BALTASAR GRACIÁN

The Art of WORLDLY WISDOM

Plus Essays on Modern Professional Life

From: **Baltasar Gracián** 1647
To: All staff
Subject: Please keep in mind

"Things pass not for what they are but for what they seem."

Translated, with notes and essays, by

JULIAN DELPHIKI

Thinking School

THE ART OF WORLDLY WISDOM

BALTASAR GRACIÁN

The Art of Worldly Wisdom

Plus Essays on Modern Professional Life

Gracián on Bosses, Office Politics and Personal Branding

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The Art of Worldly Wisdom, Plus Essays on Modern Professional Life

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Let the discreet person live as he can, if not as he would wish.

Baltasar Gracián, *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*, aphorism 120

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Preface

In 1647 a Jesuit from Aragon published a little book of three hundred pieces of advice for surviving at court. Three hundred and seventy-nine years later, it explains better than many leadership courses why the colleague who never says what he thinks gets promoted, why the person who is right in the meeting loses the project, and why a LinkedIn profile that tells everything tells nothing. And it explains it, above all, to whoever has least power. That is this book's wager, and it is worth arguing with from the first page: Gracián wrote for courtiers, but his advice serves the person who depends on someone else's favour more than the one who hands it out, and in today's office that is almost everyone.

That is not praise. It is a diagnosis, and not always a pleasant one.

Baltasar Gracián's *Oráculo manual y arte de prudencia*, known in English as *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*, is read today in two ways. One turns it into self-help: lines for coffee mugs, timeless pocket wisdom. The other turns it into a manual of manipulation: the seventeenth-century ancestor of the books on the laws of power sold in airport bookshops. Both readings have support in the text. Both go wrong in the same way: they read the book as if it answered questions we don't ask it.

This book does something else. It takes a hundred of the three hundred aphorisms (those that deal with work, bosses, reputation and time), translates them afresh from the 1647 Spanish and sets them in front of the office of 2026. Each comes with a short note.

Then come twenty essays, in four parts of five, that argue with Gracián about concrete problems of working life today. The first, "The Machine and the Craft", deals with artificial intelligence and entry-level jobs, knowledge that expires, the flatterer we now carry in our pocket, exhaustion and vocation. The

second, "The Boss and the Firm", with dealing with the boss, the temptation to make yourself indispensable, office enemies, incentives and the bad news always delivered by someone else. The third, "Image and Reputation", with permanent exposure on professional networks, mandatory return to the office, reputation, the mistake that is never forgiven and the mania for superlatives. The fourth, "Everyday Dealings", with the general inability to say no, meetings, the art of waiting, the truth best not told in full and judging people.

Why Gracián and not someone else? For three reasons, none of them sentimental.

The first is that his world resembles ours more than it should. Gracián wrote for people who depended on a superior's favour, competed with equals for few positions, lived surrounded by gossip and could not afford a public mistake. Replace "the prince" with "the CEO" and "the court" with "the leadership team", and half the book works without changing a comma. That says something about Gracián and a good deal about us.

The second is that he doesn't lie about what he describes. Today's business books talk about purpose, authenticity and teams that look after each other. Gracián talks about dependence, appearance and enemies. It is uncomfortable but useful: he describes the game as it is played, not as the values poster in the lobby describes it. Then, in the last aphorism, he asks you to be a saint. It is no small contradiction, and the reader will have to decide what to do with it.

The third is that he is badly served in English. Most cheap editions still reprint Joseph Jacobs's translation of 1892, which a later translator dismissed as little more than a paraphrase in "badly tortured English". The modern version that made Gracián required reading for American executives in the 1990s became a bestseller without anyone much arguing with it. A classic that is quoted a lot and argued with little deserves someone to disagree with it. And a Spanish book deserves, now and then, a translation made by someone who reads Spanish as a native.

I came back to Gracián through a habit. For years I have kept my highlights: several thousand, from hundreds of books, and most of them no longer than a dozen words. A book made of three hundred aphorisms of less than a page each is almost a collection of highlights written in advance. When I reread the *Oracle* with that habit, I found I was reading it the way I read the news from the trade I have worked in for twenty years: looking for what was promised, what happened and who came out ahead.

I have been teaching for almost two decades, and the aphorism I use most without naming it is 213, "Know how to contradict". In class I ask more than I assert, offer two or three readings of the same figure and let the discussion do the rest. Gracián called it a trick. I prefer to think it is the most honest way to teach something I am not entirely sure of either, and to admit as much in front of the room.

It is worth saying what this book is not. It is not a critical edition: the specialists' editions exist for that, and they are listed at the end. It is not a career-success manual: it promises no promotions and contains no ninety-day plans. Nor does it defend Gracián: some of his advice is useful, some is petty and some is both at once. The notes say so when they need to.

Remember when the personal brand was going to free us from companies? And when remote work was going to be for ever, and then the office came back five days a week? Gracián would have predicted neither, but neither would have surprised him. That is probably the best compliment you can pay a book from 1647, and the most unsettling.

A practical note. The aphorisms can be read in any order, as Gracián wrote them; the essays make more sense after the corresponding sections but don't need them. The numbers follow the original numbering, so anyone can look up the two hundred missing here in a complete edition. Gracián would have approved: good things, if few, are twice as good.

The four parts are not a whim of the table of contents. They are the four fronts on which, read from an office, Gracián sees a career being played: your own craft, whoever is in charge, the image you leave, and the small change of everyday dealings. And there is one exception that runs through all of them, in aphorism 120: everything can go out of fashion except goodness. Four fronts and one exception. It is the closest thing to a system you can draw from a book that refused to have one, and the epilogue comes back to it.

An exercise to start with, five minutes long. Open the last long email you sent and strike out every superlative: "incredible", "key", "crucial", "unprecedented". Then read it again. If it says the same, they were padding; if it says less, the email was selling something it didn't have. That is aphorism 41, "Never exaggerate", and the fifteenth essay develops it.

Context

A Jesuit with a pseudonym

Baltasar Gracián was born in Belmonte, near Calatayud in Aragon; he was baptised on 8 January 1601. The son of a doctor, he studied with the Jesuits and joined the Society of Jesus in 1619. He was a teacher, preacher and confessor in colleges across Aragon, Catalonia and Valencia, spent time in Madrid, and served as a chaplain with the troops at Lérida in 1646.

He published almost everything under another name. His books appeared as the work of "Lorenzo Gracián", the name of a brother born in 1614. It was a way of getting round his order's prior censorship, which required permission to publish. The only work he signed with his real name, and with permission, was a devotional book, *El Comulgatorio*.

Huesca, 1647

The *Oráculo manual y arte de prudencia* was printed in Huesca in 1647 by Juan Nogués. It was published by Vincencio Juan de Lastanosa, a local nobleman, collector and patron whose house, library and gardens were the centre of the town's cultivated circle. The full title says what it is: an oracle "drawn from the aphorisms discussed in the works of Lorenzo Gracián". In his note to the reader, the author presents it as the essence of his "twelve Graciáns" and boasts that his *Discreto* had already been translated into French.

For centuries the 1647 edition was a ghost. The book was long known from the Madrid edition of 1653, and several biographers doubted an earlier one had existed. The doubt was settled in the mid-twentieth century: in 1947 a bookseller

offered a copy of the Huesca edition for sale, and in 1958 a facsimile appeared in Buenos Aires. In 2001, for the author's quatercentenary, the Institución Fernando el Católico in Zaragoza published another facsimile, with a prologue by Aurora Egido.

The book consists of three hundred aphorisms, each with a heading or maxim and a short commentary. According to specialists, most of the first hundred come from the author's earlier works; the other two hundred were written for the occasion. There are no chapters and no thematic order. Gracián doesn't organise his manual: he drops it on you, and every reader assembles their own.

Style and punishment

Gracián is the great name of *conceptismo*, the Baroque style that tries to say a great deal in few words, through wit, double meanings and sentences that fold back on themselves. That is why some aphorisms read like riddles, and why every translation, this one included, loses puns along the way.

The pseudonym didn't protect him for ever. The three parts of his great allegorical novel, *El Criticón*, appeared in 1651, 1653 and 1657. The Society reprimanded him for publishing without permission, and after the third part it punished him: early in 1658 he was removed from his teaching post at Zaragoza and sent to Graus. He asked to transfer to another religious order; he was refused. Half rehabilitated, he was posted to Tarazona, where he died on 6 December 1658.

It is a biography with built-in irony: the author of the most famous manual on how not to fall from your superiors' favour ended up falling from his own.

How it became a European classic

The *Oracle* travelled further than its author. The first foreign translation appeared in Parma, Italy, in 1670. The one that launched it in Europe was the French version by Amelot de La Houssaie, in 1684, under a title that changed the book's meaning: *L'Homme de cour*, the courtier. For two centuries it was read as a courtier's handbook.

In Germany it was rescued by Arthur Schopenhauer, who translated it. His translation is dated Frankfurt 1832, but it was not published until 1862, in Leipzig, two years after the philosopher's death. Schopenhauer made no secret of his admiration: in an 1832 letter he called Gracián his favourite writer and said that *El Criticón* was one of the books he loved most in the world. The line sometimes

quoted about "one of the best books in the world" therefore refers to *El Criticón*, not to the *Oracle*, even though it was the *Oracle* he translated.

In English, Joseph Jacobs's translation (London, 1892) was the standard version for a century, and it still fills cheap editions because it is in the public domain. In 1992 a new translation by Christopher Maurer became a bestseller in the United States, read as a bedside book for executives.

Why a hundred

This edition does not reproduce all three hundred aphorisms. It selects a hundred, those that can usefully be argued with in the light of today's work, and keeps their original numbers. The other two hundred are not worse; many deal with taste, conversation or virtue in terms that call for another book. The selection is a reading, and like every reading it leaves things out. Anyone who wants the complete text will find it in the editions listed at the end.

PART ONE

The Oracle at the Office

A hundred of Gracián's aphorisms, with their original numbers. Each has its 1647 opening in italics, a new translation and a note.

I

Becoming a Person

1

Everything Is at Its Peak

1647 *"Todo está ya en su punto, y el ser persona en el mayor."*

Everything has now reached its peak, and being a person most of all. It takes more today to make one wise man than it once took to make seven, and more to deal with a single man in these times than with a whole nation in times past.

> Note The seven are the Seven Sages of Greece. Every generation complains that the world has become harder, and it is usually right about something. "Being a person" is the book's key term: not just anyone, but someone who has finished making himself. The rest of the *Oracle* is the building manual.