

ON THE GRADUAL CONSTRUCTION OF THOUGHTS DURING SPEECH

BY HEINRICH VON KLEIST, TRANSLATED BY MICHAEL HAMBURGER¹

If there is something you want to know and cannot discover by meditation, then, my dear, ingenious friend, I advise you to discuss it with the first acquaintance whom you happen to meet. He need not have a sharp intellect, nor do I mean that you should question him on the subject. No! Rather you yourself should begin by telling it all to him.

I can see you opening your eyes wide at this and replying that in former years you were advised never to talk about anything that you do not already understand. In those days, however, you probably spoke with the pretentious purpose of enlightening others – I want you to speak with the reasonable purpose of enlightening yourself, and it is possible that each of these rules of conduct, different as they are, will apply in certain cases. The French say: *l'appétit vient en mangeant* and this maxim holds true when parodied into: *l'idée vient en parlant*.

Often I sit at my desk, poring over documents and trying to discover the point of view from which some complicated controversy might be judged. Then, when my inmost being is involved in the endeavour to arrive at the truth, I usually stare into the light, the brightest point in the room. Or when an algebraic problem arises, I look for the first preliminary statement, the equation, which expresses the given circumstances and from which later the solution can be easily deduced by calculation. But, lo and behold, if I mention it to my sister, who is sitting behind me and working, I discover facts which whole hours of brooding, perhaps, would not have revealed. Not that she literally *tells* them to me; for neither does she know the book of rules, nor has she studied Euler or Kästner. Nor is it that her skilful questioning leads me on to the point which matters, though this may frequently be the case. But since I always have some obscure preconception, distantly connected in some way with whatever I am looking for, I have only to begin boldly and the mind, obliged to find an end for this beginning, transforms my confused concept as I speak into thoughts that are perfectly clear, so that, to my surprise, the end of the sentence coincides with the desired knowledge. I interpose inarticulate sounds, draw out the connecting words, possibly even use an apposition when required and employ other tricks which will prolong my speech in order to gain sufficient time for the fabrication of my idea in the workshop of reason.

During this process nothing is more helpful to me than a sudden move-

¹ First broadcast in the third programme of the B.B.C. on January 12th, 1951.

ment on my sister's part, as if she were about to interrupt me; for my mind, already tense, becomes even more excited by this attempt to deprive it of the speech of which it enjoys the possession and, like a great general in an awkward position, reaches an even higher tension and increases in capacity.

In this sense I understand the extent to which Molière could make use of his servant girl; for when, as he claims, he trusted her to make a judgment sound enough to correct his own, this is a kind of modesty which I do not believe to have existed in his heart. The human face confronting a speaker is an extraordinary source of inspiration to him and a glance which informs us that a thought we have only half expressed has already been grasped often saves us the trouble of expressing all the remaining half. I believe that, at the moment when he opened his mouth, many a great orator did not know what he was going to say. But the conviction that the necessary wealth of ideas would be provided by the circumstances and by the resulting excitement of his mind, made him bold enough to pick the opening words at random.

Take Mirabeau's 'thunderbolt', with which he silenced that Master of Ceremonies who — after the adjournment of the King's last Royal Session on June 23rd in which he had commanded the Three Orders to vote separately — returned to the assembly hall, where the Three Orders still lingered together, and asked them whether they had heard the King's command. 'Yes,' Mirabeau replied, 'we have heard the King's command.' I am sure that during this humane opening he was not yet thinking of the bayonet with which he concluded: 'yes, sir,' he repeated, 'we have heard it.' One can see that he still does not really know what he wants. 'But what entitles you' — he continued, and now suddenly a well of immense possibilities breaks through to his consciousness — 'to draw our attention to commands in this place? We are the representatives of the Nation.' That was what he needed: 'The Nation gives orders and does not take them' — only to hoist himself at once on to the peak of audacity. 'And to ensure that I am making myself perfectly clear to you' — and only now he finds the words to express all the resistance for which his soul is armed: 'go and tell your King that nothing but the bayonet's power will force us to leave our seats' — whereupon, satisfied with himself, he sat down on a chair.

If one thinks of the Master of Ceremonies, it is impossible to imagine him during this scene other than in a state of utter mental bankruptcy; according to a similar law, a body void of electricity, when placed in the atmosphere of a body electrically charged, suddenly acquires a corresponding charge. And just as, in the electrically active body, the inherent electric charge is renewed after the interaction, so our orator's courage was heightened to the most reckless enthusiasm by the destruction of his opponent. In this way it is possible that in the end it was the twitching of an upper lip or the

ambiguous flicking of a cuff that caused the collapse of the whole social order in France.

The books tell us that as soon as the Master of Ceremonies had left, Mirabeau got up and proposed (1) that they should immediately set themselves up as the National Assembly (2) as being inviolable. For by releasing his energy in the manner of a Kleistian flask he had now become neutral once more and, alighting from his reckless flight, re-admitted caution and fear of the Châtelet.

