

# Persuasion

## *A Critical Function of Leadership*

When writers in ancient times considered leadership and human affairs, they adverted to the particular importance of persuasive speech. Some suggested that for all of us, the ability to persuade is critical. Thus, Euripides has Hecuba lament:

Why  
do we make so much of knowledge, struggle so hard  
to get some little skill not worth the effort?  
But persuasion, the only art whose power  
is absolute, worth any price we pay,  
we totally neglect. And so we fail;  
we lose our hopes.<sup>1</sup>

Hecuba gives us two themes that we explore later in this chapter: the importance of persuasion and our apparent willingness to ignore it or distrust it. Hecuba's daughter, Cassandra, sounds a related theme. Cassandra is given a horrible curse. Apollo bestows on her the gift of prophecy, but after she refuses to be his lover, he curses her; henceforth, although she can see the truth, she will be unable to get anyone to believe her. Thus, Cassandra sees the soldiers inside the Trojan Horse, but unable to persuade, she can only watch with excruciating pain the ultimate fall of her city. "Ye shall know the

truth and the truth shall make ye free," Christ says, but for Cassandra, and perhaps for most of us, the truth has to be communicated persuasively. Unable to do this, she experiences frustration and despair.

We can find in ancient writings specific reference to the role of persuasion in leadership. Thucydides alerts us to this role. He has Pericles speak of four characteristics of a good leader: the leader must know what good policy is, must be able to expound that policy and make it clear to others, must not be treasonous, and must not be open to bribery.<sup>2</sup> It is the second of these characteristics that concerns us, and we might reasonably argue that the clear expounding is by implication a basic kind of persuasion. Elsewhere Thucydides speaks of Themistokles as having "the ability to expound to others the enterprises he had in hand."<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Thucydides tells us that Antiphon was "one of the best men of his day in Athens . . . with a head to contrive measures and a tongue to recommend them." Note here that Thucydides sounds a negative note as well: Antiphon's "reputation for craftiness made the people wary of him."<sup>4</sup>

Writers in ancient Rome give further examples. We find Polybius referring to Aratus as "a perfect man of affairs. He was a powerful speaker and a clear thinker and had the faculty of keeping his own counsel. In his power of dealing suavely with political opponents, of attaching friends to himself and forming fresh alliances he was second to none."<sup>5</sup> In his comparison of Demosthenes and Cicero, Plutarch suggests that "it is necessary, indeed, for a political leader to be an able speaker; but it is an ignoble thing for any man to admire and relish the glory of his own eloquence."<sup>6</sup> In *De Oratore*, Cicero refers to "men of action and as orators" and suggests that these are "two careers that are inseparable."<sup>7</sup> Edward Gibbon, certainly an astute observer of Roman times, notes that "the arts of persuasion, so diligently cultivated by the first Caesars, were neglected by the military ignorance and Asiatic pride of their successors."<sup>8</sup>

Such suggestions of persuasion as a critical aspect of leadership are not limited to ancient times. In his letters to his son, Lord Chesterfield adverted many times to the importance of persuasion: without it, “the best head will contrive to very little purpose.”<sup>9</sup> Winston Churchill noted of John Adams, “In his judgments he was frequently right, but he lacked the arts of persuasion.”<sup>10</sup> Churchill himself demonstrated his persuasive abilities as a leader. Harold Nicolson gives us a telling example, describing the emergence of Churchill as a leader in Parliament on September 26, 1939:

The effect of Winston’s speech was infinitely greater than could be derived from any reading of the text. His delivery was really amazing and he sounded every note from deep preoccupation to flippancy, from resolution to sheer boyishness. . . . In those twenty minutes Churchill had brought himself nearer the post of Prime Minister than he had ever been before. In the Lobbies afterwards even Chamberlainites were saying “We have now found our leader.” Old Parliamentary hands confessed that never in their experience had they seen a single speech so change the temper of the House.<sup>11</sup>

During World War II, Churchill’s speeches were critical to holding England. C. P. Snow says it well:

Like most people of my age, I remember—I shall not forget it while I live—the beautiful, cloudless, desperate summer of 1940. One night I was listening with a friend, for we were never far from a radio that June, to one of the grand Churchillian speeches. The accent was odd, to our more modern English ears. It was nothing like the clipped upper-class English which was already fashionable and was to become more so. The style of oratory, like that of Lloyd George, was obsolescent. But we

noticed neither of these things as we listened that night, and other summer nights. For that voice was our hope. It was the voice of will and strength incarnate. It was saying what we wanted to hear said (“We shall never surrender”) and what we tried to believe, sometimes against the protests of realism and common sense, would come true. (“We shall fight on unconquerable until the curse of Hitler is lifted from the brows of mankind. We are sure that in the end all will come right.”)<sup>12</sup>

Stephen Skowronek argues that President Franklin Pierce “was a failure, yet, his story is instructive. The problem was not that he lacked the power or inclination to do great things but that he completely lost control over the meaning of what he did. His authority as a political leader collapsed in the exercise of his powers. Presidential history is littered with stories like this. As a rule, power has been less a problem for presidents than authority; getting things done, less of a problem than sustaining warrants for actions taken and for accomplishments realized.”<sup>13</sup>

A good many other suggestions can be adduced as to the importance of persuasion and the subtlety with which persuasion must at times be effected. In his *Essay on Man*, Alexander Pope tells us:

Tis not enough your Counsel still be true,  
Blunt truths more Mischief than nice Falsehoods do;  
Men must be taught as if you taught them not;  
And Things unknown propos'd as Things forgot.<sup>14</sup>

An interesting example of Pope’s approach can be seen in the response of Chinese scholars to the “new math” brought to China in the 1600s by the Jesuits. Chinese scholars created a myth that the new Western mathematics had in fact evolved out of ancient Chinese ideas. The new ideas, they felt, would be accepted much more quickly if they were seen as a natural outgrowth of earlier

accepted methods.<sup>15</sup> More generally, we can argue that persuasion is a cultural matter, drawing on William McNeill's notion of cultural diffusion: "When a group of men encounter a commodity, technique, or idea that seems superior to what they had previously known, they will try to acquire and make their own whatever they perceive to be superior, but only as long as this does not seem to endanger other values they hold dear."<sup>16</sup>

Early on in *Faust*, Goethe delivers a short disquisition on persuasion:

Unless you feel it, you will never achieve it.  
 If it doesn't flow from your soul  
 with natural easy power,  
 your listeners will not believe it.  
 You can sit down and paste phrases together by the hour,  
 cook up a little stew from others' feasts;  
 you can blow up miserable flames  
 from your heap of ashes  
 that will amaze children and monkeys—  
 if such little triumphs please your taste—  
 but you'll never move others, heart to heart,  
 unless your speech comes from your own heart.<sup>17</sup>

Moving to America in the nineteenth century, we find an interesting example of yet another approach to persuasion, one that convinced many Americans to make the westward journey. Persuasion here was based on reports of agriculturists'

naming soils and shrubs and trees and grasses that were already known to them; describing conditions which they had already been wont to overcome; presenting the exact terms of a battle they knew they could win. Always and everywhere that, and that alone, was the unquestionable magnet—the evidence that success with soil

could be won on terms of farm or plantation life as the prospective emigrants knew about; that known reactions of soil to weather would be experienced; that wood with which they were used to working lay ready at hand; that all the old tricks of the trade would work in the new land.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, we can recall one of many versions of the old story about the son's sending his father a letter asking for money. The father's secretary reads the letter in a monotone: "Send me some money right away. I need books and clothes." When the father heard this, he said, "What an insulting way to ask me for money. I won't send him a dime." Later he tells his wife about the letter. She grabs it and reads it in a tender and emotional voice. "Okay, then, that's different," says the father. "Now he's asking like a gentleman. I'll send him the money."

These several examples suggest that persuasion is important both in itself and as a function of leadership, and there is considerable subtlety as to how persuasion is to be effected. Before we can consider the implications of persuasion for leadership, though, we need to reflect a bit on just what persuasion is and what it is not. We need to look at the kinds of persuasion and how they are manifested in the academic disciplines and in literature and the arts.

## **Kinds of Persuasion**

There are many kinds of persuasion, many ways to try to convince others to believe or act in desired ways. One approach is through what Aristotle would term *ethos*, or character. The persuasion "works" because of the acknowledged and legitimate character of the persuader. Aristotle notes that *ethos* is established in the course of the speech. Beyond that, it can be argued that the reputation of character preceding a speaker is of considerable importance. A speaker with a reputation for probity and integrity in her research,

her professional life, and her personal life will come to the podium with many in the audience much inclined to her point of view even before she utters a word. Similarly, a person with a reputation for shading the truth (as with the previous example of Antiphon's being distrusted because of his reputation for craftiness) might find an audience already disinclined to be persuaded. In this respect, then, ethos or character is in itself a powerful kind of persuasion.

Aristotle also gives us two other basic ways to persuade: logos and pathos. Logos, persuasion based on reason, logic, and "the facts," appeals to the rational mind; the realm of persuasion here is that of the syllogism, definitions, and logical fallacies. Pathos is persuasion based on the appeal to emotions.<sup>19</sup>

There are some who say that one should always appeal to logos and ignore emotional appeals. James Boswell tells us that Samuel Johnson was one of these, but Boswell cannot agree: "Reasonable beings are not solely reasonable. They have fancies which may be pleased, passions which may be roused."<sup>20</sup>

