

Aristophanes, Clouds 213
Strepsiades

...
But where (on the map) is Sparta?

Pupil

Where it is (hopou 'stin;)? Ah, over here!

Strepsiades

[215] So close? You'd better think about that some more,
and move them a whole lot farther away from us.

On the gradual formation of thoughts in the process of speech

by Heinrich von Kleist

(translated in the evening on January 14, 1996, in Oslo, by Christoph Harbsmeier)

[Translator's note: This translation is based on Heinrich von Kleist, Werke in einem Band, Munich: Carl Hanser, 1966, pp. 810-814 "Über das Verfertigen der Gedanken beim Reden". Heinrich von Kleist, the distinguished dramatist, committed suicide in 1811, thirty-four years old, in poverty and in deep despair over his failure to win public recognition for his work, especially from powerful men like Johan Wolfgang von Goethe. The present piece was probably written for the Berlin journal Phöbus which Heinrich von Kleist edited from 1808 to February 1909. The piece was first published in 1878, 67 years after his death, on the basis of a copyist's manuscript which was corrected throughout in Kleist's hand. The paragraphing in the manuscript is not Kleist's own but that of the copyist. The paragraph divisions in this translation are those of the translator. The precise date of Kleist's composition is uncertain. He considered the work as unfinished.]

My dear thoughtful friend: if there is something you want to know without being able to find it out through meditation, turn to any acquaintance you run into to talk about the matter. There is no need for him to be a sharp mind. Also, I do not mean to say that you should ask him about this matter: Oh no, never! Rather, you should tell him the solution yourself. I can see you making big eyes and telling me that you have been advised earlier to speak of nothing except of what you understand. But at that time you may have had the mad ambition to instruct others. but I want you to tell him so you instruct yourself! In that way, perhaps, both these prudential rules may be found to be reconcilable, each applying to its own cases.

The French say *l'appetit vient en mangeant*, and this empirical maxim remains true if one makes a parody of it and says *l'idée vient en parlant*.

Often I sit over my papers and I try to find out from what angle a given conflict has to be judged. Usually, I look into the light, as the brightest spot I can find, as I try to enlighten my inner being. Or else I seek out the first approach, the first equation which expresses the obtaining relations, and from which the solution may be derived simply through plain arithmetic. And look what happens: as soon as I talk to my sister - who is sitting and working behind me - about this matter, I realise what hours of hard thinking have not been able to make clear to me. It isn't as if she was was telling me in any direct sense. She does not know the law, and has

never studied her Euler and her Kästner. Neither is that what she leads me to the crucial point through deft questions - although this latter case may occasionally occur. But since I have some vague thoughts that are in some way connected with what I am looking for, then once I have embarked on the formulation of the thought it is as if the need to lead what has been begun to some conclusion transforms my hazy imaginations into complete clarity in such a way that my insight is completed together with my rambling sentence. I mix in inarticulate noises, I draw out my sentence connectives, I use appositions where they are not strictly necessary and I use other rhetorical tricks that will draw out speech: in this way I gain the time to fabricate my idea in this workshop of reason.

Nothing in all this is more useful than some movement on the part of my sister, a movement indicating that she intends to interrupt me. For my strained mind becomes even more excited by the need to defend this inherent right to speak against attack from the outside. The mind's abilities grow like those of a great general who is faced with a very difficult situation.

It is against this background that I understand how useful Molière found his maid. For if, as he claims, he trusted her judgment more than his own, this would indicate a degree of modesty on his part which I refuse to believe was there.

The other person's face is a curious source of inspiration for a person who speaks. A single glance which indicates that a half-expressed thought is already understood, bestows on us the other half of the formulation.

I believe that many a great orator, when he opened his mouth, did not know what he was going to say. But the conviction that the necessary wealth of thought would be naturally inspired by the conditions surrounding his speech and his resulting excitement, causes him to be bold enough to make a beginning with his speech.

This makes me think of that "thunderbolt" of Mirabeau. Mirabeau sent the Master of Ceremonies packing when the latter after the last national meeting led by the King on June 23, in which the King had ordered the members of the assembly to disperse, returned to the meeting room where the assembly had not dispersed, and asked whether they had received the King's orders. "Yes", Mirabeau replied, "we have understood the King's orders." - I am convinced that when he made this humane start he did not think of those bayonets with which he closed his speech. "Yes, Sir", he repeated, "we have understood them." - One can see that he has no idea of where he is going. "However, on what authority do you think you are entitled" he continues, and a sudden source of amazing thoughts began to flow for him, "to address orders to us? We are the representatives of the nation!" - Ah, this was what he needed! "The nation gives orders. It does not receive orders." - And he surges up the heights of hubris. "And to make everything perfectly plain to you," - And only at this point he finds the proper expression for the act of defiance for which his soul is prepared, "you should go and tell your King that we shall not leave our places here except when forced with bayonets." Upon which he settled, utterly satisfied, into a chair. -

Thinking about the Master of Ceremonies it is impossible to visualise him except in a state of complete spiritual bankruptcy. The law is the same as that by which an electrically neutral body, when entering the atmosphere of a charged body, will

acquire the opposite (negative, bankrupt) electrical charge. And just as the energy charge in the charged body is strengthened through interaction, so in the case of this annihilation of the opponent, Mirabeau's enthusiasm knew no bounds.

Perhaps it was just the twitching of the upper lip or an ambiguously uncertain movement about the sleeves that caused the change of the course of events in France.

