

## **Dissecting Rationalism: A Proposition to Recontextualize Gracián's *Techné* of Prudence**

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In my response to Justin Butler's essay "Baroque Subjectivity and the Modern Fractured Self," I will focus on Baltasar Gracián's art of prudence and his notion of *caudal*. In essence, I would like to propose a recontextualization of the discussion surrounding Gracián's "courtly philosophy" in terms of the scientific and political developments that we associate with the emergence of modern rationalism. While I believe Butler is right in noting that Gracián does not endorse baroque excess, I would argue that the Jesuit's conception of the body politic in *Oráculo manual y arte de prudencia*, and also in *El héroe* and *El discreto*, represents a paradigmatic expression of baroque *desengaño* taken to its ultimate political consequences. In the process, I hope to suggest a line of continuity between the Gracianesque version of the social sphere and the dissecting view of nature that we associate with the founding fathers of the new science. Thus, I would like these notes to be read as an initial reaction to the following passages from Butler's essay: "The deceit of modernity is managed in certain specific ways in Gracián writings. One of the most important of these ways involves the proper handling of excess. *Oráculo manual y arte de prudencia* is in many respects an anti-Baroque *tractatus* precisely because of its injunction to avoid the flourishings of excess. . . . Excess leads to monstrosity; withholding or reserve, in turn, leads to power. The relation of excess to power is one to be negotiated with subtlety" (9–10).

Direct TV is currently running a twenty-second add that encourages its customers to look at friends and family members as cash cows. The idea is that we can get them to sign up for Direct TV service and "let the Benjamins stack up!" Visually the message is transmitted by showing the faces of "our friends and family" morphing into the iconic image of Benjamin Franklin which is printed on the hundred dollar bill. Surely the hundred dollar

Benjamin is not the type of currency that Baltasar Gracián is thinking of when he invites his discreet reader to amass *caudal* by cultivating the courtly art of prudence and to surround himself with *caudal*-procuring friends and connections. Yet, these very distinct notions of currency (cold hard cash versus symbolic capital) have something in common in the way they are invoked as a means to an end, the end goal being the acquisition of power and success, whether it be in today's cash driven society or in the aristocratic circles of the Spanish Absolutist court. I would like to take these preliminary observations in the direction of a proposal or a proposition to re-examine Gracián's work in the context of the emergence of modern rationalism in seventeenth-century Europe and its far-reaching consequences for nature and humanity.

Starting from the end, we could recall that the devastating impact that modern rationalism and the global market economy have had on nature and humanity has been documented in well-known works of political and critical theory going back to the Marxist critique of capitalism as an economic system that objectifies human beings and generates alienation and social injustice. I am thinking especially of the intellectual project of the Frankfurt School, in particular Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*. Poststructuralist and postcolonial critics added to this critical view of modernity. In recent decades, there have been comprehensive attempts to bridge these different intellectual and political traditions from feminist and ecological perspectives. Among the eclectic works associated with the emerging field of eco-feminism, Teresa Brennan's *History After Lacan* (1993) focused on the intersection between psychoanalysis, cultural history and economics. Brennan theorizes (Western) modernity as an era defined by the psychotic drive to "dismember nature in order to know." She links this social psychosis to the economic forces that incite, foster and profit from the desire for power and "instant gratification" (169). Her position, as she herself notes, "aligns the exploitation and alienation of humans with that of nature" (215, note 11).

I can think of a number of examples from today's mass-culture that seemingly illustrate Brennan's theory including Von Hagen's exhibits of plastinated and aesthetically arranged cadavers (Body Worlds) and Damien Hirst's highly popular galleries of dissected animals (see my *Baroque Horrors*). The cold enumeration of the materials used for the making of Hirst's 1993 Turner Prize Winner (an installation featuring bisected cows preserved in a formaldehyde solution) in the index of the *Guardian Unlimited* is a particularly apt example of the artist's (and the market's) reduction of life to commodified *raw matter* exploitable for profit: "Damien Hirst, Mother and Child, Divided, 1993 Steel, GRP, composites, glass, silicone sealants, cow, calf, formaldehyde solution; dimensions variable © the artist" ("20 Years of Turner Prize-Winners," *Guardian Unlimited Arts Index*).

Brennan's research follows in the footsteps of Carolyn Merchant's exploration of the origins of modernity in *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (1980). Merchant's pioneering argument may be summarized in the following quote:

The removal of animistic, organic assumptions about the cosmos constituted the death of nature—the most far-reaching effect of the Scientific Revolution. Because nature was now viewed as a system of dead, inert particles moved by external, rather than inherent forces, the mechanical framework itself could legitimate the manipulation of nature. Moreover, as a conceptual framework, the mechanical order had associated with it a framework of values based on power, fully compatible with the directions taken by commercial capitalism. (193)

Both Brennan and Merchant noted that the natural philosophers behind the Scientific Revolution redefined man's interaction with nature as a hierarchical relationship between Subject and Object, master and slave. Within the new scientific paradigm the pursuit of human knowledge was no longer viewed in terms of cooperation between man and nature but rather as a form of mastery. Francis Bacon made this point in the crudest of terms in his *Novum Organum* (1620) when he called for the "dissection of nature." At this point the traditional notion of *techné* (art) becomes indistinguishable from the skill of the anatomist which, according to Glanvill, consists of "the eviscerating of nature, and [the] disclosure of the springs of its motion" (qtd. in Merchant 189). Merchant underscores this aspect of the new science by citing Bacon's *Novum Organum*: "'By art and the hand of man,' nature can then be 'forced out of her natural state and squeezed and molded.' In this way, 'human knowledge and human power meet as one'" (Merchant 171).

