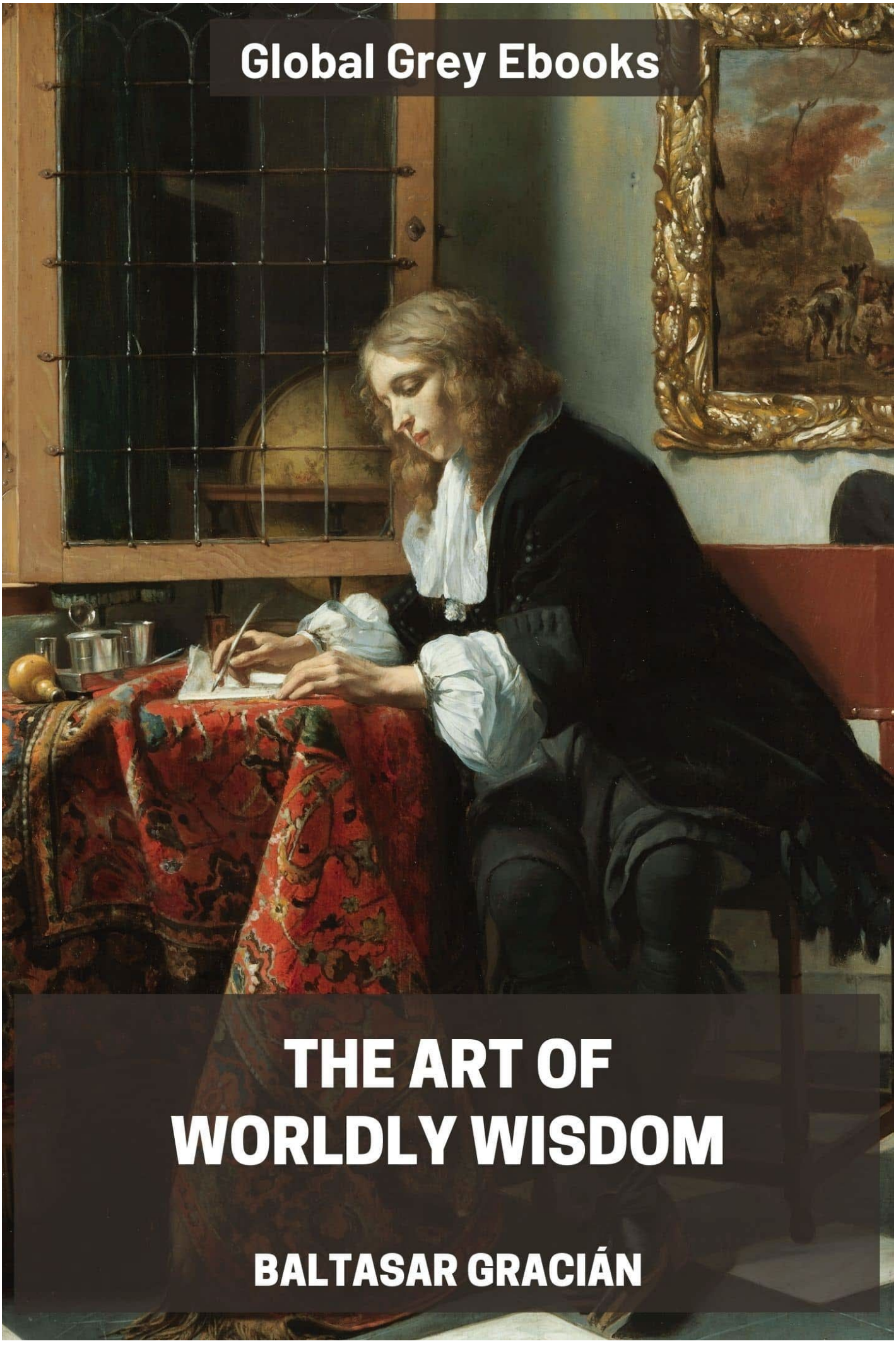
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THE ART OF WORLDLY WISDOM
BALTASAR GRACIÁN