This is a curious parallel between the phenomena of the physical and the moral worlds and, if pursued, would be found to apply even to minor details. But I shall leave the analogy and return to my theme. La Fontaine too, in his fable: *Les animaux malades de la peste*, in which the fox is forced to compose an apology for the lion without knowing where to find the material for it, provides a striking example of the gradual formation of thought out of a beginning made under stress.

The fable is well known. The plague is rife in the animal kingdom, the lion convokes its most powerful representatives and discloses to them that if heaven is to be appeased they must offer up a sacrifice. There are many sinners among the people, he says, and the worst of these must die to save the others. They must therefore confess their sins with perfect candour. He, for his part, admits that under the stress of hunger he has done away with many a sheep; even the dog, if it got in his way; indeed, in his moments of greed it has even been his misfortune to gobble up the shepherd. If no one has been guilty of greater weaknesses he is ready to die.

'Sire', says the fox, who wants to divert the thunderstorm from himself, 'you are too generous. Your noble zeal leads you to extremes. What is it, after all, to strangle a sheep? or a dog, that unworthy beast? And *quant au berger*,' he continues, for this is the crux of the matter, '*on peut dire*', although he does not yet know what, '*qui'il méritoit tout mal*'; he takes a chance, and now he has committed himself; '*étant*', a bad phrase, but one which gives him time; '*de ces gens-la*' and only now does he hit upon the idea which will save him from his plight: '*Qui sur les animaux se font un chimérique empire*'.

And now he proves that the ass, the most bloodthirsty of animals (because he nibbles at every plant), is the most suitable for sacrifice, whereupon they fall upon him and tear him to pieces. — This kind of speech is nothing less than articulated thought. The chains of ideas and of their designations proceed together at the same speed, and the mental documents for the one and for the other agree. Then speech is not an impediment, a sort of brake on the wheel of intellect, but like a second wheel running parallel with it on the same axle.

It is quite a different matter when the mind has already finished off the

thought before speech begins. For then the mind must pause at the mere expression, and this business, far from exciting it, has indeed no other effect than to provide relaxation from excitement.

Therefore, when an idea is expressed in a disorderly manner, it does not follow at all that it was also thought in a disorderly manner; rather it could easily be that the least clearly expressed ideas are just the most clearly thought. At social gatherings where minds are continually fertilized with ideas by a lively conversation, one can often see persons who as a rule are reticent, because they feel that they have no command of language, suddenly break out with a jerking movement, take hold of speech and give birth to something unintelligible. Indeed, now that they have attracted everyone's attention, they seem to intimate by their embarrassed gestures that they are no longer quite sure what it is they want to say. It is likely that these persons thought of something most striking, and thought it clearly. But the sudden change of occupation, the transition in their minds from thought to expression, soon neutralized all the excitement required for the holding fast of thought and, even more so, for its expression.

In such cases it is all the more indispensable that language should be within easy reach of our minds, so that those concepts which we have thought synchronously, but cannot express synchronously, may at least succeed one another as quickly as possible. And altogether, anyone who can talk faster than his opponent with equal clarity will have an advantage over him, because he has more troops, as it were, to lead on to the battlefield.

How necessary a certain mental stimulus really is, if only to reproduce concepts which have already occurred to us, can often be seen when persons with open and educated minds are examined and are suddenly confronted with such unexpected questions as these: what is the State? or what is property? or something of the kind. If these young people had just come from a party in which the State or property had been discussed for some time, perhaps they would easily have found the definition by the comparison, abstraction and recapitulation of ideas. But here, where this preparation of the mind is wholly absent, they are seen to falter, and only an examiner lacking in understanding would conclude that they do not *know* anything. For it is not we who know, but at first it is only a *certain state of mind* of ours that knows. Only very vulgar intellects, people who yesterday learned by heart what the State is and by tomorrow will have forgotten it, are likely to come out with the right answer here.

Perhaps there is no occasion on which it is more difficult to reveal one's good points than in a public examination.

Apart from the fact that is repulsive, irritating and that it offends one's finer feelings to be continually on the alert while one of those learned horse dealers probes our acquirements and, according to whether there are five or

six of them, buys or dismisses us; — it is difficult to play on a human mind and induce it to yield its peculiar sound: clumsy hands so easily disturb its pitch that even the most experienced observer of men, practised in the art of mental midwifery, as Kant calls it, to a masterly degree, could go wrong in this case owing to unfamiliarity with his patient.

There is one circumstance, however, which in most cases gains such young people, even the most ignorant, a good report; it is that, if the examination takes place in public, the examiners themselves are too embarrassed to be able to judge freely. For not only are they frequently conscious of the indecency of this whole procedure — we should be ashamed to order another person to empty his purse in front of us, let alone his soul — but their own intelligence must pass a strict mustering here, and they may often thank their stars if they themselves can leave the examination without having exposed themselves, more disgracefully perhaps than the young man fresh from the university whom they have been examining.