Realism is a "genre" (rather than, say, a central impulse in fiction-making); it is taken to be mere dead convention, and to be related to a certain kind of traditional plot, with predictable beginnings and endings; it deals in "round" characters, but softly and piously ("conventional humanisms"); it assumes that the world can be described, with a naively stable link between word and referent ("philosophically dubious"); and all this will tend toward a conservative or even oppressive politics ("politically . . . dubious").

We have all read many novels in which the machinery of convention is so rusted that nothing moves. Why, we say to ourselves, do people have to speak in quotation marks? Why do they speak in scenes of dialogue? Why so much "conflict"? Why do people come in and out of rooms, or put down drinks, or play with their food while they are thinking of something? Why do they always have affairs? Why is there always an aged Holocaust survivor somewhere in these books? And please, whatever you do, don't introduce incest...

In a very witty essay written in 1935, Cyril Connolly demanded that a whole family of conventions should be butchered—"all novels dealing with more than one generation or with any period before 1918 or with brilliant impoverished children in rectories, all novels set in Hampshire, Sussex, Oxford, Cambridge, the Essex coast, Wiltshire, Cornwall, Kensington, Chelsea, Hampstead, Hyde Park, and Hammersmith. Many situations should be forbidden, all getting and losing of jobs, proposals of marriage, reception of love-letters by either sex .. . all allusion to illness or suicide (except insanity), all quotations, all mentions of genius, promise, writing, painting, sculpting, art, poetry, and the phrases "I like your stuff," "What's his stuff like?" "Damned good," "Let me make you some coffee," all young men with ambition or young women with emotion, all remarks like "Darling, I've found the most wonderful cottage" (flat, castle), "Ask me any other time, dearest, only please—just this once—not now," "Love you—of course I love you" (don't love you)—and "It's not that, it's only that I feel so terribly tired." Forbidden names: Hugo, Peter, Sebastian, Adrian, Ivor, Julian, Pamela, Chloe, Enid, Inez, Miranda, Joanna, Jill, Felicity, Phyllis. Forbidden faces: all young men with curly hair or remarkable eyes, all gaunt haggard thinkers' faces, all faunlike characters, anybody over six feet, or with any distinction whatever, and all women with a nape to their neck (he loved the way her hair curled in the little hollow at the nape of her neck)."

Barthes argued that there is no "realistic" way to narrate the world. The nineteenth-century author's naive delusion that a word has a necessary and transparent link to its referent has been nullified. We move merely among different, competing genres of fiction-making, of which realism is just the most confused, and perhaps the most obtuse because the least self-conscious about its own procedures. Realism does not refer to reality; realism is not realistic. Realism, said Barthes, is a system of conventional codes, a grammar so ubiquitous that we do not notice the way it structures bourgeois storytelling. In practice, what Barthes means is that conventional novelists have pulled the wool over our eyes. We no longer bother to notice such elements of fiction as the convention that people speak within quotation marks ("'Nonsense,' he said, firmly"); that a character is briskly summarized in external description when he or she first enters a novel or story ("She was a shortish, broadfaced woman of about fifty, with rather poorly dyed hair"); that detail is carefully chosen and helpfully "telling" ("She noticed that his hands shook slightly as he poured the whisky"); that dynamic and habitual detail is conflated; that dramatic action is nicely broken up by characters' reflections ("Sitting quietly at the table, his head propped on one arm, he thought again about his father"); that characters change; that stories have endings; and so on.

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Here is Barthes in 1966: 'The function of narrative is not to 'represent,' it is to constitute a spectacle still very enigmatic for us but in any case not of a mimetic order . . . 'What takes place' in the narrative is,
from the referential (reality) point of view literally nothing; 'what happens' is language alone, the adventure of language, the unceasing celebration of its coming." Now, to charge fiction with conventionality is one thing; to move from this charge to the very skeptical conclusion that fictive convention can therefore never convey anything real, that narrative represents "literally nothing," is incoherent. First, all fiction is conventional in one way or another, and if you reject a certain kind of realism for being conventional, you will also have to reject for the same reason surrealism, science fiction, self-reflexive postmodernism, novels with four different endings, and so on. Convention is everywhere, and triumphs like old age: once you have reached a certain seniority, you either die of it, or with it. One of the nice comedies of Cyril Connolly's essay is that by blacklisting every conceivable convention he effectively bans the writing of any fiction at all—"anybody over six feet, or with any distinction whatever." Second, just because artifice and convention are involved in a literary style does not mean that realism (or any other narrative style) is so artificial and conventional that it is incapable of referring to reality. Narrative can be conventional with out being a purely arbitrary, nonreferential technique like the form of a sonnet or the sentence with which Snoopy always begins his stories ("It was a dark and stormy night . . .").

The point to make about convention is not that it is untruthful per se, but that it has a way of becoming, by repetition, steadily more and more conventional. Love becomes routine (and indeed Barthes once claimed that "I love you" is the most cliched thing anyone can say), but falling in love is not nullified by this fact. Metaphors become dead through overuse, but it would be insane to charge metaphor itself with deadness.

Brigid Lowe argues that the question of fiction's referentiality—does fiction make true statements about the world?—is the wrong one, because fiction does not ask us to believe things (in a philosophical sense) but to imagine them (in an artistic sense): "Imagining the heat of the sun on your back is about as different an activity as can be from believing that tomorrow it will be sunny. One experience is all but sensual, the other wholly abstract. When we tell a story, although we may hope to teach a lesson, our primary objective is to produce an imaginative experience." She proposes that we restore the Greek rhetorical term "hypotyposis," which means to put something before our eyes, to bring it alive for us. (Somehow I don't think that "hypotyposis" will displace "realism" as the preferred term any time soon.)