Of the many examples of appeals to emotion, two stand out for me—one ancient, one modern. The ancient appeal is that of Antony inciting the people against Brutus and the other conspirators. At Caesar's funeral, Brutus speaks first. He relies on reason, and in his short and stodgy speech, he lays out the facts to persuade the people that Caesar deserved to die. The people seem content. But then Antony speaks (against the wishes of Cassius, who, much more than Brutus, knows what can happen when an effective orator takes over). Antony relies (as Shakespeare has it) on emotional appeal. He sets up his audience with weeping (he has to pause, overcome with emotion) and heavy irony (Brutus is an honorable man, he says) and continues rousing the passion with his reading of Caesar's will (seventy-five drachmas for every citizen), displaying Caesar's cloak rent with dozens of knife stabs, and, finally, showing the crowd Caesar's bloody body. In the middle of the speech, a plebeian says Antony is speaking with "much reason," but Shakespeare (and the rest of us) knows better. Shakespeare drives

home the point even further by bookending the speech just prior to its beginning with the plebeian's saying, "Caesar was a tyrant" and "We are blest Rome is rid of him," and at its conclusion with the respectful audience, now a mob, shouting "most noble Caesar" as they run through the streets intent on mutiny and murder. So stirred up by this speech with "much reason" that when they happen upon Cinna the poet and confuse him with Cinna the conspirator, they murder him all the same: "It is no matter, his name's Cinna."

Another classic example of appeal to emotions occurred near the end of Lizzie Borden's trial. Borden was accused of the brutal hacking to death of her father and stepmother. Her defense attorney concluded his summation in this way: "To find her guilty, you must believe she is a fiend. *Gentlemen, does she look it?*" They looked, and saw Miss Lizzie with her high, severe collar; her modestly groomed hair; her long, slender hands and her sharp, patrician features; her unmistakable air of being, above all else, a lady. They looked at her, and her advocate had played his strongest card."<sup>21</sup>

Peer pressure can be a kind of persuasion. The behavior of middle school students comes readily to mind, but others can be just as vulnerable to this kind of persuasion. My wife and I were at a baseball game, sitting directly behind four drunken rowdies. To our right was a young couple, a pleasant young man and his companion. After several innings, our pleasant young man became less pleasant as he began to ape the behavior of the rowdies in front of us, persuaded by their behavior.

Bribery is another kind of persuasion. You need a visa; you want to dodge a speeding ticket; you would like a semiprivate table; you do not want to spend hours waiting in line. There are all sorts of situations in all sorts of cultures where a little bribery, a little sweetening of the pot, can persuade others to do what you want. A variation of bribery as persuasion is raising the compensation of an employee you wish to retain but who is being recruited by a competitor. Another form of this kind of persuasion is exchange, or some sort of quid pro quo. I would like your tickets for the baseball

game and will persuade you to give them to me in exchange for my helping you figure out how to install a new shower. Lyndon Johnson's quid pro quo tactics employed during his many years in the Senate give us another example: vote for my bill, and you get something in return; do not vote for my bill, and you get something else in return. It is interesting to note that once Johnson left the Senate to become vice president, he found that his power, that is, his power of persuasion, quickly diminished in the Senate. It is difficult to push people around when all of a sudden you no longer are able to dangle membership on choice committees.<sup>22</sup> As Tacitus comments in *The Annals* (Book 13), power is precarious when it is unsupported by its own strength.

Technical skill and expertise can be seen as a kind of persuasion. I was persuaded to have an operation on my knee by a doctor who gave me the plain facts about my torn meniscus. He spent no time appealing to my emotions or attempting to bribe me or placate me. The plain fact of the matter was that I needed surgery, and the plain fact was given to me by a specialist who was arguing from expertise. Another example, this one involving expertise combined with other forms of persuasion, can be gleaned from strategies used in the midst of a Seattle drought some years ago. Weather conditions were such that for the first time in history, strict restrictions were put on the use of water. The strictest restriction was prohibiting any lawn watering, a particularly bothersome stricture for many people in the area used to year-round green lawns. The first kind of persuasion applied was expertise: the water engineers flat out said that no water whatsoever would be available several months hence if people watered their lawns. It was a most compelling kind of persuasion, one that worked. People did not water their lawns. It should be noted that other kinds of persuasion came into play here. The city council established a regulation prohibiting lawn watering—a kind of persuasion by authority. The mayor, a person highly respected in the community, spoke out on several occasions about the necessity of water use curtailment—persuasion by ethos or character.

