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# Realist Vision

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YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS NEW HAVEN & LONDON

For Anna

Published with assistance from the foundation established in memory of Philip Hamilton  
McMillan of the Class of 1894, Yale College.

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Designed by James J. Johnson and set in Joanna Roman types by Tseng Information  
Systems, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Brooks, Peter, 1938–

Realist vision / Peter Brooks.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p. ) and index.

ISBN 0-300-10680-7 (clothbound : alk. paper)

1. English fiction—19th century—History and criticism. 2. Realism in literature. 3. French  
fiction—19th century—History and criticism. 4. Literature, Comparative—English and  
French. 5. Literature, Comparative—French and English. I. Title.

PR878.R4B76 2005

823'80912—dc22

2004029501

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the  
Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on  
Library Resources.

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## Preface

Three years ago, as Eastman Visiting Professor at Oxford, I was instructed to present a series of public lectures, open to students and faculty, during Michaelmas Term. This daunting prospect prompted me to turn to what I know best, the English and French novels of the nineteenth-century realist tradition, and some painters in the same sphere, to try to offer a rethinking of books and problems that have been with me for many years. The following year, I was asked to give the William Clyde DeVane Lectures at Yale University, and took this as an opportunity to revisit and expand (a Yale term being longer than an Oxford term) my thinking on the subject. I have tried to maintain as much as possible the informality and generality of the lectures in moving to this book. My hope is to renew interest in the realist vision, but especially to invite rereading, reviewing, rethinking of some masterful works.

Realist Vision

## *Realism and Representation*

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.

2 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 reasonable 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 reproductive 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

3 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 boîteux* (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

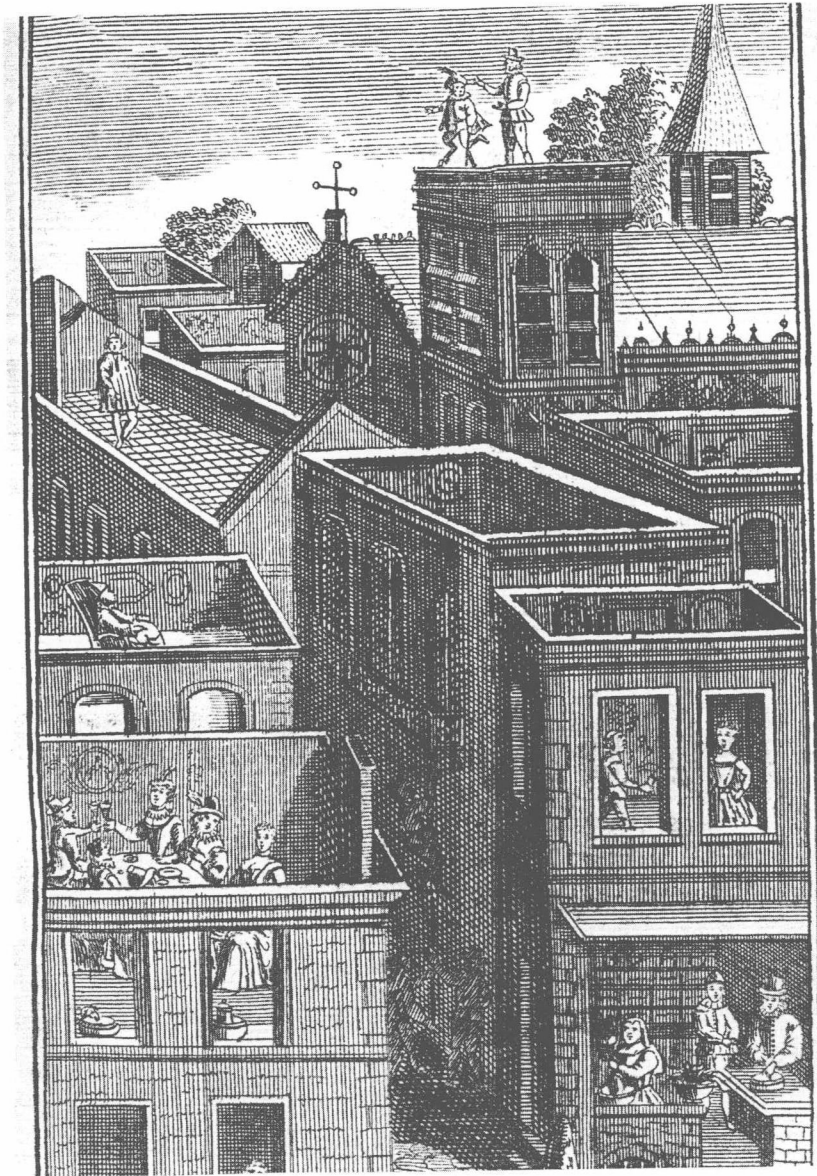


Fig. 1. Engraving of Asmodée and Don Cléofas from Alain-René Le Sage, *Le Diable boîteux* (Paris, 1707)

