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In the Raging Torrent of Translation: The Gracián Kick in the 20th Century

The history of civilization shows a continuous shift in the horizon of the *Unheimlich*.
Helmuth Plessner, *Power and Human Nature*

In February 2011, an interview with Marc Fumaroli comes out. He is a member of the *Académie française*, a specialist in 16th and 17th century European rhetoric and a commander in the Legion of Honor. He has also newly edited and prefaced Gracián's *Pocket Oracle*² under the French title *L'homme de cour*. The interview is entitled *Gracián ou l'art de se gouverner soi-même* (Gracián or the art of self-government). When asked about whether he had found his "Machiavelli of practical life" in Gracián, Fumaroli replies:

Gracián assumed that the modern layperson, who is the product of a dangerously urban and ambiguous world, cannot retreat into a state of naïve transparency or sentimental simplicity. Gracián is the Machiavelli of private morality, for he

¹ This is a revised version of the article "Der Gracián-Kick im 20. Jahrhundert", which initially appeared in the *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte* VII/3 (2013). I would like to thank Florian Baranyi (Vienna), Jan Hennings (Oxford); Jacques Le Rider (Paris), Martin Mauersberg (Vienna) and Andreas Munninger (Vienna) for their suggestions and references.

² The translator will be using the subtitle "Pocket Oracle" from Christopher Maurer's English translation of Baltasar Gracián's *Oráculo manual y arte de prudencia* to render Helmut Lethen's repeated use here of the shortened title *Handorakel* to refer to Gracián's work in German. The complete title of Maurer's English translation is *The Art of Worldly Wisdom. A Pocket Oracle*. All further quotations from this work will refer to this English edition. (Translator's note.)

concedes that virtuousness can hark back to techniques of dissimulation and cunning. [...] If need be, the virtuous hero will have to imitate evil in homeopathic doses, in order to get a hold of himself.³

Awkwardly, the concept of a “private morality” ghosts around Fumaroli’s words. This is certainly unusual for the pre-modern time, when the political was essentially enacted in courtly life, from which the private sphere had yet to separate itself. When asked about how Gracián ended up in Guy Debord’s breviary for the Situationists in his anti-capitalist manifesto *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), Fumaroli observes that Debord’s transcription of the Spanish Jesuit’s writings is based on misunderstandings. In the 1960s, as communication in the so-called “global village” turned into a global phenomenon under the influence of individualism,

[t]here was an attempt to find in Gracián a code of conduct which would be able to rescue from suffocation the singularity and the private independence of the self. [...] The revolutionary and situationist Gracián from the *Quartier Latin* had found his counterpart in the figure of the “neoliberal” Gracián, who, translated into American, became a bestseller amongst Wall Street tycoons. Detached from theology, his work could pass for a handbook on contemporary anti-capitalist terror, as well as for a “robber baron’s” financial handbook for cynical megalomaniacs.⁴

How far removed from the Spanish Jesuit’s original, which dates back to the year 1647, is this response to Gracián in 2011 France? According to Fumaroli, we could only save the original text from the colors of militancy with which it is associated and with which it circulated in the 20th century if we were to take it back to a place where 17th century theology, courtly life, and reasons of state would intersect. The theology of the hidden god and its relationship to Machiavelli’s teachings on the autonomy of the political would have to be reconstructed as the horizon

³ Marc Fumaroli and Thomas Mahler, “Gracián ou l’art de se gouverner soi-même. Entretien”, *Le Point.fr* (14/02/2011): <http://www.lepoint.fr/grands-entretiens/gracian-ou-l-art-de-se-gouverner-soi-meme-14-02-2011-1295220_326.php>.

⁴ *Ibid.*

of Gracián’s writings, in the form of Philip the IV’s Spanish court. That did not happen very often. During the period dating from the middle of the 17th century up until the 21st century, in the torrent of translation – at times raging, at times draining, at times stagnant – the “truth” of Gracián’s *Pocket Oracle* or of his *Critic* plunges. Werner Krauss also resorts to the torrent metaphor, as he attempts to vividly depict the fate of the baroque code of conduct in his 1947 work *Gracián’s Lebenslehre* [*Gracián’s teachings*].

The truth is like a river, like the stream of the Spanish Guadiana, which quickly drains, and which, quickly and unexpectedly, comes back to light. The earlier state of its consistent current will only remain noticeable in its desolate bed.⁵

Translation as World Creation Machine

Reliable philologists tend to focus their attention on the “desolate bed” of the torrent, instead of concentrating on the ways of the waves, which have brought Gracián’s work to our present time. Does the persistent “shift in the horizon of the *Unheimlich*” (Helmuth Plessner), in which the *Pocket Oracle* has lived on since the mid-17th century, tell us something about the “original text”? Our obsession with the phantom of the “original text” seems to be useful as a way to once more abandon the comfort zones where it tends to be embedded. One thing seems to be clear: without the constant labor of translation, the “world creation machine, which keeps the semantic household of cultures going, [would] come to a standstill”⁶. This viewpoint questions our familiar conception of translation, which assumes that the original text remains untouched by the dynamics involved in the chain of events that translation triggers. Thus, the translation always comes too late in regards to the original by which it is preceded; in other words, we must content ourselves

⁵ Werner Krauss, *Gracián’s Lebenslehre* (Frankfurt a. M.: Vittorino Klostermann, 1947), p. 83.