Gracián's dissecting strategies and his guidelines and recommendations for societal interaction in the power circles of the court where the *caudal* of heroes is made belong in this discussion. His reinvention of the courtly art of prudence is fully consistent with a rationalist, instrumentalist, dissecting view of the world and of human nature. Thus, we should not be confused by the presence of seemingly "pre-modern" cultural formulas and ritual language in Gracián's texts. In fact our modern societies are ritualistic in nature. Slavoj Žižek may have said it best when he asserts that the (post)modern injunction to be our true self is ultimately a ritualistic call to wear "the right mask" in accordance with a strictly self-interested view of human interaction (*The Ticklish Subject*, 373). Bradley Nelson has made this point apropos Gracián's early modern rationalism: "Gracián's modernity does not emerge by disentangling it from the ritual residue of the Baroque; rather, ritualization is the only way we can approach the lessons that baroque culture holds for modernity" ("A Ritual Practice" 80). William Childers has made a similar point in his interpretation of Gracián's art of prudence as the

Jesuit's "theory" of the baroque public sphere: "The theorist par excellence of the baroque public sphere is Gracián, whose *Oráculo manual* brilliantly describes the functioning of self-interested reason in the context of theatricalized competition for status" ("The Baroque Public Sphere" 169).

It is also important to note that the establishment of the rationalist worldview that we associate with the Scientific Revolution cannot be divorced from the realm of theological thought. Natural philosophers did not aim at establishing a natural order independent from theology. On the contrary, the new "anatomical view" of nature was aimed at securing God's position of mastery over his creation. As Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park have shown in *Wonders and the Order of Nature* (1998):

Not since Augustine had natural philosophy and theology so thoroughly bent to the will of God . . . Only a nature consisting solely of 'brute, passive, stupid matter' would not usurp divine prerogatives. The essence of the new attitudes toward nature among natural philosophers was not so much naturalization as subordination: the subordination of anomalies to watertight natural laws, of nature to God, and of citizens and Christians to established authority. (205–8)

The works of Brennan, Merchant, and Daston and Park not only help dispel the myth of an independent "new science" that freed itself from theocratic claims and earthly powers, they also invite us to re-examine the often overstated distinction between the "forward-looking" political and cultural developments of Northern Europe and the authoritarian and "excessive" culture of the Catholic South. I would propose that Gracián's rationalist and radically instrumental view of the social sphere is the "moral" equivalent of the scientific call to dissect, squeeze and mold nature (in Gracián's case human nature) in order to achieve mastery over it. Gracián's "moral philosophy," as he calls his newly sharpened "art of prudence," springs from an explicit identification of moral virtue with individual self-interest. Hence, the finest of all arts is—in the view of this self-described "moral philosopher"—the ability to dissect others in order to effectively bend their will for our own personal gain: "Conquering minds has little value if wills are not subjugated. Much has been accomplished, however, when the will has been rendered . . . This grace can be achieved with good fortune but most of all through personal diligence" (my translation, *Obras completas* 12).

As Childers and others have suggested, such a view of the social sphere rests on a radical separation of the subject of knowledge and power ("el héroe," in Gracián's terminology) from an objectified field of human interaction which is explicitly defined as theatrical space in which the aspiring hero can amass the kind of symbolic capital (*caudal*) that will grant him mastery over hearts and minds. As I argued in "Gracián and the Art of

Public Representation,” this view of the social sphere is anchored in the explicit dictum that eminent men ought not to waste their time trying to make a better world; instead they should devote themselves to dissecting other subjects, studying current circumstances, cultivating symbolic capital and amassing power and recognition. In this Gracianesque version of the social sphere, you are simply what you deserve to be based on your ability to master the new *techné* of prudence. This is where I see Gracián’s baroqueism. This is not the baroque of monstrous excess, but the baroque of *desengaño* taken to its ultimate consequences. As Childers has recently put it: “In Gracián there is no longer any tension between the heroic ideal and Baroque self-representation. He provides the definitive ‘Baroquization’ of heroism, collapsing exemplarity into strategic positioning” (“Baroque Quixote” 438). This is also the fundamental difference between the way in which Gracián and Cervantes approach the issue of the heroic ideal. Unlike in *Don Quixote*, a work in which the ethical tension of which Childers speaks is very much present (albeit with parodic overtones), in Gracián’s texts, “the representation of heroism has been entirely emptied of ethical content” (430). Gracián’s emptying out of the traditional ethics of heroism clears the path for a new modern ethics based on individual self-interest which, as Merchant noted, is “fully compatible with the directions taken by commercial capitalism” (193). In the brave new world sketched by Gracián, the ethical “disinterested act” is simply a thing of the past. By the time the European Enlightenment (with Kant leading the way) reinserts questions of personal ethics in philosophical and political debates, the “disinterested act” has become exponentially harder to conceive, even to justify, in the context of the modern body politic.

Bringing the discussion back to Butler’s thought-provoking essay, I would say that Butler makes a convincing argument when he notes that Gracián’s recommendations to the courtier are on the side of a wise, measured reflection and guarded action. It is also true that Gracián shows no patience for the man of excess. Better said, the intemperate man of excess is indeed the polar opposite of the calculating hero who would be able to make the best of Gracián’s art of prudence in his race to outfox others in pursuit of power and recognition in the worldly theaters of the 1600s. In the present response, I simply call attention to another way in which we can think of Gracián as a baroque thinker, not as someone who advocates or engages in the flourishings of baroque excess, as Butler eloquently puts it, but as a baroque “moralist” (he refers to his work as moral philosophy) who pushes the emerging rationalist, instrumentalist view of nature and society and the lessons of baroque *desengaño* to their logical limit.

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