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, metafiction—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-



6 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 Emile 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

8 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-

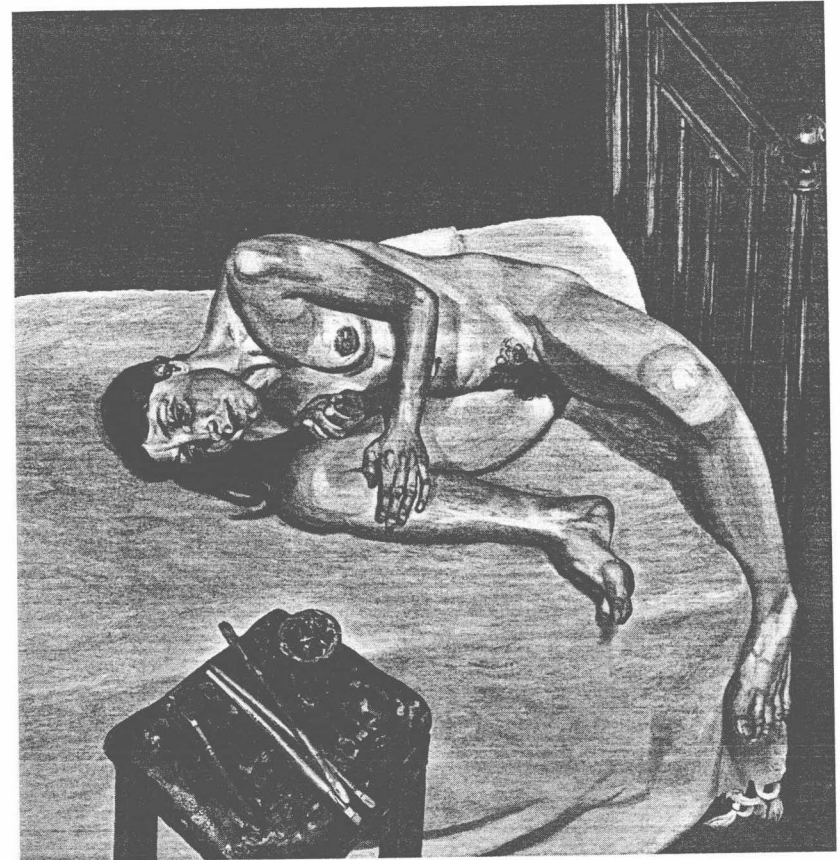


Fig. 2. Lucian Freud, *Naked Portrait*, 1972–73, oil on canvas. Tate, London.  
© Lucian Freud. Photo: Tate Gallery, London / Art Resource, NY



Fig. 3. Lucian Freud, *Naked Man with Rat*, 1977–78, oil on canvas. Collection, Art Gallery of Western Australia. © Lucian Freud

