

CHAPTER I

LIVING IN A WORLD
OF ARGUMENT



Words Make the World

IN A FAMOUS Monty Python sketch called "The Argument Clinic," a man played by Michael Palin enters an office and says to the receptionist, "I'd like to have an argument, please." What is odd about this request is that it doesn't specify what the argument is to be about. Any topic, it seems, will do, and as it turns out, no topic is put on the table, for Palin and his interlocutors (he is shunted from office to office) never proceed beyond arguing about what is and is not an argument. But of course that is a topic and, in the absence of some more substantive disagreement, it becomes substantive itself; the argument about argument fills the argumentative space and acquires a momentum of its own, and that momentum is uncontrollable.

The Palin character tries to control it and get a secure footing by putting a limit on the form argument can take. He objects that one of his argument partners (played by John Cleese) is not really arguing but just contradicting: "An argument," he insists, "is a connected series of statements intended to establish a proposition," while a contradiction "is just the automatic gainsaying of any statement the other person makes." The reply is brief and brilliant: "No it isn't." Or, in other (and more) words, "You say that contradiction can be cleanly distinguished from argument, but I refute your point—that is, argue against it—simply by denying it and thereby putting both of us in the position of having to give reasons; you now have to explain why contradiction has no place in the field of argument, and I have to explain why contradiction can be a move in the argument game, as I have just demonstrated it is; so *there!*" The amount of words I have had to expend in order to gloss "No it isn't" is testimony to the wonderful conciseness of the Cleese character's retort.

This sketch teaches (at least) three lessons: (1) You can't just engage in argument in the abstract. An abstract argument—an argument where there is nothing at stake and you are just practicing the form—is what the Palin character asks for, but before he knows it he is enmeshed in a very specific argument (about argument) and the cool distance he affects when announcing "I'd like to have an argument, please" gives way quickly to the exasperation that always attends the real thing. (2) You can neither avoid argument when it is offered to you nor extricate yourself from it on your terms. When the Palin character grows tired of the game and says, "I've had enough

of this," his partner-in-agon replies, "No you haven't," and it begins all over again. (3) You cannot manage argument. The career of argument is always running ahead of the intentions and desires of those who engage in it; as an arguer you're always playing catch-up, trying to deal with the twists and turns you had not anticipated.

A fourth, more overarching, lesson follows from the first three. There are no general strategies for conducting an argument because the specific something arguments are always about will always be embedded in a social or institutional setting in relation to which some, but not all, strategies will be relevant and, at least potentially, effective. In the political arena, one tried-and-true strategy is to smear or "swift boat" your opponent, accusing him or her of all manner of crimes, lies, betrayals, indecencies, improprieties, and failures of judgment. But if you do that in an academic argument—an argument between two scholars about the interpretation of a poem or the correct account of a historical event—you might be rebuked and sent away because you will have flouted the decorum of the academic game. The ways of argument are context-specific, and while there are surely some general things to be said about argument, and an entire intellectual tradition called rhetoric dedicated to saying them, in the end the study of argument will be a study of the various contexts in which one encounters argument in its various forms.

One general thing that can properly be said about argument is that it is essentially the art of persuasion, the art of trying to move someone from an adherence to position A—which might be political, economic, domestic, aesthetic,

military, theological, whatever—to an embracing of position B. Here is a very small example. An eleven-year-old boy wants to go to the mall with his friends. His mother says, “No.” He asks, “Why,” short for “What are your reasons?” She replies, “Because I say so.” Is that a reason? Is she making an argument? We might think that the answer to both questions is no; she’s just asserting her authority, putting her foot down. But that would be to make the mistake made by the Palin character when he declares that to contradict is not to argue. Argument is protean—ever changing, variable, mutable, kaleidoscopic, voracious—and almost anything can be its vehicle, swinging a big stick, putting on a badge, intoning a holy phrase, making the sign of the cross, wearing a uniform, speaking in a stentorian tone. In the venerable tradition that codifies and analyzes the making of arguments, the boy’s mother is performing a standard move. It is called, not surprisingly, the “argument from authority” (*argumentum ab auctoritate*) and it is listed by Aristotle as one of his twenty-eight “common topics,” the everyday strategies one might have recourse to in a situation of debate or dispute. As Aristotle explains in his *Rhetoric*, you reach for the argument from authority in order to link your view to a prestigious source such as “the Gods, or one’s father, or one’s teachers.” You declare, I must be right because the Pope or the Supreme Court or Plato or Abraham Lincoln says what I say. (It is a nice point that Aristotle, after naming the argument from authority, became one.)

The argument from authority was given a television spot some years ago when the brokerage firm E. F. Hutton ran a

series of famous ads in which one of the actors begins a sentence with these words: “My broker, E. F. Hutton, says . . .” Immediately all those within earshot stop whatever they were doing and lean toward the speaker in order to hear, and perhaps profit by, E. F. Hutton’s advice. A voice-over intones the message: “When E. F. Hutton speaks, everyone listens.” E. F. Hutton authorizes itself as an authority at the same moment its spokesman cites that authority (self-referentially) as an argument. The mother of the eleven-year-old boy does the same thing: she assumes the authority she then cites as a reason; the full version of “Because I say so” is “Because I’m your mother and I say so.” In both cases authority is at once claimed and created by the rhetorical act of invoking it.

I tried that once and got my head handed to me. My six-year-old daughter, her mother, and I were sitting eating dinner. Conversation was difficult because my daughter was “interacting” (the reason for the quotation marks around the word will soon be obvious) with our two dachshunds, who were under the table. I said to her in that “I’m your father” voice, “Susan, don’t play with the dachshunds.” She showed me her hands in a classic “look, Pa, no hands” gesture, and said, “I’m not playing with the dachshunds.” I regrouped and tried again: “Susan, don’t kick the dachshunds.” She pointed to the gentle motions of her feet and said, “I’m not kicking the dachshunds.” Determined to come up with a formulation so general and inclusive that it would leave no room for further argument, I said in a tone of (premature) triumph, “Susan, don’t do *anything* with the dachshunds.” Not missing a beat, she replied, “You mean I don’t have to feed them

anymore?" (Score: six-year-old, 3; thirty-five-year-old college professor, 0.)

Two things were immediately clear. (1) This could have gone on forever: she would have been able to recontextualize any supposedly hard-and-fast statement I came up with in a way that altered its meaning and evaded its intended force. (2) My attempt to assert the authority of a father with the help of my adult rhetorical skills was a dismal flop. I am ashamed to say that I brought the matter to a close by slapping her (itself an argument, but a suspect one), an action that sealed her triumph rather than reversing it. I was showing myself to be both a bad father and a hapless debater. I neither exercised the supposedly natural authority of a parent nor created an authority by an artful use of words.

