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The Path to Success, in Thirteen Theses

1. There is no great success without authentic achievements. But it would be a fallacy to imagine that these achievements are its foundation. The achievements are themselves a consequence—a consequence of the increased self-confidence and working pleasure of the person who finds himself recognized. This is why a great challenge, a shrewd repartee, an advantageous transaction are the genuine achievements on which great successes are built.

2. Satisfaction with the reward paralyzes success. Satisfaction with the achievement increases it. Reward and achievement balance each other out; they lie in the pans of a set of scales. The entire weight of self-respect must lie in the pan that contains the achievement. This means that the pan containing the reward will always fly into the air.

3. Only people who seem to be or really are guided in their behavior by straightforward, transparent motives will obtain success in the long run. The masses destroy every success as soon as it seems to become opaque, or to be devoid of any instructive, exemplary value. That is to say, transparent in its own terms; such success has no need to be intellectually transparent. Any priestly rule demonstrates that. Success only has to conform to an idea, or more accurately an image, whether of a hierarchy, militarism, plutocracy, or any other. Thus, the priest has his confessional, the general his medals, the financier his mansion. Anyone who refuses to pay tribute to the masses’ collection of images must fail.

4. People have no conception of the hunger for clarity. This is the supreme emotional need of any public. One center, one leader, one slogan. The more unambiguous an intellectual phenomenon, the greater its radius of action will be and the more the public will flock to it. People’s “interest” in an
author grows; that is to say, they begin to seek his formula—in other words, the most basic, unambiguous expression of his writing. From that moment on, his every new work becomes the raw material in which his readers strive to test that formula, and to refine and prove its worth. Strictly speaking, the public has an ear only for the message that the author would just have time and strength enough to utter on his deathbed with his last breath.

5. A writer cannot remind himself too often how modern our concept of “posterity” is. It dates from the era in which the independent writer made his appearance and stems from the fact that his place in society was insecure. The reference to posterity was a form of pressure on his contemporaries. As late as the seventeenth century, it would not have occurred to any writer to appeal to posterity as a weapon against his own age. All previous ages were unanimous in their conviction that their own contemporaries held the keys that would open the doors to future fame. And how much truer this is today, when every new generation finds itself with even less time or inclination to revise already established judgments, and as its need to defend itself against the sheer mass of what the past has bequeathed it is assuming ever more desperate forms.

6. Fame, or rather success, has become obligatory and is no longer the optional extra it formerly was. In an age when every wretched scrap of paper is distributed in hundreds of thousands of copies, fame is a cumulative condition. Quite simply: the less successful the writer, the less available his works.

7. A condition of victory: the enjoyment of the trappings of success as such. A pure, disinterested enjoyment, which proclaims itself best when someone just enjoys success, even if it belongs to someone else, and especially if it is “undeserved.” A pharisaical self-righteousness is one of the greatest obstacles to advancement.

8. Much is innate, but much can be improved by training. This is why success will not come to anyone who saves himself up, who exerts himself only on the most important occasions, and who is incapable of occasionally making a supreme effort for trivial goals. For the most important factor even in a crucial negotiation can be learned only through these means: the pleasure in negotiation that extends even to taking a sporting interest in your opponent, the great capacity for temporarily taking your eye off the ball (the Lord provides for his own in their sleep), and, last and most important, charm. Not the softening, straightforward, comfortable kind, but the surprising, dialectical charm that is full of verve, a lasso that unexpectedly enables you to bring your opponent into line. And isn’t society full of people from whom we can learn the secret of success? Just as in Galicia pickpockets use straw dolls, little figurines covered all over with little bells, to teach their trade to their pupils, so too we have waiters, porters, officials, and managers on whom we can practice the art of giving orders with charm.
The “Open Sesame” of success is the formula begotten from the marriage between Fortuna and the language of command.

9. “Let’s hear what you can do!”—this is what they say in America to everyone applying for a job. But they are less interested in hearing what he says than in seeing how he behaves. Here we touch on the secret of examinations. Any examiner normally wants nothing more than to be persuaded of the suitability of the person he is testing. We have all learned by experience that the more frequently you use a piece of information, an opinion, a formula, the more it seems to lose its suggestive power. Our conviction will scarcely ever persuade others as completely as it persuaded the person who witnessed its birth in our mind. It follows that in every examination the greatest chance of success lies not with the person who is well prepared, but with the one who is best at improvising. And for the same reason, it is almost always the incidental questions and events that prove decisive. The inquisitor we have before us desires above all that we hide from him the nature of his own position. If we succeed in this, he will be grateful to us and turn a blind eye to our deficiencies.

10. Cleverness, a knowledge of human nature, and similar talents are far less important in real life than we imagine. Despite this, there is genius of some sort in every successful person. But we should not try to find it, any more than we should try to find the erotic genius in a Don Juan when he is alone. Success, too, is a rendezvous: it is no small thing to be in the right place at the right time. Because it means understanding the language in which luck makes its arrangements with us. How can anyone who has never in his life heard this language pass judgment on the genius of the successful? He has no conception of it. In his eyes it is all a matter of chance. It does not occur to him that, in the grammar of success, chance plays the same role that irregular verbs do in ordinary grammar. It is the surviving trace of primeval energy.

11. The structure of all success is basically the structure of gambling. To reject one’s own name has always been the most thorough way to rid oneself of one’s inhibitions and feelings of inferiority. And gambling is precisely a sort of steeplechase over the hurdles of one’s own ego. The gambler is nameless; he has no name of his own and requires no one else’s. For he is represented by the chips he places on specific numbers on the table—which is said to be green, like the golden tree of life, but which in reality is as gray as asphalt. And what intoxication it is in this city of opportunity, in this network of good fortune, to multiply oneself, to make oneself ubiquitous and be on the lookout for the approach of Lady Luck at any one of ten different street corners.

12. A man may swindle as much as he likes. But he must never feel like a swindler. Here the confidence man is the model of creative neutrality. His inherited name is the anonymous sun around which his adopted names
revolve like planets. Pedigrees, honors, titles—they are all so many little worlds emanating from the radiant core of that sun, dispensing a gentle light and warmth over the world of ordinary people. Indeed, they are his achieve-
ment, his gift to society, and hence are evidence of the bona fides that the
sharp-witted swindler always possesses but that the poor sucker almost
never has.

13. The secret of success does not lie in the mind; it is revealed by language
itself in the term “presence of mind.” The question is not whether mind is
present, or what form it takes, but only where it is. That it happens to be
present here, at this very moment, is possible only if it enters into a person’s
intonation, his smile, his conversational pauses, his gaze, or his gestures.
For only the body can generate presence of mind. And in the case of the
highly successful person, the body keeps such a tight rein on the reserves of
the mind that the latter seldom has the opportunity to let off fireworks. This
explains why the success achieved by financial wizards in their careers is of
the same kind as that of an Abbé Galiani in the salon.3 For nowadays, as
Lenin has remarked, what must be overcome are not people, but things.
This is the source of that dullness which so often characterizes the presence
of mind of great captains of industry.

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352. Translated by Rodney Livingstone.

Notes

1. In English in the original.
2. An allusion to Mephistopheles’ lines in Goethe’s Faust: “My friend, all theory is
3. Ferdinando Galiani (1728–1787), Italian man of letters and economist, was a
friend of the Encyclopedists. His book Della moneta (On Money) appeared in
1750.