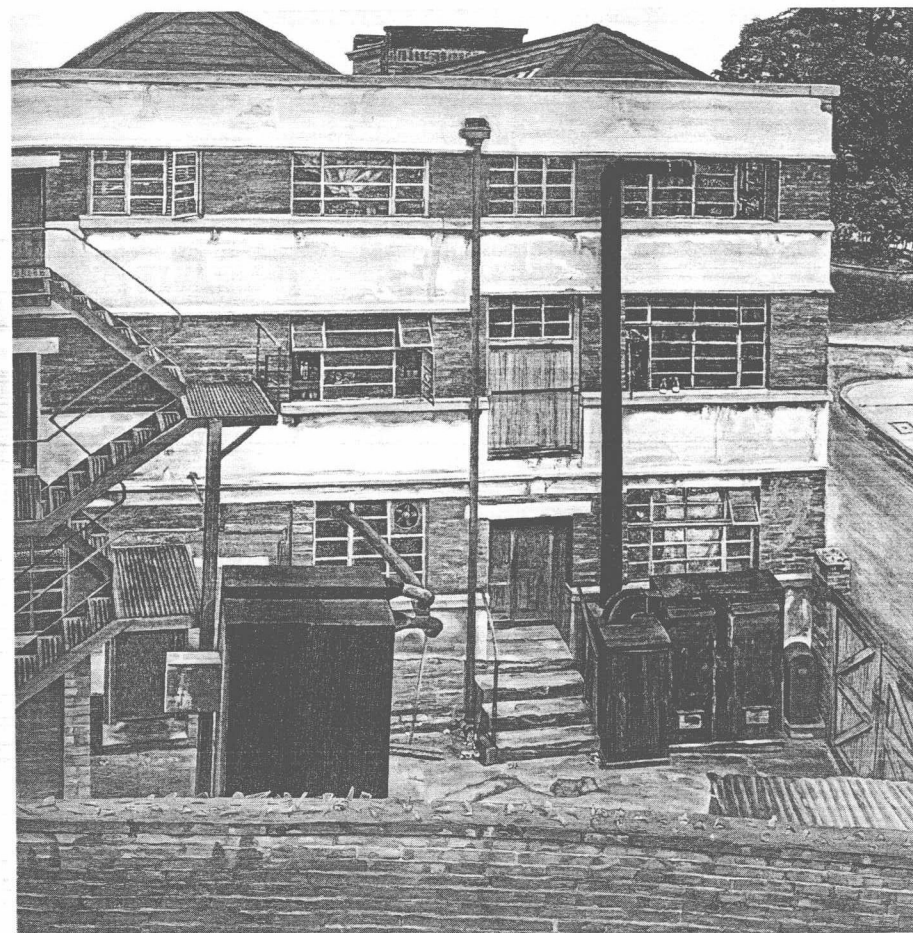


Fig. 4. Lucian Freud, *Factory in North London*, 1972, oil on canvas. Private collection. © Lucian Freud. Photo: © Christie's Images Inc. 2004

12 tion of the beautiful and the good." Zola translated into English—only late and cautiously—becomes the target of the National Vigilance Association and the subject of a parliamentary debate in 1888: "The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Matthews) (Birmingham, E.) said, that it was beyond doubt that there had been of recent years a considerable growth of evil and pernicious literature, and that its sale took place with more openness than was formerly the case. The French romantic literature of modern days, of which cheap editions were openly sold in this country, had reached a lower depth of immorality than had ever before been known." Zola's *L'Assommoir* and *Nana* were followed by his novel about peasants, *La Terre*. Even though translated in a bowdlerized version, that novel was the last straw for English middle-class morality—the word "bestial" keeps coming back in the comments—and in that same year, 1888, Zola's publisher, Henry Vizetelly, was made to suppress all three novels and promise to publish no more, was fined one hundred pounds, and was then sent to prison for three months. It is a curious reminder that the British, who had created the worst human squalor in their industrial cities, could find representation of poverty, misery, and sexuality dangerous. Being a realist or naturalist was risky business.

Realism as we know it, as a label we apply to a period and a family of works, very much belongs to the rise of the novel as a relatively rule-free genre that both appealed to and represented the private lives of the unexceptional—or rather, found and dramatized the exceptional within the ordinary, creating the heroism of everyday life. Ian Watt's story in *The Rise of the Novel* remains, despite critiques and modifications, generally accurate: the rise of the novel tracks the rise of the European bourgeoisie, it is tied to a new phenomenon of middle-class leisure time—especially for women—and a new concern with private lives and the psychology and morality of individual choices. Tied, too, of course to the expansion of printing, and the diffusion of multiple copies of the same work that, whether bought or rented from the lending library, can be read alone, at home, to oneself. Privacy is both the subject and the condition of the novel, though with this paradox that both subject and condition repose on an invasion of privacy, a promiscuous broadcast of the private. And tied also to the remarkable increase in literacy, perhaps most dramatically in France, where in 1820 about 25 percent of the population is literate, then by the 1860s, 65 percent, and by the end of the century around 90 percent. When Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, in the

preface to their novel *Germinie Lacerteux* (1865), spoke of a "droit au roman"—a right to the novel of all social sectors and classes, including the proletariat—they were demonstrating one logic of the novel and of realism: that it was inevitably tied to a loosening of hierarchy and a spread of democratized taste.