In the context of these examples, one might ask, is a rhetorically achieved authority inferior to the "real thing," to an authority established by an independent, nonrhetorical measure, an authority we might call "natural" as opposed to constructed? Or are all authorities manufactured rather than found, which would mean that all authorities, even those that present themselves as undoubted and self-evident, are rhetorical constructions and therefore vulnerable to challenge, as I certainly was in the interaction with my daughter? That is a question we shall return to repeatedly—and let me tip my hand by saying that the second alternative is the correct one.

Although the argument from authority is always presented as being in need of no other support but itself—this is the way it is and there's nothing else to say—its force is a function of arguments already in place. You can't make an argument for

authority unless the question of what is and is not an authority has been answered. So, as we have already seen, the invocation of an authority often goes hand in hand with its creation or at least its attempted creation. This is often what happens in the law, where the argument from authority is called precedent or *stare decisis*. Precedent is the practice of citing past decisions of courts in support of a present holding: judges say, we decide the case this way because it squares with what the Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit said in *Smith v. Jones* or *Black v. White*.

Precedents are described in the legal literature as either binding or persuasive. The truth is that they are binding if persuasive, if they have been successfully argued for. In response to the citing of a precedent, one can always dispute its relevance by saying that another case would be more on point, or dispute its status as a precedent by saying that it does not stand for the proposition you want to advance. Merely to call a prior case a precedent will not be decisive; it must be linked in a persuasive way with the issues thought to be in play in the present case. There has to be an argument to support the argument. And the effort might fail; the relevant audience, a judge or a court, may remain unpersuaded, just as the boy who is told he can't go to the mall may continue to press his case, my daughter may continue to play with the dogs, and the TV viewer may decide to stay with his current broker rather than come over to E. F. Hutton.

This is a key point: failure, at least as a possibility, is a condition of argument, for argument is, as Aristotle and everyone after him has said, the realm of the probable, the medium of

exchange we engage in when the field of inquiry is structured by doubt and the absolute authority of God's word or a mode of perfect calculation is not available. (If it were available, doubt would soon be dispelled, and there would be no reason to argue.) In the absence of such an authority the response to doubt is to argue, to put forward theses and proofs in the hope the matter can be clarified to the satisfaction of at least a majority of those in the relevant audience.

And that of course does happen, but not in a final way. Argument could be final in its effect only if it were rooted in an objective ground that narrowed the area of doubt, present and future, to nothing. But since the theses and proofs argument brandishes are themselves disputable, the victory of any set of them and the establishing of consensus will only be temporary, will last only so long as the newly urged theses and proofs (or the same old ones repackaged) unsettle the consensus and put in place—again temporarily—a new one. In a world bereft of transcendence, argument cannot achieve certainty; it can only achieve persuasion (and may not do even that), a resolving of the issue that lasts only until a more powerful act of persuasion supplants it.

One might think that the cycle of arguments beating down and supplanting previous arguments might be broken by some independent yardstick—some yardstick outside the arena of argument—that gives us criteria for distinguishing the good arguments from the bad ones. But this would be a possibility only if such a yardstick could be uncontroversially identified. It is not that there are no such yardsticks—they are offered all the time—it's just that once offered they become

objects of controversy themselves; they become fodder for the forensic wars they were supposed to put a stop to. Argument could produce certainty only if we lived in a world where a settled dispute stays settled because its resolution has been accomplished by a measure everyone accepts and accepts permanently. Then argument would be a matter of deduction from universally established principles; it would be a tool of those principles, a tool that could be discarded when it performed its merely instrumental task of serving something larger and more abiding than itself.

But we don't live in that world. We live in a world where God and Truth have receded, at least as active, perspicuous presences, and the form they take at any moment will be the result of a proposition successfully urged, of an argument: believe me, *this* is what God is like and what he wants, or, believe me, *this* is the truth of the matter. Rhetorically created authorities are all we have; absolute authority exists only in a heaven we may hope someday to see, but until that day we must make do with the epistemological resources available to us in our fallen condition; we must make do with argument. For all intents and purposes, and as far as we know or can know, we live in a world of argument. Indeed, arguments about the world come first, the world comes second.

The Desire for Another World

That conclusion has always been resisted by those who see in it the end of reasoned discourse and of the ability to say of something that it is right or wrong. If nothing, not even truth,

can stand against the power of words, if someone skilled in speaking can, as Aristotle put it, make the worse appear the better, all is lost and we might as well throw up our hands and do whatever we like. It is in the context of such a fearsome prospect that rhetoric has gotten bad press and been stigmatized as the medium of charlatans, deceivers, propagandists, admen, all of whom take advantage of man's susceptibility to base and illegitimate appeals and perfect the art of leading hearers by the nose to conclusions that serve some special interest rather than the interests of society.

Francis Bacon, one of the founders of the scientific method, warned in the early seventeenth century that the project of apprehending "the true divisions of nature" (a nice definition of science's aim) is always being torpedoed by words that refuse to be confined to the modest task of mirroring a prior reality and instead offer themselves as a substitute for the facts they should be faithfully representing. Bacon believed that the power of language to lead men astray is one of the unhappy consequences of the Fall. The tendency of fallen creatures to love the words they produce more than the truth the words supposedly serve is an effect, he says, "of that venom which the Serpent infused . . . which makes the mind of man to swell."

No such theological speculations inform the best-known modern example of the antirhetorical stance, George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" (1946). In this famous and influential essay, Orwell argues that the decay of political conditions—he cites the rise of fascism and communism—goes hand in hand with the decay of linguistic conditions: "the present political chaos is connected with the decay of

language . . . the German, Russian and Italian languages have all deteriorated in the last ten or fifteen years as a result of dictatorship." If your language goes wrong, your politics will go wrong and vice versa. And what does it mean for language to go wrong? It means that language is guiding thought rather than the other way around: "the worst thing one can do with words is surrender to them," that is, allow them to define the shape of fact as opposed to allowing the shape of fact to dictate the choice of words.

The way to avoid this unhappy situation, Orwell counsels, is "to think wordlessly, and then, if you want to describe the thing you have been visualizing you . . . hunt around until you find the exact words that seem to fit it." Indeed, he adds, "it is better to put off using words as long as possible," and think instead "through pictures." But this advice makes sense only if the "thing" it is the job of words to match has a "wordless" reality to which we can have nonverbal access. Those who believe that we live in a rhetorical world will say that thinking wordlessly is something that can't be done because the objects of thought—natural phenomena, political policies, urban landscapes, historical periods—become available for our attention only when the system of differences that constitute a language makes it possible to point to them, a pointing that could not have been performed independently of that system. Historians talk easily about things like the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Romantic period, and the Modern period. But the men and women who lived during those times (which were not "times" to them, just the days of their lives) did not identify themselves as Medieval or Renaissance or Modern.

Those categories—and the “realities” they name—emerged only after scholars had carved history up at the joints, joints that were not there before the carving up; they are produced by words, not by brute fact.

