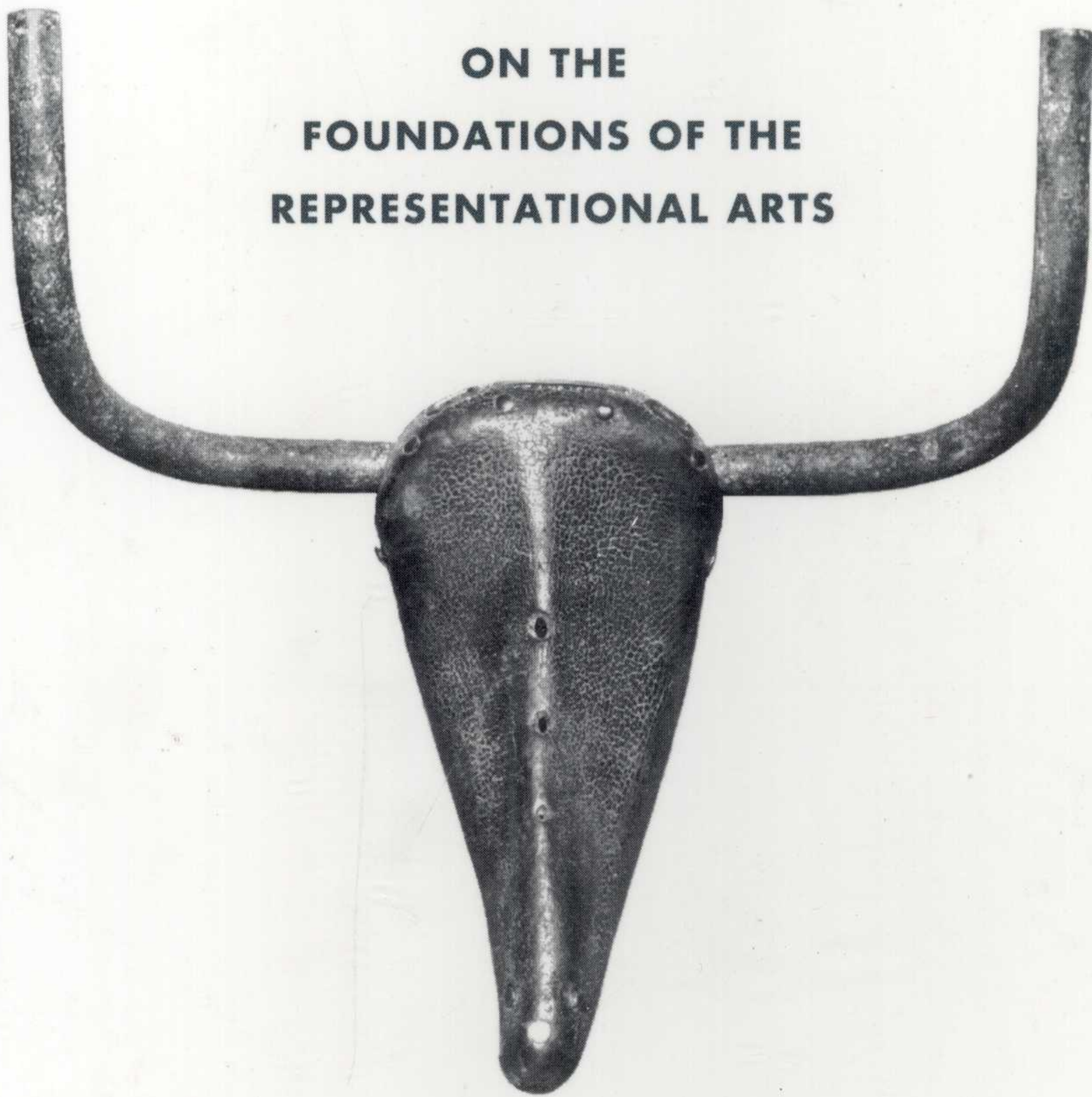


# *Mimesis as Make-Believe*

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ON THE  
FOUNDATIONS OF THE  
REPRESENTATIONAL ARTS



*Kendall L. Walton*

# Mimesis as Make-Believe

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**On the Foundations of the  
Representational Arts**

Kendall L. Walton

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*For Harold and Vendla Walton*

Ben Rogers hove in sight presently; the very boy of all boys whose ridicule he had been dreading. Ben's gait was the hop, skip, and jump—proof enough that his heart was light and his anticipations high. He was eating an apple, and giving a long melodious whoop at intervals, followed by a deep-toned ding dong dong, ding dong dong, for he was personating a steamboat! As he drew near he slackened speed, took the middle of the street, leaned far over to starboard, and rounded-to ponderously, and with laborious pomp and circumstance, for he was personating the *Big Missouri*, and considered himself to be drawing nine feet of water. He was boat, and captain, and engine-bells combined, so he had to imagine himself standing on his own hurricane-deck giving the orders and executing them.

