INTRODUCTION

An average couple will have between thirty and fifty significant arguments a year – 'significant' meaning an encounter which departs sharply from civilised norms of dialogue, would be uncomfortable to film and show friends and might involve screaming, rolled eyes, histrionic accusations, slammed doors and liberal uses of terms like 'arsehole' and 'knobhead'.

Given the intensity of the distress that arguments cause us, we could expect modern societies to have learnt to devote a great deal of attention and resources to understanding why they happen and how we might

more effectively defuse or untangle them. We might expect there to be school and university courses on how to manage arguments successfully and official targets for reducing their incidence (with news bulletins anxiously reporting that the argument-index had risen 1.7 percent in the last quarter and the opposition is demanding resignations from the richly resourced Ministry of Arguments).

But there are some strong reasons for our collective neglect. The first is that our Romantic culture sentimentally implies that there might be a necessary connection between true passion and a fiery temper. It can seem as if fighting and hurling insults might be signs not of immaturity and a woeful incapacity for self-control, but of an admirable intensity of desire and strength of commitment.

Romanticism also conspires to suggest that arguments might be part of the natural weather of relationships and could never therefore be fairly analysed through reason or dismantled with logic. Only a pedant would seek to think through an argument, as opposed to letting it run its sometimes troubling and rowdy, but ultimately always necessary course.

At a more intimate level, it may be that we cannot quite face what arguments show us about ourselves: They present an unbearable insult to our self-love. Once the argument is over, the viciousness, self-pity and pettiness on display are repulsive to have to think about, and so we artfully pretend to ourselves and our partners that what happened last night must have been a peculiar aberration, best passed over in silence from the calmer perspective of dawn.

We are further stymied in our investigations because there is so little public evidence that a version of what occurs in our unions might unfold in everyone else's as well. Out of shame and a desire to seem normal, we collectively shield each other from the reality of relationships, and then imagine that our behaviour must be uniquely savage and childish and therefore incapable of redemption or analysis. We miss out on a chance to improve because we take ourselves to be the mad exceptions.

None of this needs to be the case. We argue badly and regularly principally because we lack an education in how to teach others who we are. Beneath the surface of almost every argument lies a forlorn attempt by two people to get the other to see, acknowledge and respond to their emotional reality and sense of justice. Beyond the invective is a longing that our partner should

witness, understand and endorse some crucial element of our own experience.

The tragedy of every sorry argument is that it is constructed around a horrific mismatch between the message we so badly want to send ('I need you to love me, know me, agree with me') and the manner in which we are able to deliver it (with impatient accusations, sulks, put-downs, sarcasm, exaggerated gesticulations and forceful 'fuck yous').

A bad argument is a failed endeavour to communicate, which perversely renders the underlying message we seek to convey ever less visible. It is our very desperation which undermines us and ushers in the unreasonableness that prevents whatever point we lay claim to from making its way across. We argue in an ugly way because, in our times of distress, we lose

access to all better methods of explaining our fears, frustrated hopes, needs, concerns, excitements and convictions. And we do so principally because we are so scared that we may have ruined our lives by being in a relationship with someone who cannot fathom the inner movements of our souls; we would do things so much better if only we cared a little less.

We don't, therefore, end up in bitter arguments because we are fundamentally brutish or resolutely demented, but because we are at once so invested and yet so incapable. It is the untutored force of our wish to communicate that impedes our steady ability to do so.

And yet, though arguments may be destructive, avoiding points of conflict isn't straightforwardly the answer either. An argument is about something, and its content needs to be faced up to eventually if a

relationship is to survive. The priority is not so much to avoid points of contention as to learn to handle them in less counterproductively vindictive and more gently strategic ways. It seems we may need a lot of help in order to acquire the complex art of converting our poisonous arguments into effective and compassionate dialogues.