For most people, these kinds of persuasion fall within an acceptable range. But there are other kinds of persuasion that might be seen as less acceptable. In Chapter 38 of the Book of Job, we and Job hear God speaking out of the whirlwind, thundering, “Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge?” God keeps piling on question after question, showing his power and his greater wisdom. “Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?” is followed in this and the next three chapters by seventy-nine questions. All Job can say, at one point, is, “What shall I answer thee?” and in the end, Job capitulates: “I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.” He is “persuaded.” But we might want to raise questions about the kind of persuasion used here. There is a suggestion of oppression, perhaps even force. Perhaps in the great grandeur of the Creator’s speaking to a humble human being, we might overlook or find positive interpretations of God’s approach. But if the same structure of the exchange took place in a staff meeting, what would we think? In the space of a few minutes, a staff person raises a question, and the chief executive officer (CEO) responds with eighty hard-driving pointed questions without waiting for much of an answer. Most of the others in the room would probably think the CEO was making her point and maybe the hapless staff person capitulated in the end, but they would probably feel uncomfortable and would feel that this was not a very good kind of persuasion. Again, we might think of Lyndon Johnson, with his well-known technique of leaning close to (and over) his target, hands on his target’s jacket lapels, “persuading” or helping to “reason together.”<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps Job is forced to accede; perhaps not. But we do not have to go far in the world to find manifest examples of force used to “persuade.” Again, the ancient writers give us the initial distinction. Plato quotes Gorgias as saying that “the art of persuasion was greatly superior to all others, for it subjugated all things not by violence but by willing submission.”<sup>24</sup> In *Agricola*, Tacitus gives us his classic and terse conclusion: “*solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant*” (“They make a desert and call it peace”).<sup>25</sup>

Some years later, writing on his travels north to the Hebrides, Samuel Johnson noted that “to hinder insurrection, by driving away the people, and to govern peaceably, by having no subjects, is an expedient that argues no great profundity of politicks. To soften the obdurate, to convince the mistaken, to mollify the resentful, are worthy of a statesman; but it affords a legislator little self-applause to consider, that where there was formerly an insurrection, there is now a wilderness.”<sup>26</sup> Close to Johnson, at least in this respect, is Edmund Burke: “The use of force alone is but *temporary*. It may subdue for a moment, but it does not remove the necessity of subduing again; and a nation is not governed which is perpetually to be conquered.”<sup>27</sup>

The question we must ask, then, is whether force is persuasion, and if we say it is a kind of persuasion, we still must determine whether we think it is an acceptable kind of persuasion. I would argue that force is not persuasion: force is evidence of a failure to persuade. James Boyd White suggests something similar: “When persuasion fails, the boundaries of the culture are defined.”<sup>28</sup> As was once said to me some years ago, “The only alternative to war is persuasion,” and force is a kind of war. In talking about commerce, Alfred North Whitehead makes a similar distinction: “Now the intercourse between individuals and between social groups takes one of two forms, force or persuasion. Commerce is the great example of intercourse in the way of persuasion. War, slavery, and governmental compulsion exemplify the reign of force.”<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Marcel Mauss speaks of commerce and exchange as a kind of persuasion: “In order to trade, man must first lay down his spear. When that is done he can succeed in exchanging goods and persons not only between clan and clan but between tribe and tribe and nation and nation, and above all between individuals. It is only then that people can create, can satisfy their interests mutually and define them without recourse to arms.”<sup>30</sup>

During Hitler’s first visit to Italy in June 1934, Mussolini provided a grim example of the juxtaposition of persuasion and force.

Speaking to a large and demonstrative crowd at the Piazza San Marco in Venice, Mussolini, a “gifted orator and unscrupulous demagogue,”<sup>31</sup> claimed that his ultimate goal was the “greatness of the Italian people . . . the patrimony of the whole nation. This patrimony we will defend against every one. We will defend it by persuasion if possible, otherwise with the song of our machine guns.”<sup>32</sup>

A contemporary example of force masquerading as persuasion is found in Part I of the film *The Godfather*. Don Corleone “persuades” a Hollywood producer to cast his godson in the producer’s movie—by slaying the producer’s favorite horse and, as everyone who has seen the movie knows, putting the horse’s head in the producer’s bed. Don Corleone echoes what we pick up in Part II of *The Godfather*, with the young Corleone saying he will deal with Fannuci, the Black Hand gangster trying to extort money: “Don’t worry—I’ll make him an offer he can’t refuse.” The neighborhood learns quite quickly that Corleone’s final offer was to murder Fannuci, and it is shortly after the murder that we see the way Corleone “persuades” the slum landlord. I’m a reasonable man, Corleone says. Do me a favor. Ask around the neighborhood: you’ll find I know how to return a favor. And, of course, the slum landlord, when faced with “persuasion” of the argument that what happened to Fannuci will necessarily happen to him, capitulates.

## Persuasion in the Academic Disciplines

The academic disciplines, especially what are sometimes seen as the “objective” disciplines, can seem straightforward, with a just-the-facts presentation of data. On closer examination, however, it seems that persuasion is deeply involved. Let us examine in brief the persuasive nature of science, mathematics, economics, anthropology, history, and law.