Even when we think through pictures as Orwell advises, what we picture will have assumed its shape as a consequence of the linguistic differences that mark out and *bring into being* a “this” which is different from a “that.” The difference doesn’t precede its notation in language: language’s system of differences creates it. We don’t know what a spoon is by looking at it directly; we know what a spoon is by knowing that it is not a knife or a fork, and we know what a knife or fork is by knowing that it isn’t a spoon. Items do not emerge singly, but in a package or unit—like the unit of eating utensils as distinguished from the unit of gardening utensils—that is itself linguistically established; eating utensils and garden utensils are not natural kinds in the world. Knowledge of things is relational, not frontal, and the relations that matter because they are constitutive are the relations between signs, between words. We don’t see first and *then* bring in words as a supplemental, secondary tool; we see through the lens of whatever vocabulary fills our consciousness, and items in the world emerge in the form permitted and demanded by that lens.

It follows that we can’t “go around” language to get at things directly; we can only pass from one vocabulary that delivers the world to us in a particular shape to another vocabulary that will deliver the world to us in another particular shape. So while Orwell is right to link the deployment of a polemical vocabulary to the assertion (and perhaps imposition)

of a political vision, he is wrong to think that there is a vocabulary that embodies no political assumptions at all, a vocabulary that just tells the truth, a vocabulary that will, if we attach ourselves to it, allow us to escape angled seeing and thereby neutralize politics. Orwell believes that we can arrive at that vocabulary (called by the historian of science Thomas Kuhn a “neutral observation language”) by subtraction, by excising all words that “do not point to any . . . object,” all words that refer to abstractions rather than concrete things, all words that are not Anglo-Saxon monosyllables. If we do this, if we clean up our language—rid it of shadings, colorings, preferences, hidden biases, and foreign influences—we will have taken, he promises, “the first step to political regeneration. . . . If you simplify your English, you are freed from the worst follies of orthodoxy.” We can disarm the siren songs of fascism and communism by hewing to a vocabulary that immediately registers them as nonsense. If only it were that easy.

The Hope of Doing Without Language

Orwell’s is not a new project. The idea that by purging our vocabulary we might both refine our perception and ground our actions in something more objective than words has been around for a long time. At its most extreme, as in the third book of Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, it amounts to a recommendation (which Orwell is close to making) that we forsake language altogether. The citizens of Swift’s Lagado carry a large number of things in their packs, and when they want to “converse” they take out those things “necessary

to express the particular business they are to discourse on." If you have the thing itself and stick to it, you needn't fear that its true shape will be obscured by words. Over the centuries, the project has been more seriously urged than it is by Swift, who obviously mocks it. Many learned proposals have been put forward, including the recovery of the pre-Tower of Babel language spoken by Adam and Eve in Eden (where both the human mind and its linguistic expressions were pristine and unadulterated), the construction of artificial languages like Esperanto, the construction of languages that mime and are constrained by the structure of logic (if you can only say things that are logically sound, you will be insulated from error), and the imposition of strict limits on the kind of language you can use.

One of Orwell's precursors, John Wilkins, proposed (in his 1668 "An Essay Towards a Real Character, and a Philosophical Language") the elimination from our vocabulary of redundancies (more than one word for a thing), equivocals (words that refer to more than one thing), and metaphors (words that tell you what a thing is like, not what it is). Wilkins anticipates Orwell when he predicts that these simple steps will have the salutary effect of "unmasking many wild errors that shelter themselves under the guise of affected phrases." Wilkins's contemporary Bishop Thomas Sprat is positively outraged at the harm done to learning by eloquence: "Who can behold, without indignation, how many mists and uncertainties these specious tropes and figures have brought on our knowledge?" (*The History of the Royal Society of London*, 1667).

If the uncertainties Sprat complains of could be removed

by confining ourselves to a language that did not admit them, there would be no need for argument; for argument is required only when there are competing accounts of what is the case. If everyone agreed on how a set of facts should be characterized, there would be no competing accounts and there would be nothing to argue about. And such agreement would be assured if there were a prior agreement about the correct vocabulary for stating things. If all parties were bound to a language that reflected a general perspective rather than the perspective of any one of them, bound to the kind of language Orwell, Wilkins, and Sprat urge in slightly different ways (a language much like mathematics or geometry or the digital computer), disagreement could not occur because the triggers of disagreement—conflict and uncertainty—would have been dispelled in advance. In the usual model of argument, the participants begin by talking past each other; you say this and I say that and then we engage in a give-and-take that will (it is hoped) take us to a place where we both stand on even ground and are saying the same thing. But if all parties are ventriloquists of the same language from the beginning (because they accept the constraints of the same severe linguistic regime), they are already saying the same thing and argument has no work to do.

Clearly then, *the desire for a language purged of subjectivity and political bias and the desire for an end to argument go together*; each implies the other. Establish the neutral observation language as the only acceptable linguistic currency and no one will be able to say something errant or off the wall without immediately being detected and rejected; everyone will be

on the same page; the goal argument works toward—a shared understanding so complete that argument can retire from the field—will have already been reached. We will have achieved what the contemporary philosopher Jürgen Habermas calls the “ideal speech situation,” a situation in which everyone has left behind his partisan desire for a self-serving outcome and offers to his fellows only “better arguments,” arguments motivated not by the desire to win but by a commitment to securing universal assent among all rational interlocutors. (We shall revisit Habermas at this book’s conclusion.)

The Impossible Dream

That’s the antirhetorical vision, which depends, as I have said, on identifying a baseline of perception and judgment that in and of itself constitutes a barrier to the depredations language can bring about. Whether that baseline takes the form of a stripped down, no-nonsense vocabulary (Orwell, Sprat, and Wilkins), or a policing of arguments so that only the better ones get admitted to the conversation (Habermas), or the naked word of God (referred to in theological treatises as the “milk of the pure word”), it is not something we have access to; it is a utopian hope incapable of being realized by human beings.

And yet its appeal is perennial and undeniable. We would all like to believe—on the model of Winston Churchill’s quip “Jaw, jaw is better than war, war”—that agreement on the facts or on policy can be reached through rational deliberation, a respectful exchange of views, a willingness to put

yourself in the other fellow’s shoes, better information, a spirit of compromise, et cetera. And of course that does sometimes happen. The question is, does it happen because the parties have tapped into some conceptual or linguistic common ground that in and of itself *compels* agreement—there’s nothing else to say, the case could not be clearer, no room for debate—or does it happen because the parties have determined that a temporary alliance with those whose basic views they despise will further the partisan cause at this moment? (Later on, full-blown hostilities can resume.) If it’s the first, the promise of true common ground is alive; if it’s the second, common ground, supposedly the antidote to or check on rhetorical manipulation, is itself a rhetorical achievement and therefore temporary, fragile, and vulnerable.