If we reexamine Aristotle's original formulation of mimesis, in the Poetics, we find that his definition is not about reference. History shows us, says Aristotle, "what Alcibiades did"; poetry—i.e., fictional narrative—shows us "the kind of thing that would happen" to Alcibiades. Hypothetical plausibility—probability—is the important and neglected idea here: probability involves the defense of the credible imagination against the incredible. This is surely why Aristotle writes that a convincing impossibility in mimesis is always preferable to an unconvincing possibility. The burden is instantly placed not on simple verisimilitude or reference (since Aristotle concedes that an artist may represent something that is physically impossible), but on mimetic persuasion: it is the artist's task to convince us that this could have happened. Internal consistency and plausibility then become more important than referential rectitude. And this task will of course involve much fictive artifice and not mere reportage.

So let us replace the always problematic word "realism" with the much more problematic word "truth" . . . Once we throw the term "realism" overboard, we can account for the ways in which, say, Kafka's Metamorphosis and Hamsun's Hunger and Beckett's Endgame are not representations of likely or typical human activity but are nevertheless harrowingly truthful texts. This, we say to ourselves, is what it would feel like to be outcast from one's family, like an insect (Kafka), or a young madman (Hamsun), or an aged parent kept in a bin and fed pap (Beckett). There is still nothing as terrifying in contemporary fiction, not even in the blood-bin of Cormac McCarthy or the sadistic eros of Dennis Cooper, as the moment when Knut Hamsun's narrator in Hunger, a starving young intellectual, puts his finger in his mouth and starts eating himself. None of us, I hope, has done this, or will ever want to. But Hamsun has made us share it, has made us feel it. Dr. Johnson, in his "Preface to Shakespeare," reminds us, "Imitations produce pain or pleasure, not because they are mistaken for realities, but because they bring realities to mind."
Convention itself, like metaphor itself, is not dead; but it is always dying. So the artist is always trying to outwit it. But in outwitting it, the artist is always establishing another dying convention. It is this paradox that explains the further, well-known literary-historical paradox, namely that poets and novelists repeatedly attack one kind of realism only to argue for their own kind of realism.

It is summarized in Flaubert’s remark about pornography: "Obscene books are immoral because untruthful. When reading them, one says, 'That's not the way things are.' Mind you, I detest realism, though I am claimed as one of its pontiffs." On the one hand, Flaubert wants nothing to do with the movement of "realism"; on the other, he deems certain books "untruthful" because they do not depict things as they are. (Chekhov used a similar formulation when watching an Ibsen play: "But Ibsen is no playwright ... Ibsen just doesn't know life. In life it simply isn't like that.") Thomas Hardy argued that art wasn’t realistic because art is "a disproportioning—(i.e. distorting, throwing out of proportion)—of realities, to show more clearly the features that matter in those realities, which, if merely copied or reported inventorially, might possibly be observed, but would more probably be overlooked. Hence 'realism' is not Art." Yet Hardy, of course, no less than Flaubert, strove to write novels and poems that show "the way things are." Who has written more beautifully or more truthfully than Hardy about rural communities, or about grief?

These writers rejected mere photographic fidelity, because art selects and shapes. But they revered truth and truthfulness. They believed, as George Eliot put it in her essay "The Natural History of German Life," that "Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot."

Alain Robbe Grillet, in his book Pour un nouveau roman, rightly says, "All writers believe they are realists. None ever calls himself abstract, illusionistic, chimerical, fantastic." But, he goes on to say, if all these writers are mustered under the same flag, it is not because they agree about what realism is; it is because they want to use their different idea of realism to tear each other apart. If we add to these examples the invocations of "Nature" beloved of neoclassical critics, the overwhelmingly strong Aristotelian tradition with its distinction between probability and the improbably marvelous (accepted by Cervantes, Fielding, Richardson, Dr. Johnson), the claim made by Wordsworth and Coleridge that the poems in Lyrical Ballads offer "a natural delineation of human passions, human characters, and human incidents," and so on, we are likely to think of the desire to be truthful about life—the desire to produce art that accurately sees "the way things are"—as a universal literary motive and project, the broad central language of the novel and drama: what James in What Maisie Knew calls "the firm ground of fiction, through which indeed there curled the blue river of truth." "Realism" and the technical or philosophical squabbles it has engendered seem like a school of bright red herrings.

Realism, seen broadly as truthfulness to the way things are, cannot be mere verisimilitude, cannot be mere lifelikeness, or lifesameness, but what I must call lifeness: life on the page, life brought to different life by the highest artistry. And it cannot be a genre; instead, it makes other forms of fiction seem like genres. For realism of this kind—lifeness—is the origin. It teaches everyone else; it schools its own truants: it is what allows magical realism, hysterical realism, fantasy, science fiction, even thrillers, to exist. It is nothing like as naive as its opponents charge; almost all the great twentiethcentury realist novels also reflect on their own making, and are full of artifice. All the greatest realists, from Austen to Alice Munro, are at the same time great formalists. But this will be unceasingly difficult: for the writer has to act as if the available novelistic methods are continually about to turn into mere convention and so has to try to outwit that inevitable aging. The true writer, that free servant of life, is one who must always be acting as if life were a category beyond anything the novel had yet grasped; as if life itself were always on the verge of becoming conventional.