John Campbell, a perceptive analyst of rhetoric and science, gives us a sense of how the science of Darwin and persuasive efforts of Darwin are intertwined:

To claim that Charles Darwin was a “rhetorician” may seem to confuse the provinces of rhetoric and science. Their juxtaposition, however, is not only warranted; it is also inescapable. Even scientific discourse must be persuasive to rescue insight from indifference, misunderstanding, contempt, or rejection. Aristarchus was not believed when he argued that the earth moved around the sun, and although Mendel discovered the laws of inheritance, he failed to convince his scientific peers. To claim that Darwin was a rhetorician, therefore, is not to dismiss his science, but to draw attention to his accommodation of his message to the professional and lay audiences whose support was necessary for its acceptance.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, as Campbell notes, we can “contrast the reassuring inductivist style of *The Origin* with the rapid sequence of topics, inferences, and reflections on strategies of persuasion one finds in Darwin’s notebooks. . . . In the notebooks, we see the young Darwin, even before he solved the technical problem of speciation, thinking of ways to solve the problem of persuasive exposition.”<sup>34</sup>

Mathematics is often seen as the antithesis of rhetoric and persuasion, with truth a movement from hypothesis to conclusion through a series of logical steps. But as Philip Davis and Reuben Hersh point out, although “in theory, you should be hearing the presentation of those small logical transformations which are to lead inexorably from hypothesis to conclusion,” one will undoubtedly hear other phrases, such as “‘It is easy to show that . . .’ ‘By an obvious generalization . . .’, ‘a long, but elementary computation, which I leave to the student, will verify that . . .’ These phrases are not proof: they are rhetoric in the service of proof.” Mathematics, they suggest, is “a form of social interaction where ‘proof’ is a complex of the formal and the informal, of calculations and casual comments, of convincing argument and appeals to the imagination and the intuition.”<sup>35</sup>

Economics might appear to be immune from rhetorical structuring and appeal, but practitioners of the “dismal science,” too, have their own persuasive strategies, using models as literary metaphors and choosing a scientific language that is actually “the economic scientist’s metaphysics, morals, and personal convictions.”<sup>36</sup> Economist Kenneth Arrow said that in judging competing theories, he used as a criterion “persuasiveness. Does it correspond to our understanding of the economic world? I think it foolish to say that we rely on hard empirical evidence completely.”<sup>37</sup>

Anthropologist Renato Rosaldo pointed out that the “kinds of questions about how to represent other forms of life rarely enter into discussions of method in anthropology. It is as if one imagined that photographs told the unadorned real truth without ever noticing how they are constructed—framed and taken from particular angles, at certain distances, and with different depths of field.”<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Clifford Geertz talks of “the difficulty of constructing texts ostensibly scientific out of experiences broadly biographical” and concludes that “finding somewhere to stand in a text that is supposed to be at one and the same time an intimate view and a cool assessment is almost as much of a challenge as gaining the view and making the assessment in the first place.”<sup>39</sup>

The field or discipline of history has had its share of claims of objectivity while eschewing persuasive elements. Others have recognized the inherent presence of persuasion. Morris Cohen spoke of “the ideal of an imaginative reconstruction of the past which is scientific in its determinations and artistic in its formulation.”<sup>40</sup> In *Style in History*, Peter Gay analyzes the style and persuasive elements of four historians—Edward Gibbon, Leopold von Ranke, Thomas Macaulay, and Jacob Burckhardt—and finds that persuasion is a key factor in the work of all four, even Ranke, the founder of “scientific history.”<sup>41</sup>

When we read Gibbon’s account of how he decided to write *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, we are reading the third and

final version of this “historical” event. David Jordan gives us the three versions:

In my Journal the place and moment of conception are recorded; the fifteenth of October 1764, in the close of the evening, as I sat musing in the Church of the Zoccolanti or Franciscan fryars, while they were singing Vespers in the Temple of Jupiter on the ruins of the Capitol.

It was on the fifteen of October, in the gloom of the evening, as I sat musing on the Capitol, while the bare-footed fryars were chanting their litanies in the temple of Jupiter, that I conceived the first thought of my history.

It was Rome, on the fifteenth of October, 1764, as I sat musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol while the bare-footed fryars were singing Vespers in the temple of Jupiter, that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the city first started to my mind.<sup>42</sup>

We can note the care with which he shaped the juxtaposition of the church services to the Roman ruins. What Jordan points out, too, is that “there is nothing in Gibbon’s journal about this moment of conception. The journal speaks only of arriving in Rome and has none of the poetry of even the first, tentative version.”<sup>43</sup> If history is simply an “objective” science, without a rhetoric, why would Gibbon spend so much time crafting and reshaping his syntax (and his facts) to present his motivation in the best, most persuasive light?