With the rise of the realist novel in the nineteenth century, we are into the age of Jules Michelet and Thomas Carlyle, of Karl Marx and John Ruskin, of Charles Darwin and Hippolyte Taine: that is, an age where history takes on new importance, and learns to be more scientific, and where theories of history come to explain how we got to be how we are, and in particular how we evolved from earlier forms to the present. It is the time of industrial, social, and political revolution, and one of the defining characteristics of any realist writing is I think a willingness to confront these issues. England develops a recognizable "industrial novel," one that takes on the problems of social misery and class conflict, and France has its "roman social," including popular socialist varieties. Some English novelists address the issue Benjamin Disraeli, novelist as well as politician, labeled that of "the two nations," the owners and the dispossessed. If the Industrial Revolution comes to England far earlier than to France—and more visibly—political upheaval becomes a French specialty in the nineteenth century: the revolutions (and counter-revolutions) that punctuate modern French history starting in 1789 and its long aftermath concluding in restoration of the monarchy in 1815, then 1830, 1848, 1851, 1871—and one could refine on the list. Perhaps because modern French history is so well demarcated by the rise and overthrow of various regimes, it seems to have offered particularly grateful territory for the novelist who wanted to be the historian of contemporary society. Balzac and Zola, for instance, both write their principal works following a revolution that has put an endstop to the period they are writing about, and this gives them valuable perspective, enables them to see an epoch in its entirety. And it confronts them with the stark question: To whom does France belong?

The nineteenth century in the Western world is of course a time of massive change, much of it resulting from the industrial transformation of work and production, the creation of complex heavy machinery, the coming of the railroad—a true revolution in the experience of space and time—and the formation of the modern city, bringing with it the perception of glamour, entertainment, the variety and excitement of the urban crowd—but also the perception of threat from a newly constituted urban proletariat. The

14 population of Paris doubles during the first half of the century, and similar changes occur in other major cities, even more dramatically in the new industrial cities such as Manchester. Such rapid urban growth strains the relations of social groups one to another—it makes class warfare something of a daily experience. It also makes the city a total environment that writers concerned with the contexts of life must come to terms with.

The nineteenth century also marks the emergence of the cash nexus as possibly underlying or representing all social relations. If Old Regime wealth was principally expressed and undergirded by ownership of land—the feudal, aristocratic model of wealth and of identity—this will be replaced by money in ways both liberating and terrifying. You inherit land, you make money: and the emergence of the cash nexus tracks a transition from inherited identity to achieved identity, that of the self-made man, or the speculator, the capitalist, the gambler—or the destitute genius—all familiar figures in the nineteenth-century novel. Marx noted that capitalist industrial production typically creates objects that are transitory, quickly used up and cast aside in the forward movement of progress: “All that is solid melts into air.” Money represents the fluidity and vaporousness of things in an economy that can swiftly move from boom to bust and then recycle. Money indeed comes to represent representation itself: a system of signs for things. It’s no accident that the founder of modern linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure, often compares language as a system to money: meaning in both systems depends on exchange value, what you get in return for what you are offering. And the great realist novelists come to understand that words, like shillings or francs, are part of a circulatory system subject to inflation and deflation, that meanings may be governed by the linguistic economies and marketplaces of which they are part.

In a direct and literal way, the coming of modern modes of production will transform literature in the nineteenth century, propelling it toward what the French critic Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve called “industrial literature.” Sainte-Beuve was reacting in particular to the creation of the *roman-feuilleton*, the serial novel running in daily installments on the front page of the newspaper. This was a French invention from the 1830s and 1840s that then caught on worldwide (and continues in some parts of the world today), and was an example of fiction financing fact. The serial novel allowed newspapers to reduce their subscription rates dramatically (there were no single-

15 issue sales at the time) and increase their circulation three- and fourfold. The novelists who succeeded in the new form learned to segment melodramatic plots into short episodes with cliff-hanging endings, followed by the sacramental line: “La suite à demain”: Continued tomorrow. But the serial novel is only the most flamboyant instance of literature in its industrial transformation, tied to the development of the steam press, cheap paper, the bookseller, and the lending library. Writers now can attempt to live from sales of their works—and sometimes succeed at it—rather than from noble or royal patronage. We have the beginnings of an uneasy relation between high culture and the mass market, with the novel hovering ambiguously between: a socially mobile form that can go popular, in an age of expanding readership, or upscale toward increasingly alienated artistic milieux, or in rare cases appeal to the whole population.