One reads that Mirabeau stood up, as soon as the Master of Ceremonies had left, and proposed that the assembly should constitute itself as the national assembly and as inviolable. For since he had lost his charge, like a Kleistian bottle, he had become neutralised and he gave room in his mind to fear of the judiciary at Chatelet and to carefulness in political action.

This is a curious convergence between the phenomena of the natural and the moral world which, if one wished to pursue the matter, could be shown to apply even in the minor subplots of this episode. But I shall leave my simile, and I shall return to my subject.

Even LaFontaine gives a very fine example of the gradual constitution of thought in the process of speaking in his fable entitled *Les animaux malades de la peste*. In this fable the fox is forced to give a speech in defence of the lion without knowing where on earth he should find support for his defence. The well-rounded idea is born from a beginning which is dictated by necessity.

The fable is well known. The plague is ravaging the animal kingdom. The lion assembles the "important" animals and explains that it must be offered Heaven with a sacrifice in order to get it to relent. The lion maintained that there were many sinners among the animals, and the greatest of these would have to be sacrificed for the survival of the others. He therefore suggested that everyone should confess their sins to him. He, for his part, had to admit that in the heat of hunger he had killed many a sheep and even some dogs who had come too close. Moreover, he had once by chance - in a gourmet mood - feasted on a shepherd. If no one else could show greater weaknesses he was ready to die.

"Sir, said the fox, who was trying to avert disaster from himself, "You are too generous. Your honest endeavour leads you too far. What's wrong with strangling a sheep? Or a dog, worthless creature! And then: *quant au berger*" he continues, for this is the main point, "*on peut dire*" although he has no idea what to say about him!, "*qu'il me2ritait tout mal*": he says that on the off chance that he can think of something, and now he is in trouble. "*Étant*" he continues, a poor phrase to use, but it does give him time: "*de ces gens la4*" and only at this point does he hit that thought which gets him out of trouble: "*qui sur les animaux se font un chime2rique empire*" - And now for the demonstration that the ass, the bloodthirsty one!, (who eats away at the herbs), that the ass was the proper sacrificial victim. And everyone pounces on the ass, tears him to pieces.

Such speech is truly thought in the vocal medium. The sequences of thoughts and expressions go alongside each other, and the underlying psychological realities

converge. Language, under these conditions is not manacles, it is not like some impediment on the wheel of the spirit. Language is a second wheel on the same axle!

The situation is quite different if the mind is finished already with a thought before the speaking starts. Then the spirit stays back in the process of mere articulation and this business of articulation, far from exciting the spirit, on the contrary reduces the mental intensity. If therefore a thought is expressed in a fuzzy way, then it does not at all follow that this thought was conceived in a confused way. On the contrary it is quite possible that the ideas that are expressed in the most confusing fashion are the ones that were thought out most clearly.

One often sees, in social company where congenial conversation inspires everyone with continuous fresh ideas, that people who usually feel linguistically inept feel inspired to break into flickering of unstable articulation, to take hold of language - and produce something utterly incomprehensible. And when these people have the others' attention they show through their embarrassed gestures that they have no idea what they were really trying to say. It is quite probable that these people have thought up something quite apt and clear. But the abrupt change in activity, the passage of the mind from thinking to articulation, this abrupt change dampened that very excitement which was necessary for keeping the thought in mind as well as for putting it into words. In such cases it is all the more necessary that language is available to us with facility and ease so that what we have just thought and are unable to articulate at that very same time, can at least be put into words as soon as possible afterwards.

Quite generally, someone who - with the same degree of clarity - speaks faster than his opponent, will have a distinct advantage over him. The reason is that the fast talker is leading more troops into the field.

When, in examinations, one abruptly examines open-minded and well-educated people, without introduction, on questions like "What is the state?" or "What is property", one realises how necessary it is that the mind be excited in a certain way for us to be able to recreate in our minds even thoughts that we have had before. If the same people whom we examine in this way are found in congenial company where the talk has been about questions of the state and of property for a while, then perhaps these people would have no trouble through comparisons, contrasts and summary of the concepts???? concerned to find acceptable definitions. But under examination conditions, where the preparation of the mind is missing, one finds that they falter. Only an ignorant examiner will conclude that they do not know.

For it is not we who know. It is a certain state of us that knows.

Only truly vulgar spirits, people who have learnt by heart yesterday what the state is supposed to be and who have forgotten it tomorrow, will have a ready answer. Perhaps there is no more inappropriate occasion to show oneself in a positive light than a public examination. I disregard the fact that public examinations are disgusting and hurtful to the sensitive mind. I disregard the fact that it is provoking to be faced with with a hack who looks at our knowledge in order to decide whether to buy us if the number is five and to send us away if the number is

six.

It is very hard to play on the instrument of the human mind, to elicit its proper sound from it . The mind gets so easily out of tune under clumsy hands. So much so, that the greatest connoisseur of men, the consummate specialist in the midwifery of thoughts - as Kant calls it - might well commit serious mistakes with the young soul entrusted to him.

What ensures good results for such young people, by the way, even the most ignorant among them, is the circumstance that the examiners' minds, in the case of public examinations, are far too preoccupied to be able to pass a free judgment. Not only do they often feel the indecency of the whole procedure: it would be indecent enough to ask someone to open his purse before our eyes, but how much more indecent it is to ask him to open up his soul for examination! There is another thing: the examiners themselves have to pass a severe test in these examinations, and they may often thank the Lord for being able to leave examinations without showing weaknesses that are greater, perhaps, than those disclosed in the youth that has just emerged from the university and whom they have examined.

Note: *Les animaux malades de la peste* is the first fable of Book 7 in Jean de La Fontaine's *Fables*, the opening fable in the original second volume of the work.