“Stop her, sir! Ling-a-ling-ling.” The headway ran almost out, and he drew up slowly towards the side-walk. “Ship up to back! Ling-a-ling-ling!” His arms straightened and stiffened down his sides. “Set her back on the stabboard! Ling-a-ling! Chow! ch-chowwow-chow!” his right hand meantime describing stately circles, for it was representing a forty-foot-wheel. “Let her go back on the labboard! Ling-a-ling-ling! Chow-ch-chow-chow!” The left hand began to describe circles.

“Stop the stabboard! Ling-a-ling-ling! Stop the labboard! Come ahead on the stabboard! Stop her! Let your outside turn over slow! Ling-a-ling-ling! Chow-ow-ow! Get out that head-line! Lively, now! Come—out with your spring-line—what're you about there? Take a turn round that stump with the bight of it! Stand by that stage now—let her go! Done with the engines, sir! Ling-a-ling-ling!”

“Sht! s'sht! sht!” (Trying the gauge-cocks.)

Tom went on whitewashing—paid no attention to the steamer.

—Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*

philosophers have contributed in many ways to my understanding of the representational arts and to the theory I develop here. The references in the text only hint at my indebtedness to this rich and richly diverse literature.

My fascination with philosophical problems concerning the representational arts began in my early graduate student days and found expression in a series of papers, the first of which appeared in 1973. I have changed my mind about some things over the years, and have found what I believe to be more perspicuous ways of presenting and developing lines of thought I continue to find fruitful. But the present study owes much to these earlier ventures. None of my previous papers escaped dismemberment—and I hope improvement—in being incorporated into this book. But I have helped myself freely to ideas and sentences from them when doing so served my present purposes. The papers I have drawn on are: “Pictures and Make-Believe,” *Philosophical Review* 82 (1973); “Are Representations Symbols?” *The Monist* 58 (1974); “Points of View in Narrative and Depictive Representation,” *Nous* 10 (1976); “Fearing Fictions,” *Journal of Philosophy* 75 (1978); “How Remote Are Fictional Worlds from the Real World?” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 37 (1978); review of Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Works and Worlds of Art*, in *Journal of Philosophy* 80 (1983); “Fiction, Fiction-Making, and Styles of Fictionality,” *Philosophy and Literature* 7 (1983); “Do We Need Fictional Entities? Notes toward a Theory,” in *Aesthetics: Proceedings of the Eighth International Wittgenstein Symposium*, part I, ed. Rudolf Haller (Vienna: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1984); and “Looking at Pictures and Looking at Things,” in *Philosophy and the Visual Arts*, ed. Andrew Harrison (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1987). I thank the editors and publishers involved for permission to use material from these publications.

I am grateful to the American Council of Learned Societies, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Stanford Humanities Center for fellowships which, on several occasions during the last two decades, freed me from other obligations to concentrate on the writing of this book or the papers that preceded it. I express my appreciation also to the Horace H. Rackham School of Graduate Studies for summer support and support for preparation of the manuscript, and to the University of Michigan College of Literature, Science, and the Arts for assistance with the expenses of acquiring the illustrations. I thank the National Endowment for the Humanities for its generous publication support.

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In taking issue, at times, with the writings of Nelson Goodman, Richard Wollheim, and Nicholas Wolterstorff, I express my admiration for their work. I have probably followed their leads more often than I have departed from them, and if I have emphasized disagreements more than agreements that is only because the former seemed to me more instructive. I recall with pleasure illuminating conversations on a number of occasions with Wollheim and Wolterstorff, about their work and mine.

To facilitate the exposition of my theory of make-believe, I have employed a large cast of characters, some of whom are actual as well as fictional, and I am grateful for their contributions. Special thanks to Gregory and Eric, real characters both.

The issues I address in this book are inherently interdisciplinary ones, and they have engaged the talents of many distinguished scholars in many fields of study. Critics, art historians, literary theorists, psychologists, and

They are playing a game. They are playing at not playing a game. If I show them I see they are, I shall break the rules and they will punish me. I must play their game, of not seeing I see the game.

—R. D. Laing, *Knots*



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## *Introduction*

My starting point is simply the observation of paintings, novels, stories, plays, films, and the like—Seurat's *Sunday on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities*, Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*, Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, Mozart's *Magic Flute*, Michelangelo's *David*, Edgar Allan Poe's *Telltale Heart*, for example—together with an awareness of the importance these works have in our lives and in our culture. One cannot help reflecting on and wondering about what they are made of and how they work, the purposes they serve and the means by which they do so, the various ways in which people understand and appreciate them, the shapes of the spaces they occupy in our individual and collective histories. When approached from a more technical perspective, they have other fascinations as well: they pose intriguing problems, often disruptive ones, for metaphysical theories and theories of language.