“The age of property,” E. M. Forster called the nineteenth century, and there is much in these novels about property of all sorts, there are lots of things, clutter, an apparent fear of emptiness. In Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, the law clerk Wemmick delivers to young Pip homilies on the importance of “portable property.” To Wemmick, anything of value is potentially portable property. It should not be lost, squandered, allowed to slip away. It needs to be accumulated, stored in one’s home, considered as one’s castle (and Wemmick’s home in the Walworth suburb of London, a miniature gimcrack castle, literalizes the metaphor), turned into wealth. Balzac’s usurer and miser, Gobseck, probably appears in more novels of the *Comédie humaine* than any other character: he is at the still center of the turning earth, trading in property, lending money against things. By the end of his life, he can’t get rid of things fast enough: at his death his house is stuffed with decaying things and rotting produce. At a time of nascent capitalism (which comes earlier in Britain than in France), there is a fascination with investment, accumulation, wealth—and of course their collapse in bankruptcy. If wealth and poverty are, very explicitly for these novelists, questions of money—the ultimate portable property—their overt expression most often is visible in objects, things, bought and sold as part of one’s declaration of success or failure. Careers are played out between the gambling house and the pawnshop. The property noted by Forster clutters up many of these novels, precisely because it tells us so much about those who have accumulated it, in self-definition. Balzac left us a remarkable unpublished non-novel: the inventory he labori-

16 ously wrote of the furnishings in his newly acquired, overstuffed house in Passy. It is more Balzacian than Balzac.

“Things” will in fact be a main theme in my exploration of the realist vision. Things, first of all, because they represent the hard materiality that one cannot get around in any non-idealist picture of the world: things in the sense of the stone that Dr. Johnson kicked in refutation of Bishop Berkeley’s idealism. You cannot, the realist claims, represent people without taking account of the things that people use and acquire in order to define themselves—their tools, their furniture, their accessories. These things are indeed part of the very definition of “character,” of who one is and what one claims to be. The presence of things in these novels also signals their break from the neoclassical stylistic tradition, which tended to see the concrete, the particular, the utilitarian as vulgar, lower class, and to find beauty in the generalized and the noble. The need to include and to represent things will consequently imply a visual inspection of the world of phenomena and a detailed report on it—a report often in the form of what we call description. The descriptive is typical—sometimes maddeningly so—of these novels. And the picture of the whole only emerges—if it does—from the accumulation of things. In fact, to work through the accumulation of things, of details, of particularities, could be considered nearly definitional of the realist novel. If lyric poetry, according to the linguist Roman Jakobson, typically uses and best represents itself in the figure of metaphor, narrative fiction of the realist type uses and represents itself in metonymy, the selected parts that we must construct sequentially into a whole.

Thing-ism, then, is our subject, in the context of the world looked at. For realism is almost by definition highly visual, concerned with registering what the world looks like. We tend to believe—and centuries of philosophical tradition stand behind the belief—that sight is the most objective and impartial of our senses. Thus any honest accounting for the real, in the sense of the appearances of the world, needs to call upon visual inspection and inventory. It needs to give a sense of the thereness of the physical world, as in a still-life painting. In fact, realism as a critical and polemical term comes into the culture, in the early 1850s, to characterize painting—that of Courbet in particular—and then by extension is taken to describe a literary style. It is a term resolutely attached to the visual, to those works that seek to inventory the immediate perceptible world. And then: to show that the immediate

perceptible world and the systems it represents and implies constitute constraints on human agents attempting to act in the world, hard edges against which they rub up. And here we return to the importance of money, of the cash nexus, in realism: money becomes the representation of representation itself, of the systematic need to acquire things in self-definition. As Balzac’s usurer Gobseck puts it, money is the lifeblood of modern civilization.