I’m afraid it’s the second. The commonality we occasionally achieve is nothing more (or less) than the momentary convergence of interests established locally and abandoned as soon as one of the parties sees a shorter route to the realization of its desires. (This of course is the career of coalition politics as it is practiced in the parliamentary systems of Ireland and Israel, among others.) A strategically impelled commonality is a construction, and more often than not will have to be constructed again. In this version of common ground, rhetoric is neither a value-added extra making the naturally or objectively good look a bit better nor an obstacle to clear-sightedness; rather it is necessary and constitutive; it is everything; without it, institutions, communities, crusades, reform movements, political change, and much more could not even get started. The claim is as old as the writings of the Greek

rhetorician Isocrates and as new as the case Sam Leith makes for the civilizing power of eloquence in his 2012 book *Words Like Loaded Pistols: Rhetoric from Aristotle to Obama*:

What has rhetoric done for us? Well, it has brought about all of Western civilization, for a start. What is democracy, but the idea that the art of persuasion should be formally enshrined at the center of the political process? What is law, but a way of giving words formal strength in the world, and what is the law court but a place where the art of persuasion gives shape to civil society?

Sounds good, and it is good, but it leaves out the darker side of the picture, the side that leads Orwell, Wilkins, Sprat, and countless others to warn against eloquence's dangers and propose remedies designed to curtail its effects. Their common fear is the one expressed early on by Aristotle, that a sufficiently skilled speaker may make the worse appear the better and so turn humankind in the wrong direction. It is as a stay against that fear that rationalists of various stripes offer methods and requirements—no metaphors, only better arguments, only simple Anglo-Saxon words, mathematical plainness, plain meaning, strict construction, a stringent literalism—in the hope that both linguistic and general disaster might be forestalled.

“General disaster” may seem hyperbolic, but here is a Minnesota court insisting that the health of society depends on the possibility of enforcing contracts according to the literal

meanings of the words they contain: “Were it otherwise, written contracts would be enforced not according to the plain effect of their language, but pursuant to the story of their negotiation as told by the litigant having at the time being the greater power of persuading the trier of fact . . . and general disaster would result” (*Cargill Commission Co. v. Stuartwood*, 1924). General disaster because if there is not a level of language that repels interpretative manipulation, there is no limit to the damage the rhetorician—the best storyteller—can do.

That is why Sprat calls eloquence a “weapon” and worries that virtuous persons unskilled in the art “would be exposed to the armed malice of the wicked.” There has always been an intimate relationship between talking and warfare. Words are aimed, they are sent out in volleys, they are said to “strike,” they feel like knife wounds in the heart, they are sprayed around like bullets. Indeed, their effect can be greater than the effect of bullets because they do internal damage to the mind and soul. We know the colloquialisms: “His arguments beat me into the ground.” “Everything was clear until he began talking.” “I felt I was under a spell.” “He talked me to death.” The aphorism “sticks and stones can break my bones, but names will never hurt me” is false. Words can eviscerate you.

Merchants of Doubt

They can even precipitate the fall of man. Leith identifies Satan as the first and best rhetorician, the archdeceiver and the

father of lies. In John Milton's version of the Eden story, Satan has assigned himself the job of persuading Adam and Eve to eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In the form of a snake, he leads Eve to the forbidden tree, all the while singing its praises. But the moment Eve sees it, she recognizes it for what it is, and she says no matter what its virtues she can't eat this fruit, for "of this tree we may not taste nor touch; / God so commanded and left that command / Sole daughter of his voice" (*Paradise Lost*, bk. 9, lines 651–53).

Here it would seem is a signal instance of a bedrock utterance that is invulnerable to argument and interpretive variation; it is not ambiguous; its source bears an impeccable authority; it is complete in and of itself. Satan seems to be in a corner, confronted with a text that leaves him no room to maneuver. Can he extricate himself and find a way to get Eve to do what she knows, with total certainty, she should not do?

Piece of cake! What he does is utter a single interjection when Eve stops speaking: "Indeed?" or, in other words, "You don't say; fancy that." The apparently benign implication is that he and she should talk about it, get it clear, which suggests, ever so gently, that it wasn't clear in the first place. Simply by subjecting the divine prohibition to the mild interrogation of "Indeed?" Satan opens up a space of doubt that he then fills with alternative readings of God's utterance. He does this by varying the intentional context within which the supposedly hard and fixed words are first heard, and then pointing out that in the light of this newly thought-up intention—and there is no end of intentions that could be hypothesized—the words mean something quite different.

Eve had assumed that the God who speaks to her and Adam is both direct and benevolent; this God is looking out for them and issuing a helpful warning. Satan's first move is to invent a God who is also benevolent, but not so direct. Yes, he says, God is testing you, but what he is testing is not your obedience but your courage. He may have said "don't eat the apple," but what he meant was "do you have the guts to defy my apparent command in the hope of improving your lot": "Will God incense his ire / For such a petty trespass, and not praise / Rather your dauntless virtue?" (692–94).

No sooner has this new God—well-meaning but a bit devious—been created by Satan's words than he creates another, a God who is not well-meaning at all, but jealous of his power and authority. That God has forbidden you to eat, Satan tells Eve, because he knows that if you do, your capacities will be enlarged and he will be less able "to keep ye low and ignorant / His worshippers" (704–5). So he's either a good God who will reward you for disobeying him because he wants you to grow, or he's a not-so-good God who forbids you to eat because he wants to keep you down. Either way, disobedience seems the way to go; you should disobey him because that is what he really desires you to do, or you should disobey him because as a tyrant he doesn't deserve your loyalty. The God whose supposedly plain words Eve could confidently cite a few moments ago is gone. (How's that for a rhetorical trick?)

It doesn't matter which of Satan's multiple (and contradictory) versions of God Eve is persuaded to. What matters is that simply by listening to him, by being willing to hear

his arguments, she loses her hold on the God who had always been the foundation of her thoughts and actions, and opens the way to his being replaced by an indeterminate, “iffy” thing, the meaning of whose words is suddenly debatable. I observed earlier that argument is called for only when there is doubt, that is, when certainty is unavailable. But so great is the power of argument that certainty, no matter how apparently firm, can always be unsettled by it. Satan doesn’t have to sell a particular position; all he has to do is sell doubt. He is a merchant of doubt.

Merchants of Doubt is the title of a 2010 book (and a 2014 documentary) that tells the story of how a group of men, some of them distinguished scientists, dispelled the certainties that had been established by their own discipline. They persuaded a significant portion of the American public that there is no proven connection between smoking and cancer, that acid rain is harmless, that there is no ozone layer hole, that DDT is good and Rachel Carson bad, and that global warming is not occurring, or, if it is occurring, is the result of natural cycles and not of preventable human activity.