⁶ Ludwig Jäger, “Erst Transkription macht Wissen anschlussfähig” (*Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften*, 2, 2002), pp. 81-91, here p. 81.

with the belated retellings or rewritings of the original text's meaning. The philologist Ludwig Jäger challenges this conception of translation by proposing a different theoretical frame, which assumes that, in translation, texts are constituted anew – i.e. in new constellations – in the process of their linguistic and cultural transmission; they do not stay identical to the object that they once were. Jäger relies on Walter Benjamin's claim that "in its afterlife [...] the original undergoes a change"⁷. Certain aspects of the object of reference become noticeable only through the chain of translations – even if philology would deem them erroneous; for without translation these aspects would not even be perceptible. Each translation is now equipped with the aura of an original belonging to its own time, thus becoming a fetish in the age of reproduction.

After the Endgame of Courtly Intrigue

Even if sanctioned by Walter Benjamin's words, this concept of translation is not necessarily valid. That is why I would like to test this philological model of translation by applying it to Gracián's *Pocket Oracle*. Considering three centuries of reception history, the first image of the flow of translations that comes to mind is the following:

In the 17th century, as the "Machiavellianism of the art of life", the *Pocket Oracle* is dragged into the "war stratagems" of its time, owing to its many available editions and translations into eight European languages. Gracián's rules blossom in Machiavelli's soil. As a consequence of this century's imbalance of power, the raging torrent of translations fades in the 18th century, in the wake of the intellectual ostracizing of Machiavelli, who nonetheless continues to secretly guide war stratagems in the battlefield. At this point, Castiglione's earlier humanism of the *Cortegiano* – more in line with French moralism in its distance from

⁷ Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator: An Introduction to the Translation of Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens*", Translated by Harry Zohn, *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. by Lawrence Venuti (New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 75-85, here p. 77.

the coldness of the idea of the state – seems timelier than the Spaniard⁸. In the 18th century, the classical teachings of the political habitus of courtesy break away from the courtly “*Anwesenheitsgesellschaft*”⁹, where the essence of the political was earlier enacted. The dissociation of public politics from the battlefield of courtly life leads to a shift and creates a sphere in which new groupings of the middle class emerge. These social layers are supposed to sanitize social interaction from any violent disputes. Aggressive behavior, which “naturally burdens all human interaction”, is sublimated for the sake of civil appearances, in a “space of play, where both partners mutually agree to renounce the urge to attack and harm one another”¹⁰. The court ceases to be the place of political legitimation. As a result, advice on play-acting as a survival strategy for courtly life becomes the target of criticism in the Enlightenment era. Gracián is obsolete in this bourgeois space of peaceful interaction. His aristocratic technique of play-acting fails both spectacularly and painfully in Choderlo de Laclos’s *Dangerous Liaisons*. The “Endgame of the Courtly Intrigue” (Peter von Matt) is also the endgame of the *Pocket Oracle*¹¹.

In the 19th century, the militant elements of aristocratic conduct rituals still prevail in the underground of the bourgeois space. Thus, Gracián’s code of conduct is temporarily replaced by the now fragile rules of a more distinguished form of interaction. The Spaniard cannot be an aspiring figure for the burgher because he has suspended the moral barriers behind which the burgher hides from the savageries of competitive struggle. Burghers do not play act; they are rather

⁸ Peter Burke, *Die Geschicke des “Hofmann”*. Zur Wirkung eines Renaissance-Breviers über angemessenes Verhalten, Translated by Ebba D. Drolshagen (Berlin: Wagenbach, 1996).

⁹ A concept from the social sciences coined by Rudolph Schögl that literally means “society of presence”, which aims to describe social relations in pre-modern Europe. (Translator’s note.)

¹⁰ Jean Starobinski, “Über die Schmeichelei”, *Das Rettende in der Gefahr. Kunstgriffe der Aufklärung*, Translated from the French and with an essay by Horst Günther (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1990), pp. 65-101, here p. 65.

¹¹ Peter von Matt, *Die Intrige. Theorie und Praxis der Hinterlist* (Munich and Vienna: Hanser, 2006), pp. 396-408.

enveloped with a morality which prevents them from understanding the consequences of their own conception of success.