Visual inspection and inventory of the world mean, I noted, a large deployment of description, in what sometimes seems to us a misplaced faith that verbal pictures of the world are both necessary and sufficient to creating a sense of place, context, milieu that in turn explain and motivate characters, their actions and reflections. To understand how and what people are, and how they have become such, you need to understand their environment. There is a naturalist or zoological premise in realism, made explicit early on by Balzac, theorized by Taine in his famous “race, milieu, and moment” as the vectors of human history. It is what we might call the Bronx Zoo principle: you need to see the animals in their native habitats to understand them. Their adaptive mechanisms, their character traits, come from the need to hunt on the plains or seek refuge in the trees—and this applies to industrial Manchester and the *beaux quartiers* of Paris as well.

We may at this point want to recall Virginia Woolf in her famous essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (retitled in one of its versions “Character in Fiction”) on the practice of the novelists she calls “the Edwardians”: “I asked them—they are my elders and betters—How shall I begin to describe this woman’s character? And they said, ‘Begin by saying that her father kept a shop in Harrogate. Ascertain the rent. Ascertain the wages of the shop assistants in the year 1878. Discover what her mother died of. Describe cancer. Describe calico. Describe—’ But I cried, ‘Stop! Stop!’ And I regret to say that I threw that ugly, that clumsy, that incongruous tool out of the window.” As readers of Balzac and Dickens we well know the kind of impatience with description that makes Woolf throw Arnold Bennett out the window—and may have provoked similar reactions in us. The invasion of narrative by this kind of discourse, what Roland Barthes would call the “cultural code” of the text—heavy in referential material, in names of places, people, things, in sociohistorical explanation—constitutes a kind of babble typical of the realist text, what can often seem most dated about it, least accessible. The descriptive imperative points to the primacy of the visual in realism, and

18 for Woolf there is a need to go beyond the register of appearances. As Woolf also says in her essay, Mr. Bennett “is trying to hypnotise us into the belief that, because he has made a house, there must be a person living there.” She rejects the premise that description of the habitat is the royal way to understanding persons. With the great modernists—with Woolf and James Joyce and Thomas Mann and Proust—the conception of character itself has undergone modification, in a inward turn of narrative that has often been described, perhaps most succinctly by Woolf herself when she says, “On or about December 1910 human character changed.”

It seems to me that “postmodernism” has allowed us to relax a bit from the Woolfian strictures and that the history of the world since the high modernist moment has suggested that the inward turn of the European novel, its overriding concern with the workings of consciousness, had certain limitations—that the “environmentalism” of the realists matters in trying to understand alien cultures, for instance. We are perhaps more confused in our aesthetic appreciations than the high modernists, certainly more eclectic. As postmodernism in architecture may best illustrate, we have come to appreciate decoration, ornament, a certain elaboration of surfaces, not solely the sleek or stark functionalism of modernism. Our age is once again intensely visual, nourished on the museum and the media, and attuned to the enduring popular forms of fiction making—such as melodrama—that the media perpetuate as if they were platonic forms of the imaginary. And in literary studies, the renewal of an attention to historical and cultural context has made it possible, and important, to rethink what realism was up to. Behind cultural poetics in literary study stands the *Annales*-inspired history of the ordinary and the everyday: for example, the multivolume French undertaking, the *History of Private Life*, in which historians invade what had traditionally been the province of the novelist. Not only do such historians often turn to the novel, especially to Balzac, for their documentation, but they tend to write as novelists: for instance, the chapter by Alain Corbin in the nineteenth-century volume of the *History of Private Life* entitled “Backstage,” which is about everything ostensibly hidden from sight by bourgeois society: about what the butler knew, or the washerwoman. This is precisely the world of the great realist novelists.

Balzac, Dickens, Flaubert, Eliot, Zola, Gissing, James, Woolf, along with Courbet, Edouard Manet, Gustave Caillebotte: this is essentially the selection

I will use to make the case for realism. There are omissions, of course, and disputed cases: Why have I left off Stendhal, consecrated as the first realist by Auerbach and possibly my favorite novelist? Too witty and worldly, too uninterested in the descriptive and the conditions of life, to be a true realist, in my view. I’ve actually sacrificed with more regret such novelists as Guy de Maupassant, Joris-Karl Huysmans, and Arnold Bennett—though they have not held up as well over time as the ones I’ve chosen. Gissing may appear distinctly of a lower rank than the other classics I’ve picked—but his claim as the only true English “naturalist” makes him interesting. Since I have with each writer chosen a single novel, there is further room for contest about the selections made. For all its shortcomings, the list has the advantage of including both French and English novels, which I would see as principally representative of the realist tradition—though a bit later the great Russians make their claim.