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Introduction

I. Of Balthasar Gracian And His Works

WE may certainly say of Gracian what Heine by an amiable fiction said of himself: he was one of the first men of his century. For he was born 8th January 1601 N.S.[1] at Belmonte, a suburb of Calatayud, in the kingdom of Aragon. Calatayud, properly Kalat Ayoub, "Job's Town," is nearly on the site of the ancient Bilbilis, Martial's birthplace. As its name indicates, it was one of the Moorish settlements, and nearly one of the most northern. By Gracian's time it had again been Christian and Spanish for many generations, and Gracian himself was of noble birth. For a Spaniard of noble birth only two careers were open, arms and the Church. In the seventeenth century arms had yielded to the cassock, and Balthasar and his three brothers all took orders. Felipe, his eldest, joined the order of St. Francis; the next brother, Pedro, became a Trinitarian during his short life; and the third, Raymundo, became a Carmelite[2] . Balthasar himself tells us (*Agudeza*, c. xxv.) that he was brought up in the house of his uncle, the licentiate Antonio Gracian, at Toledo, from which we may gather that both his father and his mother, a Morales, died in his early youth. He joined the Company of Jesus in 1619, when in its most flourishing state, after the organising genius of Acquaviva had given solid form to the bold counter-stroke of Loyola to the Protestant Revolution. The *Ratio Studiorum* was just coming into full force, and Gracian was one of the earliest men in Europe to be educated on the system which has dominated the secondary education of Europe almost down to our own days. This point is of some importance, we shall see, in considering Gracian's chief work.

Once enrolled among the ranks of the Jesuits, the individual disappears, the Jesuit alone remains. There is scarcely anything to record of Gracian's life except that he was a Jesuit, and engaged in teaching what passes with the Order for philosophy and sacred literature, and became ultimately Rector of the Jesuit College at Tarragona. His great friend was Don Vincencio Juan de Lastanosa, a dilettante of the period, who lived at Huesca, and collected coins, medals, and other archæological bric-a-brac. Gracian appears to have shared his tastes, for Lastanosa mentions him in his description, of his own cabinet. A long correspondence with him was once extant and seen by Latassa, who gives the dates and places where the letters were written. From these it would seem that Gracian moved about considerably from Madrid to Zarogoza, and thence to Tarragona. From another source we learn that Philip III. often had him to dinner to provide Attic salt to the royal table. He preached, and his sermons were popular. In short, a life of prudent prosperity came to an end when Balthasar Gracian, Rector of the Jesuit College at Tarragona, died there 6th December 1658, at the age of nearly fifty-eight years.

Of Gracian's works there is perhaps more to say even while leaving for separate consideration that one which is here presented to the English reader and forms his chief claim to attention. Spanish literature was passing into its period of swagger, a period that came to all literatures of modern Europe after the training in classics had given afresh the sense of style. The characteristic of this period in a literature is suitably enough the appearance of "conceits" or elaborate and far-fetched figures of speech. The process began with Antonia

[1] The ordinary authorities vary between 1594 and 1604. I follow Latassa y Ortin, *Biblioteca nueva de los escritores Aragoneses*, Pamplona, 1799, iii. 267 *seq.*, practically the only original source for Gracian's life and works.

[2] Gracian mentions his brothers in his *Agudeza*.

The Maxims

1. ***Everything is at its Acme*****;**

especially the art of making one's way in the world. There is more required nowadays to make a single wise man than formerly to make Seven Sages, and more is needed nowadays to deal with a single person than was required with a whole people in former times.

2. ***Character and Intellect*****:**

the two poles of our capacity; one without the other is but halfway to happiness. Intellect sufficeth not, character is also needed. On the other hand, it is the fool's misfortune, to fail in obtaining the position, the employment, the neighbourhood, and the circle of friends that suit him.

3. ***Keep Matters for a Time in Suspense.***

Admiration at their novelty heightens the value of your achievements, It is both useless and insipid to play with the cards on the table. If you do not declare yourself immediately, you arouse expectation, especially when the importance of your position makes you the object of general attention. Mix a little mystery with everything, and the very mystery arouses veneration. And when you explain, be not too explicit, just as you do not expose your inmost thoughts in ordinary intercourse. Cautious silence is the holy of holies of worldly wisdom. A resolution declared is never highly thought of; it only leaves room for criticism. And if it happens to fail, you are doubly unfortunate. Besides you imitate the Divine way when you cause men to wonder and watch.

4. ***Knowledge and Courage***

are the elements of Greatness. They give immortality, because they are immortal. Each is as much as he knows, and the wise can do anything. A man without knowledge, a world without light. Wisdom and strength, eyes and hands. Knowledge without courage is sterile.

5. ***Create a Feeling of Dependence.***

Not he that adorns but he that adores makes a divinity. The wise man would rather see men needing him than thanking him. To keep them on the threshold of hope is diplomatic, to trust to their gratitude boorish; hope has a good memory, gratitude a bad one. More is to be got from dependence than from courtesy. He that has satisfied his thirst turns his back on the well, and the orange once sucked falls from the golden platter into the waste-basket. When dependence disappears, good behaviour goes with it as well as respect. Let it be one of the chief lessons of experience to keep hope alive without entirely satisfying it, by preserving it to make oneself always needed even by a patron on the throne. But let not silence be carried to excess lest you go wrong, nor let another's failing grow incurable for the sake of your own advantage.

6. ***A Man at his Highest Point.***

We are not born perfect: every day we develop in our personality and in our calling till we reach the highest point of our completed being, to the full round of our accomplishments, of our excellences. This is known by the purity of our taste, the clearness of our thought, the maturity of our judgment, and the firmness of our will. Some never arrive at being complete; somewhat is always awanting: others ripen late. The complete man, wise in speech, prudent in act, is admitted to the familiar intimacy of discreet persons, is even sought for by them.

86. ***Prevent Scandal.***

Many heads go to make the mob, and in each of them are eyes for malice to use and a tongue for detraction to wag. If a single ill report spread, it casts a blemish on your fair fame, and if it clings to you with a nickname, your reputation is in danger. Generally it is some salient defect or ridiculous trait that gives rise to the rumours. At times these are malicious additions of private envy to general distrust. For there are wicked tongues that ruin a great reputation more easily by a witty sneer than by a direct accusation. It is easy to get into bad repute, because it is easy to believe evil of any one: it is not easy to clear yourself. The wise accordingly avoid these mischances, guarding against vulgar scandal with sedulous vigilance. It is far easier to prevent than to rectify.

87. ***Culture and Elegance.***

Man is born a barbarian, and only raises himself above the beast by culture. Culture therefore makes the man; the more a man, the higher. Thanks to it, Greece could call the rest of the world barbarians. Ignorance is very raw; nothing contributes so much to culture as knowledge. But even knowledge is coarse If without elegance. Not alone must our intelligence be elegant, but our desires, and above all our conversation. Some men are naturally elegant in internal and external qualities, in their thoughts, in their address, in their dress, which is the rind of the soul, and in their talents, which is its fruit. There are others, on the other hand, so *gauche* that everything about them, even their very excellences, is tarnished by an intolerable and barbaric want of neatness.

88. ***Let your Behaviour be Fine and Noble.***

A great man ought not to be little in his behaviour. He ought never to pry too minutely into things, least of all in unpleasant matters. For though it is important to know all, it is not necessary to know all about all. One ought to act in such cases with the generosity of a gentleman, conduct worthy of a gallant man. To overlook forms a large part of the work of ruling. Most things must be left unnoticed among relatives and friends, and even among enemies. All superfluity is annoying, especially in things that annoy. To keep hovering around the object or your annoyance is a kind of mania. Generally speaking, every man behaves according to his heart and his understanding.

89. ***Know Yourself***

—in talents and capacity, in judgment and inclination. You cannot master yourself unless you know yourself. There are mirrors for the face but none for the mind. Let careful thought about yourself serve as a substitute. When the outer image is forgotten, keep the inner one to improve and perfect. Learn the force of your intellect and capacity for affairs, test the force of your courage in order to apply it, and keep your foundations secure and your head clear for everything.

90. ***The Secret of Long Life***

Lead a good life. Two things bring life speedily to an end: folly and immorality. Some lose their life because they have not the intelligence to keep it, others because they have not the will. Just as virtue is its own reward, so is vice its own punishment. He who lives a fast life runs through life in a double sense. A virtuous life never dies. The firmness of the soul is communicated to the body, and a good life is long not only in intention but also in extension.

91. ***Never set to work at anything if you have any doubts of its Prudence.***

A suspicion of failure in the mind of the doer is proof positive of it in that of the onlooker, especially if he is a rival. If in the heat of action your judgment feels scruples, it will

Even excellences become defects if they become notorious. Notoriety arises from singularity, which is always blamed: he that is singular is left severely alone. Even beauty is discredited by coxcombry, which offends by the very notice it attracts. Still more does this apply to discreditable singularities. Yet among the wicked there are some that seek to be known for seeking novelties in vice so as to attain to the fame of infamy. Even in matters of the intellect want of moderation may degenerate into loquacity.

279. ***Do not contradict the Contradicter.***

You have to distinguish whether the contra-diction comes from cunning or from vulgarity. It is not always obstinacy, but may be artfulness. Notice this: for in the first case one may get into difficulties, in the other into danger. Caution is never more needed than against spies. There is no such countercheck to the picklock of the mind as to leave the key of caution in the lock.

280. ***Be Trustworthy.***

Honourable dealing is at an end: trusts are denied: few keep their word: the greater the service, the poorer the reward: that is the way with all the world nowadays. There are whole nations inclined to false dealing: with some treachery has always to be feared, with others breach of promise, with others deceit. Yet this bad behaviour of others should rather be a warning to us than an example. The fear is that the sight of such unworthy behaviour should override our integrity. But a man of honour should never forget what he is because he sees what others are.

281. ***Find Favour with Men of Sense.***

The tepid Yes of a remarkable man is worth more than all the applause of the vulgar: you cannot make a meal off the smoke of chaff. The wise speak with understanding and their praise gives permanent satisfaction. The sage Antigonus reduced the theatre of his fame to Zeus alone, and Plato called Aristotle his whole school. Some strive to fill their stomach albeit only with the breath of the mob. Even monarchs have need of authors, and fear their pens more than ugly women the painter’s pencil.

282. ***Make use of Absence to make yourself more esteemed or valued.***

If the accustomed presence diminishes fame, absence augments it. One that is regarded as a lion in his absence may be laughed at when present as the ridiculous result of the parturition of the mountains. Talents get soiled by use, for it is easier to see the exterior rind than the kernel of greatness it encloses. Imagination reaches farther than sight, and disillusion, which ordinarily comes through the ears, also goes out through the ears. He keeps his fame that keeps himself in the centre of public opinion. Even the Phoenix uses its retirement for new adornment and turns absence into desire.

283. ***Have the Gift of Discovery.***

It is a proof of the highest genius, yet when was genius without a touch of madness? If discovery be a gift of genius, choice of means is a mark of sound sense. Discovery comes by special grace and very seldom. For many can follow up a thing when found, but to find it first is the gift of the few, and those the first in excellence and in age. Novelty flatters, and if successful gives the possessor double credit. In matters of judgment novelties are dangerous because leading to paradox, in matters of genius they deserve all praise. Yet both equally deserve applause if successful.

284. ***Do not be Importunate,***

and so you will not be slighted. Respect yourself if you would have others respect you. Be sooner sparing than lavish with your presence. You will thus become desired and so well received. Never come unasked and only go when sent for. If you undertake a thing of your own accord you get all the blame if it fails, none of the thanks If it succeeds. The importunate is always the butt of blame; and because he thrusts himself in without shame he is thrust out with it.

285. ***Never die of another's Ill-luck*****.**

Notice those who stick in the mud, and observe how they call others to their aid so as to console themselves with a companion in misfortune. They seek some one to help them to bear misfortune, and often those who turned the cold shoulder on them in prosperity give them now a helping hand. There is great caution needed in helping the drowning without danger to oneself.

286. ***Do not become responsible for all or for every one*****,**

otherwise you become a slave and the slave of all. Some are born more fortunate than others: they are born to do good as others to receive it. Freedom is more precious than any gifts for which you may be tempted to give it up. Lay less stress on making many dependent on you than on keeping yourself independent of any. The sole advantage of power is that you can do more good. Above all do not regard responsibility as a favour, for generally it is another's plan to make one dependent on him.

287. ***Never act in a Passion*****.**

If you do, all is lost. You cannot act for yourself if you are not yourself, and passion always drives out reason. In such cases inter-pose a prudent go-between who can only be prudent if he keeps cool. That is why lookers-on see most of the game, because they keep cool. As soon as you notice that you are losing your temper beat a wise retreat. For no sooner is the blood up than it is spilt, and in a few moments occasion may be given for many days' repentance for oneself and complaints of the other party.

288. ***Live for the Moment*****.**

Our acts and thoughts and all must be determined by circumstances. Will when you may, for time and tide wait for no man. Do not live by certain fixed rules, except those that relate to the cardinal virtues. Nor let your will subscribe fixed conditions, for you may have to drink the water to-morrow which you cast away to-day. There be some so absurdly paradoxical that they expect all the circumstances of an action should bend to their eccentric whims and not *vice versâ*. The wise man knows that the very polestar of prudence lies in steering by the wind.

289. ***Nothing depreciates a Man more than to show he is a Man like other Men*****.**

The day he is seen to be very human he ceases to be thought divine. Frivolity is the exact opposite of reputation. And as the re-served are held to be more than men, so the frivolous are held to be less. No failing causes such failure of respect. For frivolity is the exact opposite of solid seriousness. A man of levity cannot be a man of weight even when he is old, and age should oblige him to be prudent. Although this blemish is so common it is none the less despised.

290. ***'Tis a piece of good Fortune to combine Men's Love and Respect*****.**

Generally one dare not be liked if one would be respected. Love is more sensitive than hate. Love and honour do not go well together. So that one should aim neither to be much feared nor much loved. Love introduces confidence, and the further this advances, the more respect