In the 20th century, Gracián's recommendations take on Nietzsche's tone of the dangerous life. The alliance with Machiavelli grows stronger. And so, in November of the year 1920, a copy of the *Pocket Oracle* finds its way to the military institution Wünsdorf, in Hanover; here, the reading of the Spanish code of conduct, among other things, inspires Ernst Jünger in his elaborations of military regulations in the early mornings after his mandatory freezing bath. Gracián is used in the early-morning indoctrination of the modern soldier when he is prepared for the front. Carl Schmitt's concept of the arena of the political forcefully pushes Gracián closer to Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*. This stiffening of Gracián's teachings influences the 1943 work of the Romance studies scholar Werner Krauss. At this point, the text finds itself literally on a knife's edge. In jail, awaiting his execution by guillotine, Krauss "shortens", as he says, "some dreadful hours" by working on Gracián¹². The Romance studies scholar, who was imprisoned due to his activity as a spy for the Russian organization *Red Chapel*, discovers in the Spanish teachings an incentive for intellectual exercise at the "threshold between humanism and barbarism"¹³. The pre-modern code of conduct guides him in the mined terrain of the national socialist period, in which one always needs to watch out before taking a step in any direction. In this situation, morality does not give one any orientation whatsoever. Krauss learns from Gracián that in the midst of overall menace, "morality is reduced entirely to tactical rules"¹⁴. Gracián's *Pocket Oracle* promises guidance for situations in which one's existence is "unfathomable"¹⁵ and in which truth, "through severe manifestations of debilitation", has gone into hiding¹⁶. In 1947, when Werner Krauss's book is published,

¹² Werner Krauss, *Bericht über meine Beteiligung and der Aktion Schulze-Boysen*, Typescript, Werner Krauss-Archiv Humboldt Universität Berlin. Cited in Helmut Lethen, *Verhaltenslehren der Kälte. Lebensversuche zwischen den Kriegen* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1994), p. 53f.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹⁴ Krauss, *Gracián's Lebenslehre*, p. 19.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁶ Krauss, *Gracián's Lebenslehre*, p. 83.

one reviewer in the journal *Romanische Forschungen* insightfully reacts to this work by noting that:

A Marxist would certainly enjoy reading Gracián, if only due to the fact that some of his formulations would invite the Marxist reader to free his teachings from its “mystical shell” and to highlight its “useful” kernel, as the Prophet himself had done with Hegel’s dialectic.¹⁷

Gracián had finally arrived in the cold war of the modern era.

In the Delta after 1945

In the postwar period, the raging torrent of translation settles down into a delta of a more differentiated use of the Spanish teachings. Only according to Carl Schmitt and Guy Debord does it remain in Machiavelli’s sphere. Following the example of Helmuth Plessner’s *Grenzen der Gemeinschaft* [*The Limits of Community*], others such as Hans Blumenberg, Lionel Trilling, Richard Sennett, Aleida Assmann and the poet Sibylle Lewitscharoff capitalize on the *Pocket Oracle* in a demilitarized, privatizing manner. Alongside this, Gracián occasionally turns up in manager training events in the USA, conducted under the title *Hidden Persuasion in Business and Politics*.

Thus, the original seems to have finally sunken amidst the pounding waves of translation. The question, however, is whether we can even talk about the reception of an original, if each new reading is more likely to obey the dynamic of continuance in the reception chain, while the original text, encapsulated in baroque styles and forms, becomes increasingly opaque. Ultimately, the “original” itself is only a tidemark of previous translations, from Seneca up until the period of new stoicism in the 17th century. That is why philologists insist on correcting, with positivistic strength, the “desolate bed” in which the torrent of translations was tossing and turning. They note, concerned,

¹⁷ Ludwig Flachskamp, “Werner Krauss: Gracián’s Lebenslehre” (*Romanische Forschungen*, 62, 1950), pp. 260-265, here p. 264.

that Gracián's reception history, under the influence of Machiavelli, effaced the polyvalence of his texts in favor of less complex handling instructions, breaking down the paradoxes of his *Concetti* – up until the *Verhaltenslehre der Kälte* [*Cool Conduct*]. For the sake of philology, the “truth game” which one could detect in Gracián's pragmatic texts should not leave the space of written reflection. Its subversive force lies in the fact that through merciless self-observation it undeviatingly lets its truth claim corrode. To offer a dry conclusion: the only pragmatism in this advice consists in “enduring” the uncertainty of the sphere of action that they evoke¹⁸. The philologist's objection mirrors the atmosphere of stalled action. Last exit melancholy? We get the closer to the original, the fewer options for acting in the here and now we are able to read into it. For a politically engaged philologist such as Krauss, this was without appeal in the period between the wars.

Werner Krauss in the Shadow of Carl Schmitt

Fumaroli's comment was an early indication of his understating of Gracián's *Pocket Oracle* as an amalgam consisting of Castiglione's 1528 humanistic breviary and the basic principles of Machiavelli's *Principe* (1531) – both dating back to one century before Gracián's work. Two factors that also point to this are Fumaroli's translation of the Spanish title of the *Pocket Oracle* as *L'homme de cour*, which is a reference to the *Cortegiano*, as well as his characterization of the code of conduct as the “Machiavelli of private morality” (Fumaroli). In fact, the translations of Gracián's title up until the 18th century – in Italian *L'uomo di corte* – often suggest a close proximity to the humanistic model. Gracián himself recommends Castiglione as the authority in things pertaining to the art of the courtier¹⁹. But whereas the *Cortegiano* of the early 16th century went out of fashion in the

¹⁸ This view was represented by the Gracián specialist Bernhard Teuber (Munich), and supported by Gerhard Poppenberg (Heidelberg), at the workshop *Gracián's Künste* (in Munich, December 2012).