The two national traditions are not the same, in large part because of the greater self-censorship of the English novel, as of English culture in general. The French novel in the nineteenth century is well into adultery, casual fornication, prostitution, homosexuality, and all varieties of sexual obsession, tragic or kinky, at a time when sexual relations could barely be alluded to in the English novel. James, that American cosmopolitan who nourished himself on French just as much as English fiction, often objected that the English novel needed to grow up, to come out of its protracted adolescence, to break out of its “mistrust of any but the most guarded treatment of the great relation between men and women.” The result of this mistrust, he says, has been “an immense omission in our fiction.” Walter Scott and Dickens, for instance, represent fiction with “the ‘love-making’ left, as the phrase is, out.” James, writing in 1899—a decade after Zola had been banned in Britain—believes that things have changed. “The novel is older, and so are the young”: the young are demanding fiction no longer wholly anodyne. For James, the English novel has failed to acknowledge sufficiently the elasticity and freedom of the novel form. “There are too many sources of interest neglected—whole categories of manners, whole corpuscular classes and provinces, museums of character and condition, unvisited”: the Goncourts’ *droit au roman* has been singularly unused. And James goes on to notice in particular “the revolution taking place in the position and outlook of women”—with the result that “we may very well yet see the female elbow itself, kept in increas-

20 ing activity by the play of the pen, smash with final resonance the window all this time most superstitiously closed." Prophetic words—except that James as admirer of Eliot, in particular, surely appreciated that windows had been broken before, even if not with the fracas of the French novelists. In fact, James more than anyone sees as well the strengths of the English tradition that may in part derive from its constraints: the more meditative and indirect approach to "the great relation." James in any event may be the best argument in favor of including English and French novelists as both indispensable. Studying, in this case, a single national tradition would be inadequate.

I think that we postmodernists (as I suppose we inevitably are) have come to appreciate again a certain eclecticism of styles, in which the realist discourse of things—its interpretation of realism in the etymological sense of *res*-ism, *thing*-ism—can again be enjoyed and valued. Of course as we pursue the works of such consummate fiction makers as these, we discover that any label such as "realism" is inadequate and that great literature is precisely that which understands this inadequacy, which sees around the corner of its own declared aesthetics, sees what may make its house of cards come tumbling down. Reading these novelists we are ever discovering both what it is like to try to come to terms with the real within the constraints of language, and how one encounters in the process the limits of realism, and the limits to representation itself. For these are among the most intelligent, inventive, aware—as well as the most ambitious—novelists in our history. And they are still—they are more than ever—part of our history, part of how we understand ourselves.

## CHAPTER 2

**Balzac Invents the Nineteenth Century**

I BEGIN WITH BALZAC BECAUSE, AS OSCAR WILDE DECLARED, "THE NINETEENTH century, as we know it, is largely an invention of Balzac's." This is profoundly true, in that our conceptualization of the nineteenth century owes more to this reactionary who claimed to hate his time than to anyone else. Balzac was well-placed to invent a new century: born in 1799, he arrived—like so many of his young protagonists—from the provinces in Paris after the collapse of the Napoleonic epic, during the Bourbon Restoration that tried to turn back the clocks to Old Regime standard time but in the process only made it more evident that things had changed utterly. Monarchist and Catholic though he declared himself to be, Balzac nonetheless was fierce in his denunciation of the Restoration—which lasted from 1815 to 1830—as a time of narrow egotism when the ruling class sought only to restore its wealth and privileges, and forgot about the need to win the hearts and minds of the citizenry, and to recruit into its ranks the young intelligentsia—such as Balzac—who wanted to continue with the pen and the brain what Napoleon had begun with the sword.

It is important to bear in mind that Balzac's major fiction was written following the demise of the Restoration in the July Revolution of 1830, though it generally is set during the Restoration. In this sense, Balzac is able to make use of the lesson of the historical novel provided by Walter Scott, whom he prized above all other novelists. Balzac could be said to create the novel of modern society by decreasing the gap between the moment of writing (and reading) and the moment represented, making the historical gap a matter of a decade rather than some centuries. But even the retrospective of a decade allows him to see the France he represents as whole, as a complete society,



22 in the manner that Scott sees twelfth-century England, for instance. It must be said that the revolutions that punctuate French history from 1789 through 1830, 1848 (and 1851) to 1871 make French society particularly grateful terrain for the novelist: change and continuity, the struggle of order and adventure, are strongly marked. Each upheaval gives a viewing platform on history.

