in the world that can be literally reproduced in literary imitation—as in dialogue, which we can reproduce in the novel—and this gives what Plato would identify as the only complete form of *mimesis*. But this form of reproduction is fairly limited, and even dialogue tends to refer outside itself, to events and settings once again mediated through representation. Fictions need forms of telling and showing other than *mimesis*—what Plato labels as *diegesis*, and later writers have called "summary" or "narration" or a variety of other things. Fictions have to lie in order to tell the truth: they must foreshorten, summarize, perspectivize, give an illusion of completeness from fragments. Henry James said that of all novelists, Balzac pretended hardest. It is how you pretend that counts.

But here of course is a source of objection to attempts at realist representation: Why bother with such pretending, especially since we know that language does not coincide with the world? The lesson of much criticism and theory in the last decades of the twentieth century seemed to suggest that notions of representation, and especially representation that thinks of itself as an accurate designation of the world, are naive and deluded. Representation in the realist mode seemed to depend on a faulty understanding of the linguistic sign, which in fact does not transparently designate the world. Linguistic signs are used to compensate for the absence of the things they designate—use of a word stands in for the absent referent of the word, or perhaps creates the illusion that there is a referent for the word where some might doubt this to be the case (for example, "god" or "soul" or perhaps "honor"). Signs are slippery as well as creative: as Niccolò Machiavelli noted, language was given to men and women so they could lie. Realist fictions labor under the burden of accusation that they are lies that don’t know it, lies that naively or mendaciously claim to believe they are truths. For experimental "new novelists" of the 1960s and after, as for some post-structuralist critics, the “Balzacian novel” became a kind of whipping boy, an example of blinded and bourgeois novelizing without any sophisticated critical perspective on sign-systems and on the illusions of the bourgeois society and its concepts—including the fully rounded and situated "character"—it was dedicated to representing.
This was, I think, a blinded view of Balzac and the realist tradition in general. But it of course picked up a very old line of critique of realism, reaching back at least to Plato. If to Plato art is an imitation of an imitation—that is, of shadows, appearances, rather than true reality—then the art that attempts to be most faithful to appearances, to surfaces, will be the lowest in value. And for many centuries of European art and especially literature, imitation of the everyday, of the real in the sense of what we know best, belongs to low art, and to low style: comedy, farce, certain kinds of satire. Erich Auerbach's magisterial history of the representation of reality in Western literature, _Mimesis_, tells the story of the emergence of a serious attention to the everyday real. It is not that there haven't been kinds of realism, and impulses toward realism, throughout history—see Chaucer, see Rabelais, see Pieter Bruegel the Elder, or American photorealism of the 1970s. The instinct of realist reproduction may be a constant in the human imagination (though at times it seems to be wholly dismissed or repressed, as in Byzantine art). What seems to change with the coming of the modern age—dating that from sometime around the end of the eighteenth century, with the French Revolution as its great emblematic event, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau and then the English Romantic writers as its flag bearers—is a new valuation of ordinary experience and its ordinary settings and things. This new valuation is of course tied to the rise of the middle classes to cultural influence, and to the rise of the novel as the preeminent form of modernity. What we see at the dawn of modernity—and the age of revolutions—is the struggle to emerge of imaginative forms and styles that would do greater justice to the language of ordinary men (in William Wordsworth’s terms) and to the meaning of unexceptional human experience.

Keeping a register of what happens every day, Rousseau once described his one novel. This means finding a certain dignity in the ordinary, as in Wordsworth’s strange cast of peasants. But it can also mean attention to the ugly, that which doesn’t fit the standard definitions of the beautiful. George Eliot in _Adam Bede_ famously compares her novel to Dutch genre painting, but even that kind of humble picturesqueness seems too prettified for what such late realists—or “naturalists”—as Émile Zola and George Gissing seek. Zola proposed that every writer saw life through a certain kind of screen. Whereas the Romantic screen gave rosy coloring to what was viewed through it, the
Naturalist screen was plainly transparent—yet, Zola admits, with a certain effect of graying, making more somber what was perceived through it. That is, Zola recognizes that the realist, in reaction against more idealized forms of art, seeks to show us a non-beautified world. Or perhaps more aptly: to show us the interest, possibly the beauty, of the non-beautiful. When the painting of Gustave Courbet first appeared on the Paris art scene, critics notably found it ugly. (See, for instance, in chapter 5, Courbet’s Burial at Ornans, fig. 5, and Bathers, fig. 9.) “Vive le laid, le laid seul est aimable,” they wrote, in parody of the critic Nicolas Boileau’s famous line in praise of truth. In their obtuseness, these critics were on to something: the fascination of the non-conforming, that one finds in our own moment, for instance, in the work of Lucian Freud. This painting has the almost oxymoronic title of Naked Portrait (fig. 2): that it is a portrait makes a strong point, about its individualization, particularization, as opposed to the generalizing and idealizing tradition of the nude. Consider also Freud’s Naked Man with Rat (fig. 3), with its kind of raw exposure. Freud, like Courbet before him, has claimed he can only paint what he sees; and the act of seeing is itself exposing, relentlessly stripping bare to a self that is not allowed to hide from the painter’s gaze. Then there is Freud’s repeated use of the huge model Leigh Bowery, as in determined violation of all the canons of beauty (see fig. 36, in chapter 12). Documentation of the modern city, in writing, painting, and photography, will also find a fascination in the ugly, as part of our created landscape (fig. 4). The ugly is often used here, as in Zola, as a call to attention: look, see. And of course when you do look with the intensity of Lucian Freud, the ugly ceases to be simply that, to become something full of interest. The discovery of the ugly is part of the process of disillusioning in which realism deals, but then beyond the loss of illusions something else seems to loom: something we find in Freud’s painting, or in Flaubert’s later work—the fascination of the banal and the ugly. We will want to explore further this problematic question of the ugly and what you might call its mode of existence.

Realism as the ugly stands close to realism as the shocking, that which transgresses the bounds of the acceptable and the representable. Flaubert and Madame Bovary are put on trial in 1857 for outrage to public morality; though acquitted, Flaubert is severely reprimanded by the presiding judge for exceeding the limits permitted to literature, and for proposing a “system” that, applied to art and literature, leads to “a realism which would be the nega-