When we think of law, we are less likely to think of claims of an objective science. Surely, and moving beyond the example of Lizzie Borden’s defense attorney, the law involves persuasion. In their practice, lawyers seek to establish reasonable proof, persuasive proof, rather than some sort of final, absolute Truth. In the words of James Boyd White,

Law works by a process of argument that places one version of events against another and creates a tension between them (and between the endings appropriate to each); in doing so, it makes our choice of language conscious rather than habitual and creates a moment at which controlled change of language and culture becomes possible. . . . The multiplicity of readings that the law permits is not its weakness but its strength, for it is this that makes room for different voices and gives a purchase by which culture may be modified in response to the demands of circumstance. It is a method at once for recognizing others, for acknowledging ignorance, and for achieving cultural change.<sup>44</sup>

These examples of persuasion in the disciplines could be extended to include illustrations from psychology, theology, political science, literary interpretation, and women's studies,<sup>45</sup> but the point is made with those I have cited here: persuasion is an inherent part of the disciplines, an inherent part of constructing knowledge and viewing the world so as to make it acceptable to others.

## Persuasion in Literature and the Arts

As with the disciplines, literature and the arts are deeply engaged in trying to persuade. Again without attempting to be inclusive, let us touch on novels, drama, music, and art.

A novel wishes to tell us something—about characters and their time, or about the author, or about those of us reading it, or all of these. Whether a novel succeeds in persuading us depends in part on how well the author can convince us that he or she has “been there,” especially if we have “been there” too. Those who have hung around pool halls will have a pretty good sense of whether Walter Tevis's *The Hustler* is persuasive, that is, believable. Even those who are less familiar with pool halls can get a bit of sense of whether

Tevis has been there or just read about it as research for his novel. Similarly, the novelist's insights into the psychological makeup of her characters will be persuasive if they accord with our own experiences. If the insights contradict our experiences, then the novelist must bring her full powers to bear to persuade us to look at the world in a different way. To the extent we buy the novelist's insights, characterizations, and arguments, we will say that she has written a "good" novel.

Drama affords ample opportunity for persuasion. A performance of *Hamlet* can be persuasive or not, depending on the ability of the actors, their willingness to put energy and focus into the particular performance, and the mood of the audience. There is nothing given here. After a performance, you can come away moved—that is to say, persuaded—or you can come away unmoved and unpersuaded. I have seen a performance of *Hamlet* that left me caring little whether Hamlet lived or died, as long as he got on with it and did whatever he was going to do so I could get home. And I have seen a performance that made me think anew about Hamlet and myself.

Musical performances are notoriously persuasive or unpersuasive. The notes are the same, the piano is tuned at regulation pitch, and the concert hall acoustics are roughly the same from day to day. But the same piece of music, performed by the same artist in the same hall, might one time leave you cold and another time leave you having had an intense emotional and learning experience. One of my piano teachers once told me a story. He was working as an usher at Orchestra Hall in Chicago during a recital by Vladimir Horowitz. Horowitz played, among other pieces, the Chopin "Military" polonaise, an old warhorse played by most aspiring pianists of varying abilities with varying results. But when Horowitz played the first chord of the polonaise, my teacher said he could feel electricity throughout the hall. And when Horowitz began the great rolling arpeggios in the middle section of the piece, the entire audience stood up as one and remained standing until the end. Here, indeed, was a persuasive performance.

In its own way, dance too is persuasive, or it is not. Costumes, choreography, focus, flow, skill—all contribute to moving us or leaving us uncommitted.

We can experience persuasion in art. A painting is capable of getting us to see the world in a new way. Moving, getting us to see, is a kind of persuasion. We are convinced of something through engagement with the painting. On the other hand, if for whatever reason the painting is not persuasive, we simply move on through the gallery.

Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch gives a good summary of my argument so far. “Who does not seek after Persuasion? It is the aim of all the arts, and, I suppose of all exposition of the sciences; nay, of all useful exchange of converse in our daily life. It is what Velasquez attempts in a picture, Euclid in a proposition, the Prime Minister at the Treasury box, the journalist in a leading article, our Vicar in his sermon. Persuasion, as Matthew Arnold once said, is the only true intellectual process.”<sup>46</sup>

## The Negative Voices of Persuasion

Thus, we have looked at persuasion, kinds of persuasion, and persuasion in the disciplines and in literature and the arts. It seems a persuasive picture, with persuasion pervading all of our efforts. But we must return to Hecuba and her lament. Why do we neglect persuasion, or, beyond that, what accounts for the considerable opposition to persuasion? Again, we begin with the ancient quarrels, then move to our own time.

In ancient times it is Plato who leads the attack on the rhetoricians. In *The Gorgias*, Socrates concedes that “there are two kinds of political oratory, one of them is pandering and base clap-trap; only the other is good, which aims at the edification of the souls of citizens and is always striving to say what is best, whether it be welcome or unwelcome to the ears of the audience.” This second kind of orator, of whom Socrates professes to know no examples and asks

to have someone of this kind identified for him, will in “any speech or action by which he seeks to influence the souls of men” focus his attention on “bringing righteousness and moderation and every other virtue to birth in the souls of his fellow-citizens, and on removing their opposites, unrighteousness and excess and vice.”<sup>47</sup> For whatever reasons, though, Plato seems to have felt that virtually all oratory was of the first sort—venal, calculating, immoral, calculated not to discover truth but to please the masses by whatever means possible.