Balzac “invented” the nineteenth century by giving form to its emerging urban agglomerations, its nascent capitalist dynamics, its rampant cult of the individual personality. By conceptualizing, theorizing, and dramatizing the new—all the while deploring it—he initiated his readers into understanding the shape of a century. Because of his reactionary stance, he was able to perceive all the more sharply the decline of the landed gentry, the coming of the cash nexus, and the end of what he nostalgically saw as an ordered, organic society with each person in an assigned role. The new era was one of convulsive egotism, the exaltation of ungoverned individualism. His fictional philosopher, Louis Lambert, before he sinks into sullen madness formulates a “law of disorganization” that characterizes the new society. As Old Goriot raves on his deathbed, in *Le Père Goriot*, nothing matters anymore but money: money will buy you anything, even your unfaithful daughters. No wonder that, for all his reactionary views and his fear of the urban proletariat, he has ever been a favorite of Marxist critics, starting with Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels themselves.

The inevitable context of the new was the city—for Balzac, Paris, where he made his way in 1814, to study law, which he never practiced, preferring to write novels in a garret while he pursued various ill-fated get-rich-quick schemes, including a printing and publishing business that swiftly went bankrupt. Paris doubled in size during the first half of the century, mainly through immigration from the French provinces. If some of the new arrivals were ambitious young men like his own creations Eugène de Rastignac and Lucien de Rubempré—drawn to the sphere where talent could prosper and gain recognition—most contributed to the creation of a new sense of a dangerous urban underclass. Paris was becoming a jungle, and Balzac, an avid reader of James Fenimore Cooper, saw himself as its pathfinder. No novelist before Balzac made the city such a looming and living presence, and he offered a model for Dickens’s London and Fyodor Dostoevsky’s Saint Petersburg: cities as labyrinths, total environments where survival depends on your ability to read the signs, penetrate the appearances,

and, for the ambitious, move out of the “valley of plaster” (where Rastignac begins his Parisian career) to the beaux quartiers. 23

Since Balzac’s *Comédie humaine* counts some ninety novels and tales, and they are interlocked through the return of many of the same characters from one book to another, choice of a single representative text is not easy. *Le Père Goriot* and *Eugénie Grandet* are probably the most widely read of the novels. But on reflection, there is clearly one absolutely indispensable novel, which with its sequel makes up the backbone of the *Comédie humaine*. This is *Illusions perdues*—*Lost Illusions*—which, starting with its very title, stands as the seminal novel of the nineteenth century. The great Marxist critic Georg Lukács’s claimed that this novel presents “the tragi-comedy of the capitalization of spirit,” which seems a promising beginning for the study of realism. This exceptional and unwieldy novel was published in three parts over a long stretch of time (1837–43). It is part 2, “Un grand homme de province à Paris”—which we might translate loosely as “A provincial big shot comes to Paris”—that is of the most intense interest. But just a word needs to be said about part 1, and especially about the strange and arresting first paragraph:

At the time when this story begins the Stanhope press and inking rollers were not yet functioning in small provincial printing offices. Despite the local paper-making that kept it in contact with Parisian printing, Angoulême was still using wooden presses, to which our language owes the phrase “to make the press groan,” now no longer applicable. There, out-of-date printing made use of leather balls spread with ink to dab on the characters. The movable bed on which the form holding the letters is set, on which the sheet of paper is placed, was still in stone, justifying its name “the marble.” The devouring mechanical presses of today have so made us forget this machinery—to which we owe, despite its imperfections, the fine books of such as Elzevir, Plantin, Aldi and Didot—that it’s necessary to mention these old tools for which Jérôme-Nicholas Séchard had a superstitious affection, for they have a role to play in this great, though small, history. (*Illusions perdues*, 61) [*Lost Illusions*, 3]

We are certainly in the realm of the kind of descriptive material that Virginia Woolf would throw out the window. Why do we start with the detail of the “Stanhope press” (the kind of thing that now drives us to the footnotes), especially when we are told that this press wasn’t yet functioning in the French provinces, including Angoulême, where part 1 is set?