¹⁹ Burke, *Die Geschicke des “Hofmann”*, p. 147.

belligerent 17th century due to the fact that the book, understood as a “collection of trickeries designed for social climbers at the court”²⁰, was not cynical enough, the Spaniard succeeded; the reason for Gracián’s success was his willingness to see the court as a dangerous battleground of the political. Adding to this, readers were able to recognize in such reflections of self-regulation Machiavelli’s idea of the autonomy of the political state and of the importance of non-moral survival techniques. In the 19th century, the *Cortegiano* was lucky to be revived as the “ideal conduct for men belonging to the British higher classes”. The figure of the dandy, whose aim is “to become a work of art by his attire” and to define “his identity through artificiality”, is used to resist, if not oppose, the Romantic cult of sincerity²¹.

The *Cortegiano* figure will later return in Thomas Mann’s *Felix Krull*. Apparently civilized. Meanwhile, Gracián’s *Pocket Oracle* transforms itself into the outlaw’s code (Carl Schmitt included). It completely detaches itself from the official sphere of the political arena and plunges in the underground scene of the avant-gardes: in Fritz Lang’s film *M – Eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder* [*M – A City looks for a Murderer*], and in Brecht’s *Dreigroschenoper* [The Threepenny Opera]. The boldest translation of this set of rules is to be found in Walter Serner’s *Letzte Lockerung. Ein Handbrevier für Hochstapler* [*Last Loosening. A Handbook for Con Men*]. In this book, Gracián is supposed to lead a man to success who in his never-ending escape from the vigilant eyes around him loses himself in endlessly surreal linguistic loops. (Nr. 328: “Always have a small mirror handy. You may need to rush to the toilet to try out a facial expression; or you may have to dedicate your attention to a hollow tooth, using both a pocket and a wall mirror”²².)

The Gracián kick of the 20th century, however, is connected to the fact that political philosophy of the first few decades of the 20th century ceases to view Gracián’s *Pocket Oracle* as a manual that teaches good manners. Helmuth Plessner is the exception; in 1924, in his *Grenzen*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

²¹ Burke, *Die Geschicke des “Hofmann”*, p. 156.

²² Walter Serner, *Letzte Lockerung. Ein Handbrevier für Hochstapler und solche, die es werden wollen*, Ed. Andreas Puff-Trojan (Zurich: Manesse, 2007), p. 182.

der Gemeinschaft [*The Limits of Community*], Plessner tries to combine the courtier's grace with the belligerent Machiavelli complex and, as a trained zoologist, he supplies them both with a basis in human nature. It was also possible to read the Italian *Cortegiano* as a manual breviary on how to deal with mundane women. It was not possible to do the same with Gracián's *Pocket Oracle*. Gracián believed women to lead a shadowy existence. According to him, "words are female, and deeds are male"²³. As Werner Krauss observes, unlike the late Renaissance courtier, "Gracián is clearly unnerved by any arcadian moods"²⁴. Gracián aimed to interrupt the endless palaver; there is no place for that in the battleground, notes Werner Krauss in 1943, in jail, looking back to his academic career. This sleight of hand allows Krauss to move the Spaniard into the period between 1918 and 1943. In his postwar years in the GDR, Krauss distanced himself from the *Pocket Oracle*. Perhaps this has to do with him having to recognize how his reading was heavily influenced by Schmitt's *Begriff des Politischen* [*The Concept of the Political*]. If one considers this trace, the Romance studies scholar's otherwise inconspicuous retrospection of his academic interactions in the postwar period becomes uncanny:

Considering how the heavy weights are distributed across one's life, so that, for instance, half of one's life is spent in conversation, it is only natural that one desires to question these previously overlooked territories at a fundamental level.²⁵

"Those who know the concepts, but are unable to control them" – we suddenly hear a decisionist Krauss behind the mask of a Gracián citation: "*those who only know things but do not also act upon them, are not philosophers, but merely grammarians*"²⁶. According to Krauss's decree, what is at play is "Machiavelli's symptomatic change from theory

²³ Cf. Baltasar Gracián, *The Art of Worldly Wisdom. A Pocket Oracle*, Translated by Christopher Maurer (London: Mandarin Paperback, 1994), p. 114, nr. 202.

²⁴ Krauss, *Gracián's Lebenslehre*, p. 86.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

to active knowledge”²⁷; the battlefield lies beyond good and evil. As a measure of the intensity of dispute, the political permeates all spheres, and teaches everywhere to identify the dangerous rival as an enemy; “*Distinguo ergo sum*”; Carl Schmitt instructs the courtly persona. The political is no longer connected to statehood, and certainly not to the rule of law. Rather, it is much more the “rendezvous of the dangerous life”, “the appealing testing ground in which wisdom exposes itself to the storm of experience”²⁸. This is the Gracián kick, which pushes the Spanish code of conduct into the 20th century under the influence of Nietzsche and Machiavelli.