The subtitle of the book asks and promises to answer the key question: *How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*. The task the handful faced was daunting, not as daunting, perhaps, as the task facing a talking snake who is trying to convince the mother of us all to believe him rather than God, but daunting nevertheless. It would seem that no set of arguments could succeed in the face of undeniable scientific fact: “How,” ask Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway, the authors of *Merchants*

of *Doubt*, “could the industry possibly defend itself when the vast majority of independent experts agreed that tobacco was harmful, and their own documents showed that they knew this?” (24).

The answer, simply, was “to market doubt,” just as Satan did. A tobacco industry executive admitted in 1969, “Doubt is our product,” because “it is the best means of competing with the ‘body of fact’ that exists in the minds of the general public” (34). Here the scene of persuasion is nicely defined: there’s the public, whose members believe something because they have been told it by authoritative voices, including the voice of the surgeon general of the United States, and there’s the mission apparently impossible that the industry spokespersons have assigned themselves—to dislodge from the public mind the set of truths it has accepted for good reason. So, how do they do it?

They don’t so much dispute the science (although they do that, too) as mount a philosophical argument in the light of which the science is inconclusive and regulation premature. That argument has four steps: First, declare (correctly) that absolute or undeniable truth is not what science delivers; rather, what is taken to be true at any moment has been established by a research consensus, not by God or pure reason. Second, observe (again correctly) that a research consensus is merely the present thinking of fallible men and women, and as such it can be disrupted by the emergence of new evidence or the discovery of a flaw in the data scientists had been relying on. Third, argue that because the present consensus is subject to change and revision, it should not be the basis of

a resolution to act decisively; caution is warranted. Fourth, conclude that strong government oversight is not called for; we needn't mount a campaign against tobacco use or spend money combatting acid rain or devise industry-crippling plans to deal with global warming on the basis of the not-yet-proven assumption that it is man-made.

The brilliance of this argument is that in its course the fact of consensus is turned into a liability; widespread agreement among researchers becomes a cause for suspicion; perhaps they're all just toeing a party line and closing their minds to challenges from outlying precincts; let's do more research and wait until all the evidence is in.

The sleight of hand here involves the deliberate forgetting of where the sequence began, with the acknowledgment that in science (or in any other field of investigation for that matter) all the evidence is never in. And if incomplete evidence is the inevitable condition of inquiry, you can't cite the incompleteness of evidence as a reason for failing to act on the evidence that *is* in. (You can't say we shouldn't act until all the evidence is in if you've just said that all the evidence is never in.)

Yet that is the argument that proved to be persuasive to many, in part because it was joined to an appeal that flattered the public even as it was being misled. Always remember, the public was told, that scientists aren't infallible; they can't really determine what is absolutely the case; so shouldn't we all exercise our own judgment? Here is a spokesman for the tobacco industry making just that point: "We believe that any proof developed should be presented fully and objectively

to the public and that the public should be allowed to make its own decisions" (32). Saying "you be the judge" is always a good rhetorical move, especially when the "you" being deferred to doesn't know what it's talking about and can be led to any conclusion desired by a master manipulator. And that is the way, say Oreskes and Conway, that "the tobacco industry . . . and the skeptics about acid rain, the ozone hole, and global warming strove to 'maintain the controversy' and 'keep the debate alive' by fostering claims that were contrary to the mainstream of scientific evidence and expert judgment" (241).

The Escape from Doubt

What is remarkable is that after exhaustively documenting a series of massive deceptions foisted on a public that was incapable of withstanding them, Oreskes and Conway somehow believe that we can take steps to "make sure that we don't get fooled again" (248). Being fooled means being bamboozled, having the wool pulled over our eyes, and the implication of the phrase is that if we had only been more alert or less susceptible to illegitimate appeals, it wouldn't have happened. But the message of *Merchants of Doubt*, delivered over and over, is that there were no defenses against the strategies devised by the hucksters: "The industry had realized that you could create the impression of controversy simply by asking questions" (18). And once the impression is created nothing can completely remove it, not even the bringing forward of the evidence the doubters have been demanding. A significant

number of Americans still believes that President Obama is a Kenyan and a Muslim, still believes that Saddam Hussein had something to do with 9/11, still believes that 9/11 was an inside job, still believes that Elvis lives.

When apparently incontrovertible evidence contrary to these beliefs is presented, it is no trick at all—or, rather an always successful trick—to discredit it, or ask for more or declare the very volume of the evidence to be a reason for doubting it. (There must be something they're hiding.) The power of an argument is not diminished by a strong and massively supported response to it; instead the argument will draw fuel and sustenance from the very fierceness with which it is resisted; knocked down, it rises again, refreshed and reenergized by the encounter, as the mythical giant Antaeus was reenergized every time he was thrown to the ground.

The lesson is one that Oreskes and Conway resist even though their analysis generates it: argument cannot be stopped in its tracks by invoking a self-authenticating reality—an absolutely perspicuous truth or a piece of brute data or an unimpeachable authority. There is no inoculation against argument's force because there is nothing to the side of argument—no cleared space of thought, science, calculation, or revelation—that will provide us with an independent measure for assessing its validity.

Although Oreskes and Conway testify on every page to the unavailability of an antidote to argument's poison, they nevertheless offer one: Trust the experts! "We can cook our own food, clean our own homes, do our own taxes. . . . But we cannot do our own science. So it comes to this: we must

trust our scientific experts . . . because there isn't a workable alternative" (272). As practical advice this is pretty good. I've given it myself when insisting that the most up-to-date knowledge in any discipline deserves our confidence in the absence of a message from God. But Oreskes and Conway's entire book is a record of how the invocation of expertise, even when backed by advanced degrees, banks of data, and official imprimaturs, was easily countered by the repeated act of posing a simple question like Satan's "Indeed?" The book might easily have been subtitled *How the American Public Rejected Expert Testimony Again and Again*, and it is at the least surprising to find that after 270 pages of documenting that rejection, we are told we can reverse it by fiat. If "trust in our designated experts" (273) were an efficacious action—if trust could simply be willed and survive all assaults against it—the events the book rehearses would never have occurred and there would be no reason to write it. "Trust the experts" is a recommendation without a follow-through—it's not that easy—and so when Oreskes and Conway say that without that trust, "we are paralyzed" and left "with nothing but confused clamor," they are unhappily right.

