

FICTIONS*

R. A. LEWIS

Department of Modern Languages, University of Rhodesia

WE ALL OF US know what fiction is. It is a form of literature, or an exercise of the imagination in which we occasionally indulge in order to get out of a tight corner. But we do not usually put the word in the plural, and if I have done so tonight one of my motives was undoubtedly to attract you here, knowing you to be motivated by that incorrigible academic curiosity which supposes that the unfamiliar is always worth investigating. Let me assure you that I do not intend to speak of works of fiction: or rather, when I do so, I shall speak of them only as part of a larger subject. 'Fictions' is not the plural of the generic term 'fiction', but of the more specific one 'a fiction', and this, it seems to me, is a useful term by which to describe one of the most important activities of thought and language. As I propose to use this expression in my lecture tonight, a fiction is a hypothesis which, so far as we are concerned, is unverifiable, and which we accept because it helps to make living easier or humanly possible. It is an imaginative interpretation of experience. Certainly we seek to base our lives and actions on known facts, but these need to be organized and amplified into fictions if they are to make any sense at all. We are intelligent but inadequately informed individuals. All literature makes use of fictions, not merely the novel and short story; and so too do history, physics, mathematics, sociology, economics, politics and all other systems which the mind extrapolates from human experience. I do not intend to attempt the exposure of those moments in which otherwise rational minds slip into superstition, convention or prejudice. Far from it. I wish to suggest that, for us, our fictions are as valid as our facts, and, indeed, that the latter cannot make much sense without the former.

I would not deny that the academic disciplines to which I have referred are based upon the study of fact. But facts take on significance only in a given context. Innumerable apples had fallen to the ground before that day on which Newton decided to integrate this phenomenon into a theory of gravitation which, if it had not been for Einstein, we should doubtless still regard as fact. If we are merely gathering apples to make cider, we need pay no attention to either Newton or Einstein. Their fictions were directed primarily towards specialists whom they enabled, by their conjectures, to form a more satisfying picture of the working of the universe than they had hitherto possessed. In order to do so they had recourse to concepts of size

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and distance, minute or astronomical, which are totally unreal so far as human experience is concerned. In their work the difference between a fact and an apparently valid deduction seems to disappear. But such interpretations are acts of the imagination, acceptable in so far as they correspond to contemporary knowledge. They may be accepted or rejected or otherwise interpreted by physicists of the future. All our fictions are apparently valid deductions from experienced fact, necessary because such experience, without some intellectual or imaginative interpretation, is meaningless.

The world as understood by the physicist, the chemist, the economist, the historian or the geographer is the world not as we know it by day-to-day contact but as interpreted by the light of a particular fiction. To say this is not to deny that modern science uses experienced fact both as a spring-board for the imagination and as a restraining influence. Even so, Africa did not exist as an entity until the geographers invented it. It remains a concept more easily understood by the student who opens his glossy atlas and sees the continent displayed on a single page than by the tribesman who lives and dies within its confines. The physicist may recognise that we are largely composed of empty space, but nothing in our common experience suggests this, nor do we think of it as true except when pursuing the particular preoccupations of physics. The conscientious historian may be thought of as a slave to facts, but of course he is not; it is he who chooses the facts which he thinks are relevant to his thesis, and in so doing he opens to us a world from which we are for ever cut off by time. The economist treats us as economic units, and though we could not possibly live our personal lives on the basis of such an assumption, we find his picture useful. We dare not question mathematics, since we make such abundant use of it in our everyday lives; but we know that mathematics is a closed system which relies heavily on concepts for which there is no real-life equivalent. Two and two make four, but two is an abstraction: two elephants and two irregular verbs do not make four of anything. When we view the world in the context of such disciplines, it is rather as if we see it through a piece of coloured glass. It is the same world, but the colour of the glass gives it a new character and a new uniformity.

It may be objected that such studies are not fictions, but are remote from common experience only in that they involve a high degree of specialisation. But in fact what is interesting in them is that they are of universal application. Each has its own story to tell, and each works within its own convention. The sum total of all the knowledge they convey would not give us a picture of life, but merely a compendium of different approaches to life. We cannot think of their adepts as so many masons each contributing in his own way to the building of some definitive cathedral of truth. On the contrary, each develops or reforms the conventions of his own type of thinking, which represents the fictional extension of some dimension of human existence and experience.