In *De Oratore*, Cicero notes that Socrates scorned oratory. Socrates “separated the science of wise thinking from that of elegant speaking, though in reality they are closely linked together. . . . This is the source from which has sprung the undoubtedly absurd and unprofitable and reprehensible severance between the tongue and the brain, leading to our having one set of professors to teach us to think and another to teach us to speak.”<sup>48</sup>

Cicero, and others, tried to argue that the two should not be separated:

For eloquence is one of the supreme virtues—although all the virtues are equal and on a par, but nevertheless one has more beauty and distinction in outward appearance than another, as is the case with this faculty, which, after compassing a knowledge of facts, gives verbal expression to the thoughts and purposes of the mind in such a manner as to have the power of driving the hearers forward in any direction in which it has applied its weight; and the stronger this faculty is, the more necessary it is to be combined with integrity and supreme wisdom, and if we bestow fluency of speech on persons devoid of those virtues, we shall not have made orators of them but shall have put weapons into the hands of madmen.<sup>49</sup>

The severance of philosophy and rhetoric that Cicero speaks of continued for close to two thousand years. Thus, in our own time, we note that the comprehensive, eight-volume *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* has no entry for *rhetoric*. We note too that the journal *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, begun in 1968, had for many years just one editor—always a philosopher—and the journal’s editorial board was separated with one listing of philosophers and another listing of those in speech, English, and Classics. The editor was a philosopher. Only in 1991 were the boards combined into one listing and joint editors in philosophy and speech/English/Classics appointed.

In modern times, John Dewey weighed in against persuasion, invoking another modernist, Francis Bacon:

Bacon also brought his charge against the Aristotelian method itself. In its rigorous forms it aimed at demonstration, and in its milder forms at persuasion. But both demonstration and persuasion aim at conquest of mind rather than of nature. Moreover they both assume that some one is already in possession of a truth or a belief, and that the only problem is to convince some one else, or to teach. In contrast, his new method had an exceedingly slight opinion of the amount of truth already existent, and a lively sense of the extent and importance of truths still to be attained. It would be a logic of discovery, not a logic of argumentation, proof, and persuasion. To Bacon, the old logic even at its best was a logic for teaching the already known, and teaching meant indoctrination, disciplining. It was an axiom of Aristotle that only that which was already known could be learned, that growth of knowledge consisted of bringing together a universal truth of reason and a particular truth of sense which had previously been noted separately. In any case, learning meant *growth* of knowledge, and growth belongs in the region of becoming, change, and hence is inferior

to *possession* of knowledge in the syllogistic self-revolving manipulation of what was already known—demonstration. In contrast with this point of view, Bacon eloquently proclaimed the superiority of discovery of new facts and truths to the demonstrations of the old.<sup>50</sup>

If persuasion (and, more largely, rhetoric) is seen as solely as inculcation of already-known “truths,” then Dewey has a solid argument. What others (beginning with the Sophists) would say in response is that rhetoric in the proper sense is in large part a process of, as Aristotle put it, “discovering the possible means of persuasion in reference to any subject whatever,” and that the act of observing (or discovery) is precisely the kind of inquiry Dewey is talking about.<sup>51</sup>

In our own time, many continue to see persuasion at most as a necessary but unpleasant task. The negative images abound. One recent example stands out for me—a car salesman, talking about his approach to an older couple: “Most people think car salesmen have plaid jackets, white shoes, and Elvis hairdos and that they lie. But I talk to customers and find out what’s going on and show a little empathy. [The couple in question] were Christian people, so I let them know I attribute my success to a higher power. You need to find that common ground. In the car business, you have to build the rapport before you go for the jugular.”<sup>52</sup>

Advertising is often seen as a virulent activity that is the apotheosis of persuasion. In the 1950s, Vance Packard’s *The Hidden Persuaders* sounded the tocsin, with scary claims about subliminal messages in print and television ads forcing unwitting consumers to buy products they didn’t want, didn’t need, and couldn’t afford. Perhaps it was part of the culture of the time that Packard’s claims seemed plausible; after all, this was the same 1950s culture that spawned films such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, with the basic theme centering on aliens of one kind or another getting us to do their bidding, and books such as William H. Whyte’s *The Organization*

*Man*, with its emphasis on nonthinking conformity, and David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*, with its notions of other-directed beings taking their behavioral cues from others rather than from themselves. The theme continues in the 1970s, as exemplified by Robert Heilbroner's attack. Heilbroner thought advertising "the single most value-destroying activity of a business civilization" and spoke of "the extraordinary subversive influence of the relentless effort to persuade people to change their lifeways, not out of any knowledge of, or deeply held convictions about the 'good life,' but merely to sell whatever article or service is being pandered."<sup>53</sup> The theme continues with Michael Schudson's 1984 contribution, *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion: Its Dubious Impact on American Society*.<sup>54</sup> The title nicely sums up the book's main argument—an argument that apparently has as much appeal now as it did fifty years ago.

Advertising runs nose to nose with American politics in helping to give persuasion a bad name. Given the thesis of this book, we would expect to find politics intertwined with persuasion. Politics is about leadership, after all, and it is about getting people to see your point of view and act accordingly. At the same time, we can expect to find that when politics and politicians are seen negatively, the primary weapon of politicians at hand—persuasion—will also be seen negatively.<sup>55</sup> There are a few positive and edifying examples of political persuasion. The *Federalist Papers* is probably the greatest persuasive exposition on American government ever written. And we have Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, an elegant and moving reminder of the fundamental grounding of the nation.<sup>56</sup> On the many other hands, we have American political campaigns engaging in "persuasion" of the most scurrilous sort.<sup>57</sup> We all have our favorite or most obnoxious attack ads, and they run the gamut from the little girl plucking daisy petals (1964, attacking Barry Goldwater) to Willie Horton (1988, attacking Michael Dukakis). Every four years, we find ourselves in the midst of yet another seemingly endless presidential campaign where we are again subjected

to incessant television ads, with scenes of the candidate hugging diversity archetypes, the alto tones of the female voice-over oozing sincerity, and soft piano music in the background, or—attack time—sharp focus scenes of the carnage resulting from some of the opponent’s policies (dead trees, dead whales, dead people) and black-and-white scratchy images of the opponent looking mean or stupid, with the same female voice-over oozing well-modulated shock and faint disgust, and discordant music in the background.

Part of the current negative sense of persuasion seems to stem from perceptions of persuasion as propaganda or brainwashing. Some of these perceptions seem rooted in images of the dictatorships spanning most of the previous century, with masses of people being swayed at rallies at Nuremberg or in Red Square. And some of these perceptions are based on a kind of relativism or post-modern view of truth. With relativism, I can say that truth cannot be known anyway, so why should I presume to tell you what to do or think? We should not want to impose our values on others. My values are not your values, and I do not want to dictate my values to you, which means that in some sort of strange way, all values are equal. (It is curious and ironic that Plato attacks the rhetoricians for being satisfied with “relative” truth as opposed to absolute truth. He attacks them for being relativists. In our own time, the post-modern relativists attack the rhetoricians for claiming “truth.” Once again, the rhetoricians do not seem to be able to come out unscathed.)

For a host of reasons, then, some think that persuasion is dirty stuff, beneath us. What is interesting is that we use it all the same. Even in ancient times, even among those who claimed to disdain it, persuasion apparently had its uses. Cicero notes that Socrates was “the person who on the evidence of all men of learning and the verdict of the whole of Greece, owing not only to his wisdom and penetration and charm and subtlety but also to his eloquence and variety and fertility easily came out top of whatever side in a debate he took up.”<sup>58</sup>

And in our own time, I have observed that some of the same folks who argue that persuasion is a bad thing spend hundreds of hours in developing with artful craft a funding proposal or research paper clearly intended to persuade. We might think persuasion is beneath us, but when we write a proposal to a foundation or government agency, we take care that our arguments are in good order (including citing at length someone we suspect will be reviewing the proposal) and that the proposal “looks good,” with well-chosen illustrations and an easy-to-read typeface. And we include letters of support, again carefully selected again with an eye to whom we think will be reviewing the proposal.

When we put together our vita, we take a great deal of care in explaining what we did in the past, how we did it, and the significance of it. So important is the vita as a persuasive tool that we sometimes seek professional advice. If persuasion were unimportant or beneath us and if our vita speaks for itself (as nothing but bare facts), then why do we take such care?

We use persuasion because we know that despite disclaimers, there is more to the message than straight, rational recitations of facts and logical argument. We know what would happen if in the middle of a major sales pitch we started talking like Hal, the computer in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. We know the difference between reading the transcript of a trial and being in the courtroom hearing hesitations, tones of voice, pauses between question and response, and all the other parts of communication that have persuasive meaning. We know, with Shakespeare, that there can be “speech in their dumbness, language in their very gesture.”<sup>59</sup>

## Conclusion

It is reasonable to say that we do use persuasion, all of us. Leaders in particular try to persuade. Thucydides is not off the mark in suggesting that persuasion is a critical part of leadership. Is this all lead-

ers do? Clearly no. There are many aspects of leadership. But without the ability to persuade, leaders will have no following. All of the big ideas, mission statements, five-year strategic plans, goals, and objectives will not matter much at all if leaders cannot persuade people that what they are saying makes sense and is worth doing.

What we turn to now is a fundamental part of persuasion: the choice of arguments that the leader will use. Choice of arguments depends on two factors: the kinds of information the leader seeks, obtains, and subsequently chooses to bolster the persuasive case, and the kinds of arguments the leader chooses. We consider these two factors in Chapters Two and Three.