The merging of Gracián and Machiavelli, which was already apparent in the 17th century, is not at all self-evident. The *Principe* was included in the Spanish index; however, as is known, books were included in the index precisely because of their widespread influence, which was to be contained. In any case, the *liberi prohibiti* were circulating among intellectuals in Italy, France, Spain and in the Netherlands. Surprisingly, Machiavelli’s *Discorsi* had not been banned in Spain. The prohibition of the *Principe* had a clear impact on Gracián’s work: in his *The Critic*, Machiavelli is mentioned by name only once, in a positive light, and referred to as the “eagle of flight and visions”²⁹. He is otherwise covertly included as a “Tacitus” or dismissed as an evil conspirer and amoral gossip. The main character in *The Critic*, a civilization type named Critilo, explicitly aims to protect his pupil Andrenio, a nature type, from Machiavelli’s perverse teachings. He depicts Machiavelli as a “flimsy politician”, who would like to “indoctrinate others with his ignorant principles”³⁰, by transferring the *raison d’état* to the sphere of courtly life and subjugating all virtue to dynastic interests and career opportunism. Given that for Gracián virtue is understood in a non-moral sense, it remains unclear why he wants to differentiate himself from Machiavelli precisely on this issue. Is this an attempt to separate the military from the courtly spheres? Hartmut Köhler, referring to

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

²⁹ Baltasar Gracián, *Das Kritikon*, Translated by Hartmut Köhler (Zurich: Ammann, 2001), p. 752.

³⁰ Gracián, *Das Kritikon*, p. 130.

the Machiavelli-Gracián complex, observes that after the emergence of the prince in 1532, the banishing of the author Machiavelli quickly began, but the “mentality of the Florentine left behind plenty of traces in Gracián’s writings”³¹. Gracián takes part in the “polemic distortion”³² of the *Principe*, making the prince’s theory of the state responsible for the “demise of the era”³³. Machiavelli’s writing explicitly articulated the “depravity of that age”³⁴. Is this a hidden tribute to “realism”, which Machiavelli used to describe the power structures of his day and age? Gracián gets caught up in the amoral stratagems of his opponent; he ensues by pursuing. At the very least, he pursues the same goal he describes when he also drags the Italian theorist into the contradictions of the Spanish context. Later on, the tensions give way to a sense of unity, under the influence of a modern concept of the political as it had been devised by Carl Schmitt at the end of the 20th century. The contradictions between both thinkers fall into oblivion. This is already noticeable with Werner Krauss. He claims that “the political is the tool; the court is the place of observation; history is the experimentation field of human force”³⁵. The political entails all the “rules of interaction” in a society³⁶.

Is Krauss’s reception in jail in 1943 the furthest point touched by the translations? Human beings who seem to be on the verge of falling apart and losing their outer appearance seem to feel a particular proximity to Gracián’s maxims. Distance and proximity are not mutually exclusive.

Gracián as the *Off* Voice of the Nazi Regime

On May 1st, 1948, Carl Schmitt writes down seven new maxims in the manner of Gracián’s *Pocket Oracle*. As the Prussian privy council at the court of Hermann Göring in Carinhall – a castle located

³¹ Gracián, *Das Kritikon*, p. 130, annotation 38.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 400, annotation 79.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 400.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Krauss, *Gracián’s Lebenslehre*, p. 97.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

between the lakes *Groß Döllnersee* and *Wuckersee* in the municipality of Schorfheide, he will have known – surrounded as he was by the has-been *Nibelungen* staff of the Third Reich – how to deal with intrigues. We have learned from Werner Krauss that when morality is reduced to the obeying of tactical rules, individuals require an outside voice to orient their conduct. Schmitt was imprisoned until May 1947. His entries in the *Glossarium* show his attempt to justify his attitudes during the terror regime. In one of Schmitt's Spanish maxims, a voice speaks from the *off* space:

If you get roped into a loudly screaming chant, you must scream the text along as long as you can. Anything else would mean your certain and nastiest death. Your hearing and your brain would be shattered from the outside in, if you did not protect yourself by screaming along from the inside; I am thus recommending a purely physical instrument so that you can defend yourself against extermination by means of sound waves.³⁷

The instruction's legitimating tone is evident: if one wants to find protection from violence, one must look for it in conformity. The phonocentric quality of his advice is proof of his paranoia, of his growing conviction that he was surrounded by voices that were persecuting him. He displaces the scenario from the enclosed space of a *Gewaltzentrum* (in which, at one time, he believed he could serve as the prompter for those in power) into a public space, filled with masses, in other words, into the type of place that he always avoided. It is unclear, to which of Gracián's maxims Schmitt is referring to here; perhaps to maxim nr. 43:

Feel with the few, speak with the many. Rowing against the current makes it impossible to discover the truth and is extremely dangerous. [...] You can never tell the wise by what they say in public. They speak not in their own voices, but in that of common stupidity, though deep inside they are cursing it. The sensible person avoids both being contradicted and contradicting others.³⁸

³⁷ Carl Schmitt, *Glossarium. Aufzeichnungen der Jahre 1947 – 1951*, Edited by Eberhard Frhr. v. Medem (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1991), p. 144.

³⁸ Gracián, *A Pocket Oracle*, p. 24f.

If this were the source text, what would happen to it in 1948?

Perhaps in order to demonstrate that the history of civilization really shows a “shift in the horizon of the *Unheimlich*” (Helmuth Plessner), Carl Schmitt adds another rule to the more taciturn maxims. This one is actually an encoded revelation of what he tries to conceal:

Go to the fallout shelter if you perceive any indication to do so; put your hands up when you are told to do so; do not forget that the relationship between protection and obedience is no longer valid, nor is it self-evident; the fallout shelter can be the gas chamber.³⁹

In light of Gracián’s maxims, at this point one wants to speak of the “the source’s right to veto” (Reinhart Koselleck).

Schmitt indirectly brings Thomas Hobbes into the field, for whom obedience was still a guarantee for protection; Gracián, too, might have subscribed to this fundamental notion. For a while, Schmitt had legitimized a form of government which had destroyed the connection between protection and obedience. The national socialist regime was based on the assumption that certain races were allowed to bully other races which were naturally defenseless. It is perverse to think that someone had been looking for a fallout shelter when that person had been driven to the gas chamber.

Hans Blumenberg and the Anthropology of the Hidden Human Being

One can find the explanation for Gracián’s appeal to the postwar father generation in a chapter of a book in which one does not at all expect to encounter Gracián. In his 1982 book *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt* [*The Legibility of the World*], Hans Blumenberg discovers in Gracián an example of self-concealment. Through Gracián’s teachings, the “age of the hidden god” is replaced by the anthropology of the “hidden human being”⁴⁰. “It is not the divine which hides itself from its natural

³⁹ Schmitt, *Glossarium*, p. 144.

⁴⁰ Hans Blumenberg, *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1981), p. 113f.

creatures anymore; rather, these creatures hide from each other in their culture”⁴¹. With cultural techniques that rely on distancing, Gracián offers the benefits of concealment as an alternative to the culture of dismay that dominates West Germany in the 1980s, and as an alternative to the trend of self-revelation and media exposure. And Blumenberg is aware of his need for the cold bath of reflexive distance and for social retreat in a hermetic writing space when he says: “Humans are unable to tolerate the realism of human reciprocity. As a way to remedy this intolerability, they make themselves illegible for each another”⁴². Human beings make use of their symbolic cultural practices as a way to build an almost impenetrable wall between themselves and the “natural world”⁴³. They hide in the ambiguity of the appearances of social interaction (Blumenberg speaks of the “ambiguities of cultural systems of expression”⁴⁴), if they even want social exchange beyond written expression at all. This requires an astute translator who can decipher the code of worldly appearances, and who is able to steadfastly refine his/her technique of using stratagems as a way to keep up the pace with the constantly growing sophistication of the world’s encoding⁴⁵. For that, this translator desperately needs Gracián’s “instruction[s] to the Machiavellianism of the art of living”⁴⁶.

Blumenberg exploits Gracián’s *Pocket Oracle*. That, at least, seems to have been how Sibylle Lewitscharoff saw it in her novel *Blumenberg* (2011), where she writes: “Too much proximity was able to ruin everything”⁴⁷. She immerses her protagonist in the poetic darkness of secrecy; one can only think on condition of the withdrawal of one’s self. But critical commentary on the novel has brought this secrecy back to a gaudy, anecdotal light: as a professor, who is all by himself in his house in Altenberg. “He received no visitors there; rather, he sporadically

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁴⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 117.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

⁴⁷ Sibylle Lewitscharoff, *Blumenberg* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2011), p. 35.

took phone calls from carefully chosen interlocutors”⁴⁸. All action takes place in his office at night, which according to Lewitscharoff is when he comes up with these maxims that emulate Gracián:

*Do not play around with the depths of the Other; he had always intuitively tried to follow this Wittgensteinian principle, even if he not always succeeded in doing so. One has the obligation to spare the Other from one’s own fears, and one should not deliberately provoke fear in Others. With one’s own avowal of fear, one can only cause perplexity in an Other.*⁴⁹

According to the novel and to the witnesses of the time, the lonely professor in Münster both copiously and abruptly cuts himself off from the intrigues of the “*Anwesenheitsgesellschaft*” [society of presence] (Rudolf Schlögl) at the court in Konstanz, as well as from the *Poetik und Hermeneutik* [Poetics and Hermeneutics] group, in order to remain all alone in his cave and occupy himself with written works. At the University of Münster, Blumenberg reduces his visibility to the inevitable bare minimum.

Today his lecture dealt with humanity’s need for solace, which coincides with its inability for solace. Using a side door, he entered the lecture hall in the castle of Münster at exactly 2.15 pm. The audience seats were fully occupied, the last ones were currently filling up with the last latecomers. Blumenberg’s eyes fell to the lectern; his facial expression showed disgust. Six Coca-Cola bottles stood there, and they stood there as a provocation. Blumenberg put down his *Homburg* hat and his overcoat, put his bag on a long table, which flanked the lectern from both sides, and thought about what to do next. He would not waste one word on this. To minimize the amount of contact surface shared between the sticky object and his own skin, he seized the first bottle with the tips of his thumbs and index fingers and placed it on the windowsill located on the side of the courtyard.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ See Patrick Bahner’s discussion of this text in “Too much proximity can ruin everything” (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 5/10/2011).

⁴⁹ Lewitscharoff, *Blumenberg*, p. 128.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21f.

As he proceeds with the painful task of removing the Coca-Cola bottles from the lectern, he starts to deliver his reflections on humanity's need for solace; after one hour, he folds his index cards, "packed his hat and overcoat, and disappeared quickly through the side door, the same way he had gotten in"⁵¹.

The art of self-concealment in Gracián certainly has a purpose, which the novel painfully reveals. Like a magnet, Blumenberg attracts the students' desire for contact. Contaminated by the aura of the speaker, the students run into danger and die. In the final chapter, the virtuoso of the art of distance is overtaken by the others' desire for contact: as he lies defenseless in the burial chamber, all the others, whom he had kept away from any bodily contact, come to touch him; they are as dead as he is.

The 20th century mainstream revisions of Gracián had totally eliminated the eye of god, which oversees the courtiers' earthly interactions; it comes up again in Blumenberg's chapter on Gracián in *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt* [*The Legibility of the World*]. He who oversees and vaults the whole terrain of small and big wars, the great absent of modern translations, finds his placement in the space of Blumenberg's critical commentary. Despite the fact that Blumenberg sees Gracián as a pioneer of a "hypothetical atheism"⁵² belonging to the early modern period, he emphasizes the presence of divine rule, which Gracián never questioned. For, according to Gracián, with the arts of dissimulation and concealment, one is merely imitating "divine rule" – keeping people restless with vague assumptions about their existence, as the third maxim already announces:

Keep matters in suspense. Successes that are novel win admiration. Being too obvious is neither useful nor tasteful. By not declaring yourself immediately you will keep people guessing, especially if your position is important enough to awaken expectations. Mystery by its very arcaneness causes veneration. Even when revealing yourself, avoid total frankness, and don't let everyone look inside you. Cautious silence is where prudence takes refuge. Once declared, resolutions

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁵² Blumenberg, *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt*, p. 119.

are never esteemed, and they lie open to criticism. If they turn out badly, you will be twice unfortunate. If you want people to watch and wait on you, imitate the divinity.⁵³

Towards the end of the 20th century, the *Pocket Oracle* shifts towards the tense terrain of shame and guilt culture in Germany. In 2002, Aleida Assmann reads Gracián in the context of a “sphere dominated by the law of mutual surveillance”, and where “techniques of self-protection” emerge to compete with the “puritan[ism]” of “self-revelation”. Also, as Blumenberg’s case shows, only the “realm of writing [offers] a safe space for introspection, in which human beings’ relationships with themselves can be gauged anew”⁵⁴. Against the Protestant “cult of expression”⁵⁵, Gracián offers masks that sustain the traffic of exchange while at the same time allowing for silence to dominate the scene. Aleida Assmann, in turn, submerges the Spanish text in the domain of the “traumatic”⁵⁶ experience of the Holocaust, linking it to the “state of communicative silence [*Beschweigen*]”, which according to Hermann Lübbe, served as the “*modus operandi* for the integration of the postwar population in the new republic”⁵⁷. The “glorification of this refusal to speak out [*schweigen*]”⁵⁸, for which Gracián now stands, also marks the withdrawal from the political public sphere, which for Gracián had centered on the court. It is precisely by observing the rules of communicative silence [*Beschweigen*] that Carl Schmitt – whom Aleida Assmann sees as a first-class “generator of secrets” – protects the “impenetrable core of his identity”, which “cannot even be dissolved with psychotherapeutic treatment”⁵⁹.

In the postwar period, Gracián falls into discredit. On the one hand, Aleida Assmann gives Schmitt credit for his revisiting of Gracián’s

⁵³ Gracián, *A Pocket Oracle*, p. 2.

⁵⁴ Aleida Assmann, “Masken – Schweigen – Geheimnis” (*Zeitsprünge. Forschungen zur Frühen Neuzeit*, 6, 2002), pp. 43-58, here p. 44.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

work – he claims that Gracián could be useful as “an outlet for resistance against the unrestrained public anger of the modern media spectacle”⁶⁰. On the other hand, Assmann does recognize the danger of using him as an accomplice of those who refused to speak out [*Verschweigen*] about crimes committed by the *Vätergeneration*. As a result, her final judgment is not surprising. According to her, Gracián became part of a “Catholic-inspired antidemocratic discourse”, which connects the “safeguarding of values such as truth, earnestness and force of character with the withdrawal from the public sphere”⁶¹.

Is this the last word on Gracián? Is the tidal wave which Gracián had once released to vanish in the morality of the German postwar population?

The Most Difficult Thing about Running is Stopping

Erdmut Wizisla found an edition of the *Pocket Oracle* in Brecht’s library, an edition that had been published in 1931 by Insel Verlag⁶². The book is part of an appendage to Brecht’s estate library, an estate that holds the 100 books which did not fit in Brecht’s luggage when he was forced to flee to Finland in 1940. In the volume’s title page, one can detect a dedication written in microscopic letters. Walter Benjamin used black ink to write a line from the “Lied von der Unzulänglichkeit menschlichen Strebens” [Song of the Insufficiency of Human Endeavor] from the *Dreigroschenoper* [*The Threepenny Opera*]: “For this bleak existence man is never sharp enough”. Towards the end of the (Weimar) Republic, nothing was further away from Brecht’s mind than having to escape from Germany. At a point when his radical friend had exhausted his political knowledge, was Benjamin’s gift a warning for Brecht about a fate which his communist project did not at all expect?

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁶² Helmut Lethen and Erdmut Wizisla, “‘Das Schwierigste beim Gehen ist das Stillstehen.’ Benjamin schenkt Brecht Gracián. Ein Hinweis” (*Brecht Yearbook/ Das Brecht-Jahrbuch*, 23, 1998), pp. 142-146.

Was the dedication to serve as a reminder that his own words about the insufficiency of this Great Plan had overtaken him?

Aye, make yourself a plan
They need you at the top!
Then make yourself a second plan
Then let the whole thing drop.
For this bleak existence
Man is never bad enough
Though his sheer persistence
Can be lovely stuff.⁶³

Still, the *Pocket Oracle* allowed Brecht to encounter the imaginary space which he had designed for his city nomads in *Lesebuch für Städtebewohner* [*Reader for City Dwellers*]. It is as if he had been relying on the Spanish Jesuit for inspiration all along (Ignatius of Loyola was, after all, already involved in *Hauspostille* [*Manual of Piety*]), for he had provided his characters with advice which he could now find in Benjamin's gift: stay at a distance, consider accommodation as provisional, avoid arcadian moods, separate from the cohort, pull your hat down tight, do not let yourself get too worked up, cut off your family ties, do not attract attention on account of your individuality, and howl with the wolves, if necessary.

It is evident that Brecht repeatedly turned to the book for advice; he underlined 26 of the 300 aphorisms. He puts a question mark at the beginning of Gracián's maxim "*Don't let your sympathy for the unfortunate make you one of them*" (nr. 163), which touches upon a principle that probably sounded quite familiar to him as a reader of Nietzsche and to which he adhered in some of his *Lehrstücke* [didactic plays]. Next to the sentence "*[o]ne lies with words, but also with things*" (nr. 154), he writes an exclamation mark. It stands out that his textual annotations do not respond to the gaudy and amoral-sounding maxims. Instead, the maxims that Brecht takes note of are rather the subdued

⁶³ Bertolt Brecht, *The Threepenny Opera*, Translated by John Willett and Ralph Manheim (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005). Web 23 2017.

and defensive aphorisms, the ones that take into account the economy of time; or even the paradoxical ones, such as “*the most difficult thing about running is stopping*” (nr. 155). In times of humanistic sensibilities while in exile, Brecht – now free from the pressure of political decision making, and deprived of any possibility of direct intervention in the German political arena – suppresses the Jesuit Brevier as a guide for meditating on the forced standstill.

Nothing But the Pure Present Time

Brecht takes part in the catastrophic experience of the First World War. There is no more mystification of war, so that the coldness of the world goes straight to the bone. Still, towards the end of the Weimar Republic, Brecht still had Marxism-Leninism, which in its mimetic approximation to the coldness of the world also promised protection from its dangers. During the first years of exile, the protective function disintegrated. The hidden god, whose rule Gracián’s maxims aimed to imitate, retreated to the point of becoming totally illegible. As much as Marc Fumaroli, as commander of the Legion of Honor, might dispute it, this fact has favored the readings of the *Pocket Manual* that exclude god. What could be understood as the most distant point in relation to the original text is actually its point of contact. We seem to be left with a destiny which is a god-awful lot like situations from the pre-modern era. The torrent of translations of the *Pocket Manual* leads us to cataracts and provisionally flows into a pool of uncertainty. What is left of the “original text”, when all its translations do not attest to anything but to the pure present of the time in which they circulate?

T. S. Eliot was aware of this in his *Four Quartets*:

What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.

Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden. My words echo
Thus, in your mind.⁶⁴

The end of translation would mean the end of the present time.

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