I must make it clear that in describing such systems as 'fictions' I am

not saying anything about their truth. The point has been usefully made by R. Wellek and A. Warren in their *Theory of Literature* (1949, p.34): 'The opposite of "fiction" is not "truth" but "fact" or "time-and-space existence".' One cannot say that one's life consists of so many facts. Facts only become facts when, for some reason or another, we become conscious of them as a feature of our experience. Each specialist must select his own facts and dismiss the irrelevant. In so doing he does not diverge from truth, but necessarily substitutes his own fiction for the reality of common experience. This is presumably why scholars are not necessarily any wiser or more prudent than other human beings, and may indeed be a good deal more useless than others in any real-life situation.

We cannot substitute terms such as 'hypothesis' or 'postulate' for 'fictions', since though our fictions may be hypotheses or postulates they are not felt to be so, nor do we expect to prove them. The physicist cannot question the validity of physics as a whole, nor the historian of history. The philosopher or mystic may question the validity of physics, and the geophysicist may dismiss as unimportant the trivial flash of time which is the field of the historian; and the psychologist and economist may do battle over the significance of any event in human experience. But each must accept his own conventions and work within his own pattern of thought. In less academic fields, fictions are a part of our ordinary life, and we question them scarcely more frequently than we question the facts of our actual experience. I have illustrated the concept of the fiction by reference to academic disciplines, but most fictions do not belong to such systems or fit into neat categories. They are simple extensions of known fact, extra rooms added to our human habitation, extra lines or colours added to a scene to make it a picture. They come into being because the human mind needs other dimensions in which to move than those with which fact provides him. The animal lives in a world of fact, of space and-time existence. We share that world, but if we were restricted to it we would not be human. The instrument we use to extend it is language. Fictions are verbal, and one of the prime functions of language is to produce them.

I shall not attempt to prove that a factual world actually, or absolutely, exists: since philosophers these days are prepared to beg that particular question, it is a responsibility which I may legitimately shirk. To demonstrate the existence of a *verbal* world understood and accepted in terms of its verbal equivalents presents no difficulties. For Descartes' splendidly ambitious assertion 'Cogito, ergo sum' — 'Je pense, donc je suis' — we may substitute a more modest alternative: 'Je parle, donc je suis.' The fact that a lecturer is talking does not prove that he is thinking, but in so far as words confer existence, he exists. Let me illustrate the difference, as I understand it, between fiction, fact and truth. Sexual relations between men and women are a fact. Romantic love may play a greater part in a man's life than sexual relations, but is even so a fiction for which only some societies, ages and individuals have felt a need. Religious experience is a fact, but its association with any specific belief in God is a fiction. This tells us nothing about its truth. I am not

arguing for logical positivism. But there is a clear distinction between the case of the man who denies that it is raining when he is soaked to the skin in a downpour and one who denies the existence of God, even though, to the convinced Christian believer, who sees the atheist as part of God's creation, both denials may seem equally absurd. I would add that, had this distinction been more generally recognized, a great deal of massacre and persecution might have been avoided.

Even so, the distinction between fact and fiction is not usually so easy to make. According to the Book of Genesis, the world itself is a verbal fiction. 'God said, "Let there be light"' — and He was, of course, talking to Himself at the time, as there was nobody else around — and there was light. 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God', St John tells us, in his more sophisticated interpretation of primitive man's belief in the creative power of language. On an individual level, man may be said to create his own personality through speech. The baby cries, and the response it obtains from its mother is testimony from the outside world that it exists as a significant individual. Adults, I suspect, talk for much the same reason. It is difficult to imagine how, if one were shut up for a long while in a dark cell, one could remain conscious of one's own identity without talking to oneself, or thinking to oneself, in words. There was a time when linguists and philosophers were agreed that the primary function of language was to communicate thought. They held this improbable view, I suppose, because that was how they themselves used language, at least when they were writing their books. A few moments spent listening to the average conversation should have convinced them of their error. Speech may have many functions, but one of the most important is that of establishing, in our own minds, the conviction that we significantly exist. The experience of being 'sent to Coventry' can produce a nervous breakdown: that of taking a prominent part in a discussion produces a sense of elation and power. To create our personality we ally ourselves with a body of sympathies, hatreds, concepts and assumptions — a process which may range from supporting a football team to belief in the Holy Trinity — which we only know ourselves to possess when we express them in language. In this connexion, the question of whether these beliefs are true or false in any objective sense is of no importance; if they are manifestly false the holder is more vulnerable to argument, but this is unlikely to worry him if he holds a handgrenade or a machine-gun. The animal inherits an individual and communal character which it can do nothing to change, and its speech is adapted only to limited and stereotyped situations. But man's language is a medium which enables him to develop, for good or ill, along lines not entirely governed by fact. So far as I am aware, no one has as yet explained why living things should be possessed by an overriding desire to survive (even lemmings, until they make their last and fatal mistake), but in the case of humans it is clear that survival involves not merely avoidance of physical death but vindication of personality; that is, of the fictions with which the individual has associated himself. I would not