The scope of our investigation is less easily decided than its starting point. What category of things shall we inquire into? My subtitle promises an investigation of the “representational arts”—a promise I will keep, in a way—and I take our examples to be paradigms of representational art, however uncertain it may be how far and in what directions that category extends. The examples also qualify as central instances of works of “fiction,” and this notion too will play a part in determining the field of our exploration. Both phrases point in the right direction, but vaguely and only approximately.

A quick survey of its frontiers shows the notion of representational art to be especially problematic. Does the Sydney Opera House qualify? Would it if it were titled *Sailing through the Heavens*? Is Brancusi's *Bird in Space* representational? Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie*? Do Jackson Pollock's paintings represent the actions by which they were made? Should we allow that “expressive” music

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*represents* emotions or the experiencing of emotions? Is expression a species of representation? Program music is representational, no doubt, but what about background music in film? How shall we classify Stravinsky's *Pulcinella Suite*, Jasper Johns's targets and flags, Duchamp's readymades, happenings? The existence of borderline or undecidable cases, even vast numbers of them, is not the problem. What is of concern is the fact that we cannot easily say why something does or does not count as representational or why it is borderline, or what one would have to learn about it to decide. Some problematic works are probably not borderline at all. If only we understood better what representationality is, one may feel, we would see that a given item *definitely* qualifies or that it *definitely* does not. We are not just uncertain about what is representational, we are confused. We need a theory.

If our category is representational *art*, we face the interminable and excruciatingly unedifying task of separating art from nonart. We can save ourselves some grief by fixing our sights on the class of the *representational*, whose members may but need not be art. But this lets in many more puzzles. Does this class include clouds or constellations of stars when they are seen as animals? Do passport photographs qualify? X-ray photographs, live television images, reflections? Are chemistry textbooks, historical novels, Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, a love poem, and a love letter written in verse all representational in a single sense, and in the same sense that *The Telltale Heart* is? What about scarecrows, plastic flowers, dollar bills, counterfeit dollar bills, Monopoly money, the bread and wine used in communion, a child's boots bronzed and mounted and displayed, a taste of soup, Madame Tussaud's wax figures, footprints, doodles, coronations, cremations, cockfights, graphs, diagrams, playing cards, chess pieces—and, let us add, hobbyhorses and toy trucks? How might we go about deciding? Every one of these items qualifies as “representational” in *some* reasonable sense of the term, no doubt. The trouble is that there seem to be too many senses criss-crossing the field and interfering with one another.

I will carve out a new category, one we might think of as a principled modification—not just a clarification or refinement—of an ordinary notion of representational art. I will call its members simply “representations,” preempting this expression for my own purposes and assigning it an extension both broader and narrower than it is usually understood to possess. I will not take the concept of art very seriously, for the most part, but it is suggestive in one important

respect of what I will call representations. The works of “representational *art*” most likely to spring to mind are, like our initial examples, works of *fiction*—novels, stories, and tales, for instance, among literary works, rather than biographies, histories, and textbooks. I will concentrate on fiction, and only fiction will qualify as “representational” in my special sense.

What shall we mean by “fiction”? This expression may not exude quite as much sheer mystery as “representation” originally does, but confusion abounds. We will exorcise some of it in Chapter 2, disentangling one sense of the term from others and refining it. We will find it best not to limit “fiction” to *works*, to human artifacts, and to use it more broadly in other respects than is commonly done. “Fiction” in this sense will be interchangeable with “representation” as we will understand it, although I will favor “representation” except when contrasts with what is commonly called “nonfiction” need emphasis.

The term “representation” is less than ideal for the role I will assign it, but I know of no better one. “Fictional representation” would point more clearly to the exclusion of nonfiction. But I resist the implication that our category is a species of a larger class of “representations,” understood to include “nonfictional” as well as “fictional” ones. And “fictional” will have another job to do anyway. “Mimesis,” with its distinguished history, can be understood to correspond roughly to “representation” in my sense, and it is associated with important earlier discussions of many of the issues I will address. Hence its use in my title. But I disavow any implied commitment either to a picture theory of language (or “symbols”) or correspondence theory of truth, or to an imitation or resemblance theory of depiction. “Representation,” too, may suggest to some a commitment of the former sort. But in one respect at least it is unexcelled: It is used so multifariously, in such a confused profusion of senses and nonsenses, and in the service of such a variety of theoretical designs, that no current use can claim exclusive rights to it. It is so obviously in need of a fresh start that there can be no objection to my giving it one.

