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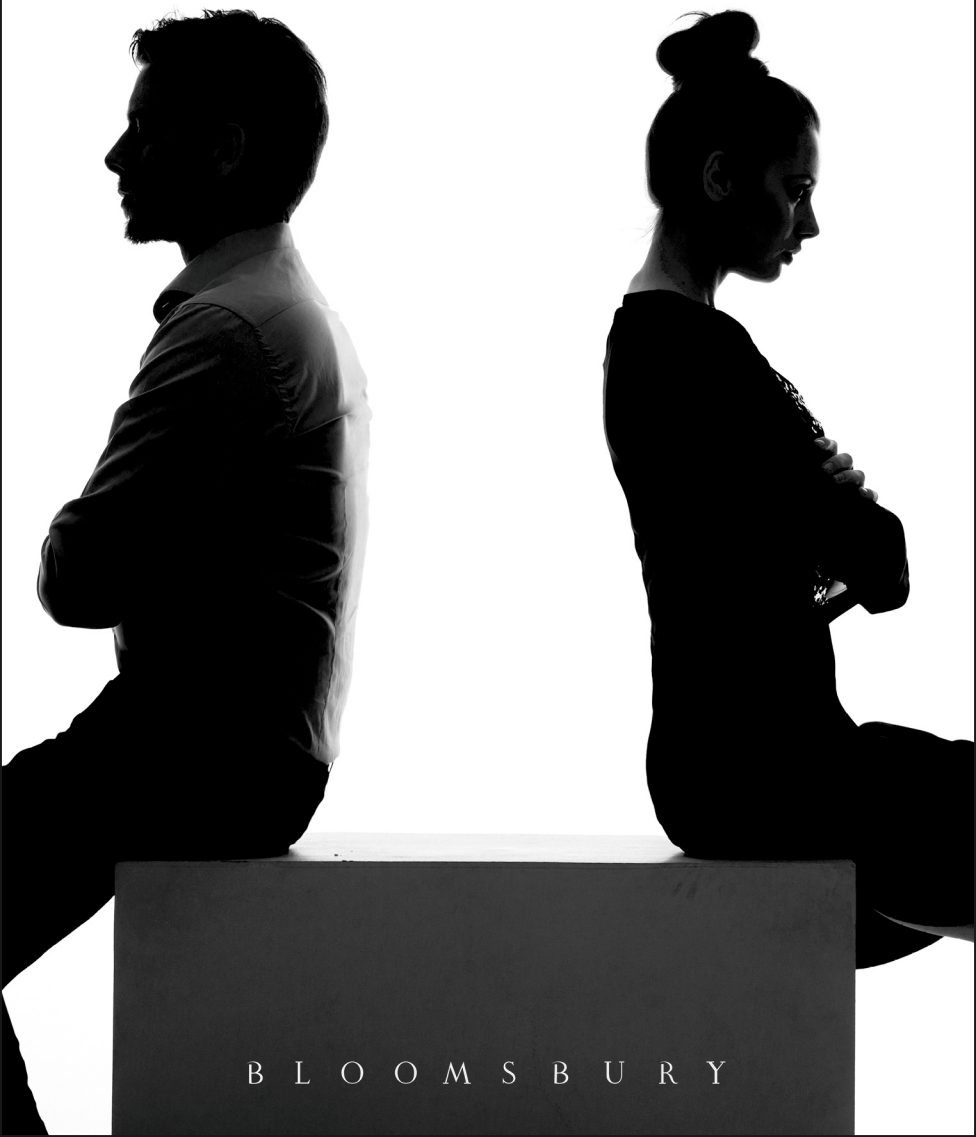
THE ARGUMENT

William Boyd



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The Argument

Everybody argues. Human beings have been arguing with each other forever. In fact, since *homo sapiens* first achieved the power of coherent speech, mankind has been arguing on both minor and major scales, from domestic tiffs to global warfare. The ability to argue applies to every race, every nationality, every language, every age, every era – and both sexes, it goes without saying. So it must, therefore, be an absolutely fundamental human activity – like laughing, or inventing, or sharing – a core part of our dynamic as sentient beings, a facility hard-wired into our basic natures. Nobody teaches you how to argue: there are no rules written down, no holds are barred, no skill-sets are necessary – and yet we all do it utterly instinctively for good or, more usually, bad.

My own arguing history reached an early peak in my teens at my boarding school. Here we argued for the pure sake of arguing – to make the time pass, to relieve the awful tedium of our lives. I remember summer nights in our bare, noisome dormitories when we were sent to bed at nine p.m. and the Scottish evening sunshine backlit the flimsy curtains on the windows until midnight. We couldn't sleep so we argued. We would argue black was white, or white was black. The more obscure and petty the argument, the more it was relished. I recall an epic three-day argument with a friend over the merits of low-scoring matches versus high-scoring matches (he was for low-scoring; I was for high-scoring – how utterly pointless was that?), finally ending when we almost came to blows and we realised we were about to destroy a precious friendship. It was symptomatic of the argument-for-its-own-sake – the marshalling of specious opinions, false certitudes and dodgy statistics – merely to keep the stimulus of the dispute (that nobody cared about, anyway) going. It was almost Swiftian in its perversity.

I've never argued as much since those days but I think I honed my arguing technique during those tiresome,

time-consuming squabbles at boarding school. And I suspect it was some recollection of those endless, inane altercations that made me think about the 'argument', per se, and how in a real way it is a crucial part of our human discourse. I was thinking about writing a play – a contemporary play – and I suddenly, unusually, had a sense of structure before anything else. The idea came to me that I could write a play that was simply a series of arguments, of types of arguments, some insignificant and pusillanimous, some brutal and very destabilising. I wouldn't have scenes, I decided, I would have arguments – and there would be no interval. No time to draw breath, no escape.

As I thought about this initial concept, this shape of the play, I became more aware of another aspect of the enterprise. It has always struck me that one of the pure, atavistic appeals of live theatre centres around the idea of eavesdropping. We, the audience, sit there in the dark and spy on and overhear what is happening on the lit stage before us. It can be seen as a kind of thrilling privilege and, when it's working well, the frisson it delivers can be transforming. It's the same pleasure – except writ large – that we all derive from people-watching and overhearing other people's conversations. These random glimpses and overheard exchanges are a very simple, basic form of quotidian theatre, it seems to me, that we all understand, interpret and indulge in – an entertaining diversion for the watcher and the listener that usually lasts just a few seconds. The produced play in the theatre takes this pleasure a great many complex and sophisticated levels further on but, it seems to me, it is still, for the members of the audience, tapping in to that sense of being secret onlookers, secret listeners, and stirs something deep within us.

And what can be more enthralling and disturbing than to witness a fierce and passionate argument between two people? Private arguments are different from public arguments. A public argument is a form of debate; a private argument opens a door on a couple's personal life and gives

you perhaps too much access, too much information. Again, the idea of being an unknown, unseen secret-sharer in other people's lives – of being a kind of spy, in short – is the great allure here. Only live theatre, it seems to me, can fully replicate this guilty pleasure and deliver the visceral, vicarious recognition.

However, seeing and hearing two people arguing in public – intensely, personally, hostilely – is a rare event. As soon as the arguers are aware of being watched or listened to – as soon as the argument is observed by others – then it almost instantly stops. It's too raw an unmasking, too close to the bone. This reticence tells us something else about arguments – arguments are very intimate, as intimate as love-making, in their own way. But in the theatre we are allowed to watch on – the exposure, the revelation, does not end.

The built-in nature of our ability to argue inevitably tells a lot about ourselves. Our inherent understanding of the rhetoric of an argument; our sense of its ebb and flow; of the tactics and stratagems required to win provide a window on to an individual's character and personality. Where and how do we learn this aptitude, these techniques? How do we personalise them? In the playground? As infants fighting over a toy? Or is it more complicated, something that matures along with our life experience and verbal dexterity, something akin to a language-skill?

In this play, a recently married young couple, Pip and Meredith, find that their marriage is in crisis and the ten arguments that ensue between them, and their two respective best friends, and Meredith's parents, chart the progress of the disintegration of their relationship and its eventual – potential – salvation. The testy, comic and occasionally cruel dance between these six people that goes on for the duration of the play examines the different types of argument we employ – given the situation and given our ambitions for that argument – and the way we use arguments, almost in a primitive way, to establish a form of

dominance or hierarchy. A argues with B, B argues with C, C then argues with A – and so this disputatious *La Ronde* continues until its ambivalent conclusion arrives, many arguments later.

When the Plains Indians of North America were in battle with other tribes it was enough to 'count a coup' against an opponent. There was no necessity for a weapon or a wound, let alone a death – a mere touch with the coup-stick established the prestige and honour of the warrior. Perhaps that's how arguments function in human society: we are 'counting coup' with each other – no need to wring someone's neck, or stab them in the back – just win the argument.

William Boyd
London, March 2016