agree with Donne that every man's death diminishes me, for, to quote a sage whose name I am afraid I can no longer remember, there are some people who would be greatly improved by death; but I have no doubt that every defeat suffered by my adopted fictions does so, unless I am able to adapt so as to identify myself with the victorious ones which replace them.

I have spoken of academic disciplines as fictions, since they are imaginative extrapolations from reality, even though they are based on and tested by the study of fact. But some fictions might aptly be described as prejudices, were it not that the word is applicable, in common usage, only to other people's views. The appropriate term for one's own views is 'convictions' or 'principles'. It is a fairly widespread belief that prejudices are bad things, but there is no justification for such a sweeping assertion. We are all prejudiced, and would not be one whit better if we were not: indeed, it is doubtful whether, without prejudice, we should even exist, since belief in the desirability of our own survival rests on no rational basis. The man who, on seeing a child playing within striking distance of a cobra, sits down to debate such vital questions as to whether there is any reason to suppose that a human life is of greater value than a cobra's, or whether the child, if saved, might not ultimately die an agonizing death from cancer or multiple sclerosis, or alternatively become a sex-maniac or a politician, or whether the world is not already grossly overpopulated, so that the removal of one child would be a kindness to the human race — such a man would be not a superman but a monster. If he is a man he acts according to instinctive prejudice and saves the child, even if, regrettably, this means killing the cobra. The view that human prejudice is a characteristic which could or should be eradicated seems to me absurd, both on the grounds that it runs counter to natural instincts that we share with the animals, and also because the endorsement of fictions, by definition unprovable, is necessary to our humanity. The real problem is not to eliminate them but to recognize them for what they are, in ourselves as in others, so that we may learn to distinguish between those which are harmful and those which are helpful to humanity in given circumstances. The fiction that all men are brothers may be a useful one (although its value is lessened by the fact that so were Cain and Abel) but not all the nagging of all the moralists and politicians of the world will induce us to feel for man in general what we feel for those near and dear to us; and for this we may be thankful, since otherwise we would either go mad under the pressure of unfulfillable responsibilities or develop an armour of total indifference. Since I am speaking in a Rhodesian context, I may add that the concept of the inherent superiority of the European is equally fictional, as is the belief that all men and all races are equal, by some kind of divine right. Superiority can be factually demonstrated only in free and equal competition, and even then is only meaningful in specific fields, while the experience of centuries seems to suggest that none of us have more than squatter's rights on any part of the earth's surface. But such concepts are useful, or dangerous, to the degree that they foster loyalties which benefit or endanger our communal survival. In their

imperial pride the Romans committed the most bestial atrocities and also founded an enduring civilization. We must seek to eliminate the evil and fortify the good results of man's faith in himself, but not to destroy that faith, prejudice though it necessarily is. I am afraid that many people today are endeavouring to do just that, by a wilful substitution of ideological and moral fictions for lived experience. Just as one may burn a man at the stake for the good of his soul, so one may subject him to servitude in the name of 'liberation'.

In this respect, the failure to distinguish between fact and fiction is of particular relevance to the case of the modern university, whether here or elsewhere. The proportion of students who are actively espoused to any political fiction is, I suspect, quite small in any country where politics is not compulsory. Yet the general public often feels that students and, indeed, academic staff are dangerous revolutionaries. I think we should make some effort to understand this feeling. Politics is partly factual and partly fictional, as most things are. The factual side is limited to the conflict of ambitious individuals and groups, to economic and social pressures, and to the element of pure chance which furthers or frustrates human designs. The general public has little experience of it, save perhaps in small nations where domestic affairs predominate, or occasionally in great nations at times of crisis. For the general public (which is itself a fiction, since it consists of individuals), politics is largely a matter of fictions. The concept of the nation or race, and the idea that one man may speak for it, whether as self-appointed dictator or on a basis of 'one man, one vote', is pure fiction. So is aristocracy, which presupposes, to a degree not borne out by experience, that the ability to rule can be inherited from generation to generation. So too is democracy, which presupposes in all men an access to information, an ability to think, a concern for public affairs and an understanding of the art of government which quite obviously they do not possess. All men are not equal — and cannot be made so by giving them the right to put a cross on a ballot paper: power will remain not in their hands but in the hands of those who have the talent, the ambition, the ruthlessness and the weapons necessary for its exercise. The small man crushed out of existence by the big combine finds that private enterprise, too, is a fiction, as is the popular socialism which eliminates those members of the public who do not endorse it. As we have said, fictions are necessary to human mind, but they should be recognized for what they are.

The common man, excluded though he may be from the factual world of politics, nevertheless has his own facts on which politics impinge. It is he who is likely to die in wars, or lose his life's savings, or find his earning channelled to support the ambitions of the great or the furtherance of political fictions in which he may have little interest. For the most part he has a certain scepticism about these fictions, and where one finds the masses united in support of them, one finds also that this situation is brought about by censorship of the news media and considerable pressure from the police and the army. It is a situation which can result only from a good deal of crude political

engineering. Now the universities present a different picture. Although they rarely admit the fact, they are cloistered institutions devoted to the pursuit of fictions. The students who attend them have the minimum of contact with the real problems of the community, the minimum of factual responsibility, the minimum of factual experience. But many of them have gone to university imagining that there they will learn about life, and their elders have unwisely told them, only too often, that they are the natural leaders of the future, although there is no evidence that a university education confers upon its recipient a talent for leadership. It is not unnatural that some, imbued with the simple fictions of their studies, imagine that if the world remains today, as it always has been, something of a mess, it is really quite easy for them to alter this state of affairs. They have not been told, and would not want to believe, that one learns about life by living it — outside a university.

I am aware that this view sounds very middle-aged and reactionary. But the fictions we teach at universities are both splendid and dangerous things. There is no theoretical reason why Rousseau's *Social Contract* should have opened the floodgates of Terror in the French Revolution, but to no small extent it did. Karl Marx, reading in the prim silence of the British Museum, did not know that he was beating out a path which was to lead countless thousands to the prison camps of Siberia and elsewhere. Plato and the inoffensive Nietzsche did not know that their views would find a grotesque parody in Nazi Germany. Whether Christ knew that his words would be on the lips of the judges of the Holy Inquisition and the witch-burners of seventeenth-century England is a question best left to the theologians. But I must admit that I have some sympathy with those who regard universities with qualms of misgiving. We are not, as we sometimes like to believe, the custodians of the world's conscience. We are armaments manufacturers, and the use which will be made of the weapons we produce will not be decided by academics.

Man's survival is closely linked with the fictions he endorses, but the use that will be made of these depends on factors which no one can anticipate. Man progresses and regresses by reason of his will and imagination. His will to survive can be either reinforced or undermined by his fictions. The university, as a nursery of fictions, has a vital rôle to play, and the student who is prepared to undergo its disciplines is by no means opting out of life. The wisdom he acquires may be of decisive importance. But it requires patience. Christ's public life was restricted to some three years: the preparation for it took ten times as long. Of the student who has a less ambitious aim one demands less, but one demands at least that he shall thoroughly understand his evidence before he reaches his conclusions. It should be a matter for serious concern to universities, in which knowledge, if not wisdom, is obtained by the free interchange of conflicting fictions, that in some countries both students and academics are acquiring a most disturbing reputation for intolerance. In Britain, the university appears to be the one institution in which a visiting speaker is liable to be prevented from expressing his views by a

minority already convinced that what he has to say will be immoral. If this criticism should seem contrary to what I have already said about the need for prejudice, I would point out that there is a vast difference between on the one hand endorsing a fiction knowing it to be such and appreciating its value, and on the other believing one's own fictions to be fact and condemning out of hand those who do not so regard them.

Since this lecture is given by one who professes a modern language, it seems appropriate to lay some stress on the fact that the natural tendency of language to generate fictions manifests itself in the creation of literature. All forms of literature help to give the illusion of a homocentric world, and create a population of phantoms, in some ways more real than reality because more easily comprehended, to reinforce our beleaguered garrison on earth. I shall have time tonight to refer to only one genre, the novel. This appears to differ from other fictions we have considered in that it is a conscious lie which the reader does not really believe. But in its more significant forms it must be rather more than this, for we not infrequently hear intelligent men refer to the characters of books — and of course plays and films — as if they were in some way real and could be judged, analysed and learnt from as would be the case if they had really lived. This may be justified in so far as they represent facets of the author's experience illuminated by his flashes of insight. But even so, one wonders . . . How is it that Balzac, who portrayed so brilliantly the machinations of a society based on money, was himself so incompetent in money matters; that Stendhal who wrote with such perspicacity on love, was an unsuccessful lover; that Flaubert, who castigated the bourgeoisie with such caustic irony, was himself a kindly bourgeois; or for that matter that Conan Doyle seems to have been a Dr Watson rather than a Sherlock Holmes? Should we agree with Borges that literature holds up a mirror to nature in that it presents it to us in reverse? Certainly the grounds for supposing that it presents us with a faithful copy are slender. We have all of us found, at one time or another, that in recounting our adventures we are able to produce a verbal equivalent which is a good deal more satisfying than fact, and even the most superficial observation of human conversation will demonstrate that this process of 'tidying up' experience to the narrator's advantage is one of the permanent obsessions of the human race. Freud's view that literature is a compensation for life may not be adequate, but should not be ignored; we may, after all, find the verisimilitude of literature a good deal more satisfying than chaotic truth.

A character in André Gide's novel *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* is rescued from the wreck of the *Bourgogne*. She is picked up by an already full lifeboat, and undergoes the traumatic experience of seeing the seamen cutting off the hands of those struggling in the water who attempt to clamber into the already over-loaded boat. From this she derives a philosophy — which her author does not share — of survival by ruthless selfishness. Walter Lord, in his carefully documented account of the sinking of the *Titanic*, records that all the lifeboats, pitifully few as they were, pulled away from the sinking

ship half-empty, leaving hundreds to drown who might have been saved. The fiction presented by the novel suggests one morality, the real-life episode suggests another.

Albert Camus, in *La Peste*, imagines a city isolated from the world by an outbreak of the plague. It goes without saying that the characters involved behave in a manner which illustrates appropriately the author's concept of man's situation in an absurd universe. In seventeenth-century England, before the universe became absurd, an actual outbreak of the plague did occur in the small Derbyshire village of Eyam and the village isolated itself voluntarily, to contain the spread of the disease, from the rest of the world. So far as one can judge people acted with considerable self-discipline and sense of responsibility, and this little episode in history certainly would not lead one's thoughts in the same direction as Camus' novel. Here we have a clash of fictions. I am not criticizing Camus for not literally describing events of which he had never heard; but it is a disturbing fact that millions have read Camus' novel, and from it have doubtless drawn appropriate conclusions about life, while few have heard of Eyam. In this sense the novelist may be said not so much to interpret life as actually to change it. How much of our view of the nature of living is derived from fictional concepts which we no longer consciously think of as being anything other than real?

Some years ago I read a brief newspaper item to the effect that a number of Japanese schoolchildren had been rescued from an island on which they had been marooned for many months following a shipwreck. They appeared to have suffered from nothing worse during their stay than a very understandable boredom. But this, of course, would have made a much less interesting novel than William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*.

It may be rightly objected that documented studies, historical events and newspaper reports are no less fictions than novels: we cannot know from first-hand experience the events from which they derive, and even the most conscientious research can give us no more than an interpretation. But the fact remains that though novels may be made to 'look like' life, their essence derives from their author's imagination; and if he is a successful conjuror with words they become a part of what we think of as our experience. They may well become even more vivid than fact, since they are pre-digested and may be readily assimilated into an overall pattern, whereas real-life facts are notoriously untidy. We can talk quite naturally of the world of Balzac, Zola or Proust, thus acknowledging that their world in some way differs from what we think of as the 'real' world. Yet their worlds, by reason of wide dissemination in print, have become part of the experience of vast numbers of readers; they are shared in a way that the factual events of life are not. They create fictional experience, and change the nature of living. I wish we would give a little more thought to what this implies. Professor D. J. Boorstin, in his book *The Image* (1962), has given a very disturbing account of the manner in which what we now call 'the media' — television, radio, newspapers and books — encourage the fabrication of events which are arranged simply for the purpose

of being reported. Literature would seem to belong to this sham world. Ought we not to examine the implications of this form of mental persuasion more seriously than we do, instead of taking it for granted that this kind of conscious fiction in some way necessarily enhances our knowledge of real life?

In the three examples I have quoted of discrepancy between what we know of real-life experience and its fictional equivalent, it is notable that in each case fiction made the event and its outcome more catastrophic and disturbing than was, apparently, the real-life equivalent. The lifeboats of the *Titanic* could have returned to pick up survivors and should have done so: a commonplace conclusion, and therefore less interesting than that proposed by Gide's fictional character on the basis of a fictional experience. The inhabitants of Eyam behaved on the whole, it would seem, very much as we would wish them to, and so proved themselves to be unsuitable as characters in contemporary fiction. And since the Japanese schoolchildren did not revert to barbarism, they merit no more than a passing reference in the press.

Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, in some respects a classic of realism, may be described as a story in which everything — absolutely everything — goes wrong for the heroine. Devotees of the cinema will be familiar with this approach as being that of innumerable Charlie Chaplin or Laurel and Hardy comedies, in which a character cannot walk under a ladder without having a bucket of whitewash fall on his head. In fact, Flaubert's story could have been narrated as hilarious farce, without any substantial change in character or event. Thus the world as presented in fiction is, as it were, modulated into a certain key which is of the author's choosing, or at least corresponds to the cast of his thought. Taking literature as a whole, and at all levels, the effect of this is to add vastly to our awareness of certain aspects of living — among them sex, violence, anti-social behaviour, and various forms of disaster and frustration which, in ordinary experience, would be highly unpleasant. It is striking that the objectors to censorship (which I am not advocating) consistently turn a blind eye to this obvious fact. They speak of the author's right to treat any aspect of life, but seem to be unaware that the craft of fiction has never encouraged such a catholic viewpoint. If, as has so often been noted, Milton in *Paradise Lost* makes Satan a great deal more interesting than God, this is an effect not of his religious belief but of his craft. We may dismiss, as the result of modern sensationalism, the fact that the average adolescent has seen a thousand murders perpetrated on his television screen; but, no less than the author of the latest television serial, Aeschylus and Shakespeare find murder far more interesting than the experiences which most of us are likely to encounter in everyday life.

The fact is, surely, that the author creates a fictional world in which we have the illusion of participating; but we are only spectators, comfortably settled in our armchairs while the world of our fictional characters crumbles around them. If the writer shows little interest in such pleasant subjects as cookery or happy marriage this is because, if we are lucky enough to enjoy such things, we do not need them in his fictions. Even the most escapist of

literature dwells on the hazards and difficulties which precede the ringing of wedding bells. On a more serious level, life can be disturbing, puzzling, terrifying; and so we value the gift the author has of enabling us to face these aspects of the human condition in safety through his fictional creations. We may admire the power of the lion's muscles and claws from behind a car window in a game park, but not if we meet it unexpectedly in the bush. So far as I am aware, no theologian or moralist has yet solved the problem of evil in the world. However, if we imagine ourselves as divine spectators, viewing the panorama of the world from a safe distance and with no more than imaginative involvement, the problem ceases to exist; it is the very substance of the plot in which we are absorbed. We are only too anxious to get Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden so that the serious business of adultery and murder can begin. The novelist is concerned with the illusion of the real only in that, if he fails to convince us that what he is writing about is real life, he fails to liberate us from reality. We must believe that the monsters we are watching are real monsters and not merely stuffed bears or puppets manipulated by a mortal like ourselves.

I am not advancing a theory of literature, and would not deny that it has functions and qualities other than those which have been discussed tonight. But we should not forget that art is illusion, and its practitioners conjurers who by a combination of imagination and dexterity transform the familiar and the repulsive into a source of pleasure. We are all of us, through our daily use of language, creators of fictions which enable us to see the world in terms related specifically to our needs as humans. When the Frenchman uses the expression 'Tout le monde' he means, incredibly enough, people, not deserts, seas, spiders and microbes. Man cocoons himself in his language. The writer, by his gift for mimicking reality, makes us at one and the same time more aware of it and also, while we are under his spell, confers upon us a certain immunity to it, which helps us to tolerate the intolerable and sometimes even to change it. His art is a splendid one which enormously widens the bounds of our experience. We should study this magic art both for its own sake and for the light it throws on the general human need for fictions to make the world comprehensible in our own terms. Fictions provide us with a dimension in which our needs and desires are significant. But the point I would leave with you tonight is that, by definition, they are not fact. Whether they are based on science or convention or literary imagination, they are no more than expedients to be tested continually against experience. The eras which have produced the most splendid fictions are also those which have excelled in practical achievement; but if we seek to bludgeon reality with our dreams and our verbal antics, if, in any field of human activity, we allow our awareness of fact to be obscured by our fictions, and cease to replace these when they become obsolete or irrelevant, then we fall victim to the most total of all tyrannies, the oppression of commonsense and common humanity by diabolical or ridiculous abstractions. When that happens, the gates are open to the Inquisitors and the gunmen.