My decisions about how to shape the category of representations and the reasons for them will emerge gradually as our theory develops. Indeed, to construct a theory, to achieve an understanding of things, is in large part to decide how best to classify them, what similarities and differences to recognize and emphasize. Determination of the scope of our investigation will thus be largely a result of it. We won’t know just what, beyond my initial examples, the theory is a theory of until we have it in hand.

#### 4 Introduction

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But we do have the initial examples, a loose collection of cultural objects commonly described both as “representational art” and as “works of fiction.” Even when this classification, or these, gives way to the more perspicuous and more illuminating category of representations in our special sense, paintings, novels, stories, plays, and films such as *La Grande Jatte*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *The Telltale Heart*, *Hedda Gabler*, and *North by Northwest* will remain central in our attention. My primary purpose in devising this category and developing the theory to which it belongs is to deepen our understanding of works like these and their surroundings. It is in this way that I will keep the promise to investigate the foundations of the “representational arts.”

There is enormous diversity among even the initial examples. I note now that they include both literary works and works of the visual arts, as well as hybrids such as theater, film, and opera. We will examine this and other differences among them in due course, but it is essential first to see what representations of all varieties have in common. Concentrating just on literature, or just on the visual arts, has sometimes led to serious misconceptions that are best corrected by placing representations of one sort alongside ones of the other. Not until Part Three will I systematically distinguish literary and depictive representations and consider more than in passing other differences among them. Until then we will focus on what can be said about representations generally.

What all representations have in common is a role in *make-believe*. Make-believe, explained in terms of imagination, will constitute the core of my theory. I take seriously the association with children’s games—with playing house and school, cops and robbers, cowboys and Indians, with fantasies built around dolls, teddy bears, and toy trucks. We can learn a lot about novels, paintings, theater, and film by pursuing analogies with make-believe activities like these.

This suggestion is hardly a daring innovation; nor was it when Ernst Gombrich, in a famous essay, compared pictures to hobbyhorses.<sup>1</sup> That make-believe (or imagination, or pretense) of *some* sort is cen-

1. “Meditations on a Hobby Horse.” (Complete bibliographical information on works cited in short form in the notes appears in Works Cited.) Gombrich’s suggestion that a picture of a man is a “substitute” for a man as a hobbyhorse is a “substitute” for a horse points around several mistakes. But it is also misleading. A hobbyhorse does not substitute for a horse in the way a horseless carriage substitutes for a horse-drawn one. One rides in the horseless carriage as one rides in the horse-drawn one, but the child does not actually ride his stick. Moreover, it is crucial that the child *think of* his stick as a horse, whereas the user of an automobile may long have forgotten the horse-drawn carriage that it replaces.



tral, somehow, to “works of fiction” is surely beyond question. Establishing this much is like pulling a rabbit out of a hutch. But there have been few concerted attempts to explain what make-believe is or to trace the roots of fiction (or representation in anything like our sense) in that direction. And the consequences of taking make-believe to be central have not been appreciated. Some of them are surprising. As obvious and as innocuous as the basic insight may seem, we will find ourselves endorsing some quite unexpected and unorthodox conclusions in the course of developing it. In the end one might think the hutch must actually have been a hat. But by then the rabbit will be in our hands.

Many recent theorists, especially, look to language—to the workings of natural languages in standard, ordinary, nonfictional contexts—for models on which to understand novels, paintings, theater, and film. My emphasis on make-believe is designed in part to counteract the excesses of this approach. I don’t deny that linguistic models have much to offer. Theorists have clarified significant features of the works we are interested in by considering them together with “serious” uses of language and by bringing theories of language to bear on them. But every model has its dangers, and linguistic ones have so dominated recent thinking about fiction and the representational arts that many of their limitations have gone unnoticed. It is time to look at things from a fresh perspective. A make-believe theory needn’t be in conflict with linguistically based ones, of course. The genuine insights of one theory can be accepted along with those of others. Some will argue that games of make-believe can themselves be illuminated by thinking of them in linguistic terms (as “semiotic”). No doubt there is some truth in this. It is equally true, however, that the notion of make-believe can clarify significant aspects of language, as we shall see. In any case it is essential to break the hold that the preoccupation with language has exerted on our thinking about representation and to see through the distortions it has engendered. We can always come back to linguistic models later to appreciate what is right about them.

I alluded earlier to a distinction between two kinds of questions to be investigated. On the one hand, there are questions about the role representations have in our lives, the purposes they serve, the nature of appreciators’ responses. The very fact that people make up stories and tell them to one another, the fact that they are interested at all in what they know to be mere fiction, is astonishing and needs to be explained. On the other hand, there are more technical issues concerning the ontological standing of characters and other fictitious