The first language of non-fiction is English. The very concept is Anglo-American. Its spreading into other languages is part of the process of globalization. So is this conference, which in its language and format is a tiny episode in the same overarching process. These are sweeping statements, but I am prepared to defend them. I believe that they fit into the category of non-fiction. Nowadays, non-fiction as a literary genre is an international affair which, in many ways, is similar to fiction (including poetry), except in the one respect that is so clearly indicated by its name: non-fiction. This name has a negative prefix; I propose considering it as something positive. I shall take it up as a programme. And I shall try to make this very lecture into an exercise in non-fiction—a "demonstration lecture," as in medical school when a symptom is demonstrated in person, by a patient. I shall try to not only talk about non-fiction, but to speak non-fiction. As the Dutch poet Chris van Geel once wrote: "I want facts, no fables, the griffin said."

There is a polemical thrust in this programme. The polemic is directed not against fiction, but against fictions. We find ourselves surrounded by fictions all the time; and, often enough, we absorb them and pass them on. This is what makes the paradox implied in Van Geel's epigram so appealing. It points to an ambivalence in us all. We need facts, but we are continuously drawn toward fantasies. We are confronted with fantasies in our dreams and daydreams, and in the yarns other people spin for us. But no matter how much we may like indulging in fables, we have to keep our feet on the ground. We are bound to the real world, the world of non-fiction, and we need to orientate ourselves in the real world.

Perhaps our most fallacious and pernicious fantasies are bound up with our tendencies toward egocentrism and ethnocentrism. Everybody is at the centre of his or her own world; but nobody is at the centre of the world. Modern astronomers inform us that the entire universe has no centre, and they like to say: it is only when you are in the fog that you believe yourself to be at the centre. We may also reverse this statement and say: if you believe yourself to be at the centre, you are in the fog. Non-fiction should help us to dispel the fog. Indeed, I believe that the primary function of non-fiction as a literary
genre is to offer an intellectual counterweight to the prevailing tendencies toward egocentrism and ethnocentrism.

Of course, non-fiction literature comprises an enormous field, at least as large as the field of fiction. It would be an odd fantasy on my part to pretend that I can command a view of this entire field. I shall be able to mention only a few examples; my selection has to be arbitrary, and subject to two severe time limits: the very restricted amount of time I have been able to spend reading and browsing through books, and the thirty minutes I have to talk to you today. In discussing my examples I shall refer to a set of four general criteria that I have used before, in my book Sociology in the Balance, to apply to the field of sociology (Sociology in the Balance. Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1977, pp. 19-20). I think they are also germane to the field of non-fiction at large (of which socio-logical writing forms only a segment). The four criteria are: precision, consistency, scope, and relevance. I shall not introduce them one by one; their meaning will become clear as I go along.

In the letter in which he invited me to give this talk, Maarten Valken raised the question of whether non-fiction is a new genre. That question can be answered with a straight "no." Non-fiction writing may have undergone some changes in recent decades; but as a genre it is at least as old as fiction. The most ancient forms of writing known today were developed in Sumer, in Mesopotamia, some 5,000 years ago. Those ancient texts consist mainly of lists—lists drawn up by temple scribes to serve as precise and reliable records of all sorts of items, including names, possessions, and statutes (The Domestication of the Savage Mind. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1977, pp. 74-111). Clearly, those lists must have served direct practical purposes, but those practical purposes were part of a more general function: the precision of the lists could help to counteract fantasy and fraud. Of course, like any form of non-fiction, the form of lists can also be used as an instrument of fraud. This is inherent in human communication: the trappings of sincerity and truth are, likewise, the most effective means of deception. That, however, should not make us despair about non-fiction. The genre as such does not consist of a random collection of texts, each of which may be equally deceitful. On the contrary: non-fiction is an institution—a world-wide institution, as I implied in my opening remarks.

Proper lists are marked not only by the degree of factual precision with which they refer to items in the real world, but also by a measure of internal consistency or orderliness. It is because of this very combination that readers continue to delight in such books as the Guinness Book of Records, which offer odd bits of information presented according to clear principles of classification. While the Guinness Book of Records continues, on the one hand, the most ancient tradition of list-writing, its global format also shows the extent to which the genre of non-fiction is embedded in institutions that encompass the entire world.

Within that global framework, national and linguistic boundaries remain effective. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the greatest best-seller in