

## Monster-like Angel and Angelic Monster

### “Custom” in Francis Bacon

That *monster, custom*, who all sense doth eat  
Of habits *evil*, is angel yet in this,  
That to the use of actions fair and good  
He likewise gives a frock or livery  
That aptly is put on.

(Shakespeare: *Hamlet* III.4.163–7)

#### 1 ORIENTATIONS

Hamlet lectures about the double faces of “custom” calling it once a “monster” and, later in the Closet Scene, an “angel.” When playing the moralist, and teaching his mother how to become virtuous, he makes use of the concept of “custom.” In his explanation, Hamlet asserts the double directions in which “custom” works. On the one hand custom is a “monster,” for it blurs the eye in the sense that when one becomes accustomed to wrong deeds, one will not be able to recognise them as wrong. On the other hand custom is an “angel,” for it helps one to become virtuous in the sense that through the practice of well-doing, one will become accustomed to virtuous actions.

The double faces of “custom,” however, did not solely exist on the Renaissance stage, but appear in Francis Bacon’s moral philosophy too. In this essay I will argue that “custom” was seen both as a monster and as an angel in his

texts.<sup>1</sup> I would also like to demonstrate that Bacon did not only repeat the traditional ideas about custom originating in Aristotle, but also gave it a new significance through the change of the context in which the discussion of custom emerges.

The new orientation was not on Bacon's mind from the beginning. The first treatment of "custom" in *The Advancement of Learning* is very much an Aristotelian approach to custom, as it deals only with the individual without explicit reference to the social context. The later essay, "Of Custom and Education," broadens the horizon of the discussion. The new orientation is not only individual and practical in its attitude, but also socio-politico-institutional. The elucidation of this context-shift is the other aim of the present paper.

## 2 "CUSTOM" IN THE ADVANCEMENT OF LEARNING

The first coherent meditation on custom appeared in *The Advancement of Learning*, Book II (1605) under the subdivision *De Cultura Animi*. Bacon lists some themes such as the natures and dispositions of men, affections, custom, exercise, habit, example, imitation, emulation etc. that have not been discussed sufficiently by previous authors and need elaboration. He also provides two examples to show what kind of approach is missing. One of these examples is on "Custom and Habit" (p. 260) or "Exercise and Custom" (p. 261).

### 2.1 Aristotle criticised

The embryonic essay that considers custom within the horizon of the individual consists of three parts. The first part is rather theoretical, criticising Aristotle on two accounts. Firstly, because Aristotle was not subtle enough when distinguishing between the objects upon which custom has and does not have influence. Bacon's second critical remark concerns the lack of practical advice in Aristotle.

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<sup>1</sup> All parenthesised references pertain to *Francis Bacon: A Critical Edition of the Major Works*. Ed. Brian Vickers. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. "Of Custom and Education" is located in this edition between pages 418-420, and *The Advancement of Learning* between pages 120-299.

When arguing that moral virtues cannot be man's property by nature in the *Magna Moralia*, but are acquired by *ethos* ("habit," "custom"), Aristotle substantiates his thesis with reference to natural phenomena.

For instance, a stone and heavy things in general, naturally go downwards. If any one, then throws them up repeatedly, and tries to train them to go up, all the same they never would go up, but always down. Similarly in all other such cases.<sup>2</sup>

In the case of natural phenomena, mere repetition does not change the structure of the external world. The way things are integrated into the all-encompassing structure of the world cannot be modified at all. According to the structure (*physis*) of the sublunary world, stones are to move downwards, unless an external force moves them otherwise, because of their natural constitution. If the stone happened to move upwards in the sublunary territory without an external force, it would mean an absolute, or more precisely, substantial change in its composition. In this case, however, it could not ever be called a stone. Thus, substantial change can never be induced *via* habituation.

Bacon, on the contrary, claims that even some natural phenomena can be changed through custom. If we take a pair of gloves that at the beginning proved small, but after having forced them onto our hands several times, they may well become comfortable, then apparently they have changed their quantity: they were small once but now being of the appropriate size. We have thus natural objects, repetition, and change, i.e. some kind of habituation in Bacon's example.

Though the observation is acceptable that, phenomenally, we have something different here from what Aristotle states, Bacon is not absolutely right. In Aristotle the change is extreme: for the stone to move upwards without an external agent means a complete constitutional, substantial change. In Bacon's example, however, the change can only be subsumed under the category of quantity, as it does not effect the composition, the what-it-is-ness of the natural object under consideration. The things that can now be put on our hands are still called gloves: the essential properties that make a pair of gloves a pair of gloves remained untouched.

Bacon's misunderstanding of Aristotle becomes evident if his further examples are taken into consideration. To prove that natural things may well be

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<sup>2</sup> Aristotle. *Magna Moralia*. I.vi, 1186a6-8. *The Works of Aristotle*. