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The Art of Worldly Wisdom

Oráculo manual y arte de prudencia

Baltasar Gracián

1647

Philosophy · Religion

The Art of Worldly Wisdom

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Translated from the Spanish by Ether Library

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Baltasar Gracián (1601–1658)

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First published in 1647 at Huesca, under the name of Lorenzo Gracián.

A Note on the Translation

This is a complete translation of Baltasar Gracián's *Oráculo manual y arte de prudencia*, made directly from the Spanish. No earlier English version was used as its basis; the Victorian translation was consulted only at a few places where the Spanish could be read two ways. The source is a public-domain digital transcription of the text first printed at Huesca in 1647, with the spelling modernized.

The Spanish title means "A Pocket Oracle and the Art of Prudence": *manual* is a book to be held in the hand. English readers have known the book since 1892 as *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*, and that name is kept on the cover so the book can be found. Inside, Gracián's key word *prudencia* is everywhere "prudence."

The book opens with a short address to the reader by Gracián's patron, Vincencio Juan de Lastanosa, who presented it. Then come the three hundred aphorisms, numbered as in the original. Each aphorism is one paragraph, neither split nor merged, and its first sentence, the heading, stays at the head of the paragraph as Gracián set it. The division into four groups of seventy-five was made only for the table of contents.

Gracián keeps apart words that English tends to merge, and each is rendered one way throughout: *prudencia* prudence, *cordura* good sense, *discreción* discernment (not "discretion," which now means keeping quiet), *ingenio* wit, *genio* temperament, *gusto* taste, *juicio* judgment. *Desengaño*, the great Baroque word for waking from illusion to see things as they are, is "undeceiving." *Sindéresis*, the inborn power to judge rightly, keeps its old English form, *synderesis*.

Gracián speaks to no one in particular. His infinitives and third-person commands are given as imperatives or with "one" and "a man"; "you" appears only in Lastanosa's address and in quotations. Spelling is American. The seventy-seven short notes, all the translator's, identify persons, sayings, and wordplay the English cannot carry; none interprets.

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To the Reader

No laws for the just, no advice for the wise; and yet no one ever knew enough for himself. One thing you must forgive me, and another you must thank me for. Forgive me for calling this epitome of the right ways of living an Oracle, which it is in its sententiousness and its brevity. Thank me for offering you, at a single stroke, all twelve Graciáns,¹ each so highly esteemed that *El Discreto*² had scarcely been seen in Spain before France had it, translated into its own language and printed at its court. Let this serve Reason as a bill of fare at the banquet of her wise men, on which she may enter the dishes of prudence that will be served to her one after another in the other works, so that she may portion out their flavor to each according to his temperament.

[1.](#) Lastanosa's way of saying that this book distills all of Gracián's works. By 1647 four had appeared: *El Héroe* (1637), *El Político* (1640), *Arte de ingenio* (1642), and *El Discreto* (1646).

[2.](#) "The Man of Discernment," Gracián's book of 1646 on the gifts of the cultivated, judicious man.

Aphorisms 1–75

1 Everything has reached its peak by now, and being a true person the highest peak of all. More is required today to make one wise man than once went to make seven,¹ and more is needed to deal with a single man in these times than with a whole people in times past.

2 Temperament and wit. The two axes on which a man's gifts shine: one without the other, half the happiness. Brains are not enough; a happy temperament is wanted too. The fool's misfortune: to miss his calling in his station, his post, his place, his company.

3 Keep matters in suspense. Wonder at what is new turns into esteem for one's successes. Playing with the cards face up is neither useful nor pleasant. Not declaring oneself at once keeps people in suspense, all the more where a lofty post makes one the object of everyone's expectation; it hints at mystery in everything, and its very secrecy calls forth veneration. Even in making oneself understood, plainness is to be avoided, just as in one's dealings not everyone is to be let inside. Guarded silence is the sanctuary of good sense. A resolution made known was never esteemed; rather it lays itself open to criticism, and if it turns out badly, it is doubly unhappy. Imitate, then, the way of the divine, so as to keep men watching and wakeful.

4 Knowledge and courage take turns at greatness. Being immortal, they make men immortal; a man is as much as he knows, and the wise man can do anything. A man without knowledge, a

world in the dark. Counsel and strength, eyes and hands: without courage, wisdom is barren.

5 Create dependence. It is not the one who gilds the idol who makes it a god, but the one who adores it; the shrewd man would rather have people need him than thank him. To trust to base gratitude is to rob courteous hope, for hope has as long a memory as gratitude has a short one. More is got from dependence than from courtesy: the man who has drunk his fill turns his back on the spring at once, and the squeezed orange falls from the gold plate into the mud. When dependence ends, the attentions paid in return end too, and with them esteem. Let it be a lesson, and the first that experience teaches, to keep dependence alive without satisfying it, keeping even a crowned master always in need of oneself; but one must not go so far as to keep silent so that he errs, nor make another's harm incurable for one's own profit.

6 A man at his peak. No one is born finished. A man perfects himself day by day, in his person and in his post, until he reaches the point of consummate being, the full complement of gifts and eminences. It will be known by a refined taste, a purified wit, a mature judgment, a will cleared of its dregs. Some never become whole; something is always missing. Others are slow in the making. The consummate man, wise in words and sensible in deeds, is admitted into the rare company of the discerning, and is even sought after by it.

7 Avoid victories over one's master. All winning breeds hatred, and winning over one's master is either foolish or fatal. Superiority was always hated, and superiority over a superior all the more. The attentive man will usually hide common advantages, as beauty is played down by careless dress. There may well be those willing to yield in good fortune or in temperament, but in wit, no one, much less a sovereign. Wit is the king of attributes, and so every crime against it was lese majesty. Sovereigns are sovereign, and wish to

be so in what matters most. Princes like to be helped, but not surpassed, and they want advice to look like a reminder of something they had forgotten rather than a light on something they could not reach. The stars teach us this subtlety, and happily: though they are the sun's children, and shining, they never presume upon its splendor.

8 The man beyond passion: a gift of the highest loftiness of spirit. His very superiority frees him from subjection to stray, vulgar impressions. There is no greater mastery than mastery of oneself and one's feelings; it amounts to a triumph of free will. And when passion takes hold of the person, let it not dare touch the office, and all the less, the higher the office: a refined way to spare oneself trouble, and even a short cut to reputation.

9 Belie the failings of one's nation. Water takes on the good or bad qualities of the veins it runs through, and man those of the climate where he is born. Some owe more than others to their homelands, because a kinder zenith fell to them there. No nation escapes some native defect, not even the most cultivated, and its neighbors are quick to censure it, either as a precaution or as a consolation. It is a victorious skill to correct these national blemishes, or at least to belie them: one wins the applauded credit of being unique among one's own, for what was least expected was esteemed the more. There are also failings of lineage, of station, of post, and of age, which, if they all meet in one person and are not forestalled by attention, make an intolerable monster.

10 Fortune and Fame. What is fickle in the one is firm in the other. The first for living, the second for afterward; the one against envy, the other against oblivion. Fortune is desired and sometimes helped; fame is worked for. The desire for reputation is born of virtue. Fame was, and is, the sister of giants;² she always goes to extremes, monsters or prodigies, of abomination or of applause.

11 Associate with those one can learn from. Let friendly dealings be a school of learning, and conversation a cultivated instruction; make teachers of one's friends, blending the profit of learning with the pleasure of talk. With people of understanding the enjoyment is mutual: what one says is rewarded by the applause it receives, and what one hears by the instruction it gives. What usually draws us to another is our own interest; here it is ennobled. The attentive man frequents the houses of those courtly heroes which are theaters of heroism rather than palaces of vanity. There are lords renowned for their discernment who are themselves oracles of all greatness by their example and their conversation, and besides, the circle of those who attend them is a courtly academy of every good and gallant discernment.

12 Nature and art; material and workmanship. There is no beauty without help, and no perfection that does not lapse into barbarism without the heightening of artifice: artifice rescues the bad and perfects the good. Nature commonly deserts us just when we need it most; let us take refuge in art. The best natural gift is uncultivated without art, and perfections lack half of themselves if they lack culture. Every man tastes coarse without artifice, and needs polishing in every order of perfection.

13 Act on intention, now second, now first. The life of man is warfare against the malice of man, and shrewdness fights with stratagems of intention. It never does what it indicates. It takes aim, yes, but only to dazzle; it feints skillfully at the air and strikes where no one expected, always bent on belying what it showed. It lets one intention fly to hold the rival's attention, then turns on it at once and wins by surprise. But a penetrating intelligence forestalls it with attentiveness and lies in wait for it with reflection; it always understands the opposite of what it is meant to understand, and at once recognizes any false attempt. It lets every first intention pass and waits for the second, and even the third.

Simulation, seeing its artifice found out, goes further and tries to deceive with truth itself: it changes its game to change its trick, makes artifice out of having no artifice, and founds its cunning on the greatest candor. Observation comes to meet it, seeing through its sharpness, and discovers the darkness dressed in light; it deciphers the intention, which is the better hidden the simpler it looks. Thus the craft of Python fights against the candor of Apollo's piercing rays.³

14 The thing and the manner. Substance is not enough; circumstance is required as well. A bad manner spoils everything, even justice and reason. A good one makes up for everything: it gilds a no, sweetens the truth, and puts rouge on old age itself. The how has a large part in things, and a pleasing little manner is a card-sharp who wins every taste. Fine bearing is the finery of living, and a good turn of phrase gets one out of any difficulty singularly well.

15 Have auxiliary wits. The happiness of the powerful: to surround oneself with champions of understanding who will get one out of every tight spot of ignorance and fight one's battles against difficulty. It is a singular greatness to make use of the wise, far beyond the barbarous taste of Tigranes,⁴ who liked to keep conquered kings as servants. A new kind of mastery, in the best thing life offers: to make servants, by art, of those whom nature made superior. There is much to know and little life to know it in, and one does not live without knowing. It is therefore a singular skill to study without cost, and much through many, knowing through them all. Afterward such a man speaks in council for many, or through his mouth speak as many wise men as briefed him beforehand, and he wins the credit of an oracle by another's sweat. These wise men first make a selection of the lessons, and then serve him knowledge in quintessences. But a man who cannot have wisdom in his service should have it among his friends.

16 Knowledge with upright intention. It ensures a harvest of success. A good understanding married to a bad will was always a monstrous violence. Malevolent intention is a poison to perfections, and, aided by knowledge, it does harm with greater subtlety. Unhappy the eminence that is spent on baseness! Knowledge without sense, double madness.

17 Vary the tenor of one's actions. Not always in the same way, so as to baffle attention, especially a rival's. Not always on first intention, for one's uniformity will be caught, and one's actions anticipated and even frustrated. A bird that flies straight is easy to shoot on the wing; not so one that twists. Nor always on second intention, for the trick will be understood the second time. Malice lies in wait; great subtlety is needed to outwit it. The gambler never plays the card his opponent expects, much less the one he wants.

18 Application and Minerva.⁵ There is no eminence without both, and where they meet, excellence beyond measure. Mediocrity with application achieves more than superiority without it. Reputation is bought at the price of work; what costs little is worth little. Even for the highest posts, application has been found wanting in some; it seldom belies natural genius. Not to be eminent in a common post because one would rather be middling in a sublime one has the excuse of a noble mind; but to be content with being middling in the lowest when one could be excellent in the highest has none. Nature and art, then, are both required, and application sets the seal on them.

19 Do not make an entrance amid too much expectation. The usual slight suffered by everything much celebrated beforehand is that it does not afterward reach the excess of what was imagined. The real could never catch up with the imagined, because to imagine perfections is easy and to attain them very hard. Imagination marries desire and always conceives far more than things are.

However great the excellences, they are not enough to satisfy the idea, and finding it deluded by exorbitant expectation, they undeceive it sooner than they win its admiration. Hope is a great falsifier of truth: let good sense correct it, making sure that the enjoyment exceeds the desire. A first show of credit serves to awaken curiosity, not to stake the whole object. It goes better when the reality exceeds the idea and is more than was believed. This rule will fail with what is bad, for there exaggeration itself helps: when the reality belies the exaggeration, it is greeted with applause, and what was feared as the height of vileness even comes to seem tolerable.

20 A man of his century. Persons of eminent rarity depend on the times. Not all had the age they deserved, and many who had it did not manage to make use of it. Some were worthy of a better century, for not every good thing always triumphs; things have their turn, and even eminences go in and out of fashion. But wisdom has one advantage: it is eternal; and if this is not its century, many others will be.

21 The art of being fortunate. There are rules for luck, for to the wise man not all of it is chance; it can be helped by industry. Some are content to take up a good stance at the doors of Fortune and wait for her to act. Others do better: they go on ahead and make use of sensible daring, which on the wings of its virtue and courage can overtake good fortune and flatter her to good effect. But, philosophizing rightly, there is no other means than virtue and attention, for there is no other good fortune or misfortune than prudence or imprudence.

22 A man of welcome knowledge. The ammunition of the discerning is a courtly, agreeable learning: a practical knowledge of all that is current, leaning toward the well informed, away from the vulgar. To have a seasoned store of salt in sayings and of gallantry in deeds, and to know how to use them at the right moment, for a

warning has sometimes gone over better in a joke than in the gravest teaching. Conversable wisdom has been worth more to some than all the seven arts, liberal as they are.⁶

23 Have no blemish. It is the condition of perfection. Few live without some failing, moral or natural, and they grow fond of their failings when they could easily cure them. Another's good sense is grieved to see that sometimes the slightest defect dares to attack a sublime universality of gifts, and one cloud is enough to eclipse a whole sun. They are moles on one's reputation, where malevolence at once halts, and lingers to remark. It would be the height of skill to turn them into distinctions. Thus Caesar knew how to crown his natural defect with laurel.⁷

24 Temper the imagination. Sometimes by correcting it, sometimes by helping it, for it is everything for happiness, and it even regulates good sense. It turns tyrant: not content with contemplation, it acts, and often even takes over a life, making it pleasant or burdensome according to the folly it falls into, for it makes men discontented or satisfied with themselves. To some it continually holds up sufferings, becoming the household executioner of fools. To others it holds out happiness and adventure with cheerful giddiness. It can do all this unless it is reined in by the most prudent synderesis.⁸

25 A quick understanding. It was once the art of arts to know how to reason; now that is not enough: one must divine, above all where there is deception to see through. No one can be understood who is not quick to understand. There are water diviners of the heart and lynxes of intention. The truths that matter most to us always come half spoken; let the attentive man take them in with full understanding: in what is favorable, with a tight rein on belief; in what is odious, with the spur.

26 Find each man's thumbscrew. This is the art of moving wills; it lies more in skill than in resolve: a knowing where to get in with

each man. There is no will without its particular fondness, and they differ with the variety of tastes. All men are idolaters: some of esteem, others of interest, and most of pleasure. The trick lies in knowing these idols in order to move men, knowing the impulse that works on each: it is like holding the key to another's will. One must go to the prime mover, which is not always the highest; most often it is the lowest, for in this world the disordered outnumber the well ordered. First prepare his temperament, then put the word to him, then bear down with his fondness, and it will infallibly checkmate his free will.

27 Set more store by intensity than by extent. Perfection lies not in quantity but in quality. Everything very good was always scant and rare; abundance brings discredit. Even among men, the giants are usually the real dwarfs. Some value books by their bulk, as if they were written to exercise the arms rather than the wits. Extent alone could never rise above mediocrity, and it is the plague of universal men that, wanting to be in everything, they are in nothing. Intensity gives eminence, and heroic eminence if the matter is sublime.

28 Vulgar in nothing. Not in taste. Oh, a great wise man he was who was displeased that his works pleased the many! Surfeits of common applause do not satisfy the discerning. Some are such chameleons of popularity that they take their enjoyment not in the gentle breezes of Apollo but in the breath of the crowd.⁹ Nor in understanding: let no one take pleasure in the miracles of the crowd, which are nothing but tricks to frighten the ignorant, common folly marveling at them while singular insight sees through them.

29 A man of integrity. Always on the side of reason, with such firmness of purpose that neither vulgar passion nor tyrannical violence will ever make him step over the line of reason. But who will be this phoenix of equity? For integrity has few true followers.

Many celebrate it, but not in their own house; others follow it up to the point of danger; there the false deny it and the politic dissemble it. It does not shrink from colliding with friendship, with power, and even with one's own interest, and here comes the pinch where men disown it. The cunning take refuge in abstractions, with a metaphysics that wins applause, so as not to offend either higher reason or reason of state; but the constant man judges dissembling a kind of treason; he prides himself more on tenacity than on shrewdness; he is found where truth is found; and if he leaves people, it is not from any fickleness of his but of theirs, in leaving truth first.

30 Do not profess discredited occupations. Still less fantastic ones, which serve rather to invite contempt than credit. The sects of caprice are many, and the sensible man must flee them all. There are exotic tastes that always marry whatever the wise repudiate: they are well pleased with every singularity, which, though it makes them well known, does so as a cause of laughter rather than of reputation. Even in the profession of wisdom the attentive man should not make himself conspicuous, much less in those professions that make their devotees ridiculous; nor need these be specified, for common discredit has already singled them out.

31 Know the fortunate, to choose them, and the unfortunate, to flee them. Ill fortune is usually the crime of folly, and of its accomplices: there is no contagion so catching. Never open the door to the least ill, for many others, and greater, will always come after it in ambush. The best trick in the game is knowing how to discard: the lowest card of the trump now running matters more than the highest of the one that has passed. When in doubt, the right move is to join the wise and prudent, who sooner or later come upon good luck.

32 Have the name of giving pleasure. For those who govern, the credit of pleasing is a great one: a distinction of sovereigns for

winning the goodwill of all. This is the one advantage of command: to be able to do more good than anyone else. True friends are those who do friendly turns. Others, on the contrary, are set on giving no pleasure, not so much from being tiresome as from malice, opposed in everything to the divine communicativeness.

33 Know how to hold aloof, for if knowing how to say no is a great lesson in living, a greater one is knowing how to say no to oneself, to business, and to personages. There are extraneous occupations, moths of precious time, and to be busy with trifles is worse than doing nothing. For the attentive man it is not enough not to meddle; he must also see that he is not meddled with. He must not belong so much to everyone that he does not belong to himself. Even friends are not to be abused, nor should he want more from them than they grant. Everything excessive is a vice, and much more so in dealings with others. With this sensible temperance he best keeps everyone's liking, and their esteem, because his most precious decency is not rubbed away. Let him have, then, freedom of temperament, a passion for what is choice, and never sin against the faith of his good taste.

34 Know one's chief distinction: the outstanding gift, cultivating that one and helping the rest. Anyone would have achieved eminence in something if he had known his advantage. Let him observe his king of attributes and bear down on it with application: in some, judgment excels; in others, courage. Most do violence to their Minerva, and so attain superiority in nothing: what passion is quick to flatter, time is slow to undeceive.

35 Take the measure of things. And most of all of what matters most. All fools are lost for not thinking: they never grasp half of anything; and since they do not perceive the harm or the advantage, neither do they apply diligence. Some make much of what matters little, and little of what matters much, always weighing backward. Many who lack sense never lose it. There are things

that should be observed with all one's effort and kept in the depths of the mind. The wise man takes the measure of everything, but with discrimination he digs where there is depth and reason to pause; and he sometimes thinks there is more than he thinks, so that reflection reaches where apprehension did not.

36 Have one's fortune sounded: for action, for commitment. It matters more than observing one's constitution, for if the man who at forty calls on Hippocrates for his health is a fool,¹⁰ more so the one who calls on Seneca for good sense. It is a great art to know how to steer it, now waiting for it, for waiting has its place with fortune, now seizing it, for it has its turn and its chance, though its tenor cannot be caught, so irregular is its course. Whoever has found it favorable should go forward with ease, for it is often partial to the bold, and even, being gallant, to the young. Whoever is unlucky should not act; let him withdraw, and not give it room for two misfortunes. Forward, whoever has the upper hand of it.

37 Know darts and know how to use them.¹¹ This is the subtlest point in human dealings. They are thrown out to test men's spirits, and with them is made the most disguised and penetrating probe of the heart. Others are malicious missiles, dipped in the poison herb of envy, smeared with the venom of passion: imperceptible thunderbolts to bring a man down from grace and from esteem. Many have fallen from favor, high and low, wounded by one slight remark of this kind, men whom a whole conspiracy of vulgar murmuring and singular malevolence had not been enough to make tremble in the least. Others, on the contrary, work in a man's favor, propping up and confirming his reputation. But with the same skill with which intention throws them, caution must receive them and attention await them, for defense lies in knowing, and the foreseen shot always misses.

38 Know how to quit while winning with fortune. It is what gamblers of reputation do. A fine retreat matters as much as a gallant attack; one should bank one's exploits when they are enough, when they are many. Continued good fortune was always suspect; the interrupted kind is safer, and one with something bittersweet about it, even for the enjoyment. The more good fortunes crowd on one another, the greater their risk of slipping and wrecking everything. Sometimes the shortness of the duration is made up for by the intensity of the favor. Fortune tires of carrying one man on her back for so long.

39 Know things at their point, in their season, and know how to make the most of them. The works of nature all reach the fullness of their perfection; up to that point they were gaining, from then on losing. Of the works of art, few reach the point where they cannot be improved. It is the eminence of good taste to enjoy each thing at its fullness: not everyone can, and not all who can know how. Even the fruits of the understanding have this point of ripeness; it matters to know it, for esteeming them and for using them.

40 The goodwill of people. It is much to win common admiration, but more to win affection; it has something of one's star about it, and most of it is industry; it begins with the star and goes on with industry. Eminence of gifts is not enough, though it is supposed that once good opinion is won, affection is easy to win. Benevolence, then, requires beneficence: doing good with both hands, good words and better deeds, loving in order to be loved. Courtesy is the greatest political spell of great personages. One must reach first for exploits and then for pens, from the blade to the leaf, for there is a goodwill of writers, and it is eternal.

41 Never exaggerate. A great concern of attention: not to speak in superlatives, both so as not to risk offending the truth and so as not to tarnish one's good sense. Exaggerations are squanderings of

esteem, and betray the narrowness of one's knowledge and taste. Praise vividly awakens curiosity and pricks desire, and afterward, if the worth does not match the appraisal, as usually happens, expectation turns against the deceit and takes its revenge in contempt for the thing celebrated and for the one who celebrated it. The sensible man therefore goes very carefully, and would rather err by falling short than by going too far. Eminences are rare: let esteem be tempered. Overpraising is a branch of lying, and with it one loses the credit of good taste, which is great, and that of understanding, which is greater.

42 Natural authority. It is a secret force of superiority. It must not come from tiresome artifice but from a commanding nature. Everyone submits to it without noticing how, recognizing the secret vigor of inborn authority. These are lordly temperaments, kings by merit and lions by innate privilege, who capture the hearts, and even the minds, of others through the respect they inspire. If their other gifts are favorable, they were born to be the prime movers of the state, for they accomplish more with a gesture than others with long effort.

43 Think with the few and speak with the many. Going against the current is as impossible a way to undeceive as it is an easy way into danger. Only a Socrates could undertake it. Dissent is taken as an affront, because it condemns another's judgment. The offended multiply, on account of the thing censured and on account of whoever applauded it. Truth belongs to the few; deception is as common as it is vulgar. Nor is the wise man to be known by what he says in the public square, for there he speaks not with his own voice but with that of common folly, however much his inner self may be belying it. The sensible man avoids being contradicted as much as contradicting: what he is quick to censure he is slow to make public. Thought is free; it cannot and must not be forced. It

withdraws into the sanctuary of its silence, and if it sometimes allows itself out, it is in the shade of a few sensible people.

44 Sympathy with great men. It is the gift of a hero to accord with heroes: a marvel of nature for its secrecy and its advantage. There is a kinship of hearts and of temperaments, and its effects are what vulgar ignorance blames on potions. It does not stop at esteem; it goes on to benevolence, and even reaches inclination: it persuades without words and obtains without merits. There is an active kind and a passive kind; both are happy, and the more so the more sublime. It is a great skill to know them, distinguish them, and know how to profit from them, for no persistence is enough without this secret favor.

45 Use reflection, do not abuse it. It must not be affected, still less let on. All art must be concealed, for it is suspect, and above all the art of caution, which is odious. Deceit is much in use; let wariness be redoubled, but without making itself known, for that would breed distrust: it greatly disoblige and provokes revenge, and awakens an evil no one had imagined. Reflection in one's conduct is a great advantage in action: there is no greater proof of a reasoning mind. The greatest perfection of actions is secured by the mastery with which they are performed.

46 Correct one's antipathy. We are apt to hate readily, and even before we have seen a man's gifts. And sometimes this innate, vulgarizing aversion dares to attack eminent men. Let good sense correct it, for there is no worse discredit than to hate the best: as sympathy with heroes is an advantage, so antipathy to them is a blemish.

47 Avoid entanglements. It is among the first concerns of prudence. Great capacities always keep a long way from the last extremities: there is a long road from one extreme to the other, and they always stay in the middle of their good sense; they come late to the breach, for it is easier to dodge the occasion than to

come out of it well. These are temptations of judgment, safer fled than overcome. One entanglement brings on a greater, and it stands at the very edge of the precipice. There are men quarrelsome by temperament, and even by nation, quick to take on obligations; but whoever walks by the light of reason always stays well above the matter: he considers it greater courage not to get entangled than to win, and when there is already one quarrelsome fool, he takes care that there should not be two.

48 A man with depths: so much the more a person. The inside must always be as much again as the outside, in everything. There are people who are all façade, like houses left unfinished because the capital ran out: they have the entrance of a palace and the rooms of a hut. In these there is nowhere to stop, or everything stops, because when the first greeting is over, the conversation is over. They enter upon the first courtesies like Sicilian horses, and then stop dead, struck dumb, for words run dry where thought does not flow perennially. These easily deceive others, whose sight is also superficial, but not cunning, which looks within and finds them hollow, to be a byword among the discerning.

49 A man of judgment and observation. He masters objects, not objects him. He sounds at once the bottom of the greatest depth; he knows how to make a perfect anatomy of a man's capital. On seeing a personage, he grasps him and judges him in his essence. Of rare observations, a great decipherer of the most guarded inner life. He notes sharply, conceives subtly, infers judiciously: he discovers, notices, reaches, and comprehends everything.

50 Never lose respect for oneself. Nor take liberties with oneself when alone. Let a man's own integrity be the rule of his uprightness, and let him owe more to the severity of his own verdict than to all outside precepts. Let him refrain from what is unseemly more out of fear of his own good sense than out of the

rigor of others' authority. Let him come to fear himself, and he will not need Seneca's imaginary tutor.¹²

51 A man of good choice. Most of life is lived by it. It presupposes good taste and the soundest verdict, for study and wit are not enough. There is no perfection where there is no selection; it includes two advantages: being able to choose, and to choose the best. Many of fertile and subtle wit, of sharp judgment, studious and well informed besides, are lost when it comes to choosing; they always marry the worst, as if they made a point of erring, and so this is one of the greatest gifts from above.

52 Never lose one's composure. A great concern of good sense, never to be thrown into disorder: it argues much of a man, a crowned heart, for all magnanimity is hard to stir. The passions are the humors of the spirit, and any excess in them sickens good sense; and if the ailment comes out at the mouth, reputation will be in danger. Let a man, then, be so much his own master, and so great, that neither in the greatest prosperity nor in the greatest adversity can anyone censure him as disturbed, but rather admire him as above it all.

53 Diligent and intelligent. Diligence quickly carries out what intelligence slowly thinks through. Haste is the passion of fools, who, not seeing the obstacle, act without caution. The wise, on the contrary, usually err by delay, for from noticing comes hesitation. Sometimes the ineffectiveness of slackness ruins the rightness of the verdict. Promptness is the mother of good fortune. He did much who left nothing for tomorrow. An august device: make haste slowly.¹³

54 Have mettle, with good sense. Even hares pull the beard of a dead lion. There is no trifling with courage: if a man yields to the first, he will have to yield to the second as well, and so on to the last. The same difficulty will have to be overcome late that would have been better overcome at once. The mettle of the spirit

exceeds that of the body: it is like the sword, and must always go sheathed in good sense, ready for the occasion. It is the safeguard of the person: weakness of spirit does more harm than weakness of body. Many had eminent gifts who, for lack of this breath of the heart, seemed dead and ended up buried in their own listlessness; for not without providence did careful nature join in the bee the sweetness of honey with the sharpness of the sting. There are sinews and bones in the body: let the spirit not be all softness.

55 A man who can wait. It argues a great heart, with breadth of patience. Never hurry, never be carried away by passion. Let a man first be master of himself, and he will be master of others afterward. One must travel through the spaces of time to the center of opportunity. Prudent delay seasons success and ripens secrets. The crutch of time does more work than the steel club of Hercules. God himself chastises not with the rod but with the season.¹⁴ A great saying: "Time and I against any two."¹⁵ Fortune herself rewards waiting with the greatness of the prize.

56 Have good sallies. They are born of a happy promptness. For it there are no tight spots or accidents, thanks to its liveliness and ease. Some think a great deal only to get everything wrong afterward, and others get everything right without thinking beforehand. There are capacities of antiperistasis,¹⁶ which work better when hard pressed: they are usually prodigies who get everything right on the spur of the moment and everything wrong on reflection; what does not occur to them at once never does, and there is no appeal to later. The quick are applauded, because they argue a prodigious capacity: in conceptions, subtlety; in deeds, good sense.

57 The well considered are safer. Soon enough, if well enough. What is done at once is undone at once; but what is to last an eternity must take another to be made. Nothing is attended to but perfection, and only success endures. An understanding with

depths achieves eternities. What is worth much costs much, for even the most precious of metals is the slowest and the heaviest.

58 Know how to temper oneself. One should not show oneself equally knowing with everyone, nor use more strength than is needed. Let there be no waste, either of knowledge or of worth. The good falconer does not fly more hawks at the prey than he needs to take it. Let a man not always be on display, for tomorrow he will no longer astonish. There must always be something new to shine with, for whoever reveals more every day keeps expectation always alive, and the limits of his great capital are never discovered.

59 A man who leaves a good taste. In the house of Fortune, whoever enters by the door of pleasure leaves by the door of sorrow, and the other way round. Attention, then, to the end, taking more care over the happiness of the exit than over the applause of the entrance. It is the common slight of the fortunate to have very favorable beginnings and very tragic endings. The point lies not in the vulgar applause of an entrance, for everyone's entrance is applauded, but in the general regret at an exit, for few are missed. Good fortune seldom sees out those who leave: as obliging as she shows herself to those who come, so discourteous is she to those who go.

60 Sound verdicts. Some are born prudent: they come into wisdom with this advantage of inborn synderesis, and so they have half the road to success already traveled. With age and experience reason comes to its full season, and they arrive at a well-tempered judgment. They abhor every caprice as a temptation to good sense, especially in matters of state, where the supreme importance demands complete security. Such men deserve a place at the helm, either to steer or to advise.

61 Eminence in what is best. A great singularity amid the plurality of perfections. There can be no hero without some sublime

extreme: mediocrities are no subject for applause. Eminence in an important post lifts a man out of the vulgar run and raises him to the rank of the rare. To be eminent in a humble profession is to be something in little; what has more of the delightful has less of the glorious. Excellence in superior matters is like a stamp of sovereignty: it calls forth admiration and wins affection.

62 Work with good instruments. Some would have the height of their subtlety shine in the baseness of their instruments: a dangerous satisfaction, deserving a fatal punishment. The goodness of the minister never diminished the greatness of the master; rather, all the glory of success afterward falls on the principal cause, as does blame in the opposite case. Fame always goes with the first. It never says, "He had good ministers," or bad ones, but, "He was a good craftsman," or a bad one. Let there be choice, then, let there be scrutiny, for an immortality of reputation must be entrusted to them.

63 The excellence of being first. And with eminence, doubled. It is a great advantage to have the lead, for it wins when the hands are equal. Many would have been phoenixes in their posts if others had not gone before them. The first carry off the entail of fame, and the second are left a contested allowance; however much they sweat, they cannot purge the vulgar stain of imitation. It was the subtlety of prodigies to invent a new course for eminence, provided good sense first secures the venture. By the novelty of their subjects the wise have made a place for themselves on the roll of heroes. Some would rather be first in the second rank than second in the first.

64 Know how to spare oneself sorrows. It is profitable good sense to avoid vexations. Prudence avoids many: she is the Lucina of happiness,¹⁷ and therefore of contentment. Hateful news: do not give it, still less receive it; its entrance must be barred, unless it is the entrance of the remedy. Some have their ears worn out by

hearing much sweetness in flattery; others, by hearing bitterness in gossip; and there are those who cannot live without some daily vexation, any more than Mithridates could without poison.¹⁸ Nor is it a rule of self-preservation to give oneself a lifelong sorrow so as to give another pleasure once, even one's nearest. One must never sin against one's own happiness to please the man who gives advice and then stays outside; and in every case, whenever pleasing another runs up against grieving oneself, it is a lesson of self-interest that it is better for the other to be displeased now than for you to be displeased later and past remedy.

65 Exalted taste. It admits of cultivation, as wit does. The excellence of understanding heightens the appetite of desire, and then the enjoyment of possession. The height of a man's capital is known by the elevation of his affections. A great capacity needs much matter to satisfy it; as great mouthfuls are for great palates, so sublime matters are for sublime temperaments. The bravest objects fear it, and the surest perfections lose confidence; those of the first magnitude are few: let appreciation be rare. Tastes are caught through dealings and inherited by continued contact: it is great luck to associate with someone whose taste is at its peak. But one must not make a profession of being displeased with everything, which is one of the foolish extremes, and more odious when it comes from affectation than from intemperance. Some would like God to create another world and other perfections to satisfy their extravagant fancy.

66 Take care that things turn out well. Some pay more attention to the rigor of the method than to the happiness of achieving the aim, but the discredit of failure always weighs more than the credit of diligence. The man who wins need give no explanations. Most people do not perceive the exactness of the circumstances, only the good or bad outcomes; and so reputation is never lost when the aim is achieved. A good end gilds everything, though the

blunders of the means may belie it. For it is an art to go against art when there is no other way to achieve the good fortune of coming out well.

67 Prefer posts that win applause. Most things depend on the satisfaction of others. Esteem is to perfections what the west wind is to flowers: breath and life. There are posts exposed to universal acclaim, and there are others, though greater, that no one watches; the former, being carried out in sight of everyone, capture common benevolence; the latter, though they have more of the rare and the exquisite, remain in the secrecy of their imperceptibility: venerated, but not applauded. Among princes, the victorious are the celebrated, and that is why the kings of Aragon were so applauded, as warriors, conquerors, and magnanimous men. Let the great man prefer the celebrated posts that all can see and all share in, and let him be immortalized by common suffrage.

68 Lend understanding. It is a finer thing than lending memory, by as much as understanding is more than memory. At times one must remind, at other times point out. Some fail to do things that would be just right, because they do not occur to them; then let friendly advice help them see where their advantage lies. One of the greatest gifts of the mind is that what matters occurs to it. For lack of this, many successes go undone. Let him who has the light give it, and him who begs for it ask: the one with restraint, the other with attention; let it be no more than giving a cue. This subtlety is urgent when it touches the interest of the one who does the waking. One should show willingness, and go further when that is not enough; the No is already in hand; let one go after the Yes with skill, for most of the time it is not obtained because it is not attempted.

69 Do not yield to a vulgar humor. A great man is he who never submits to stray impressions. Reflection on oneself is a lesson in foresight: knowing one's present disposition and forestalling it,

and even leaning to the other extreme so as to find, between nature and art, the balance point of synderesis. To know oneself is the beginning of correcting oneself; for there are monsters of absurdity: they are always in some humor or other and change their feelings with it; and dragged forever by this mean intemperance, they commit themselves to contradictory things. And this excess not only wears out the will but even dares to attack the judgment, upsetting both will and understanding.

70 Know how to refuse. Not everything is to be granted, nor to everyone. It matters as much as knowing how to grant, and in those who command it is an urgent concern. Here manner comes in: some people's no is esteemed more than other people's yes, for a gilded no satisfies more than a bare yes. There are many who always have no on their lips, and with it they make everything taste sour. With them no always comes first, and though afterward they end up granting everything, it is not appreciated, because that first sourness came before. Things are not to be refused point-blank: let the undeceiving go down in sips; nor is one to refuse entirely, for that would be to give up dependence for dead. Let some remnants of hope always remain to temper the bitterness of refusal. Let courtesy fill the void left by the favor, and good words make up for the lack of deeds. No and Yes are short to say and ask for much thought.

71 Do not be uneven, irregular in conduct: neither by nature nor by affectation. The sensible man was always the same in all that is perfect, which earns him the credit of understanding. Let his changes depend on those of causes and merits. In matters of good sense, variety is ugly. There are some who are different from themselves every day; even their understanding is uneven, how much more their will, and even their luck. The man who yesterday was the white of their yes is today the black of their no, and they

are forever belying their own credit and confusing others' notion of them.

72 A man of resolution. Bad execution does less harm than irresolution. Matters wear out less when they flow than when they stagnate. There are men who cannot decide, who need someone else's prompting in everything; and sometimes this arises not so much from perplexity of judgment, for theirs is keen, as from ineffectiveness. Finding difficulties is usually ingenious, but finding a way out of them is more so. There are others who are hampered by nothing, of great and decided judgment; they were born for sublime posts, because their unclouded grasp makes success and dispatch easy: they find everything done for them, for after settling the affairs of one world, one of these had time left over for another; and when they are sure of their good fortune, they commit themselves with greater security.

73 Know how to use evasion. It is how the sensible get out of trouble. With the gallantry of a witticism they often find their way out of the most tangled labyrinth. With a smile they gracefully dodge the most difficult contest. On this the greatest of great captains founded his courage. A courteous trick of refusal: change the subject; and there is no greater attention than to appear not to understand.

74 Do not be unapproachable. The true wild beasts are in the most populated places. Inaccessibility is the vice of those who do not know themselves, who change their humors with their honors. Starting by annoying people is no fit way to esteem. What is it like to see one of these intractable monsters, always poised in his absurd ferocity? Those who depend on them go in to speak to them, to their misfortune, as if to fight with tigers, armed with tact as much as with fear. To rise to the post they pleased everyone, and once in it they want to get even by annoying everyone. Though their office would have them belong to many, they belong

to no one, from harshness or haughtiness. A courtly punishment for these: leave them alone, and deprive them of good sense by depriving them of company.

75 Choose a heroic ideal. More for emulation than for imitation. There are exemplars of greatness, living texts of reputation. Let each man set before himself the first in his own post, not so much to follow them as to get ahead of them. Alexander wept not for Achilles in his tomb but for himself, not yet properly born to glory.¹⁹ Nothing so stirs ambition in the spirit as the trumpet of another's fame: the very thing that lays envy low gives heart to nobility of mind.

[1.](#) The Seven Sages of ancient Greece, among them Thales and Solon.

[2.](#) In Virgil's *Aeneid* (book 4), Fama, or Rumor, is the youngest sister of the giants Coeus and Enceladus, born of Earth in her anger at the gods.

[3.](#) Python, the serpent of Delphi, was killed by Apollo's arrows. Gracián sets Python's *calidez* (craft) against Apollo's *candidez* (candor).

[4.](#) Tigranes II, king of Armenia (first century BC), who according to Plutarch had captive kings wait on him.

[5.](#) The Roman goddess of wisdom and the arts. Gracián uses her name for natural talent.

[6.](#) The seven liberal arts of the medieval schools: grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. *Liberal* also means "generous."

[7.](#) Suetonius reports that Caesar, embarrassed by his baldness, welcomed the senate's grant of the right to wear a laurel wreath at all times.

[8.](#) A scholastic term for the inborn power of the mind to discern right from wrong.

[9.](#) The ancients believed that the chameleon lived on air.

[10.](#) An old saying held that by forty a man should be his own physician. Tacitus (*Annals*, book 6) reports that Tiberius mocked those who after thirty still needed others to tell them what was good or bad for their bodies.

- [11.](#) Spanish *varillas*, little rods: remarks let fall in passing to sound out another or to wound him.
- [12.](#) Seneca advised choosing some good man and keeping him always in mind as a watcher of one's conduct (*Letters to Lucilius* 11).
- [13.](#) "Make haste slowly" (*festina lente*) was a favorite saying of Augustus (Suetonius, *Augustus* 25). Gracián's *augusta* plays on the name.
- [14.](#) The Spanish rhymes *bastón* (stick) with *sazón* (season, the right moment).
- [15.](#) A saying attributed to Philip II of Spain (1527–1598).
- [16.](#) A term of the old natural philosophy: a quality grows stronger when surrounded by its opposite.
- [17.](#) The Roman goddess of childbirth, a title also given to Juno.
- [18.](#) Mithridates VI, king of Pontus (first century BC), who out of fear of poisoning hardened his body by taking small doses of poison every day.
- [19.](#) At the tomb of Achilles at Troy, Alexander called him fortunate to have had a true friend in life and Homer to proclaim him after death (Plutarch, *Life of Alexander* 15).

Aphorisms 76–150

76 Do not always be joking. Prudence is known in what is serious, which is held in higher credit than what is witty. He who is always joking is never a man in earnest. We put such men on a par with liars in not believing them: the liars for fear of lies, the jokers for fear of mockery. One never knows when they speak with judgment, which is as good as having none. There is no greater slight than continual drollery. Others win the fame of wits and lose the credit of sensible men. Jollity must have its moment; all the others belong to seriousness.

77 Know how to adapt oneself to all. A discerning Proteus:¹ with the learned, learned, and with the saint, saintly. A great art of winning everyone, for likeness wins benevolence. Observe temperaments and tune oneself to each one's; with the serious and the jovial alike, go along with the current, making a politic transformation: urgent for those who depend on others. This great subtlety of living requires great capital; it is less difficult for the universal man, with wit in knowledge and temperament in tastes.

78 Art in attempting. Folly always rushes in, for all fools are bold. The same simplicity that first keeps them from noticing obstacles afterward takes away their feeling for slights. But good sense goes in with great caution. Its scouts are observation and wariness; they go ahead exploring, so that it can proceed without danger. All rashness is condemned by discernment to a fall, though luck may sometimes acquit it. It is well to go slowly where great depth is feared: let shrewdness feel the way, and prudence gain

ground. There are great shoals in human dealings today: one must keep sounding all the time.

79 A genial temperament. If tempered, it is a gift, not a defect. A grain of drollery seasons everything. The greatest men also play the card of humor, which wins everyone's goodwill; but always keeping up the air of good sense and paying their respects to decorum. Others make a jest a short cut out of difficulty, for there are things that must be taken in jest, and sometimes the very things the other takes most in earnest. It shows a gentle nature, a hook for hearts.

80 Care in getting information. Most of life is lived on information. What we see is the least of it; we live on others' word. The ear is the side door of truth and the front door of lies. Truth is ordinarily seen, and heard only by way of exception; it rarely arrives in its pure element, still less when it comes from far away; it always brings some admixture of the feelings it has passed through; passion tinges with its colors whatever it touches, now odious, now favorable. It always aims at making an impression: great caution with the one who praises, greater with the one who blames. This point requires all one's attention, to discover the intention of the one who comes between, knowing beforehand on which foot he set out. Let reflection be the assay of the wanting and the false.

81 Make use of renewing one's brilliance. It is the privilege of the phoenix. Excellence usually grows old, and with it fame. Custom lessens admiration, and a middling novelty usually defeats the greatest eminence grown old. Make use, then, of rebirth, in courage, in wit, in good fortune, in everything: venture upon gallant novelties, dawning many times like the sun, changing the stages on which one shines, so that absence from the one may call forth longing there, and novelty in the other applause here.

82 Never squeeze anything dry, neither the bad nor the good. A wise man reduced all wisdom to moderation in all things.² The

utmost right becomes a wrong,³ and the orange that is squeezed too hard ends by yielding the bitter. Even in enjoyment one must never go to extremes. Wit itself runs dry if pressed too hard, and whoever milks like a tyrant will draw blood instead of milk.

83 Allow oneself some venial slip. For a lapse is sometimes the best recommendation of one's gifts. Envy has its ostracism, the more civil the more criminal. It accuses what is very perfect of sinning by not sinning; and because it is perfect in everything, it condemns it in everything. It turns Argus⁴ to find faults in what is very good, if only for consolation. Censure, like lightning, strikes the loftiest distinctions. Let Homer nod, then, now and then,⁵ and affect some carelessness in wit or in courage, but never in good sense, to calm malevolence before it bursts with venom: it will be like throwing one's cloak to the bull of envy to save one's immortality.

84 Know how to use one's enemies. Everything must be taken hold of not by the blade, where it wounds, but by the hilt, where it defends; and rivalry much more so. A wise man gets more use from his enemies than a fool from his friends. Malevolence often levels mountains of difficulty that favor would not have dared to undertake. Many have had their greatness built for them by those who wished them ill. Flattery is fiercer than hatred, for hatred effectively remedies the faults that flattery hides. The sensible man makes a mirror of spite, more faithful than that of affection, and forestalls detraction by preventing his defects or mending them, for great is the caution of one who lives on the frontier of a rivalry, of a malevolence.

85 Do not be the wild card.⁶ It is a failing of everything excellent that much use turns into abuse. The very fact that everyone covets it ends by annoying everyone. It is a great misfortune to be good for nothing; no smaller one to want to be good for everything.

Such people end by losing through winning too much, and are afterward as much detested as they were desired before. These wild cards are found, worn with handling, in every kind of perfection, and losing that first esteem of the rare, they earn the contempt of the common. The only remedy for everything extreme is to keep to a middle in one's brilliance: the excess should be in the perfection and the temperance in the display. The more brightly a torch shines, the more it consumes itself and the less it lasts. Scarcity of appearance is rewarded with gains in esteem.

86 Forestall evil rumors. The common crowd has many heads, and so many eyes for malice and many tongues for discredit. Some evil rumor may happen to run through it that tarnishes the greatest credit; and if it should become a vulgar nickname, it will finish off one's reputation. It is commonly given a foothold by some conspicuous lapse, by ridiculous defects, which are welcome matter for its gossip, though there are also blemishes thrown out by particular rivalry for common malice to take up; for there are mouths of malevolence, and they ruin a great fame more quickly with a joke than with a brazen charge. Ill fame is very easily acquired, because the bad is very believable, and it costs much to erase. Let the sensible man, then, avoid these lapses, opposing vulgar insolence with his attention, for it is easier to forestall than to remedy.

87 Culture and polish. Man is born a barbarian; he redeems himself from the beast by cultivating himself. Culture makes persons, and the more of it, the more so. On the strength of it Greece could call the whole rest of the universe barbarian. Ignorance is very coarse; nothing refines like knowledge. But even wisdom itself was crude if unpolished. Not only the understanding must be polished, but also the will, and above all conversation. There are men naturally polished, elegant inside and out, in thought and in words, in the attire of the body, which is like the rind, and in the gifts of the soul, which are the fruit. There are others, on the con-

trary, so crude that they have tarnished all that is theirs, and sometimes their eminences, with an intolerable, barbarous slovenliness.

88 Let one's dealings be on a large scale, aiming at sublimity in them. The great man must not be petty in his conduct. One must never go too far into particulars, least of all in unpleasant matters; for though it is an advantage to notice everything in passing, it is not to want to look into everything on purpose. One should usually proceed with a gentlemanly generality, a branch of gallantry. Dissembling is a great part of governing. Most things should be let pass, among family, among friends, and more among enemies. All niggling is tiresome, and in a man's character, burdensome. Going back and forth over a grievance is a kind of mania; and as a rule each man's way of conducting himself will match his heart and his capacity.

89 Comprehension of oneself. In temperament, in wit; in verdicts, in feelings. No one can be master of himself who does not first comprehend himself. There are mirrors for the face, none for the spirit: let discerning reflection on oneself be that mirror. And when a man forgets his outward image, let him keep the inward one, to amend it, to improve it. Let him know the strength of his good sense and subtlety before undertaking anything; let him gauge his temper before committing himself. Let him have his depth measured and his capital weighed for everything.

90 The art of living long: living well. Two things soon put an end to life: folly or baseness. Some lost it for not knowing how to keep it, others for not wanting to. As virtue is its own reward, so vice is its own punishment. Whoever lives fast in vice soon comes to an end in two ways; whoever lives fast in virtue never dies. Integrity of spirit communicates itself to the body, and a good life is held to be long not only in intensity but in extent itself.

91 Always act free of any misgiving that one is acting imprudently. The suspicion of a blunder in the one who acts is already evidence in the one who watches, especially if he is a rival. If, in the heat of passion, one's verdict already has misgivings, afterward, free of passion, it will condemn the deed as plain folly. Actions whose prudence is in doubt are dangerous; omission would be safer. Good sense does not admit probabilities: it always walks in the noonday light of reason. How can an enterprise turn out well that misgiving condemns even as it is conceived? And if the most carefully weighed resolution, carried within *nemine discrepante*, without a dissenting voice, often turns out unhappily, what can be expected of one that began wavering in reason and ill-omened by one's verdict?

92 Transcendent sense. I mean in everything. It is the first and supreme rule of action and of speech, the more enjoined the greater and higher the posts. A grain of good sense is worth more than hundredweights of subtlety. It is a walking on the safe side, though not so much on the applauded side, but the reputation of good sense is the triumph of fame: it will be enough to satisfy the sensible, whose vote is the touchstone of success.

93 The universal man. Composed of every perfection, he is worth many. He makes living most happy, sharing this enjoyment with those close to him. Variety with perfection is the entertainment of life. It is a great art to know how to make the most of everything good; and since nature, by his eminence, made man a compendium of all of nature, let art make him a universe by exercise and cultivation of taste and understanding.

94 An unfathomable capital. Let the attentive man avoid having the bottom of his knowledge or of his worth sounded, if he wants everyone to venerate him. Let him allow himself to be known, not comprehended. Let no one find out the limits of his capacity, because of the evident danger of undeceiving. Let him never give

anyone the chance to grasp all of him: the opinion of, and the doubt about, how far each man's capital reaches produce greater effects of veneration than the evidence of it, however great.

95 Know how to keep expectation alive. Keep feeding it. Let much promise more, and let the best action be a bid for greater ones. One must not stake everything on the first throw: it is a great trick to know how to husband oneself, in strength and in knowledge, and to keep advancing one's performance.

96 Great synderesis. It is the throne of reason, the base of prudence, for by virtue of it success costs little. It is a lot dealt by heaven, and the most to be desired as the first and the best: the first piece of armor, so urgent that the lack of no other piece earns a man the name of wanting; its lack is the most noticed. All the actions of life depend on its influence, and all seek its approval, for everything must be done with sense. It consists in an inborn inclination to all that most conforms to reason, always marrying what is most right.

97 Achieve and preserve reputation. It is the usufruct of fame. It costs much, because it is born of eminences, which are as rare as mediocrities are common. Once achieved, it is easily kept. It obliges much and does more. It is a kind of majesty when it becomes veneration, by the sublimity of its cause and its sphere; but substantial reputation is the kind that has always counted.

98 Encipher one's will. The passions are the breaches of the spirit. The most practical knowledge lies in dissembling; whoever plays with the cards face up runs the risk of losing. Let the reserve of the guarded man compete with the attention of the observant: against lynxes of reasoning, cuttlefish of inwardness. Let no one know his taste, lest he be forestalled, by some with contradiction, by others with flattery.

99 Reality and appearance. Things pass not for what they are but for what they seem. Those who look within are rare, and those

who are satisfied with appearances many. It is not enough to be right with a face of malice.

100 A man undeceived: a Christian sage, a courtier philosopher. But not to seem so, still less to affect it. Philosophizing is in discredit, though it is the greatest exercise of the wise. The science of the sensible lives in disrepute. Seneca introduced it in Rome; it was kept up for some time at court; now it is held to be an irrelevance. But undeceiving was always the pasture of prudence, the delight of integrity.

101 Half the world is laughing at the other half, and all are fools. Either everything is good or everything is bad, according to the votes. What one follows, another hounds. An insufferable fool is he who would regulate every object by his own notion. Perfections do not depend on a single liking; there are as many tastes as faces, and as varied. There is no defect without its devotee, nor should one lose heart because things do not please some, for there will be no lack of others who prize them; nor should the applause of these be grounds for vanity, for others will condemn what they applaud. The standard of true satisfaction is the approval of men of reputation who have a vote in that order of things. One does not live by a single vote, nor by one fashion, nor by one century.

102 A stomach for fortune's great mouthfuls. In the body of prudence a large crop is not the least important part, for a great capacity is made up of great parts. Good fortune does not embarrass the man who deserves still greater; what is surfeit to some is hunger to others. There are many with whom any very important dish disagrees, through the narrowness of their nature, neither accustomed nor born to such sublime posts; their manners turn sour, and with the fumes that rise from borrowed honor their heads begin to swim. They run great danger in high places and cannot contain themselves, because their luck will not fit inside them. Let the great man show, then, that he still has room for

greater things, and let him flee with special care from anything that might suggest a narrow heart.

103 Majesty, each in his own way. Let all one's actions be, if not those of a king, worthy of one, according to one's sphere; royal conduct within the limits of one's sensible lot: sublimity of action, loftiness of thought. And in all his affairs let a man represent a king by merit, if not in reality, for true sovereignty lies in integrity of conduct; nor will he need to envy greatness who can be its standard. Especially those close to the throne should catch something of true superiority, and share in the gifts of majesty rather than in the ceremonies of vanity, affecting not the imperfection of puffiness but the distinction of substance.

104 Take the pulse of posts. They vary among themselves: knowing them is a masterly knowledge, and one that needs observation; some require courage, others subtlety. Those that depend on rectitude are easier to manage, and those that depend on artifice harder. For the former a good nature is all that is needed; for the latter all one's attention and vigilance are not enough. Governing men is a laborious occupation, and more so madmen or fools: double sense is needed to deal with one who has none. An intolerable post is the one that demands the whole man, with fixed hours and unvarying matter; better are those free of tedium, joining variety with gravity, for alternation refreshes taste. The most authoritative are those whose dependence is least, or most distant; and the worst is the one that in the end makes a man sweat at the human reckoning,⁷ and more at the divine.

105 Do not be a bore. The man of one matter and of one word is usually tiresome. Brevity flatters, and does more business; it gains by courtesy what it loses by curtness. The good, if brief, twice good; and even the bad, if little, not so bad. Quintessences work better than farragos; and it is a common truth that a long man is seldom a man of understanding, long not so much in the matter of

his frame as in the form of his discourse. There are men who serve rather as an encumbrance than as an ornament of the universe, odd pieces of furniture that everyone pushes aside. Let the discerning man avoid being a nuisance, much less to great personages, who live very busy lives, for it would be worse to put out one of them than all the rest of the world. What is well said is soon said.

106 Do not make a show of one's fortune. Flaunting one's dignity offends more than flaunting one's person. Playing the great man is odious; it was enough for him to be envied. Esteem is won the less the more it is sought; it depends on the respect of others; and so no one can take it for himself; he must deserve it from others and wait for it. Great posts require an authority suited to their exercise, without which they cannot be exercised worthily. Let a man keep the authority he deserves in order to fulfill what is substantial in his obligations: not squeezing it, but helping it; and all who play the grandee in office show that they did not deserve it, and that the dignity sits on top of them. If he must rely on something, let it be the eminence of his gifts rather than what is adventitious; for even a king is to be venerated more for his personal sovereignty than for the outward kind.

107 Show no satisfaction with oneself. Let a man live neither discontented, which is pusillanimity, nor satisfied, which is folly. Satisfaction in most people is born of ignorance and ends in a foolish happiness that, though it entertains the taste, does not maintain one's credit. Since it cannot reach the superlative perfections of others, it is content with any common mediocrity in itself. Misgiving was always useful, as well as sensible, either as a precaution so that things turn out well or as a consolation when they turn out badly; for the slight of his fortune comes as nothing new to one who already feared it. Homer himself nods now and then, and Alexander falls from his high estate and from his illusion.

Things depend on many circumstances; what triumphed in one place, and on one occasion, fails in another; but the incorrigibility of folly lies in this, that the vainest satisfaction has turned into a flower, and its seed keeps on sprouting.

108 A short cut to being a person: knowing whose side to keep. Dealings are very effective. Customs and tastes are shared. Temperament, and even wit, rub off without one feeling it. Let the quick man, then, try to keep company with the self-controlled, and likewise with the other temperaments; in this way he will achieve temperance without violence: it is a great skill to know how to temper oneself. The alternation of contraries beautifies the universe and sustains it, and if it creates harmony in nature, greater harmony in morals. Let him make use of this politic advice in choosing his familiars and his servants, for by the meeting of extremes a very discerning mean will be adjusted.

109 Do not be a faultfinder. There are men of fierce temperament who make a crime of everything, and not out of passion but by nature. They condemn everyone, some for what they have done, others for what they will do. It shows a spirit worse than cruel, which is to say vile, and they accuse with such exaggeration that they make beams out of motes to put out eyes: slave drivers at every post, who make a galley of what might be Elysium; and if passion comes into it, they carry everything to extremes. Ingenuousness, on the contrary, finds a way out for everything, if not of intention, then of inadvertence.

110 Do not wait to be a setting sun. It is a maxim of the sensible to leave things before they leave them. Let a man know how to make a triumph of his very end; for sometimes the sun itself, while still shining bright, withdraws behind a cloud so as not to be seen sinking, and leaves people in suspense as to whether it has set or not. Let him slip away from sunsets so as not to burst with slights; let him not wait for people to turn their backs on him, for they will

bury him alive to feeling and dead to esteem. The prudent man retires the racehorse in good time and does not wait for it to fall in mid-course and raise a laugh. Let beauty break her mirror in good time and with cunning, and not with impatience later, on seeing herself undeceived.

111 Have friends. It is a second being. Every friend is good and wise for his friend. Among friends everything turns out well. A man will be worth as much as others wish; and for them to wish it, one must win their tongues by way of their hearts. There is no spell like good service, and to win friendships the best means is to make them. Most of what we have, and the best of it, depends on others. One must live either among friends or among enemies. Every day a man should work at winning someone, if not as an intimate, then as a well-wisher, for some remain afterward as confidants, having passed the test of choice.

112 Win kindly affection, for even the First and Supreme Cause, in its greatest affairs, foresees and disposes it. One comes to good opinion by way of feeling. Some trust so much to merit that they scorn diligence; but attention knows well that the road of merits alone is a long way round if they are not helped by favor. Benevolence makes everything easy and supplies everything; it does not always find gifts but puts them there, such as courage, integrity, wisdom, even discernment. It never sees ugliness, because it would not want to see it. It usually arises from material correspondence: in temperament, nation, kinship, homeland, and post. The formal kind is more sublime: in gifts, obligations, reputation, merits. The whole difficulty is to win it, for it is easily kept. It can be worked for, and one can learn to make use of it.

113 In prosperity, prepare for adversity. It is a wise device to lay in provisions for winter in summer, and it is easier then. Favors are cheap then, and friendships abundant. It is good to save for bad times, for adversity is dear and short of everything. Let there be a

reserve of friends and of the grateful, for some day one will prize what one now ignores. Baseness never has friends: in prosperity because it does not know them, in adversity because they do not know it.

114 Never compete. Every claim that meets opposition damages one's credit. Competition at once aims to tarnish, in order to out-shine. Few wage fair war; rivalry uncovers the defects that courtesy forgot. Many lived in good credit as long as they had no rivals. The heat of opposition revives or resurrects dead infamies, digs up stench past and ancestral. Competition begins with a manifesto of blemishes, helping itself to all it can and should not; and though at times, indeed most times, offenses are no useful weapons, it makes of them a vile satisfaction for its revenge, and shakes them out with such force that it makes the dust of oblivion fly off old slights. Benevolence was always peaceful, and reputation benevolent.

115 Get used to the bad dispositions of those around one, as to ugly faces: it is expedient where dependence comes in. There are fierce temperaments with whom one can neither live nor do without. It is a skill, then, to grow accustomed to them, as to ugliness, so that they do not come as something new in the terror of the moment. The first time they frighten, but little by little that first horror wears off, and reflection forestalls vexations or tolerates them.

116 Always deal with people bound by obligations. One can commit oneself to them, and commit them. Their very obligation is the best security in dealing with them, even when it comes to wrangling, for they act as who they are, and it is better to fight with decent people than to triumph over base ones. There are no good dealings with baseness, because it does not feel obliged to integrity; that is why among the base there is never true friendship, nor is their fine courtesy of good alloy, though it may look so,

because it is not grounded in honor. Always renounce a man without honor, for whoever does not esteem honor does not esteem virtue; and honor is the throne of integrity.

117 Never talk about oneself. One must either praise oneself, which is vanity, or blame oneself, which is pettiness; and being a fault of good sense in the one who speaks, it is a penance for those who hear. If this is to be avoided among intimates, much more in high places, where one speaks in public, and any appearance of folly already passes for folly. Speaking of those present has the same drawback for good sense, because of the danger of running onto one of two reefs: flattery or blame.

118 Gain a name for courtesy, for that is enough to make a man applauded. Courtesy is the chief part of culture, a kind of spell, and so it wins everyone's goodwill, just as discourtesy earns universal contempt and annoyance. If discourtesy is born of pride, it is hateful; if of boorishness, contemptible. Courtesy should always be more rather than less, but not the same for all, for that would degenerate into injustice. Among enemies it is held a debt, so that one's courage may be seen. It costs little and is worth much: whoever honors is honored. Gallantry and honor have this advantage, that they remain: the one with him who practices it, the other with him who pays it.

119 Do not make oneself disliked. Aversion is not to be provoked, for even unbidden it comes forward. There are many who hate for nothing, without knowing how or why. Malevolence gets ahead of obligation. The irascible appetite is more effective and quicker for harm than the concupiscible for profit. Some take pains to fall out with everyone, from an annoying or annoyed temperament; and once hatred takes hold, it is, like a bad opinion, hard to erase. Men fear the judicious, hate slanderers, are sickened by the conceited, abhor mockers, and leave the eccentric alone.

Let a man show esteem, then, in order to be esteemed; whoever would found a house must take account of others.⁸

120 Live in a practical way. Even knowledge must be in fashion, and where it is not in use, one must know how to play the ignorant. Ways of reasoning and of taste change with the times: one must not reason in the old way, and one must have taste in the modern way. The taste of the leading heads casts the vote in each order of things. That is the one to follow for the time being, and to carry on to eminence. Let the sensible man accommodate himself to the present, though the past may seem better to him, in the attire of the soul as of the body. Only in goodness does this rule of life not hold, for virtue must always be practiced. Telling the truth and keeping one's word are no longer known and seem things of other times; and good men seem made for the good times, yet they are always loved; so that if there are any, they are not in fashion, nor imitated. Oh, great misfortune of our century, that virtue is held strange and malice current! Let the discerning man live as he can, if not as he would like. Let him value what luck has granted him more than what it has denied him.

121 Do not make business out of what is no business. Just as some make a tale of everything, others make business of everything: they always talk of importance and take everything in earnest, reducing it to quarrel and mystery. Few vexing things are to be taken to heart, for that would be committing oneself to no purpose. It is getting things backward to take to heart what should be shrugged off. Many things that were something became nothing by being left alone; and others that were nothing became much because they were made much of. At the beginning it is easy to put an end to anything; afterward, not. Often the remedy itself makes the illness, and letting things be is not the worst rule of life.

122 Mastery in speech and in action. It makes itself much room everywhere and wins respect in advance. It has its influence in

everything: in conversation, in oratory, even in walking; and even in one's glance, in one's love. It is a great victory to capture hearts. It is born not of foolish boldness, nor of tiresome long-windedness, but of a seemingly authority, born of a superior temperament and aided by merits.

123 The unaffected man. The more gifts, the less affectation, which is usually the vulgar blemish of them all. It is as tiresome to others as it is painful to the one who keeps it up, for he lives a martyr to care and torments himself with punctiliousness. Eminences themselves lose their merit by it, because they are judged to be born of artificial strain rather than free nature, and everything natural was always more pleasing than the artificial. The affected are taken for foreigners in what they affect; the better a thing is done, the more the effort must be belied, so that the perfection is seen to fall naturally from one's nature. Nor in fleeing affectation must one fall into it by affecting not to affect. The discerning man must never let on that he knows his merits, for that very carelessness awakens attention in others. Twice eminent is he who encloses all perfections in himself and none in his own estimation; and by the opposite path he arrives at the goal of applause.

124 Come to be wished for. Few have won so much of people's goodwill, and if it is the goodwill of the sensible, it is happiness. Lukewarmness toward those who are leaving is the ordinary thing. There are ways to deserve this prize of affection: eminence in one's post and in one's gifts is a sure way; pleasantness, an effective one. Eminence breeds dependence, so that it is seen that the office needed the man and not the man the office; some do honor to their posts, others are honored by them. It is no advantage to be made to look good by a bad successor, for that is not being wished for absolutely, but the other's being hated.

125 Do not be a green book.⁹ It is a sign that one's own fame is worn out to concern oneself with others' infamy. Some would like to hide, if not wash away, their own stains with those of others; or they console themselves, which is the consolation of fools. Their breath smells foul, for they are the sewers of the town's filth. In these matters, the more one scratches, the more one is muddled. Few escape some original failing, in the direct line or the collateral. Faults are not known in those who are little known. Let the attentive man flee from being a register of infamies, which is to be a hated roll of shame and, though alive, soulless.

126 The fool is not the one who commits a folly, but the one who, having committed it, does not know how to hide it. One's affections must be sealed; how much more one's defects! All men err, but with this difference: the shrewd belie the errors they have made, and fools tell lies about those still to be made. Credit lies in caution more than in conduct: if a man is not chaste, let him be cautious.¹⁰ The lapses of great men are more observed, like eclipses of the great lights. Let it be an exception in friendship not to confide one's defects to it; not even, if it were possible, to one's own self. But here one may make use of that other rule of life, which is knowing how to forget.

127 Ease in everything. It is the life of gifts, the breath of speech, the soul of action, the distinction of distinctions themselves. The other perfections are the ornament of nature, but ease is the ornament of the perfections themselves: it is praised even in reasoning. It owes most to privilege and least to study, for it is superior even to discipline; it goes beyond facility and advances to gallantry; it presupposes freedom and adds perfection. Without it all beauty is dead, and all grace, disgrace. It runs through courage, discernment, prudence, and majesty itself. It is a politic short cut in dispatch, and a refined way out of every entanglement.

128 Loftiness of spirit. It is among the principal requisites of a hero, for it kindles every kind of greatness. It heightens taste, enlarges the heart, raises thought, ennobles character, and disposes to majesty. Wherever it is found, it stands out, and sometimes, belied by the envy of fortune, it bursts forth to show itself. It expands in the will, even when it is constrained in what is possible. Magnanimity, generosity, and every heroic gift recognize it as their source.

129 Never complain. Complaint always brings discredit. It serves rather as an example of daring to passion than as consolation to compassion. It opens the way for the hearer to do the same, and knowledge of the first man's grievance is the second man's excuse. Some, by complaining of past offenses, give a foothold to future ones, and seeking remedy or consolation, they invite gloating, and even contempt. It is better policy to celebrate the obligations one owes to some so that they become commitments for others; repeating the favors of the absent is soliciting those of the present, is selling the credit of some to others. And let the attentive man never publish either slights or defects, only marks of esteem, which serve to keep friends and to restrain enemies.

130 Do, and make it seen. Things pass not for what they are but for what they seem. To have worth and know how to show it is to have worth twice over. What is not seen is as if it were not. Reason itself does not receive its veneration where it does not look like reason. The deceived far outnumber the observant: deception prevails, and things are judged from outside. There are things that are very different from what they seem. A good exterior is the best recommendation of inner perfection.

131 Gallantry of character. Souls have their dash, a jauntiness of the spirit, and by its gallant acts a heart cuts a very fine figure. It is not found in all, for it presupposes magnanimity. Its first concern

is to speak well of an enemy, and to act better. Its greatest luster lies in the occasions of revenge: it does not take them away but improves on them, turning revenge, when it is most victorious, into an unexpected generosity. It is politic too, and even the finery of reason of state. It never affects victories, because it affects nothing, and when merit wins them, ingenuousness hides them.

132 Make use of second counsel. Appealing for a review is security, especially where one's satisfaction is not evident; take time, either to grant or to improve on one's decision: new reasons offer themselves to confirm and strengthen one's verdict. If it is a matter of giving, the gift is valued more for the good sense behind it than for the pleasure of its promptness; what was long desired was always valued more. If one must refuse, there is room for manner, and for ripening the No so that it is better seasoned; and most often, once that first heat of desire has passed, the slight of refusal is not felt afterward in cold blood. To one who asks in haste, grant late, for it is a trick to baffle attention.

133 "Better mad with everyone than sane alone," say men of policy. For if all are mad, a man will lose nothing with any of them; and if good sense stands alone, it will be taken for madness: so much will it matter to follow the current. The greatest knowledge is sometimes not to know, or to affect not to know. One must live with others, and the ignorant are the majority. To live alone, one must have much of God or be wholly a beast.¹¹ But I would moderate the aphorism and say: better sane with the many than mad alone. Some want to be singular in chimeras.

134 Double the requisites of life. It is doubling one's living. Dependence must not rest on one alone, nor be narrowed to a single thing, however singular. Everything should be doubled, and above all the sources of profit, of favor, of pleasure. The changeableness of the moon, which marks the boundary of permanence, runs through all things, and more so through those that depend

on the human will, which is brittle. Let a reserve be set against frailty, and let it be a great rule of the art of living to double the means of good and of comfort: as nature doubled the most important and most exposed members, so let art double those on which we depend.

135 Have no spirit of contradiction, for that is loading oneself with folly and annoyance. Good sense will conspire against it. Raising difficulties about everything may well be ingenious, but obstinacy does not escape being foolish. Such people make guerilla war of sweet conversation, and so are enemies more of their intimates than of those who have no dealings with them. In the most savory morsel the bone that sticks crosswise is felt most, and contradiction is just such a bone in good times; they are pernicious fools, who add the savage to the beast.

136 Grasp matters properly; take the pulse of business at once. Many go off either along the branches of useless reasoning or among the leaves of tiresome verbosity, without hitting on the substance of the case. They go a hundred times round a point, tiring themselves and tiring others, and never reach the center of what matters. It comes from confused understandings that cannot disentangle themselves. They spend their time and their patience on what they should have left alone, and afterward there is none left for what they left alone.

137 Let the wise man be sufficient to himself. He was all his own possessions, and carrying himself he carried everything.¹² If one universal friend is enough to make Rome and the whole rest of the universe, let a man be that friend to himself, and he will be able to live alone. Whom can he miss if there is no greater mind and no greater taste than his own? He will depend on himself alone, for it is supreme happiness to resemble the Supreme Being. He who can live alone in this way will have nothing of the brute, but much of the sage and all of God.

138 The art of letting things be. And more so the more turbulent the public sea, or the domestic one. There are whirlwinds in human dealings, tempests of the will; then it is good sense to withdraw to the safe harbor of letting things pass. Ills are often made worse by remedies. Let nature act in the one case, and morality in the other. The wise physician must know as much in order not to prescribe as to prescribe, and sometimes the art lies more in not applying remedies. Let lifting one's hand and letting things settle be the way to calm vulgar whirlwinds; yielding to time now will be winning later. A spring is muddied by a little stirring, and will not grow clear again by being worked at, but by being left alone. There is no better remedy for disorders than to let them run their course, for so they fall of themselves.

139 Recognize unlucky days, for there are such: nothing will go right; and though the game may change, the bad luck does not. Two throws should be enough to recognize it and withdraw, noticing whether the day is one's own or not. Even the understanding has its turns, for no one was wise at all hours. It is luck to hit on good reasoning, as it is to write a letter well. All perfections depend on season, and beauty is not always in its prime; discernment belies itself, now falling short, now overreaching; and everything, to turn out well, must have its day. Just as for some everything goes wrong, for others everything goes right, and with less effort. A man finds everything done for him: wit is in season, temperament in good temper, and all under a lucky star. Then one should make the most of it and not waste the smallest particle. But the judicious man will not pass final sentence that the day is bad because of one mishap he has seen, nor, on the contrary, that it is good, for the one may have been mere ill humor and the other luck.

140 Hit at once on the good in everything. It is the good fortune of good taste. The bee goes straight to the sweetness for its comb,

and the viper to the bitterness for its venom. So with tastes: some go to the best, others to the worst. There is nothing that does not have something good in it, especially if it is a book, because of the thought in it. Yet the temperament of some is so graceless that among a thousand perfections they will hit on the one defect there may be, and that they censure and trumpet: collectors of the filth of wills and understandings, loading themselves with notes and defects, which is more a punishment of their bad choice than an employment of their subtlety. They lead a bad life, for they always feed on bitterness and make a pasture of imperfections. Happier is the taste of others who, among a thousand defects, will hit at once on a single perfection that chance let fall there.

141 Do not listen to oneself. It is little use pleasing oneself if one does not please others, and common contempt usually punishes private satisfaction. The man who is pleased with himself is in debt to everyone. Wanting to speak and to hear oneself does not go well; and if talking to oneself alone is madness, listening to oneself in front of others will be madness doubled. It is a failing of lords to speak with a refrain, the “Am I making sense?” and that “Eh?” that batters their listeners. At every sentence they prick up their ears for approval or flattery, trying the patience of good sense. The puffed-up also speak with an echo, and as their conversation goes on the chopines of pomp,¹³ at every word it calls for the tiresome assistance of a foolish “Well said!”

142 Never take the worse side out of stubbornness, because one’s opponent got ahead and chose the better. A man begins already defeated, and so will have to yield in disgrace. He will never take good revenge with the bad. It was his opponent’s cunning to get ahead to the better side, and his own folly to oppose him late with the worse. Those obstinate in deed are more committed than those obstinate in word, as much more as the risk of doing exceeds that of saying. It is the vulgarity of the stubborn to

care nothing for truth, so as to contradict, nor for usefulness, so as to litigate. The attentive man is always on the side of reason, not of passion, either getting there first or improving his position afterward; for if his opponent is a fool, for that very reason he will change course and go over to the opposite side, and so worsen his position. To drive him from the better side the only remedy is to embrace it oneself, for his folly will make him leave it, and his stubbornness will be his downfall.

143 Do not fall into paradox in fleeing the vulgar; both extremes bring discredit. Every subject that is out of keeping with gravity is a branch of folly. The paradoxical is a certain deceit that wins applause at the start, astonishing by its novelty and its piquancy; but afterward, with the undeceiving of its turning out so badly, it is left much disgraced. It is a kind of trickery, and in political matters the ruin of states. Those who cannot reach the heroic, or dare not, by the road of virtue, take the road of paradox, astonishing fools and proving many sensible men right. It argues intemperance in one's verdict, and that is why it is so opposed to prudence; and if it is sometimes not founded on the false, at least it is founded on the uncertain, at great risk to what matters.

144 Go in with another's will in order to come out with one's own. It is a stratagem for getting one's way. Even in heavenly matters Christian teachers enjoin this holy cunning.¹⁴ It is an important dissimulation, for the imagined advantage serves as bait to catch a will: it seems to the other that his own will goes first, and it is only to open the way for someone else's aim. One must never go in rashly, especially where there is a bottom of danger. With people whose first word is usually No, too, it is well to disguise the shot, so that the difficulty of granting is not noticed, much more when aversion is sensed. This advice belongs among those of second intention, all of which are of the quintessence of subtlety.

145 Do not show the sore finger, for everything will knock against it. Do not complain of it, for malice always strikes where weakness hurts. Taking offense will serve only to whet the sport of others. Ill will goes looking for the pretext to make one jump: it throws out darts to find where one is sensitive, and it will try a thousand ways until it reaches the quick. Let the attentive man never let on, nor reveal his ill, whether personal or inherited, for even fortune sometimes delights in wounding where it will hurt most. It always mortifies the quick; and so one must not reveal either what mortifies or what enlivens: the one so that it may end, the other so that it may last.

146 Look inside. Things are usually found to be very different from what they seemed; and ignorance that never got past the rind turns into undeceiving when it penetrates within. Falsehood is always first in everything; it drags fools along by continued vulgarity. Truth always arrives last, and late, limping along with time; the sensible reserve for it the other half of the faculty that our common mother wisely doubled.¹⁵ Deceit is very superficial, and the superficial come upon it at once. What is right lives withdrawn within, to be the more esteemed by its wise and discerning.

147 Do not be inaccessible. No one is so perfect that he does not sometimes need advice. He who will not listen is an incurable fool; the most independent must make room for friendly warning, and sovereignty must not exclude teachableness. There are men beyond remedy because they are inaccessible, who fall headlong because no one dares go up to stop them. The most self-sufficient must keep one door open to friendship, and it will be the door of help; there must be room for a friend to warn him freely, and even to rebuke him. Satisfaction must give the friend this authority, together with a high opinion of his faithfulness and prudence. Respect, and even credit, should not be made easy for everyone; but let him keep, in the closet of his reserve, the faithful mirror of

a confidant to whom he owes, and in whom he values, correction in undeceiving.

148 Have the art of conversation, in which one shows oneself a person. In no human exercise is more attention required, for it is the most ordinary in life. Here a man loses or wins himself; for if care is needed to write a letter, which is conversation thought over and set down in writing, how much more in ordinary conversation, where discernment is put to a quick examination! Experts take the pulse of the spirit by the tongue, and on the strength of this the Sage said, "Speak, if you want me to know you."¹⁶ Some hold that the art of conversation is to go without art, for it should be loose, like dress; this is understood among close friends, for when it is with persons who call for respect it must be more substantial, and show the great substance of the person. To succeed, one must adjust to the temperament and the wit of those taking part. One must not affect being a censor of words, or one will be taken for a grammarian, still less a prosecutor of arguments, or everyone will shun one's company and bar one from conversation. Discernment in speaking matters more than eloquence.

149 Know how to shift ills onto another. To have shields against malevolence is a great trick of those who govern. It is born not of incapacity, as malice thinks, but of superior industry, to have someone on whom the censure for blunders and the common punishment of murmuring may fall. Not everything can turn out well, nor can everyone be pleased. Let there be, then, a man of straw for blunders,¹⁷ a butt for misfortunes, at the cost of his own ambition.

150 Know how to sell one's wares. Their intrinsic goodness is not enough, for not everyone bites into the substance or looks within. Most people go where there is a crowd; they go because they see others going. It is a great part of the art to know how to give things credit: sometimes by praising them, for praise is a

solicitor of desire; at other times by giving them a good name, which is a great way to exalt them, always belying any affectation. Reserving a thing for connoisseurs alone is a spur to everyone, for everyone thinks himself one, and if not, the deprivation will spur desire. Never give one's subjects the credit of being easy or common, which is to vulgarize them rather than to make them accessible; everyone bites at the singular as more appetizing, both to taste and to wit.

[1.](#) The old man of the sea in Greek myth, who changed into every shape to avoid being caught.

[2.](#) Sayings such as “Nothing in excess” and “Measure is best” were attributed to the Seven Sages of Greece. Gracián does not say which sage he means.

[3.](#) The Latin maxim *summum ius, summa iniuria* (Cicero, *De officiis* 1.33). The Spanish plays on *derecho* (straight, right) and *tuerto* (crooked, wrong).

[4.](#) The hundred-eyed giant of Greek myth, some of whose eyes stayed open even in sleep.

[5.](#) From Horace, *Ars poetica* 359: even good Homer sometimes nods.

[6.](#) Spanish *malilla*, in the card games of the day a high trump that could stand for any card. Gracián means the man who is used for everything until he is worth nothing.

[7.](#) Spanish *residencia*: the formal inquiry into an official's conduct held in the Spanish empire when his term of office ended.

[8.](#) The Spanish plays on *casa* (house) and *caso* (heed): *el que quiere hacer casa hace caso*.

[9.](#) The *Libro verde de Aragón*, a sixteenth-century manuscript tracing the Jewish ancestry of Aragonese noble families, which became a byword for a book that drags up other people's family stains.

[10.](#) From the Latin maxim *si non caste, tamen caute*. The Spanish plays on *casto* (chaste) and *cauto* (cautious).

[11.](#) Aristotle, *Politics* 1.2: whoever can live without a city is either a beast or a god.

- [12.](#) Said of Bias of Priene, one of the Seven Sages, who left his captured city empty-handed and declared that he carried all his possessions with him (Cicero, *Paradoxa Stoicorum* 1.8).
- [13.](#) Cork-soled platform shoes worn by Spanish women of the time to add to their height.
- [14.](#) Thought to refer to a maxim of spiritual direction attributed to Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), founder of the Jesuits: go in by the other's door to come out by your own.
- [15.](#) The second ear. Alexander was said to cover one ear with his hand when hearing an accusation, keeping it for the accused (Plutarch, *Life of Alexander* 42).
- [16.](#) Source unknown; the saying is commonly attributed to Socrates.
- [17.](#) The Spanish *testa de yerros* twists *testaferro*, a front man who lends his name and takes the blame, by putting *yerros* (errors) in place of *hierros* (irons).

Aphorisms 151–225

151 Think ahead: today for tomorrow, and even for many days. The greatest foresight is to have hours set aside for it; for the forewarned there are no accidents, and for the prepared no tight spots. One must not wait for the moment of drowning to reason; it must be done beforehand; let the ripeness of second counsel forestall the crudest point. The pillow is a mute Sibyl, and sleeping on matters is worth more than lying awake under them. Some act and then think: that is looking for excuses rather than consequences. Others think neither before nor after. All of life should be thinking, to hit on the right course: second counsel and foresight give the means of living ahead.

152 Never keep company with someone who can make one look worse, whether by being more or by being less. What exceeds in perfection exceeds in esteem. The other will always play the first part, and he the second; and if any appreciation comes his way, it will be the other's leftovers. The moon shines, while alone, among the stars; but when the sun comes out, she either does not appear or disappears. Never lean on anyone who eclipses one, only on someone who sets one off. In this way the discerning Fabulla of Martial¹ could seem beautiful, and she shone amid the ugliness or slovenliness of her maids. Nor should he risk a pain in the side, nor honor others at the cost of his own credit. To make himself, let him go with the eminent; once made, among the middling.

153 Avoid stepping in to fill great vacancies. And if one does commit oneself, let it be with the assurance of surpassing. One

must double one's worth to equal that of one's predecessor. Just as it is a stratagem to have a successor who makes one missed, so it is a subtlety not to be eclipsed by the one who has finished. It is hard to fill a great void, because the past always seemed better; and even equality will not be enough, because the other is in possession as the first. It is necessary, then, to add gifts, to dislodge the other from his possession of the higher opinion.

154 Do not be easy either in believing or in loving. Maturity is known by slowness to believe: lying is very ordinary; let believing be extraordinary. The man who was lightly moved finds himself shamed afterward; but one must not let on that one doubts another's word, which passes from discourtesy to insult, for it treats the speaker as either deceiver or deceived. And that is not even the greatest drawback; the greater is that not believing is a sign of lying, for the liar has two ills: he neither believes nor is believed. Suspension of judgment is sensible in the hearer, and let him defer, on faith, to the author who says: "Ease in loving is also a kind of imprudence"; for if one lies with words, one also lies with things, and this deceit in deeds is the more pernicious.

155 Art in giving way to passion. If possible, let prudent reflection forestall the vulgarity of impulse. It will not be difficult for one who is prudent. The first step in getting passionate is to notice that one is getting passionate, which is to enter in mastery of the feeling, gauging the need up to such and such a point of anger, and no further. With this superior reflection let him go into a rage and come out of it. Let him know how to stop well, and in time, for the hardest part of running is stopping. It is a great proof of judgment to keep one's good sense in fits of madness. Every excess of passion degenerates from the rational; but with this masterly attention he will never trample on reason or step over the bounds of synderesis. To know how to break a passion one must always ride

with the rein held in attention, and he will be the first sensible man on horseback, if not the last.²

156 Friends of choice. For they must be friends after examination by discernment and trial by fortune, graduates not only of the will but of the understanding. And though it is the most important success in life, it is the one least attended to with care. In some it is pushiness that does it, and in most, chance. A man is defined by the friends he has, for the wise man never agreed with the ignorant; but liking someone does not argue intimacy, which may come more from the pleasant time his charm affords than from confidence in his capacity. There are legitimate friendships and adulterous ones: the adulterous for delight, the legitimate for fruitfulness of success. Few are friends of the person, and many of the fortune. One friend's good understanding is worth more than many others' good will. Let there be choice, then, and not chance. A wise friend knows how to spare one sorrows, and a foolish friend brings them on. Nor wish one's friends great fortune, if one does not want to lose them.

157 Do not be deceived about people, which is the worst and easiest deception. Better to be cheated in the price than in the goods; and there is nothing that more needs looking at from within. There is a difference between understanding things and knowing people; and it is great philosophy to grasp temperaments and distinguish the humors of men. One must have studied people as thoroughly as books.

158 Know how to use one's friends. There is an art of discernment in this: some are good at a distance and others close at hand; and one who sometimes was not good for conversation is good for correspondence. Distance purifies some defects that were intolerable in presence. One must seek in friends not only pleasure but usefulness, for a friend must have the three qualities of the good, or, as others say, of being: one, good, and true;³ for a friend is all

things. Few are good ones, and not knowing how to choose them makes them fewer. Knowing how to keep them is more than making them friends. Look for such as will last, and though at first they may be new, let it be satisfaction enough that they can become old. The very best are those with plenty of salt, though it takes a bushel of trial.⁴ There is no desert like living without friends. Friendship multiplies goods and shares out ills; it is the only remedy against adverse fortune and a relief to the soul.

159 Know how to put up with fools. The wise were always impatient, for he who increases knowledge increases impatience.⁵ Much knowledge is hard to satisfy. The greatest rule of life, according to Epictetus,⁶ is to bear, and to this he reduced half of wisdom. If all follies are to be tolerated, much patience will be needed. Sometimes we bear most from those on whom we most depend, which is important for the exercise of self-conquest. From forbearance is born priceless peace, which is the happiness of the earth. And the one who does not find in himself the spirit to bear should appeal to retirement into himself, if indeed he can tolerate even himself.

160 Speak with attention: with rivals, out of caution; with others, out of decency. There is always time to send a word off, but not to call it back. One should speak as in a will, for the fewer the words, the fewer the lawsuits. In what does not matter one should rehearse for what will. Secrecy has a shimmer of divinity. The man who is quick to speak is close to being overcome and convicted.

161 Know one's sweet defects. The most perfect man does not escape some, and marries them or keeps them as mistresses. There are some in wit, and greater ones in the greater wit, or they are more noticed. Not because the man himself does not know them, but because he loves them. Two ills together: to be infatuated, and with vices. They are moles on perfection; they offend outsiders as much as they sound pleasant to their owners. Here is

where one gallantly conquers oneself and gives this happiness to one's other distinctions; everyone stumbles there, and when they should be celebrating the great good they admire, they stop where they find fault, making that ugly as a blemish on the other gifts.

162 Know how to triumph over rivalry and malevolence. Contempt, though prudent, is little now; gallantry is more. There is no applause enough for speaking well of one who speaks ill. There is no more heroic revenge than with merits and gifts, which conquer envy and torment it. Each success is another turn of the cords on ill feeling, and the glory of the one envied is the rival's hell. This punishment is held the greatest: to make poison of happiness. The envious man does not die once, but as many times as the envied man lives amid cries of applause, the perennial fame of the one competing with the punishment of the other. The one is immortal for his glories and the other for his pains. The trumpet of fame, which sounds immortality for the one, proclaims death for the other, sentencing him to hang in the suspense of so envious a suspension.

163 Never, out of compassion for the unfortunate, incur the disfavor of the fortunate. What is misfortune for some is often good fortune for others, for one man would not be lucky if many others were not unlucky. It is the way of the unfortunate to win people's goodwill, for that goodwill wants to make up with its useless favor for the disfavor of fortune; and it has sometimes been seen that one who in prosperity was hated by all was pitied by all in adversity: vengeance on the exalted turned into compassion for the fallen. But let the shrewd man watch how luck is shuffled. There are some who never go except with the unlucky, and side today, as unhappy, with the man they fled yesterday as fortunate. It sometimes argues nobility of nature, but not shrewdness.

164 Throw some things up into the air. To test acceptance, a seeing how they are received, especially those whose success and

appeal are in doubt. It makes sure of coming out well, and leaves room either for commitment or for retreat. In this way wills are sounded, and the attentive man knows where he stands: the greatest precaution in asking, in desiring, and in governing.

165 Wage fair war. The sensible man may be forced to wage war, but not foul war. Each must act as who he is, not as he is forced to. Gallantry in rivalry wins applause. One must fight to win not only in power but in manner. To win basely is not victory but surrender. Generosity was always superiority. The decent man never uses forbidden weapons, and such are those of a friendship ended for a hatred begun, for confidence must not be used for revenge; everything that smells of treachery infects a good name. In persons bound by obligations the least atom of baseness is the more surprising; nobility and vileness must be far apart. Let him pride himself that, if gallantry, generosity, and fidelity were lost from the world, they would have to be sought in his breast.

166 Distinguish the man of words from the man of deeds. It is a singular precision, as is that of telling apart the friend, the person, or the post, which are very different. It is bad to have no good words and no bad deeds; worse, to have no bad words and no good deeds. One no longer eats words, which are wind, nor lives on courtesies, which are a courteous deceit. Catching birds with a light is the true dazzling. The vain are satisfied with wind; words must be pledges of deeds, and so must have their value. Trees that bear no fruit, only leaves, usually have no heart. It is well to know them, some for profit, others for shade.

167 Know how to help oneself. There is no better company in great straits than a stout heart; and when it weakens, it must be supplied from the parts near it. Troubles grow smaller for one who knows how to rely on himself. Let him not surrender to fortune, or she will end by becoming intolerable. Some help themselves little in their troubles and double them by not knowing how to bear

them. The man who already knows himself comes to the aid of his weakness with consideration, and the discerning man comes out of everything victorious, even out of the stars.

168 Do not become a monster of folly. Such are all the vain, the presumptuous, the obstinate, the capricious, the self-persuaded, the extravagant, the posturers, the clowns, the novelty-mongers, the paradox-makers, the sectarians, and every kind of intemperate man; all of them monsters of absurdity. Every monstrosity of the spirit is more deformed than one of the body, because it falls short of a higher beauty. But who will correct so much common disorder? Where synderesis is lacking, no room is left for direction, and what should be a reflective observation of the mockery is an ill-conceived presumption of imagined applause.

169 Take more care not to miss once than to hit a hundred times. No one looks at the sun when it shines, and everyone when it is eclipsed. The vulgar tally will not count the hits but the misses. The bad are better known for being murmured about than the good for being applauded. Many were not known until they did wrong, and all one's successes together are not enough to belie a single, tiny blemish. And let every man be undeceived: malevolence will note all his misses, but no hit.

170 Keep a reserve in all things. It is securing what matters. Not all one's capital is to be spent, nor all one's strength brought out every time; even in knowledge there should be something held back, which is a doubling of perfections. There must always be something to fall back on when in danger of coming out badly; relief does more than attack, because it shows courage and credit. The conduct of good sense was always on the safe side. And even in this sense that piquant paradox is true: the half is more than the whole.⁷

171 Do not squander favor. Great friends are for great occasions. Great confidence is not to be spent on small things, for that would

be a waste of goodwill. The sacred anchor is always kept for the last danger.⁸ If much is used up on little, what will be left for later? There is nothing worth more than protectors, nor more precious today than favor: it makes and unmakes in the world, even giving wit or taking it away. Fortune has envied the wise for what nature and fame favored them with. Knowing how to keep people and hold on to them is more than keeping possessions.

172 Do not engage with one who has nothing to lose. It is fighting on unequal terms. The other goes in unencumbered, because he has lost even his shame; he has done with everything, has nothing more to lose, and so throws himself into every insolence. Priceless reputation must never be exposed to so cruel a risk; it cost many years to win, and comes to be lost in an instant over a point of touchiness: one slight freezes much shining sweat. A man bound by obligations is made cautious by having much to lose. Looking after his own credit, he looks after his opponent's as well, and as he engages with attention, he proceeds with such restraint that he gives prudence time to withdraw in time and put his credit in safety. Not even by winning will he gain back what he has already lost by exposing himself to loss.

173 Do not be made of glass in one's dealings. Still less in friendship. Some break very easily, revealing how little substance they have; they fill themselves with offense and others with annoyance. They show a disposition more tender than the apple of the eye, for it will not allow itself to be touched, in jest or in earnest. A mote offends it; there is no need now for a remark. Those who deal with them must go very carefully, always mindful of their delicacy; they humor their airs, for the least slight puts them out. These men are usually wrapped up in themselves, slaves of their pleasure, for which they will trample everything, idolaters of their petty honor. The lover's disposition has half of the diamond in it, in lasting and in resisting.⁹

174 Do not live in a hurry. Knowing how to apportion things is knowing how to enjoy them. Many have life left over when their happiness has run out. They waste their pleasures, for they do not enjoy them, and afterward would like to go back, when they find themselves so far ahead. Postilions of life, who to the common running of time add their own temperamental haste. They would like to devour in one day what they will hardly be able to digest in a whole lifetime. They live ahead of themselves in their happiness, eat up the years to come, and, going in such haste, soon finish everything. Even in wanting to know there should be measure, so as not to know things badly known. There are more days than delights: in enjoying, slowly; in acting, quickly. Exploits are good when done; pleasures, bad when done with.

175 A man of substance. And he who is one takes no satisfaction in those who are not. Unhappy is the eminence that is not founded on substance. Not all who seem to be men are men: there are men of humbug, who conceive of chimeras and give birth to frauds; and there are others like them who support them and prefer the uncertain that a humbug promises, because it is much, to the certain that a truth assures, because it is little. In the end their caprices turn out badly, because they have no foundation of integrity. Only truth can give true reputation, and substance turns to profit. One fraud needs many others, and so the whole building is chimera, and as it is founded on air it must come to the ground: a disorder never reaches old age; seeing how much it promises is enough to make it suspect, just as what proves too much is impossible.

176 Know, or listen to one who knows. One cannot live without understanding, either one's own or borrowed; but there are many who do not know that they do not know, and others who think they know when they do not. The failings of folly are incurable, for since the ignorant do not know themselves, neither do they seek

what they lack. Some would be wise if they did not believe they were. Hence, though oracles of good sense are rare, they live idle, because no one consults them. Taking counsel neither diminishes greatness nor contradicts capacity. On the contrary, taking good counsel gives it credit. Let a man debate with reason so that misfortune does not do battle with him.

177 Avoid familiarity in one's dealings. It is neither to be used nor allowed. The man who makes himself familiar at once loses the superiority his integrity gave him, and after it esteem. The stars, by not rubbing against us, keep their splendor. Divinity demands decorum; every human touch invites contempt. The more human things are had, the less they are held, because in communication the imperfections that reserve kept hidden are communicated too. With no one is it fitting to be familiar: not with superiors, because of the danger, nor with inferiors, because of the indecency; least of all with the base, who are bold out of folly, and not recognizing the favor done them, presume an obligation. Easiness is a branch of vulgarity.

178 Trust the heart. And more so when it has been proved. Never belie it, for it is often a prognosticator of what matters most: a household oracle. Many perished of what they feared; but what use was fearing it without remedying it? Some have very loyal hearts, an advantage of a superior nature, which always forewarns them and rings the alarm at misfortune so that it may be remedied. It is not good sense to go out to welcome ills, but it is to go out to meet them and defeat them.

179 Reticence is the seal of capacity. A breast without secrets is an open letter. Where there is depth, there are deep secrets, for there are great spaces and coves where things of moment sink. It comes from great self-mastery, and to conquer oneself in this is the true triumph. A man pays tribute to as many as he opens himself to.¹⁰ The health of prudence lies in inner temperance. The

risks to reticence come from others' probing: contradicting in order to twist, throwing darts to make even the most closed attentive man jump. Things that are to be done must not be said, and those that are to be said must not be done.

180 Never be ruled by what the enemy was going to do. The fool will never do what the sensible man judges he will, because he does not grasp what is fitting; nor will he if he is discerning, because he will want to belie the intention that has been seen through, and even forestalled. Matters must be thought through from both sides and turned over this way and that, laid out to drain on either slope. Verdicts vary: let impartiality be attentive, not so much to what will be as to what can be.

181 Without lying, do not tell all the truths. Nothing requires more tact than truth, which is a bleeding from the heart. As much is needed to know how to tell it as to know how to keep it quiet. With a single lie all the credit of integrity is lost. The deceived is taken for wanting and the deceiver for false, which is worse. Not all truths can be told: some because they matter to me, others because they matter to the other.

182 A grain of boldness with everyone is important good sense. One must moderate one's notion of others so as not to think so highly of them as to fear them; never let imagination make the heart surrender. Some seem a great deal until one deals with them, but dealing with them has served more for undeceiving than for esteem. No one goes beyond the narrow limits of a man. Everyone has his "but," some in wit, others in temperament. Rank gives apparent authority; personal authority seldom goes with it, for luck usually avenges the superiority of the office with the inferiority of the merits. Imagination always runs ahead and paints things much greater than they are. It conceives not only what is but what might be. Let reason correct it, so undeceived by experience. But neither must folly be bold nor virtue fearful. And if confi-

dence has served simplicity, how much more worth and knowledge!

183 Do not cling to one's views. Every fool is self-persuaded, and every self-persuaded man a fool; and the more erroneous his verdict, the greater his tenacity. Even when the evidence is clear, it is ingenuousness to yield, for the reason one had is not unknown, and the gallantry one shows is recognized. More is lost by clinging than can be gained by victory; it is defending not the truth but boorishness. There are iron heads, hard to convince, extreme beyond remedy; when the capricious joins the self-persuaded, they marry folly indissolubly. Firmness belongs in the will, not in the judgment. Though there are exceptional cases, so as not to let oneself be lost and be beaten twice: once in the verdict, again in the execution.

184 Do not be ceremonious, for even in a king affectation in this was remarked as an eccentricity. The punctilious man is tiresome, and there are nations touched with this delicacy. The garment of folly is sewn with these stitches: idolaters of their honor, who show that it is founded on little, since they fear that anything may offend it. It is good to look to one's respect, but one should not be taken for a great master of compliments. It is true, though, that the man without ceremonies needs excellent virtues. Courtesy is neither to be affected nor despised. He who stops at points of punctilio does not show himself great.

185 Never stake one's credit on a single trial, for if that one does not go well, the damage is irreparable. It very easily happens that one misses once, and especially the first time. A man is not always in form, which is why it is said, "to have one's day." Let the second, then, back up the first if it misses; and if it hits, the first will stand surety for the second. There must always be recourse to improvement and appeal to more. Things depend on contingencies, and on many, and so the good fortune of coming out well is rare.

186 Recognize defects, however authorized they may be. Let integrity not fail to recognize vice even when it is dressed in brocade; vice sometimes crowns itself with gold, but cannot for all that hide the iron.¹¹ It does not lose the slavery of its baseness though the nobility of the person belies it; vices may well be exalted, but they are not distinctions. Some see that a certain hero had a certain blemish, but do not see that he was not a hero because of it. The example of superiors is so eloquent that it persuades even to ugliness; flattery has sometimes even affected the ugliness of a face, not noticing that what is overlooked in greatness is abhorred in lowliness.

187 Do everything pleasant oneself; everything unpleasant through others. By the one, affection is won; by the other, malevolence is deflected. For great men there is greater pleasure in doing good than in receiving it, which is the happiness of their generosity. Rarely is displeasure given to another without one's taking some, either from fellow feeling or from recoil. Superior causes do not act without reward or duress. Let good flow from one directly and ill indirectly. Let him have something for the blows of discontent to strike, and these are hatred and murmuring. Vulgar rage is usually like a dog's, which, not knowing the cause of its hurt, turns on the instrument, and though the instrument is not chiefly to blame, it suffers the penalty for being nearest.

188 Bring something to praise. It is a credit to one's taste, showing that it has been formed on what is very good, and that its esteem of what is present can be trusted. Whoever knew how to recognize perfection before will know how to esteem it later. It gives matter for conversation and for imitation, spreading welcome knowledge. It is a politic way of offering courtesy to the perfections before one. Others, on the contrary, always bring something to censure, flattering the present by despising the absent. It works with the superficial, who do not notice the trick of speaking

very ill of some to others. Some make it their policy to esteem today's mediocrities above yesterday's excellences. Let the attentive man know these subtleties of approach, and let him not be dismayed by the exaggeration of the one nor puffed up by the flattery of the other; and let him understand that they behave in the same way in the one company as in the other: they change their tune and always adjust to the place they are in.

189 Make use of another's want. For if it reaches desire, it is the most effective thumbscrew. Philosophers said it was nothing, and politicians that it was everything: the politicians knew it better. Some make the desire of others a step to reach their ends. They take advantage of the occasion, and with the difficulty of getting the thing they whet the appetite. They promise themselves more from the striving of passion than from the lukewarmness of possession; and as resistance grows, desire grows more passionate. A great subtlety in getting one's way: keep people dependent.

190 Find consolation in everything. Even the useless have one in being eternal. There is no trouble without its comfort: fools have theirs in being lucky, and it is also said, "An ugly woman's luck."¹² To live long, the trick is to be worth little; the cracked jar is the one that never finishes breaking, and it annoys everyone by lasting. Fortune seems to envy the most important people, for she matches duration with the uselessness of the one sort and importance with the shortness of the other: all who matter will be missing, and the one of no use will remain forever, either because he seems so or because he really is so. It seems that luck and death agree to forget the unlucky man.

191 Do not be taken in by excessive courtesy, which is a kind of deceit. Some do not need the herbs of Thessaly¹³ to bewitch, for with nothing but the fine air of a doffed hat they enchant fools, I mean the vain. They set a price on honor and pay with the wind of a few good words. He who promises everything promises nothing,

and promising is a slippery path for fools. True courtesy is a debt; affected courtesy, deceit, and more so the unaccustomed kind: it is not decency but dependency. They bow not to the person but to the fortune; and flattery bows not to the gifts it recognizes but to the profits it hopes for.

192 A man of great peace, a man of long life. To live, let live. The peaceful not only live, they reign. One must hear and see, but keep silent. A day without quarrels makes for a sleepy night. To live long and to live with pleasure is to live for two, and it is the fruit of peace. He has everything who cares nothing for what does not concern him. There is nothing more senseless than to take everything seriously. It is equal folly for a thing that does not touch a man to go to his heart, and for one that does matter to him not to get past his teeth.

193 Watch out for the man who goes in with another's will to come out with his own. There is no defense against cunning like being on the lookout. Against the knowing, a quick understanding. Some make their own business look like someone else's, and without the key to intentions a man finds himself at every step committed to pulling another's profit out of the fire at the cost of his own hand.

194 Have a sensible idea of oneself and one's affairs. Especially at the beginning of life. Everyone thinks highly of himself, and most of all those who are least. Each dreams up his fortune and imagines himself a prodigy. Hope commits itself recklessly, and afterward experience fulfills nothing; the undeceiving of true reality becomes a torment to one's vain imagination. Let good sense correct such blunders, and though it may desire the best, it must always expect the worst, so as to take with equanimity whatever comes. It is skill to aim somewhat higher in order to adjust the shot, but not so much as to miss wildly. On starting in one's posts this reform of one's notion is necessary, for presumption without

experience usually runs wild. There is no more universal medicine for all follies than sense. Let each man know the sphere of his activity and station, and he will be able to bring his notion into line with reality.

195 Know how to esteem. There is no one who cannot be another's master in something, nor anyone who does not surpass the one who surpasses him. Knowing how to make the most of each person is useful knowledge. The wise man esteems everyone because he recognizes the good in each and knows what it costs to do things well. The fool despises everyone out of ignorance of the good and choice of the worst.

196 Know one's star. No one is so helpless as not to have one, and if he is unlucky, it is because he does not know it. Some have the ear of princes and the powerful without knowing how or why, except that their own luck smoothed the way to favor; all that is left for industry is to help it. Others find themselves in the goodwill of the wise. One man was more welcome in one nation than in another, and better liked in this city than in that. One also meets with more good fortune in one post and station than in others, and all this with equal, even identical, merits. Luck shuffles how and when it pleases. Let each man know his own, as well as his Minerva,¹⁴ for on this depends losing or winning. Let him know how to follow it and help it; let him not change them for others, for that would be to miss the north to which the nearby Horn calls him.¹⁵

197 Never get tangled up with fools. He is a fool who does not recognize them, and more so he who, having recognized them, does not discard them. They are dangerous for casual dealings and pernicious for confidences; and though for a time their own misgivings and the care of others may restrain them, in the end they do the foolish thing or say it; and if they took long, it was to make it more solemn. He can hardly help another's credit who has none

of his own. They are most unfortunate, which is the excrescence on folly, and the one sticks to the other. Only one thing about them is less bad, and it is this: although the sensible are of no use to them, they are of much use to the wise, either as information or as warning.

198 Know how to transplant oneself. There are nations whose people must change their ground to be valued, especially in great posts. Homelands are stepmothers to their own eminences: envy reigns in them as in its native soil, and they remember the imperfections with which a man began more than the greatness he has reached. A pin could win esteem by passing from one world to another, and a bit of glass brought the diamond into contempt because it traveled. Everything foreign is esteemed, either because it came from far away or because it is had ready made and in its perfection. We have seen persons who were once the contempt of their corner and today are the honor of the world, esteemed by their own people and by strangers: by their own people because they see them from afar, by strangers because they come from afar. He who knew the statue as a trunk in the orchard will never properly venerate it on the altar.

199 Know how to make a place for oneself sensibly, not by intruding. The true road to esteem is that of merits, and if industry is founded on worth, it is a short cut to reaching it. Integrity alone is not enough; solicitation alone is unworthy, for things arrive so muddled that they disgust reputation. It lies in a middle way: deserving, and knowing how to make one's entrance.

200 Have something to desire, so as not to be happily miserable. The body breathes and the spirit yearns. If everything were possession, everything would be undeceiving and discontent. Even in the understanding there must always be something left to know, on which curiosity can feed. Hope gives life: surfeits of happiness are deadly. In rewarding, it is skillful never to satisfy. If there is

nothing to desire, everything is to be feared: an unhappy happiness; where desire ends, fear begins.

201 All who look like fools are fools, and half of those who do not. Folly has made off with the world, and if there is any wisdom, it is foolishness beside the wisdom of heaven;¹⁶ but the greatest fool is the one who does not think himself one and defines all the others. To be wise it is not enough to seem so, still less to seem so to oneself: he knows who thinks he does not know, and he does not see who does not see that others see. Though the whole world is full of fools, there is none who thinks himself one, or even suspects it.

202 Sayings and doings make a consummate man. One must speak what is very good and do what is very honorable: the one is the perfection of the head, the other of the heart, and both are born of superiority of spirit. Words are the shadow of deeds: words are the females, deeds the males. It matters more to be celebrated than to be a celebrator. Saying is easy and doing hard. Exploits are the substance of living, and maxims the ornament. Eminence in deeds lasts; in words it passes. Actions are the fruit of attention: sayings wise, deeds heroic.

203 Know the eminent men of one's century. They are not many: one phoenix in a whole world, one Great Captain,¹⁷ one perfect orator, one wise man in a whole century, one eminent king in many. Mediocrities are ordinary in number and in esteem; eminences are rare in everything, because they demand completeness of perfection, and the more sublime the category, the more difficult the extreme. Many have taken from Caesar and Alexander the title of "the Great," but emptily, for without the deeds the word is nothing but a little air: there have been few Senecas, and fame has celebrated only one Apelles.¹⁸

204 The easy must be undertaken as if difficult, and the difficult as if easy. The easy, so that confidence does not grow careless; the

difficult, so that diffidence does not lose heart. Nothing more is needed for a thing not to be done than to take it as done; and, on the contrary, diligence levels impossibility. Great undertakings should not even be thought over; it is enough to take them on, lest the difficulty, once noticed, cause hesitation.

205 Know how to play with contempt. It is a trick for getting things to scorn them. They are not commonly found when sought, and afterward, when one is not looking, they come to hand. As all things here below are shadows of the eternal, they share that property of the shadow: they flee whoever follows them and pursue whoever flees them. Contempt is also the most politic revenge. A unique maxim of the wise: never defend oneself with the pen, which leaves a trace and turns out to be more glory for rivalry than punishment for insolence. The cunning of the unworthy: to set themselves against great men so as to be celebrated indirectly, when they did not deserve it directly; for we would not know of many if their excellent opponents had not taken notice of them. There is no revenge like oblivion, which is to bury them in the dust of their nothingness. Reckless men presume to make themselves eternal by setting fire to the wonders of the world and of the ages.¹⁹ The art of reforming gossip: take no notice; contesting it does harm; and giving it credit brings discredit. And it pleases one's rivals, for even that shadow of a blemish tarnishes the greatest perfection, if it does not altogether darken it.

206 Let it be known that there is a vulgar crowd everywhere: in Corinth itself,²⁰ in the most select family. Everyone has experience of it within the doors of his own house. But there is the vulgar, and the doubly vulgar, which is worse: the particular kind has the same properties as the common, like the pieces of a broken mirror, and is even more harmful: it talks foolishly and censures absurdly; a great disciple of ignorance, godfather of folly, and ally of gossip. No attention is to be paid to what it says, still less to what it thinks. It

matters to know it so as to be free of it, either as a part of it or as its object. For any folly is vulgarity, and the vulgar crowd is made up of fools.

207 Use self-control. One must keep most on top of things in the unforeseen. The impulses of passion are the slippery places of good sense, and there lies the risk of losing oneself. A man goes further in one instant of fury or delight than in many hours of indifference. Sometimes he runs a short way only to be red-faced for the rest of his life. Another's cunning intention lays these temptations for prudence, to spy out the land, or the spirit. It uses such thumbscrews of secrets, which often drain the greatest capital. Let self-control be the counterstratagem, especially in sudden moments. Much reflection is needed to keep a passion from bolting, and he is very sensible who is sensible on horseback. He who perceives the danger goes carefully. The word that seems light to the one who throws it seems heavy to the one who receives it and weighs it.

208 Do not die of the fool's disease. Commonly the wise die lacking good sense, and fools, on the contrary, stuffed with advice. To die of folly is to die of too much reasoning. Some die because they feel, and others live because they do not feel. And so some are fools because they do not die of feeling, and others are fools because they do. A fool is he who dies of understanding too much. So some die of understanding, and others live by not understanding; but though many die of folly, few fools die.

209 Free oneself of common follies. It is a very special good sense. They are strongly entrenched by custom, and some who did not yield to particular ignorance did not know how to escape the common kind. It is vulgarity that no one is content with his lot, even the greatest, nor discontented with his wit, even the worst. All covet the happiness of others, discontented with their own. People of today, too, praise the things of yesterday, and those here

the things over there. Everything past seems better, and everything distant is more esteemed. He who laughs at everything is as much a fool as he who frets over everything.

210 Know how to handle the truth. It is dangerous, but the decent man cannot help telling it: there artifice is needed. The skillful physicians of the spirit invented the way of sweetening it, for when it touches on undeceiving it is the quintessence of bitterness. Good manner here makes use of its skill: with one and the same truth one man flatters and another bludgeons. One must speak to the present in terms of the past. With a quick understanding it is enough to show the edge of the card; and when nothing is enough, it is time to fall silent. Princes are not to be cured with bitter things; for that there is the art of gilding undeceptions.

211 In Heaven all is contentment; in Hell all is sorrow. In the world, being in between, both. We are between two extremes, and so we share in both. Lots alternate: neither should everything be happiness, nor everything adversity. This world is a zero: by itself it is worth nothing; joined with Heaven, much. Indifference to its changes is good sense, and nothing comes as new to the wise. Our life goes on thickening its plot like a comedy, and at the end it comes to be untangled. Attention, then, to ending well.

212 Always keep the last tricks of the art in reserve. That is what great masters do, who use their subtlety in the very act of teaching it. One must always remain superior, and always master. One must use art in imparting the art; the fountain of teaching must never be drained, any more than that of giving. In this way reputation and dependence are preserved. In pleasing and in teaching one must observe that great lesson of always feeding admiration and advancing perfection. Reserve in all matters was a great rule of living and of winning, and above all in the most sublime posts.

213 Know how to contradict. It is a great trick of probing, not to commit oneself but to commit the other. It is the one thumbscrew that makes the feelings jump. Lukewarmness in believing is an emetic for secrets, the key to the most locked breast. The double probe of will and judgment is made with great subtlety. A shrewd contempt for another's mysterious word hunts down the deepest secrets, and gently brings them up mouthful by mouthful until they reach the tongue and fall into the nets of artful deceit. Restraint in the attentive man makes the other cast off his own reserve and reveals his feeling, which otherwise was the inscrutable heart. An affected doubt is the subtlest picklock of curiosity, for learning all it wants. And even for learning it is the pupil's trick to contradict the master, who then commits himself with greater effort to explaining and grounding the truth; so that moderate opposition gives occasion for complete teaching.

214 Do not make two follies out of one. It is very ordinary, in order to patch up one, to commit four others. To excuse one absurdity with a greater one is of the breed of lying, or lying is of the breed of folly, for to sustain one it needs many. The defense of a bad case was always worse than the case; worse than the ill itself is not knowing how to disguise it. It is the toll of imperfections that they put out many others at interest. The wisest man may fall into one lapse, but not into two; and in passing, not to stay.

215 Watch out for the man who comes with a second intention. It is the trick of the man of business to put the will off its guard in order to attack it, for it is vanquished as soon as it is convinced. Such men hide their aim in order to achieve it, and put it second so that in execution it may be first: the shot is made sure in what goes unnoticed. But let attention not sleep when intention is so wakeful; and if intention makes itself second in order to dissemble, let attention make itself first in order to recognize it. Let caution notice the artifice with which he approaches, and mark the feints

he throws out on his way to coming to rest at the point of his claim. He proposes one thing and aims at another, and turns back with subtlety to hit the target of his intention. Let a man know, then, what he is granting, and sometimes it will be well to let it be understood that he has understood.

216 Have the gift of expression. It is not only freedom but ease in one's thought. Some conceive well and give birth badly, for without clarity the children of the soul, thoughts and decisions, do not come to light. Some have the capacity of those jars that take in much and give out little. Others, on the contrary, say even more than they think. What resolution is in the will, expression is in the understanding: two great eminences. Clear wits are applauded; confused ones were venerated for not being understood, and sometimes obscurity is advisable so as not to be vulgar; but how will others form an idea of what they hear from such men, if no idea in their own minds answers to what they say?

217 One must neither love nor hate forever. Trust today's friends as tomorrow's enemies, and the worst ones; and since it happens in reality, let it happen in foresight. Weapons are not to be given to deserters from friendship, who wage the fiercest war with them. With enemies, the opposite: always an open door to reconciliation, and let it be the door of gallantry, which is the safest. Revenge taken earlier has sometimes tormented later, and the pleasure of the ill turn done to the other turns into sorrow.

218 Never act out of stubbornness, but out of attention. All stubbornness is an abscess,²¹ a great daughter of passion, which never did anything right. There are some who reduce everything to skirmishing; highwaymen of human dealings, they would like everything they do to be a victory; they do not know how to proceed peacefully. These are pernicious in command and government, because they make a faction of government, and enemies of those they should make sons. They want to arrange everything by

scheming and achieve it as the fruit of their artifice; but once others discover their paradoxical humor, they at once take aim at them and try to hinder their chimeras, and so they achieve nothing. They carry off surfeits of annoyance, and everyone helps their vexation along. Such men have an injured verdict, and sometimes a damaged heart. The way to deal with such monsters is to flee to the antipodes, for the barbarism of the people there will be easier to bear than the ferocity of these.

219 Do not be taken for a man of artifice. Though one can no longer live without it. Prudent rather than cunning. Plainness in dealings pleases everyone, but not everyone wants it in his own house. Let sincerity not go to the extreme of simplicity, nor shrewdness to that of cunning. Let a man rather be venerated as wise than feared as calculating. The sincere are loved, but deceived. Let the greatest artifice be to hide it, for it is taken for deceit. Plainness flourished in the age of gold; malice flourishes in this age of iron. The credit of a man who knows what he must do is honorable and inspires confidence, but that of an artful man is sophistical and breeds suspicion.

220 When one cannot wear the lion's skin, wear the fox's.²² Knowing how to yield to the times is to prevail. He who gets his way never loses reputation. Where strength is lacking, skill. By one road or the other: the king's highway of courage or the short cut of artifice. Skill has accomplished more things than strength, and the wise have more often defeated the brave than the other way round. When the thing cannot be had, contempt comes in.

221 Do not be quarrelsome, either in getting oneself entangled or in entangling others. There are men who are stumbling blocks to decorum, their own as well as others', always on the brink of folly. They clash very easily and break off unhappily. They cannot get through a day without a hundred annoyances. Their humor runs against the grain, and so they contradict everyone and every-

thing. They have put on their judgment like shoes on the wrong feet, and so they condemn everything. But the greatest testers of good sense are those who do nothing well and speak ill of everything, for there are many monsters in the broad country of absurdity.

222 The restrained man: evidence of a prudent one. The tongue is a wild beast, and once it is let loose, it is very hard to chain again. It is the pulse of the soul, by which the wise know its disposition. Here the attentive feel the movement of the heart. The trouble is that the one who should be most self-controlled is least so. The wise man spares himself annoyances and entanglements, and shows how much his own master he is. He proceeds circumspectly: Janus in weighing both sides, Argus in verifying. Momus would have done better to miss eyes in the hands than a little window in the breast.²³

223 Do not be too peculiar, either from affectation or from inattention. Some have a notable peculiarity, with manic actions that are defects rather than distinctions. And just as some are well known for some singular ugliness in the face, so these are known for some excess in their bearing. Making oneself peculiar serves only as a stigma, with an absurd particularity that stirs laughter in some and annoyance in others by turns.

224 Know how to take things. Never against the grain, even if that is how they come. Everything has a right side and a wrong side. The best and most favorable thing wounds if it is taken by the blade. On the contrary, the most repugnant defends if it is taken by the hilt. Many things were causes of grief that would have been causes of contentment if their advantages had been considered. In everything there are advantages and disadvantages: the skill lies in knowing how to hit on what serves. One and the same thing shows very different reflections when looked at in different lights: let it be looked at in the light of happiness. One must not switch the

bridles of good and ill. From this it comes that some find contentment in everything, and others sorrow. A great defense against the reverses of fortune, and a great rule of life for every time and every post.

225 Know one's chief defect. No one lives without it, the counterweight of his outstanding gift; and if inclination favors it, it takes control like a tyrant. Let a man begin to make war on it, proclaiming his vigilance against it, and let the first step be the manifesto, for once it is known it will be conquered, especially if the man concerned forms the same idea of it as those who notice it. To be master of oneself one must go after oneself. Once this ring-leader of imperfections has surrendered, all the rest will come to an end.

[1.](#) A woman in Martial's *Epigrams* (8.79) who kept only old or ugly friends about her so as to look beautiful.

[2.](#) The Spanish proverb runs: no man is sensible on horseback.

[3.](#) The scholastic transcendentals, the properties held to belong to every being: unity, goodness, and truth.

[4.](#) The old saying that one must eat many measures of salt with a man to know him (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 8; Cicero, *On Friendship* 19). Spanish *salado*, salty, also means witty; a *fanega* is a measure of grain.

[5.](#) Twisting Ecclesiastes 1:18, "he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow." The Spanish rhymes *ciencia* (knowledge) with *impaciencia*.

[6.](#) The Stoic philosopher (first to second century), who according to Aulus Gellius (*Attic Nights* 17.19) summed up the conduct of life in two words: bear and forbear.

[7.](#) Hesiod, *Works and Days* 40: fools do not know how much more the half is than the whole.

[8.](#) The largest anchor on a ship, let down only in the last extremity; since antiquity a figure for one's final resource.

- [9.](#) Spanish *amante* (lover) is half of *diamante* (diamond).
- [10.](#) Spanish *pecho* means both “breast” and a tribute paid by commoners: to open one’s breast to someone is to become his tributary.
- [11.](#) Spanish *yerro* (error) sounds like *hierro* (iron), so the line sets the gold crown against base iron.
- [12.](#) The Spanish proverb *ventura de fea*: plain women have better luck than pretty ones.
- [13.](#) Thessaly, in northern Greece, was famous in antiquity for witches and love potions.
- [14.](#) The Roman goddess of wisdom; here, as elsewhere in Gracián, a man’s natural talent.
- [15.](#) Spanish *bocina*, the Horn: the constellation of the Little Bear, named for its shape, by whose star sailors found the north.
- [16.](#) Echoing 1 Corinthians 3:19: “the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.”
- [17.](#) Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba (1453–1515), the Spanish general who led Isabella’s armies in the war of Granada and in Italy, called *el Gran Capitán*.
- [18.](#) The court painter of Alexander the Great (fourth century BC), held to be the greatest painter of antiquity.
- [19.](#) Herostratus, who in 356 BC set fire to the temple of Artemis at Ephesus, one of the seven wonders, so that his name would be remembered.
- [20.](#) The rich trading city of ancient Greece, famous for luxury and refinement.
- [21.](#) The Spanish rhymes *tema* (stubbornness) with *postema* (abscess).
- [22.](#) Where the lion’s skin will not reach, it must be pieced out with the fox’s: a saying of the Spartan general Lysander (Plutarch, *Life of Lysander* 7).
- [23.](#) Janus was the Roman god with two faces, Argus the hundred-eyed giant of Greek myth, and Momus the god of faultfinding, who blamed the maker of man for not setting a window in his breast through which his thoughts could be seen.

Aphorisms 226–300

226 Take care to oblige. Most people speak and act not as who they are but as others oblige them to. Anyone at all is enough to persuade others of evil, because evil is readily believed, even when it is sometimes unbelievable. Most of what we have, and the best of it, depends on the regard of others. Some are content to have reason on their side; but that is not enough, for it must be helped along with diligence. Obliging sometimes costs very little and is worth much. Deeds are bought with words. There is no furnishing so mean in this great house of the universe that it will not be needed once a year; and though it may be worth little, it will be sorely missed. Each speaks of a thing according to his feeling.

227 Do not be a man of first impressions. Some marry the first report, so that the others become concubines, and as falsehood always gets ahead, no room is left afterward for truth. Neither the will with the first object nor the understanding with the first proposition should be filled, for that is shallowness. Some have the capacity of a new vessel, which the first smell takes over, whether of bad liquor or of good. When this shallowness becomes known, it is pernicious, for it gives a foothold to malicious industry. The ill-intentioned hurry to dye credulity with their color. Let there always be room for review: let Alexander keep the other ear for the other party.¹ Let there be room for a second and a third report. Being impressionable argues incapacity, and is close to being swayed by passion.

228 Do not get a name as an evil tongue. Much less have such a character, which is to be famous for unmaking others' fame. Let a man not be witty at another's expense, which is more odious than difficult. Everyone takes revenge on him by speaking ill of him; and since he is one and they are many, he will sooner be vanquished than they convinced. The bad must never content, nor be commented on. The backbiter is forever hated, and though great personages sometimes have dealings with him, it will be more for the pleasure of his mockery than out of esteem for his good sense. And he who speaks ill always hears worse.

229 Know how to divide one's life discerningly, not as occasions come but by foresight and choice. It is painful without rests, like a long journey without inns. Learned variety makes it happy. Let the first stage of fine living be spent in talking with the dead: we are born to know and to know ourselves, and books faithfully make us persons. Let the second stage be spent with the living: to see and take note of all the good in the world; not all things are found in one country; the universal Father divided his gifts, and sometimes endowed the ugliest land most richly. Let the third stage be wholly for oneself: the final happiness, philosophizing.

230 Open one's eyes in time. Not all who see have opened their eyes, nor do all who look see. Realizing too late serves not as a remedy but as a grief. Some begin to see when there is nothing left to see: they undid their houses and their affairs before they had made themselves. It is difficult to give understanding to one who has no will, and harder to give will to one who has no understanding. Those around them play with them as with the blind, to the laughter of others. And because they are deaf to hearing, they do not open their eyes to see. But there is no lack of those who foster this insensibility, whose very being depends on the others' not being. Unhappy the horse whose master has no eyes: it will hardly grow fat.

231 Never let things be seen half done. Let them be enjoyed in their perfection. All beginnings are shapeless, and the image of that deformity stays on afterward: the memory of having seen a thing imperfect keeps one from enjoying it finished. To take in a great object at a single stroke, though it hinders judgment of the parts, of itself satisfies taste. Before a thing is everything, it is nothing, and when it begins to be, it is still deep in its nothingness. Watching the most exquisite dish being cooked arouses disgust rather than appetite. Let every great master, then, take care not to let his works be seen in embryo. Let him learn from nature not to expose them until they are fit to be seen.

232 Have a touch of the man of business. Let not everything be speculation; let there be action too. The very wise are easy to deceive, because though they know the extraordinary, they do not know the ordinary things of life, which are more needed. Contemplation of sublime things leaves them no room for practical ones; and since they do not know the first things they should know, which everyone knows to a hair, they are either wondered at or taken for ignorant by the superficial crowd. Let the wise man, then, try to have something of the man of business, enough not to be deceived, or even laughed at. Let him be a man of the practicable, which, though not the highest thing, is what life most needs. What use is knowledge if it is not practical? And knowing how to live is today the true knowledge.

233 Do not miss the mark of another's taste, which is to give pain instead of pleasure. With what some think will oblige, they annoy, for not grasping temperaments. There are acts that are flattery to some and offense to others; and what was thought a service was an affront. It has sometimes cost more to displease than it would have cost to please. They lose both the gratitude and the gift because they lost the compass of pleasing. If another's temperament is not known, it can hardly be satisfied; hence some

thought they were speaking a eulogy and spoke an insult, which was a well-deserved punishment. Others think they are entertaining with their eloquence and batter the soul with their loquacity.

234 Never entrust one's reputation without pledges of another's honor. Both must share in the profit of silence and in the harm of loose talk. In matters of honor, dealings should always be a partnership, so that one's own reputation makes one care for the other's. One should never entrust it, but if one ever does, let it be with such art that prudence can give way to caution. Let the risk be common and the cause reciprocal, so that the one who knows himself a partner will not turn into a witness.

235 Know how to ask. Nothing is more difficult for some, nor easier for others. There are some who do not know how to refuse; with them no picklock is needed. There are others whose first word at all hours is No; with them industry is needed. And with all of them, the right moment: catching their spirits cheerful, after a good meal either for the body or for the mind. Unless the attention of a wary listener sees through the subtlety of the one making the attempt, days of joy are days of favor, which overflows from within to without. One must not approach when one sees another refused, for the fear of saying No has then been lost. After sadness there is no good throw. Obliging in advance is a bill of exchange, unless baseness will not honor it.

236 Make an obligation beforehand of what would otherwise be a reward afterward. It is the skill of great statesmen. Favors before merits are the test of men who feel obligation. A favor granted in advance has two eminences: by the promptness of the giver it obliges the receiver the more. The same gift that afterward is a debt is beforehand a pledge. A subtle way of transforming obligations: the obligation that would have lain with the superior, to reward, falls on the one obliged, to repay. This applies to people

who feel obligation, for with base men it would be putting on a bridle rather than a spur, paying the wages of honor in advance.

237 Never share secrets with superiors. A man will think he is sharing pears and will share stones.² Many have perished of being confidants. They are like a spoon made of bread, which runs the same risk afterward. Being made his confidant is no favor from the prince, but a tax. Many break the mirror because it reminds them of their ugliness. He cannot bear to see the man who could see him, nor is the one who saw ill well seen. No one should be kept too much obliged, and the powerful least of all. Let it be rather by benefits done than by favors received. Above all, confidences of friendship are dangerous. He who communicated his secrets to another made himself that man's slave, and in sovereigns that is a violence that cannot last. They long to redeem their lost freedom, and for this they will trample everything, even reason. Secrets, then: neither hear them nor tell them.

238 Know the piece one lacks. Many would be very much persons if they did not lack something, without which they never reach the height of perfect being. It is noticed in some that they could be much if they attended to very little. Some lack seriousness, and so tarnish great gifts; others, gentleness of disposition, a lack their intimates are quick to feel, especially in persons of rank. In some, executive force is wanted; in others, self-control. All these shortcomings, if noticed, could easily be made good, for care can make habit a second nature.

239 Do not be oversubtle: it matters more to be prudent. Knowing more than is fitting is blunting one's point, for subtleties commonly break. Settled truth is safer. It is good to have understanding, but not smart chatter. Much reasoning is a branch of quarreling. Better a sound, substantial judgment that does not reason more than matters.

240 Know how to use folly. The wisest man sometimes plays this card, and there are occasions when the best knowledge lies in showing no knowledge. One must not be ignorant, but one may affect ignorance. With fools it matters little to be wise, and with madmen to be sensible: one must speak to each in his own language. The fool is not the one who affects folly but the one who suffers from it. Simple folly is folly, not the double kind, for artifice reaches even this far. To be well liked, the only means is to put on the skin of the simplest of beasts.

241 Bear jests, but do not make them. Bearing them is a kind of gallantry; making them, a road to entanglement. He who loses his temper at a festivity has much of the beast in him, and shows more. A jest is pleasant; knowing how to bear it argues capacity. The man who bristles gives others the cue to needle him. Jest should be dropped while they are at their best, and the safest thing is not to start them: the greatest earnest was always born of jest. Nothing calls for more attention and skill. Before starting, one must know how far the temperament of the person can go in bearing them.

242 Follow through. With some, everything goes into beginning, and they finish nothing. They invent, but do not pursue: instability of temperament. They never earn praise, because they carry nothing through; everything stops at stopping. In others, though, it comes from impatience of spirit, a failing of Spaniards, just as patience is the advantage of the Flemings.³ The Flemings finish things; the Spaniards finish with them: they sweat until the difficulty is overcome and are content with overcoming it; they do not know how to carry the victory through; they prove that they can, but they will not. Yet it is always a defect, of incapacity or of levity. If the work is good, why is it not finished? And if bad, why was it begun? Let the shrewd man, then, kill his quarry, and not spend everything on flushing it.

243 Do not be all dove. Let the craft of the serpent alternate with the candor of the dove.⁴ Nothing is easier than to deceive a decent man. He who never lies believes much, and he who never deceives trusts much. Being deceived does not always come from folly; sometimes it comes from goodness. Two kinds of people are very good at forestalling harm: those who have learned from experience, very much at their own cost, and the cunning, very much at others'. Let shrewdness be as extreme in suspicion as cunning is in intrigue, and let no one want to be so much a good man that he gives the other occasion to be a bad one. Let a man be a mixture of dove and serpent; not a monster, but a prodigy.

244 Know how to oblige. Some turn their own favor into another's, and it seems, or they let it be understood, that they are doing a favor when they receive one. There are men so shrewd that they honor by asking, and turn their own profit into the other's honor. They arrange things in such a way that it seems the others are doing them a service in giving to them, inverting the order of obligation with an extravagant policy. At the least they make it doubtful who is doing whom a favor. They buy the best at the price of praise, and out of showing pleasure in a thing they make honor and flattery. They put courtesy in pawn, making a debt of what should have been their gratitude. In this way they turn obligation from passive to active, better politicians than grammarians. A great subtlety this, but it would be a greater one to see through it, undoing the folly, giving them back their honor, and each recovering his own profit.

245 Reason sometimes in a singular way, outside the common. It argues superiority of capital. One should not esteem the man who never opposes one, for it is a sign not of the love he has for one but of the love he has for himself. Let a man not be fooled by flattery into paying for it, but condemn it. Let him also count it to his credit to be murmured against by some, especially by those

who speak ill of all good people. Let it grieve him that his things please everyone, for that is a sign they are not good, since the perfect belongs to few.

246 Never give satisfaction to one who did not ask for it. And even if it is asked for, it is a kind of offense if it is excessive. To excuse oneself before there is occasion is to accuse oneself, and to be bled in health is to wink at illness, and at malice. An anticipated excuse awakens the suspicion that was sleeping. Nor should the sensible man show that he is aware of another's suspicion, which is going out to look for offense. At such times he must try to belie it with the integrity of his conduct.

247 Know a little more, and live a little less. Others reason the opposite way. Good leisure is worth more than business. We have nothing of our own but time. Where does he live who has no room for living? It is equal misfortune to spend precious life on mechanical tasks and on too many sublime ones; one should not load oneself with occupations, nor with envy: that is trampling on living and stifling the spirit. Some extend this to knowledge, but one does not live without knowing.

248 Do not be carried off by the last to speak. There are men of the last report, for absurdity runs to extremes. Their feeling and their will are made of wax. The last one seals and erases all the others. These are never won, because they are lost with the same ease. Each dyes them his own color. They are bad as confidants, children all their lives; and so, with variety in their judgments and feelings, they go fluctuating, always lame of will and of judgment, leaning now to one side and now to the other.

249 Do not begin living where one should end. Some take their rest at the beginning and leave toil for the end. The essential must come first, and afterward, if room is left, the accessory. Others want to triumph before fighting. Some begin learning with what matters least, and leave the studies that bring credit and use for

when life is running out. Another has not yet begun to make his fortune when he is already giddy with it. Method is essential for knowing how to live and being able to.

250 When must one reason backward? When we are spoken to with malice. With some, everything must go by contraries. Yes is No, and No is Yes. Speaking ill of a thing is taken as esteem of it, for whoever wants it for himself discredits it to others. Not all praising is speaking well, for some, so as not to praise the good, praise the bad as well; and for one to whom no one is bad, no one will be good.

251 Human means must be sought as if there were no divine ones, and divine means as if there were no human ones. The rule of a great master;⁵ no commentary need be added.

252 Neither all one's own nor all another's: that is a vulgar tyranny. From wanting oneself all for oneself follows at once wanting all things for oneself. Such men cannot yield in the slightest thing, nor lose a point of their comfort. They oblige little, trust in their fortune, and their prop usually gives way. It is sometimes well to belong to others so that others may belong to one, and whoever holds a public office must be a public slave, or "give up the post along with its burden," as the old woman will say to Hadrian.⁶ Others, on the contrary, are all other people's, for folly always goes to excess, and here an unhappy one: they have no day, not even an hour, of their own, belonging so excessively to others that one of them was called "Everybody's." Even in the understanding: they know for everyone and are ignorant for themselves. Let the attentive man understand that no one seeks him, but their own interest in him, or through him.

253 Do not make one's thought too plain. Most people do not esteem what they understand, and what they do not perceive they venerate. Things must cost something to be esteemed. A man will be celebrated when he is not understood. One should always show

oneself wiser and more prudent than the person one deals with requires for his idea of one, but in proportion rather than in excess. And though with people of understanding sense counts for much in everything, for most people loftiness is necessary. They must be given no room for censure, being kept busy understanding. Many praise what, when asked, they cannot give a reason for. Why? They venerate everything recondite as mystery and celebrate it because they hear it celebrated.

254 Do not despise an ill because it is small, for one never comes alone. They go linked together, as do good fortunes. Good luck and bad luck usually go where there is most of them; and the reason is that everyone flees the unlucky and draws near the fortunate. Even doves, for all their simplicity, flock to the whitest tower.⁷ Everything comes to fail an unlucky man: he fails himself, and reason and comfort fail him. Misfortune must not be awakened when it sleeps. A slip is a small thing, but that fatal fall follows, and no one knows where it will come to rest; for just as no good was ever entirely complete, so no ill was ever entirely finished. For the ill that comes from heaven, patience; for the one that comes from the earth, prudence.

255 Know how to do good: a little, and often. The commitment should never exceed the possibility. Whoever gives much does not give, but sells. Gratitude must not be pressed to the limit, for when it sees itself unable to repay, it will break off the correspondence. Nothing more is needed to lose many than to oblige them excessively. So as not to pay, they withdraw, and from being obliged they turn into enemies. The idol would never want to see before it the sculptor who carved it, nor the debtor his benefactor before his eyes. A great subtlety of giving: that it cost little and be much desired, so that it is esteemed the more.

256 Always go prepared against the discourteous, the obstinate, the presumptuous, and every kind of fool. One comes across many,

and good sense lies in not crossing them. Let a man arm himself each day with resolutions before the mirror of his attention, and so he will overcome the assaults of folly. Let him be on top of the matter, and he will not expose his reputation to vulgar contingencies: a man forearmed with good sense will not be attacked by impertinence. The course of human dealings is difficult, being full of reefs of discredit; steering clear is the safe thing, consulting Ulysses on cunning. Artful evasion is worth much here. Above all, let him take the road of gallantry, which is the only short cut out of entanglements.

257 Never come to a rupture, for reputation always comes out of it with a broken head. Anyone will do for an enemy, not so for a friend. Few can do good, and almost all can do harm. The eagle does not nest safely even in Jupiter's very bosom on the day it breaks with a beetle:⁸ the hidden enemies, who were waiting for their chance, make a cat's paw of the declared one to stir up the fire. From friends gone bad come the worst enemies; they load the other with defects to cover their own in having been fond of him. Of those who look on, each speaks as he feels and feels as he wishes, all of them condemning both sides, at the beginning for lack of foresight or at the end for lack of patience, and always for lack of good sense. If the break is unavoidable, let it be excusable, rather by a cooling of favor than by a violence of fury. And here that saying about a fine retreat comes in well.

258 Find someone to help one bear misfortunes. Never be alone, least of all in dangers, for that would be loading oneself with all the hatred. Some think to make off with the whole superintendence, and they make off with all the murmuring. In this way a man will have someone to excuse him or to help him bear the ill. Neither fortune nor the vulgar dares so easily to attack two, and that is why the shrewd physician, having erred in the cure, does not err in finding someone who, under the title of a consultation,

will help him carry the coffin: the weight and the woe are shared, for misfortune borne alone is doubled until it is intolerable.

259 Forestall injuries and make favors of them. It is greater shrewdness to avoid them than to avenge them. It is great skill to make a confidant of one who would have been a rival, to turn those who threatened one's reputation with their shots into its defenses. Knowing how to oblige is worth much: he who has filled the time with gratitude leaves no time for offense. And it is knowing how to live to turn into pleasures what would have been sorrows. Make a confidant of malevolence itself.

260 Belong wholly to no one, and have no one wholly as one's own. Neither blood, nor friendship, nor the most binding obligation is enough, for there is a great difference between handing over one's heart and handing over one's will. The closest union admits of exceptions, and the laws of devotion are not offended by it. A friend always keeps some secret for himself, and a son himself is guarded in something toward his father; some things are hidden from some people that are told to others, and the other way round, so that one comes to grant everything and deny everything, distinguishing the terms of each relation.

261 Do not persist in folly. Some make a commitment of their blunder, and because they began to err, they think it constancy to go on. In the court of conscience they accuse their error, and in the outer court they excuse it, so that if, when they began the folly, they were noted as careless, in persisting in it they are confirmed as fools. Neither a thoughtless promise nor a mistaken resolution creates an obligation. In this way some continue their first boorishness and carry their narrowness forward: they want to be steadfast in absurdity.

262 Know how to forget: it is more luck than art. The things most fit to be forgotten are the ones most remembered. Memory is not only churlish in failing when it was most needed, but foolish

in coming when it should not: in what is to give pain it is long-winded, and in what should give pleasure it is careless. Sometimes the remedy of an ill lies in forgetting it, and it is the remedy that is forgotten. It is well, then, to train memory to such convenient habits, for it is enough to give happiness or hell. The self-satisfied are an exception, who in their state of innocence enjoy their simple happiness.

263 Many things that give pleasure should not be owned outright. They are enjoyed more as others' than as one's own. The first day is the good one for their owner, all the rest for strangers. Other people's things are enjoyed with double enjoyment, that is, without the risk of loss and with the pleasure of novelty. Everything tastes better for being withheld: even another's water passes for nectar. Owning things, besides lessening enjoyment, increases annoyance, both at lending them and at not lending them. It serves only to keep them for others, and more enemies are made than grateful friends.

264 Have no careless days. Luck likes to play a trick, and will override every contingency to catch a man unprepared. Wit, good sense, and courage must always be ready for trial; even beauty, for the day of its confidence will be the day of its discredit. Care was always lacking when it was most needed, for not thinking is the trip that brings one down. It is also often a stratagem of others' attention to catch perfections off guard for the rigorous examination of appraisal. The days of display are already known, and cunning lets them pass; but the day least expected is the one it chooses to put one's worth to the test.

265 Know how to put one's dependents to the test. A commitment at the right time has made persons of many, just as the danger of drowning makes swimmers. In this way many discovered courage, and even knowledge, that would have stayed buried in their timidity if the occasion had not offered. Straits are occasions

of reputation, and when the noble man is put in hazards of honor, he does the work of a thousand. The Catholic Queen Isabella⁹ knew this lesson of committing others eminently well, as she knew all the others; and to this politic favor the Great Captain¹⁰ owed his renown, and many others their eternal fame: she made great men by this subtlety.

266 Do not be bad from being too good. He is so who never gets angry: the insensible have little of the person about them. It does not always come from apathy, but from incapacity. A feeling shown at the right time is a personal act. Birds are quick to make fun of scarecrows. Alternating the sour with the sweet is proof of good taste: sweetness alone is for children and fools. It is a great ill to lose oneself by being too good, in this sense of insensibility.

267 Silken words, with gentleness of disposition. Arrows pierce the body, but bad words the soul. A sweet pastille makes the mouth smell good. It is a great subtlety of living to know how to sell air. Most things are paid for with words, and words are enough to get one out of an impossibility. Business is done in the air with air, and the breath of a sovereign gives much heart. One should always carry one's mouth full of sugar to candy one's words, and they taste good even to enemies. Being gentle is the only way to be lovable.

268 Let the sensible man do at the beginning what the fool does at the end. The one does the same as the other; they differ only in timing: the sensible man in season and the fool out of it. He who began by putting his understanding on like shoes on the wrong feet goes on that way in everything else: he drags underfoot what he should set upon his head; he makes his right hand his left, and so is left-handed in all his conduct. There is only one good moment for seeing the point. Fools do by force what they could have done willingly; but the discerning man sees at once what has

to be done, sooner or later, and does it with pleasure and with reputation.

269 Make use of one's novelty, for as long as one is new, one will be esteemed. Novelty pleases everyone, because of its variety; taste is refreshed, and a brand-new mediocrity is esteemed more than an accustomed excellence. Eminences wear with handling and come to grow old; and let a man be warned that this glory of novelty will last little: in four days they will lose their respect for him. Let him know, then, how to make use of these first fruits of esteem and draw from the fleeting moment of pleasing all that he could aim at; for once the heat of the new has passed, passion will cool, and the pleasure in the new will turn into annoyance at the accustomed; and let him believe that everything else, too, had its turn, and that it passed.

270 Do not condemn alone what pleases many. There is something good in it, since it satisfies so many; and though it cannot be explained, it is enjoyed. Singularity is always odious, and when it is mistaken, ridiculous; it will discredit one's own poor opinion rather than the object, and one will be left alone with one's bad taste. If one cannot find the good in it, let one hide one's shortcoming and not condemn wholesale, for bad taste usually comes from ignorance. What everyone says either is so or wants to be.

271 Let the man who knows little always keep to what is safest. In every profession; for though he will not be thought subtle, he will be thought solid. He who knows can venture and act on fancy; but to know little and take risks is a voluntary precipice. Let him always keep to the right hand, for what is established cannot fail. For little knowledge, the king's highway; and in any case, in knowing as in not knowing, safety is more sensible than singularity.

272 Sell things at the price of courtesy, for that obliges more. What the self-interested man asks will never come up to what a generous man gives when he feels obliged. Courtesy does not give,

but pledges, and gallantry is the greatest obligation. Nothing is dearer to a decent man than what is given him: it is selling it twice, and at two prices, that of its worth and that of the courtesy. It is true, though, that to the base man gallantry is gibberish, for he does not understand the terms of good terms.

273 Comprehension of the temperaments one deals with, so as to know their intentions. Once the cause is well known, the effect is known, first in the cause and then in its motive. The melancholy man always forebodes misfortunes, and the slanderer faults: the worst always occurs to them, and not perceiving the present good, they announce the possible ill. The impassioned man always speaks a language different from what things are; passion speaks in him, not reason. And each one according to his feeling or his humor, and all of them very far from the truth. Let a man know how to decipher a face and spell out the soul in its signs. Let him take the man who always laughs for wanting, and the man who never laughs for false. Let him beware of the questioner, either as frivolous or as a spy. Let him expect little good from the man with an ill-favored face, for such men usually take revenge on nature, and as she honored them little, they honor her little. Folly is usually as great as beauty is.

274 Have the power to attract, which is a spell of politic courtesy. Let the gallant hook serve to draw wills rather than benefits, or both. Merits are not enough unless they make use of pleasantness, which is what wins applause, the most practical instrument of sovereignty. To catch people's fancy is luck, but it is helped by artifice, for where there is a great natural endowment the artificial sits better. From this arises kindly affection, until it wins the goodwill of all.

275 Easygoing, but not unseemly. Not to be always on one's dignity and tiresome is a branch of gallantry. One must yield something of decorum to win common affection. Sometimes one may

go where most people go, but without unseemliness, for he who is taken for a fool in public will not be taken for sensible in private. More is lost in one day of merriment than was gained in all one's seriousness. But one must not always be the exception: being singular is condemning others; still less affect prudery; let that be left to its own sex: even spiritual prudery is ridiculous. The best thing in a man is to look like one; for a woman can affect the manly to perfection, but not the other way round.

276 Know how to renew one's temperament, by nature and by art. They say that one's disposition changes every seven years: let it be to improve and heighten one's taste. In the first seven, reason comes in; after that, with every five years, let a new perfection come in. Observe this natural variety in order to help it, and expect improvement in others as well. That is why many have changed their bearing, either with their station or with their post; and sometimes the extent of the change is not noticed until it is seen. At twenty a man will be a peacock; at thirty, a lion; at forty, a camel; at fifty, a serpent; at sixty, a dog; at seventy, a monkey; and at eighty, nothing.

277 A man of display. It is the shining of gifts. There is a moment for each: let it be seized, for not every day will be its day of triumph. There are dashing persons in whom a little shines much, and much shines to the point of wonder. When showiness joins eminence, it passes for a prodigy. There are showy nations, and the Spanish is so supremely. Light was the first shining forth of all creation. Display fills much, supplies much, and gives a second being to everything, especially when reality backs it. Heaven, which gives perfection, provides for display, for either alone would be forced. Art is needed in display: even what is very excellent depends on circumstances and does not always have its moment. Display went wrong when it lacked its season. No distinction calls for less affectation, and display always perishes of this flaw, for it is

very close to vanity, and vanity to contempt. It must be well tempered so as not to become vulgar, and with the sensible its excess is somewhat discredited. It sometimes consists rather in a mute eloquence, in showing perfection carelessly; for wise dissimulation is the most applauded parade, because that very deprivation pricks curiosity to the quick. It is a great skill of display not to reveal all one's perfection at once, but to let it be seen by degrees, as a card player edges his cards apart to peep at them, always advancing; let one distinction be the pledge of a greater, and the applause for the first a new expectation of the rest.

278 Avoid being conspicuous in everything. For once conspicuous, even one's distinctions will be defects. This comes from singularity, which was always censured; the singular man is left alone. Even what is pretty, if it stands out, brings discredit; once it draws attention, it offends, and much more so singularities without credit. But some want to be known even for their vices, seeking novelty in baseness so as to achieve so infamous a fame. Even in intelligence, excess degenerates into smart chatter.

279 Do not answer contradiction. One must tell whether it comes from cunning or from vulgarity. It is not always obstinacy; sometimes it is artifice. Attention, then, not to be drawn into the one nor to fall headlong into the other. Care is nowhere better spent than against spies, and against the picklock of minds there is no better countertrick than to leave the key of reserve inside the lock.

280 A man of good faith. Good conduct is finished, obligations are belied, there are few good returns: for the best service, the worst reward, as is now the custom of all the world. There are whole nations inclined to ill treatment: from some, treachery is always to be feared; from others, inconstancy; and from others, deceit. Let the bad return of others serve, then, not for imitation but for caution. The risk is that integrity may come off its hinges at

the sight of base conduct. But the man of good faith never forgets who he is because of what others are.

281 The goodwill of people of understanding. The lukewarm yes of a singular man is worth more than a whole common applause, for belches of chaff give no sustenance. The wise speak with the understanding, and so their praise causes an immortal satisfaction. The judicious Antigonus reduced the whole theater of his fame to Zeno alone,¹¹ and Plato called Aristotle his whole school.¹² Some care only to fill their stomachs, even if it is with vulgar rubbish. Even sovereigns need those who write, and they should fear their pens more than ugly women fear the painter's brushes.

282 Use absence: either for respect or for esteem. If presence diminishes fame, absence increases it. The man who when absent was taken for a lion was, when present, the ridiculous offspring of the mountains.¹³ Gifts lose their luster with handling, because the rind of the outside is seen sooner than the great substance of the spirit. Imagination goes further than sight, and deception, which usually enters by the ear, comes to leave by the eyes. He who keeps himself at the center of the opinion held of him preserves his reputation; for even the phoenix makes use of retirement for its decorum, and of desire for its esteem.

283 A man of sensible inventiveness. It argues an excess of wit, but what wit will there be without its grain of madness?¹⁴ Invention belongs to the witty; good choice, to the prudent. It is also a gift of grace, and a rarer one, because many have managed to choose well, but few to invent well, and those the first both in excellence and in time. Novelty flatters, and if it is happy, it gives two distinctions to the good. In matters of judgment it is dangerous, because of the paradoxical; in matters of wit, praiseworthy; and if they succeed, both are applauded.

284 Do not be meddlesome, and one will not be slighted. Esteem oneself if one would be esteemed. Be miserly rather than

lavish with oneself. Arrive wanted, and one will be well received. Never come unless called, nor go unless sent. He who takes a thing on of his own accord loads all the hatred on himself if it goes badly; and if it goes well, he gets no thanks. The meddler is a butt for contempt, and for the very reason that he thrusts himself in shamelessly, he is sent off in confusion.

285 Do not perish of another's misfortune. Recognize the man who is in the mud, and note that he will call on one to make a consolation of shared misery. Such men look for someone to help them bear their misfortune, and those who turned their backs on a man in their prosperity now hold out their hands to him. Great care is needed with the drowning, so as to come to the rescue without danger.

286 Do not let oneself be wholly obliged, nor obliged to everyone, for that would be to be a slave, and a common one. Some were born luckier than others: the luckier to do good, the others to receive it. Freedom is more precious than the gift, for it is lost in the taking. Let a man prefer that many depend on him rather than that he depend on one. Command has no other advantage than being able to do more good. Above all, let him not take as a favor the obligation he gets into; most often another's cunning will have contrived it to get ahead of him.

287 Never act in passion: everything will go wrong. Let no one act on his own who is beside himself, and passion always banishes reason. Let a prudent third party take his place then, and the third party will be prudent if he is free of passion: onlookers always see more than players, because they do not become impassioned. On recognizing that he is agitated, let good sense sound the retreat, so that his blood is not set fully on fire, for he will do everything bloodily, and in a short while will give matter for many days of confusion for himself and murmuring by others.

288 Live by the occasion. Governing, reasoning, everything must suit the case. Will when one can, for season and time wait for no one. Let a man not live by generalities, unless it is in favor of virtue, nor lay down fixed laws for his will, for tomorrow he will have to drink of the water he scorns today. There are some so paradoxically absurd that they would have all the circumstances of success fit their mania, and not the other way round. But the wise man knows that the north star of prudence lies in conducting oneself according to the occasion.

289 The greatest discredit of a man is to give signs that he is a man. People stop taking him for divine the day they see him very human. Frivolity is the greatest counterweight to reputation. Just as the reserved man is taken for more than a man, so the frivolous man is taken for less than a man. No vice discredits more, because frivolity is directly opposed to gravity. A frivolous man cannot be a man of substance, especially if he is old, when his age obliges him to good sense. And though this blemish is so common, that does not keep it from being singularly discrediting.

290 It is happiness to join esteem with affection, not being too much loved, so as to keep respect. Love is bolder than hatred; affection and veneration do not go well together; and yet one should be neither much feared nor much loved. Love brings in familiarity, and as familiarity comes in, esteem goes out. Let a man be loved with esteem rather than with fondness, which is a love very fitting for persons.

291 Know how to make trial. Let the attention of the judicious compete with the reserve of the guarded: great judgment is needed to measure another's. It matters more to know the temperaments and properties of persons than those of herbs and stones. This is one of the subtlest acts of life: metals are known by their ring, and persons by their speech. Words show integrity, but

deeds much more. Here are needed extraordinary care, deep observation, subtle notice, and judicious discernment.

292 Let one's nature prevail over the obligations of one's post, and not the other way round. However great the post, the person must show himself greater. A capital with room to spare goes on expanding and showing itself more with each post. A narrow heart is easily squeezed, and in the end its owner goes bankrupt in both obligation and reputation. The great Augustus prided himself on being a greater man than prince. Here loftiness of spirit counts, and sensible self-confidence even helps.

293 Maturity. It shines in the exterior, but more in one's habits. Material weight makes gold precious, and moral weight the person. It is the decorum of gifts, inspiring veneration. A man's composure is the façade of his soul. It is not foolishness with little movement, as levity would have it, but a very calm authority. It speaks in maxims and acts with success. It presupposes a well-formed man, for a man is as much a person as he is mature. On ceasing to be a child, he begins to be grave and authoritative.

294 Be moderate in one's opinions. Each forms his notion according to his interest, and abounds in reasons for his view. In most people, the verdict yields to feeling. It happens that two meet in contradiction and each presumes that reason is on his side; but reason, being faithful, never knew how to wear two faces. Let the wise man proceed with reflection on so delicate a point; and so his misgiving about himself will reform his judgment of the other's conduct. Let him sometimes put himself on the other side and examine his opponent's motives from there. In this way he will neither condemn the other nor justify himself so blindly.

295 Not a boaster of exploits, but a doer of them. Those who have least cause play the grandee most. They make a mystery of everything, with the greatest frigidity: chameleons of applause,¹⁵ giving everyone surfeits of laughter. Vanity was always tiresome;

here it is laughed at: the little ants of honor go begging for exploits. Let a man affect his greatest eminences less. Let him be content to do, and leave the telling to others. Let him give his exploits, not sell them; nor are golden pens to be hired to write mud, to the disgust of good sense. Let him aspire to be heroic rather than only to seem so.

296 A man of gifts, and majestic ones. First-rate gifts make first-rate men. A single one is worth a whole middling plurality. There was one who liked all his things to be great, even his everyday furnishings. How much more should the great man see that the gifts of his spirit are so! In God everything is infinite, everything immense; so in a hero everything must be great and majestic, so that all his actions, and even his words, go clothed in a transcendent, grandiose majesty.

297 Always act as if seen. That man is watchful who watches that he is watched, or will be. He knows that walls have ears and that what is ill done bursts to get out. Even when alone, he acts as if in sight of the whole world, for he knows that everything will be known; he already looks on those who will later be witnesses through report as witnesses now. The man who wished that the whole world could see him did not mind that he could be observed in his house from the houses of others.¹⁶

298 Three things make a prodigy, and they are the greatest gift of supreme liberality: a fecund wit, a profound judgment, and a taste remarkably jocund. It is a great advantage to conceive well, but a greater one to reason well, the mark of a good understanding. Wit should not lie in the backbone, for then it would be laborious rather than sharp. Thinking well is the fruit of rationality. At twenty the will reigns, at thirty wit, at forty judgment. There are understandings that throw out light, like the eyes of the lynx, and reason best in the greatest darkness; there are others made for the occasion, which always hit on what is most to the purpose. Much

occurs to them, and well: a most happy fecundity. But good taste seasons all of life.

299 Leave people hungry. They must be left with the nectar still on their lips. Desire is the measure of esteem; even with bodily thirst it is a trick of good taste to whet it, not to quench it. The good, if little, twice good. The falling off the second time is great: surfeits of pleasure are dangerous, for they bring contempt on the most eternal eminence. The one rule of pleasing: to catch the appetite sharpened by the hunger it was left with. If it must be provoked, let it be rather by the impatience of desire than by weariness of enjoyment: a happiness that has been suffered for is enjoyed twice over.

300 In a word, a saint, which says everything at once. Virtue is the chain of all perfections, the center of all happiness. It makes a man prudent, attentive, shrewd, sensible, wise, courageous, self-controlled, upright, happy, applauded, true, and a universal hero. Three S's make a man happy: saintly, sound, and sage. Virtue is the sun of the lesser world, and has a good conscience for its hemisphere; it is so beautiful that it wins grace with God and with men. Nothing is lovable but virtue, nothing hateful but vice. Virtue is a thing in earnest; all else is in jest. Capacity and greatness are to be measured by virtue, not by fortune. Virtue alone is sufficient to itself. While a man lives, it makes him lovable; and when he is dead, memorable.

[1.](#) Alexander was said to cover one ear with his hand when hearing an accusation, keeping it for the accused.

[2.](#) To “share pears” (*partir peras*) with someone is Spanish for being on easy, familiar terms. Gracián changes the pears (*peras*) to stones (*piedras*).

[3.](#) Spanish *belgas*: the people of the Low Countries, then ruled by the Spanish crown.

4. "Be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves" (Matthew 10:16).
5. Commonly given as a rule of Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), founder of the Jesuits.
6. An anecdote told by Cassius Dio. When a woman stopped Hadrian in the road with a petition, he said he had no time; she cried out, "Then stop being emperor," and he turned back and heard her.
7. Ovid (*Tristia* 1.9): doves flock to white towers, and no bird roosts in a filthy one.
8. Aesop's fable of the eagle and the beetle. The beetle, wronged by the eagle, kept rolling its eggs out of the nest; when the eagle laid them in Jupiter's lap, the beetle dropped a ball of dung there, the god rose to shake it off, and the eggs fell and broke.
9. Isabella I of Castile (1451–1504), who with her husband, Ferdinand of Aragon, received from the pope the title of the Catholic Monarchs.
10. Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba (1453–1515), Isabella's general, called *el Gran Capitán*.
11. Antigonus II Gonatas, king of Macedon (c. 320–239 BC), admired Zeno of Citium, founder of Stoicism, and went to hear him when he was in Athens.
12. The ancient lives report that Plato called Aristotle the "mind" of his school, and when he was absent said, "The mind is not here."
13. From Horace, *Ars poetica*: the mountains labor, and a ridiculous mouse is born.
14. Seneca (*On Tranquillity of Mind*) quotes Aristotle: there has been no great genius without a touch of madness.
15. The ancients believed that the chameleon lived on air.
16. Probably Marcus Livius Drusus, the Roman tribune, who told an architect offering to build him a house no one could see into that he should rather build it so that everyone could see whatever he did (Velleius Paterculus, *Roman History* 2.14).

Colophon

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