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HEINRICH VON KLEIST

SELECTED
WRITINGS

Edited and translated by
DAVID CONSTANTINE
University of Oxford

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ESSAYS

ON THE GRADUAL PRODUCTION OF THOUGHTS WHILST SPEAKING

For Rühle von Lilienstern*

If there is something you wish to know and by meditation you cannot find it, my advice to you, my ingenious old friend, is: speak about it with the first acquaintance you encounter. He does not need to be especially perspicacious, nor do I mean that you should ask his opinion, not at all. On the contrary, you should yourself tell him at once what it is you wish to know. I see astonishment in your face. I hear you reply that when you were young you were advised only to speak of things you already understood. But in those days, doubtless, you spoke in the presumption of instructing others but my wish is that you speak in the sensible intention of instructing yourself, and so, different rules applying in different circumstances, both may perhaps be allowed to stand. The French say 'l'appétit vient en mangeant'* and this maxim is just as true if we parody it and say 'l'idée vient en parlant'. Often I have sat at my desk over the papers of a difficult case and sought the point of view from which it might be grasped. My habit then, in this striving of my innermost being after enlightenment, is to gaze into the lamplight, as into the brightest point. Or a problem in algebra occurs to me and I need a starting point, I need the equation which expresses the given relationships and from which by simple calculation the solution may be found. And lo and behold! If I speak about it to my sister sitting behind me at her work, I learn more than I should have arrived at by perhaps hours of brooding. Not that she in any real sense *tells* me, for she is not familiar with the penal code nor has she studied Euler* or Kästner*. Nor is it that by skilful questioning she brings me to the crux of the matter, though that might often be the way to do it, I daresay. But

because I do have some dim conception at the outset, one distantly related to what I am looking for, if I boldly make a start with that, my mind, even as my speech proceeds, under the necessity of finding an end for that beginning, will shape my first confused idea into complete clarity so that, to my amazement, understanding is arrived at as the sentence ends. I put in a few unarticulated sounds, dwell lengthily on the conjunctions, perhaps make use of apposition where it is not necessary, and have recourse to other tricks which will spin out my speech, all to gain time for the fabrication of my idea in the workshop of the mind. And in this process nothing helps me more than if my sister makes a move suggesting she wishes to interrupt; for such an attempt from outside to wrest speech from its grasp still further excites my already hard-worked mind and, like a general when circumstances press, its powers are raised a further degree. This, in my view, was how Molière* used his maid; for to allow her judgement to correct his, as he said he did, would show more modesty than I can believe he had. It is a strangely inspiring thing to have a human face before us as we speak; and often a look announcing that a half-expressed thought is already grasped gives us its other half's expression. I believe many a great speaker to have been ignorant when he opened his mouth of what he was going to say. But the conviction that he would be able to draw all the ideas he needed from the circumstances themselves and from the mental excitement they generated made him bold enough to trust to luck and make a start. I think of the 'thunderbolt' with which Mirabeau* dismissed the Master of Ceremonies who, after the meeting of 23 June, the last under the *ancien régime*, when the King had ordered the estates to disperse, returned to the hall in which they were still assembled and asked them had they heard the King's command. 'Yes,' Mirabeau replied, 'we have heard the King's command.' — I am certain that beginning thus humanely he had not yet thought of the bayonets with which he would finish. 'Yes, my dear sir,' he repeated, 'we have heard it.' — As we see, he is not yet exactly sure what he intends. 'But by what right ...' he continues, and suddenly a source of colossal ideas is opened up to him, 'do you give us orders here? We are the representatives of the nation.' — That was what he needed! — 'The nation does not take orders. It gives them.' — Which launches him there and then to the highest pitch of boldness. — 'And to make myself perfectly plain to you ...' — And only now does he find words to express how fully his soul has armed itself and stands ready to resist — 'Tell your king we shall not move from here unless forced to by bayonets.' — Whereupon, well content with himself, he sat down. — As to the Master of

Ceremonies, we must imagine him bankrupted by this encounter of all ideas. For a law applies rather similar to the law which says that if a body having no electricity of its own enters the zone of a body which has been electrified at once the latter's electricity will be produced in it. And just as in the electrified body, by a reciprocal effect, a strengthening of the innate electricity then occurs, so our speaker's confidence, as he annihilated his opponent, was converted into an inspired and extraordinary boldness. In this way it was perhaps the twitching of an upper lip or an equivocal tugging at the cuffs that brought about the overthrow of the order of things in France. We read that Mirabeau as soon as the Master of Ceremonies had withdrawn stood up and proposed (i) that they constitute themselves a national assembly at once, and (ii) declare themselves inviolable. For having, like a Kleistian jar,* discharged himself now he was neutral again. Returning from boldness, speedily he made way for caution and fear of the Châtelet.* — We have here a remarkable congruence between the phenomena of the physical world and those of the moral world which, if we were to pursue it, would hold good in the subsidiary circumstances too. But I shall leave my comparison and return to the matter in hand. La Fontaine also, in his fable 'Les animaux malades de la peste',* where the fox is obliged to justify himself to the lion and does not know what material to draw on, gives us a remarkable example of the gradual completion of thought out of a beginning made under pressure. The fable is well known. Plague is raging among the animals, the lion summons the grandes of the kingdom and informs them that heaven, if it is to be propitiated, must have a sacrifice. There are many sinners among the people, the death of the greatest must save the rest from destruction. Accordingly, he bids them make him a candid confession of all their crimes. He, for his part, admits that, driven by hunger, he has cut short the lives of many a sheep; dogs likewise, when they came too near; indeed, in delicious moments he has even been known to eat the shepherd. If no one is guilty of worse weaknesses than these then he, the lion, will gladly be the one to die. 'Sire,' says the fox, wishing to ward the lightning off himself, 'in your zeal and generosity you have gone too far. What if you have done a sheep or two to death? Or a dog, a vile creature? And: quant au berger,' he continues, for this is the chief point, 'on peut dire,' though he still does not know what, 'qu'il méritoit tout mal,' trusting to luck, and with that he has embroiled himself, 'étant,' a poor word but which buys him time, 'de ces gens là,' and only now does he hit upon the thought that gets him out of his difficulty, 'qui sur les animaux se font un chimérique empire.' — And he goes on to prove that the donkey, the bloodthirsty

donkey (devourer of grass and plants) is the most fitting sacrifice. And with that they fall on him and tear him to pieces. — Speech of that kind is truly a thinking aloud. The ideas in succession and the signs for them proceed side by side and the mental acts entailed by both converge. Speech then is not at all an impediment; it is not, as one might say, a brake on the mind but rather a second wheel running along parallel on the same axle. It is a quite different matter when the mind, before any utterance of speech, has completed its thought. For then it is left with the mere expression of that thought, and this business, far from exciting the mind, has, on the contrary, only a relaxing effect. Thus if an idea is expressed confusedly we should by no means assume that it was thought confusedly too; on the contrary, it might well be the case that the most confusedly expressed ideas are the clearest thought. In any gathering where by a lively conversation a continuous insemination of minds with ideas is under way you will often see people who, not feeling in control of language, have usually held back, all of a sudden, with a convulsive movement, take fire, seize a chance to speak and bring something incomprehensible into the world. Indeed, having drawn the whole company's attention upon themselves, they seem then by embarrassed gestures to indicate that they themselves no longer quite know what it was they wanted to say. It is probable that such a person has thought something very apt, and very clearly. But the sudden shift of activity, the mind's transition from thinking to expression, caused the lapsing of all its excitement, which it needed both to hold on to the thought and then to utter it. In such cases it is all the more necessary that we have language readily at our disposal so that the things we have thought of all at once but have not all at once been able to utter we may as quickly as possible deliver in sequence. And in general if two men have the same clarity of thought the faster speaker will always have an advantage since he brings, so to speak, more forces to the battle than his opponent. That a certain excitement of the intelligence is necessary even to revivify ideas we have already had is amply demonstrated whenever open-minded and knowledgeable people are being examined and without any preamble are asked such questions as: What is the state? Or: What is property? Things of that kind. If these young people had been in company and for a while the subject of conversation had been the state or property they would by a process of comparison, discrimination and summary perhaps with ease have arrived at the definition. But being wholly deprived of any such preparation they are seen to falter and only an obtuse examiner will conclude from this that they do not *know*. For it is not *we* who know things but pre-eminently a certain *condition* of ours which knows.

Only very commonplace intellects, people who yesterday learned by heart what the state is and today have forgotten it again, will have their answers pat in an examination. Indeed, there may be no worse opportunity in the world for showing oneself to advantage than a public examination. Besides the fact that it offends and wounds our sense of decency and incites us to recalcitrance to have some learned horsedealer looking into how many things we know who then, depending on whether they are five or six, either buys us or dismisses us: it is so difficult to play upon a human mind and induce it to give forth its peculiar music, it so easily under clumsy hands goes out of tune, that even the most practised connoisseur of human beings, a real master in what Kant calls the midwifery of thinking,* even he, not being acquainted with the one whose labour he is assisting at, may make mistakes. And if such young people, even the most ignorant among them, do most often achieve good marks this is because the minds of the examiners, if the examination is in public, are themselves too embarrassed to deliver a true judgement. For not only do they themselves feel the indecency of the whole procedure: we should be ashamed to ask a person to tip out the contents of his purse before us, let alone his soul: but their own intelligences come under dangerous appraisal and they may count themselves lucky if they manage to leave the examination without having revealed more shameful weaknesses than the young finalist himself has whom they have been examining.

(To be continued.)*