Well, not quite. We are left with argument, with rhetoric, with persuasion; that is, with everything that has created the clamor. We are left with the hair of the dog that bit us. The only real antidote to rhetoric is rhetoric. As I write, Pope Francis has just issued his encyclical on global warming and poverty. It doesn't say anything that hasn't been said before by researchers and politicians, but my guess is that because it is the Pope who is saying it, his arguments will have an

effect greater than anything that might have resulted from all the scientists in the world issuing their own encyclical. The truth of global warming is more likely to be established by an argument from authority than by data that supposedly speaks for itself. It may seem paradoxical, but in the contest between rhetoric and truth, truth's best ally is the rhetoric it scorns. The opposition between a naked truth and the artful language that obscures it just won't hold up. Truth and everything that supposedly threatens it are inextricable. Truth independent of argument is not something we can have, and the truth we can have—the truth forged in the course of argument—may always turn out to be falsehood. What is absent, and will always be absent, is a formula or algorithm for telling the difference. An old commercial for recording tape asked, "Is it live or is it Memorex?" It's always Memorex.

Liberal Rationalism as the Way Out (Not): Twelve Angry Men

When Oreskes and Conway express confidence in the possibility of our not being fooled in the future, they reveal themselves to be liberal rationalists—believers in a core of reason that can be made to shine through once the encrustations of custom, prejudice, fancy words, self-interest, and misinformation have been peeled away. All you have to do is institute a procedure designed specifically to get at the truth, and if the process is respected and extraneous considerations are kept out, the truth will emerge and be recognized as such by everyone.

One celebrated dramatic presentation of this rational optimism or optimism about rationality is Reginald Rose's teleplay and film *Twelve Angry Men* (1954, 1957), the story of a jury locked in a room and charged with getting at the truth about a matter of life and death. They are being asked to judge the fate of a young man accused of murdering his father with a knife. A witness testifies that he heard the two arguing and the boy yelling "I'll kill you," and then saw him running away. Another witness says that she got to see the whole thing as she was awakened by a noise and looked out her bedroom window. The boy had done a stint in reform school and been picked up by the police for wielding a knife. As the jurors enter the jury room they seem ready to convict. One juror declares that it's "obvious."

The foreman suggests taking a vote and eleven men vote "guilty," but one man, Juror #8, votes "not guilty." The others are annoyed and call him an outlier. He responds, "It's not easy for me to raise my hand and send a boy off to die without talking about it first." This is the same strategy Satan employs—let's talk about it—and the only difference between Juror #8 and the merchants of doubt whom Oreskes and Conway excoriate is that Rose enlists us as viewers in the production of the doubt Juror #8 proceeds to sow. He does this by getting us to identify with Juror #8, described in the "Notes on Characters" as "a man who sees all sides of every question and constantly seeks the truth." (In the movie he's played by Henry Fonda. Who doesn't trust Henry Fonda?) That is exactly the pose adopted by Satan and the tobacco scientists; but because in this case we like the result—the

acquittal of a disadvantaged inner-city youth—we cheer as the seeds of doubt are planted and begin to grow.

The testimony of one witness is discredited by calling into question his physical ability to get to the window where he could see what he said he saw in the time he said he saw it. The testimony of the woman at the window is compromised when someone notices she was wearing thick bifocals that she would not have been wearing when she was asleep. The fatal knife wound appears to have been the result of a blow struck downward, but, as one juror points out, the boy is much shorter than his father. Another juror familiar with knife fights explains that someone like the defendant, who knew how to use a switchblade, would never have inflicted that kind of wound.

One by one the jurors change their minds, and when one of the last holdouts blurts out a stream of racist sentiments—“life don’t mean as much to them as it does to us”—the others turn their back on him, labeling him the repository of the prejudices they are pledged to set aside in the search for truth. A little later he too acknowledges, reluctantly, that there is a reasonable doubt, leaving only one outlier who is now in the position Juror #8 occupied at the beginning: he is the lone minority voice. He threatens to stand firm and produce a hung jury, but then, as the others file out, he folds and says, “Not guilty.” Perfect unanimity. End of argument. End of play.

Now this ending seems to mark the triumph of careful, reasoned argument over bias, misinformation, and premature judgment, the triumph of responsible deliberation over prej-

udice, racism, and mere rhetoric. All audiences receive the play in just that way (it is taught and performed in many high schools and colleges as a paradigmatic example of civil discourse working correctly), but in fact it is the triumph of a story told more eloquently than the stories it competes with; not necessarily a truer story, but a more persuasive one. The play is a master class in the art of slanting a narrative and stacking the rhetorical deck. Rose takes care to put all the things an audience wants to hear—be tolerant, be measured, be respectful of legal process—in Juror #8’s mouth. Those in favor of conviction say things that are easily traced back to motives no one wants to acknowledge. It’s a liberal setup, with all the pumps primed to deliver the requisite audience sympathy, a sympathy that makes the audience feel good about itself for having been on the right side and for being willing, like Henry Fonda—oops, Juror #8—to see all sides of every question.

It is also a setup because all the characters, except for the offstage defendant, are male and white and straight. We can imagine a remake with women, blacks, Asians, and gays playing some of the parts, but unless the changes were cosmetic (as they were in a 1997 version), the dialogue, not to mention the title, would have to be expanded to include issues and perspectives that are excluded from the sanitized liberal conversation (full of proofs and nifty logical demonstrations) audiences respond to. A play that presents itself as a lesson in how to avoid being manipulated by surfaces, verbal and otherwise, is a tour de force of manipulation. What emerges at the end is not, as Rose would have us believe, a truth that has

been *revealed* by argument, but a truth that has been *created* by argument, which might just as well have created an opposing truth. (One of the jurors holding out for conviction says that the real crime is being committed right here, in the jury room; he has a point.) The same argumentative moves that bring about an outcome you like can and have been deployed to bring about an outcome you don't like—the fall of man or the victory of the tobacco companies. A merchant of doubt is a merchant of doubt even if he flies your colors.

Mark Antony and Donald Trump: I'm Just Speaking from the Heart

So we see that argument can be either celebrated as a positive heuristic leading to the discovery of truth (as the audience of *Tirelve Angry Men* is pressured to believe) or deplored as an agent of “confused clamor,” and we see, too, that there is no independent way of determining which it is in any instance. In either of its guises (and again they are not as distinct as many wish) no set of conditions, however carefully staged and hedged about, can resist argument's force. This is brilliantly illustrated by the most famous example of argumentative power in English literature, Mark Antony's funeral oration over the body of Julius Caesar. Antony speaks only by Brutus's and Cassius's permission and under instructions not to dwell on Caesar's virtues. Brutus speaks first and seems to win the Roman populace to the side of the conspirators by explaining his reason for killing his friend: “Not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more.” He offers to kill

himself with the same dagger, but the assembled citizens cry “Live, Brutus,” “Let him be Caesar,” and “We are blest that Rome is rid of him.” Enter Antony, who announces, “I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him,” not, that is, to speak in a way that will provoke outrage against his slayers.

This is only the first of Antony's several disclaimers of rhetorical intent. I am not, he says, “disposed to stir / Your hearts and minds.” Therefore I will not read Caesar's will lest it “inflame you.” (But of course his hearers' hearts and minds have now been inflamed by the desire to have the will read.) Nor will I parade reasons, as Brutus did (“I speak not to disprove what Brutus spoke”). Instead, I shall “speak right on,” that is, without premeditation, because that's the kind of man I am. “I am no orator, as Brutus is; / But as you know me well, a plain blunt man. . . . For I have neither wit, nor words, nor worth, / Action nor utterance, nor the power of speech / To stir men's blood.” In short, I'm not trying to do anything (like persuade you); nor am I trying to get you to do anything (like rise up against Caesar's murderers). I am without artifice and speak directly from the heart with no ulterior motive.

The trick of artfully disclaiming art is one of the oldest in the book; everyone knows it (“aw shucks, I'm just a country boy”) and yet it works, almost every time. One of the curious things about rhetorical strategies is that they can succeed even when those they manipulate are aware of what is being done to them. Think of the penitent husband who says, “I'm sorry, honey, and by the way, you look beautiful today.” People who are being flattered know it, but they love it anyway. Knowledge, even deep knowledge, of the techniques of argument,

is no defense against them. An orator can call attention to the mechanics of his performance and still be secure in the success of his art.

That is what Antony does when, in the space of a few lines, he produces an effect, denies any intention of doing so, and displaces the effect he simultaneously produces and denies onto a fictional surrogate—the person he would be were he not so woefully inarticulate. I am not eloquent, he says, but here's what would happen if I were turned into someone who was: "Were I Brutus and Brutus Antony, there were an Antony / Would ruffle up your spirits." He pictures himself playing a role he is in fact playing, imagines a response to his performance that is anything but imaginary (it is occurring now and he knows it), and describes with anatomical precision the process by which his words are at this instant entering the minds and hearts of his auditors: such an Antony as I am not would "put a tongue / In every wound of Caesar that should move / The stones of Rome to rise and mutiny." No sooner has he said that he doesn't want them to mutiny than they shout, in unison, "We'll mutiny."

This is a textbook illustration of the power of rhetoric and argument to fashion the truths that move men to action. In principle, Antony's performance is no different from Juror #8's; it's just more showy. Within a few minutes the citizens have traded in one certainty—"We are blest that Rome is rid of him"—for another: "Revenge! About! Seek! Burn! Fire! Kill! Slay! / Let not a traitor live," and had there been an opportunity for Brutus to regain the pulpit, he might well have turned the tide again. After his speech is over, Antony

comments on its effect: "Now let it work. Mischief thou art afoot / Take thou what course thou wilt." Like a mighty river the course eloquence takes overflows all boundaries and overwhelms the obstacles (like common sense, common ground, pure reason, empirical fact) erected to dam or contain it.

At the moment of his rhetorical but rhetorically disclaimed triumph, Antony conjures up a vision of stones rising at the command of the Brutus he is not, an allusion to Orpheus, whose voice was so alluring that in response to it stones were moved to dance and spears thrown at him were made to turn back. Orpheus could sing his way out of anything, even Hell. In the American version of the same legend, Stephen Vincent Benét's "The Devil and Daniel Webster," the title hero is described as an orator who once "spoke against a river and made it sink into the ground"; it was said that when he went fishing, "the trout would jump out of the stream right into his pocket, for they knew it was no use putting up a fight against him." In the story, Webster defends a man who, in a moment of despair, had sold his soul to the Devil. Now the Devil wants his due and the farmer begs Webster to argue his case, which he does before a jury of villains and reprobates hand-picked by the Devil. The odds against him are long (the judge has presided enthusiastically over the Salem witch trials), but in the end the jury decides for the defendant, and its spokesman explains that "even the damned may salute the eloquence of Mr. Webster."

But as we have seen in the persons of Satan and the merchants of doubt, the damned may also *practice* the eloquence of Mr. Webster. If the power of argument can, like faith, move

mountains, it can do so in the service of bad as well as good motives. Argument's strengths are also its dangers. Argument unsettles; it opens things up; it challenges and unfreezes orthodoxies; it clarifies positions, your own as well as your opponent's. (This is what we are supposed to think happens in *Twelve Angry Men*.) But argument can also work to muddy the waters or to obscure a truth, as it does in *Paradise Lost* and in the story told by Oreskes and Conway. Argument, when conducted with strength and savvy, is potent medicine; and like other potent medicines it can have side effects that are worse than any benefit it might confer. Argument can beat back the powers of Hell, as it does for Orpheus and for Daniel Webster in Benét's story, and it can also pave the road to Hell, as it does, quite literally, in *Paradise Lost*, and practically as it does in the story of the tobacco scientists.

What is common to the examples surveyed so far is that in each of them the wielder of argument succeeds in circumstances that make success unlikely. Who would have thought that Satan could so easily dislodge the word of God? Who would have thought that the tobacco scientists could effectively sow doubt in the face of what seemed to be incontrovertible evidence? Who would have thought that Juror #8 would prevail against the unanimous judgment of his fellow jurors? Who would have thought that Mark Antony could in a short time entirely reverse a recently entrenched public opinion?

And who would have thought that in the 2016 election cycle, Donald Trump would top the list of Republican presidential candidates despite the fact that (a) he had no political

experience, (b) he had almost no campaign organization, and (c) he gave speeches that violated every rule in the political consultant's handbook.

That handbook will tell you that a good political speech should make policy points concisely and clearly; examples should be apt and not get in one another's way; the line of argument should be clean and crisp; the effect should be cumulative, building up to an earned conclusion. You don't want to give the impression of speaking randomly, of being all over the place, of saying whatever happens to come into your head without any care for what you just said a moment ago.

But that's exactly the impression Trump gave. His speeches had no beginnings. He just jumped in with a topic (often a hobbyhorse) and then abandoned it within seconds. He offered asides that became the main path, but only for a little while. He interrupted himself to touch and comment on his hair. He bragged about his hotels and apartment houses and golf courses and boasted that he went to the Wharton School. He recalled at length conversations with friends no one in the audience would have known or cared about. He beat up on the press; and he did all these things in no particular order and with no apparent concern for the coherence of his presentation.

This hodgepodge of anecdote, innuendo, braggadocio, and bombast led one pundit (Jack Shafer) to say, "Donald Trump talks like a third-grader." No, he talks like Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592), one of the smartest men that ever lived. Reacting against the highly structured and obviously

composed writing of his predecessors and contemporaries, Montaigne announced, "I write naturally and without a plan; the first stroke of the pen just leads to a second." His prose, he said, is the "minute to minute" unfolding of "changeable" and sometimes "contradictory" notions. The key word is "naturally." I'm not of superior intelligence, Montaigne is telling his audience; I'm not coming at you with canned points; I'm just telling you what I think. Trump tells his audience, "I don't use teleprompters, I just speak from the heart." Politicians always say that, but Trump's performance breathes it.

And yet that performance has a method. Trump's artlessness, like Mark Antony's, is only apparent. Listen, for example, as he performs one of his favorite riffs. He begins by saying something critical of Mexicans and Chinese. Then he turns around and says, "I love the Mexican and Chinese people, especially the rich ones who buy my apartments or stay at my hotels or play on my golf courses." It's their leaders I criticize, he explains, but then in a millisecond he pulls the sting from the criticism: "they are smarter and stronger than our leaders; they're beating us." And then the payoff all this has been leading up to, the making explicit of what has been implied all along. "If I can sell them condominiums, rent space to them in my building at my price, and outfox them in deals, I could certainly outmaneuver them when it came to trade negotiations and immigration." (And besides, they love me.)

Here is the real message, the message that makes sense of the disparate pieces of what looks like mere disjointed rambling: I am Donald Trump; nobody owns me. I don't pander

to you; I don't pretend to be nice and polite; I am rich and that's what you would like to be; I'm a winner; I beat people at their own game, and if you vote for me I will beat our adversaries; if you want wonky policy details, go with those losers who offer you ten-point plans; if you want to feel good about yourselves and your country, stick with me.

So despite the lack of a formal center or an orderly presentation, Trump was always on point because the point was always the same. He couldn't get off message because the one message was all he had.

His rivals didn't understand this until it was too late. They kept asking, "Where are the specific policies?" and "How exactly will he get Mexico to pay for that wall?" and "What about his divorces and bankruptcies?" Then they wondered why none of this negative stuff was sticking. What they didn't understand was that the old political playbook in which these questions would have some force was not the one Trump was playing by. Had he taken their questions seriously, he would have been entering a contest he didn't want to win, the contest to determine which of the candidates measured up to the traditional standards of the political process. Trump was in the act of throwing those standards out; he wasn't saying, I'm better than those guys; he was saying, those guys are up to the same old tricks, pandering to every constituency in sight; I'm not pandering to anyone, in fact I'm doing what you have always wanted to do, stick it to all of those elites who have been lording it over you for years. Of course he was himself one of those elites, and the voters knew that, but they just didn't care. They saw in Trump a big rich guy who had

everything, wasn't ashamed of it, and was promising to give a piece of it to them. The fact that he never really explained how he was going to do it didn't count for anything, to the dismay of those who woke up each morning resolved to find a way to stop him. They never did.

Trump's success—incomprehensible to political commentators—is a twenty-first-century testimony to the truth classical rhetoricians made the basis of their pedagogy. They challenged students to make winning arguments for positions and causes it was thought no one could defend. They knew that argument could overcome any obstacle; and they knew, too, what Trump and Satan and Mark Antony and the merchants of doubt demonstrate: even in the most extreme cases, the achievements of argument are always wonderful (in the root sense of provoking wonder), especially when they are awful.

Argument's Two Faces: Good and Bad Persuasion

The fact that the skill of argument is neither an unalloyed good thing nor a diabolically inspired bad thing, but is sometimes one, sometimes the other, sometimes both, has led the friends of argument to argue for argument's "indifferent" status: it is not good or bad in itself, but can be either good or bad depending on the circumstances and the spirit in which it is deployed. Aristotle acknowledges that bad men may abuse it, but, after all, he observes, that "is a charge which may be made in common against all good things."

But this view of rhetoric/argument as a neutral instrument that can be put to both beneficial and harmful uses is entirely too cool an account of the matter for either rhetoric's ardent champions or its fierce detractors. Each of these parties has its favorite story, which, once formulated, is retold again and again through the centuries.

The positive story, rehearsed endlessly by Cicero and his followers, is one in which at the beginning of human history "men wandered at large like animals" without the benefit of an ordered system of social values. At a certain point the first master of eloquence and argument emerged and by the power of his voice (Orpheus again), he "transformed . . . wild savages into a kind and gentle folk" (Cicero, *De Inventione*). In his *Antidosis*, Isocrates is even more fulsome in his praise of argument and persuasion: "Because there has been implanted in us the power to persuade each other and to make clear to each other whatever we desire, not only have we escaped the life of wild beasts, but we have come together and founded cities and made laws and invented arts; . . . there is no institution devised by man which the power of speech has not helped us to establish." Eloquence and argument, in short, bring civilization.

But in the other, the negative story, told by Plato and a host of successors down to Orwell and beyond, eloquence and argument threaten civilization and bring epistemological anarchy ("confused clamor") by replacing the plain truth with flowery language and mesmerizing fictions.

Both stories are true.

They are stories, finally, of two kinds of persuasion, one bad and one good. Good persuasion aids in the rational sorting through of alternatives that characterizes a democratic society; participants make their points in a cooperative effort to arrive at a solution to a political or economic or military problem. "What's the best thing to do?" is the governing question. Bad persuasion is an instrument of power; participants make their points with the twin intentions of leaving the opponent with nothing to say and capturing the sympathy, not the rational agreement, of the audience. "What can I do to win?" is the governing question. But—and this is the kicker—because the resources available to the two kinds of persuasion (figures of speech, figures of sound, emotional appeals) are the same, it is difficult, to say the least, to tell the difference between them; especially since one of the strategies of the bad kind of persuasion is to present itself as the good kind, either by disclaiming any rhetorical intent (as Mark Antony does) or by larding its presentation with the trappings of rational discourse—numbered sections, words and phrases like "therefore" and "so we see"—or by repeated and theatrical invocations of Truth.

Devising a method for ensuring that the good kind of persuasion is not mistaken for or overwhelmed by the bad kind has been a project of rhetorical theorists from the beginning. Aristotle's taxonomy of the components of persuasion at once pinpoints the danger and suggests a way of neutralizing it. Proofs in discourse can, he said, be of three kinds: (1) *logos*, roughly the rational force of one's arguments in and of themselves; (2) *ethos*, the good character the speaker projects—you

should believe me because of the kind of person I say I am; and (3) *pathos*, an appeal to the emotions and prejudices the speaker knows his audience to have—you should believe me because I speak to fears and desires you already feel and to values you already hold.

Of the three, *logos* is thought to be the most legitimate because it is the least tricked-up and angled, and it would be better, says Aristotle, if we could "fight our case with no help beyond the bare facts." Unfortunately, he laments, the manner of presentation greatly affects the reception of what is said, "owing to the defects of our hearers." The implication is that if only the rational capacities of men were strong enough always to guide judgment—if human faculties were rightly ordered as they were in Eden—there would be no need of an art of rhetoric at all. But given what human beings are like, the best we can do, Aristotle implies, is take care that rhetoric's potent appeals are deployed solely in the service of truth; tether the undeniable power of the ethical and pathetic to a rational purpose. The idea is that we can duly acknowledge the "defects of our hearers" without surrendering to them; we can make *ethos* and *pathos* subordinate to *logos* and not the other way around; we can have our rhetoric and not be eaten by it too.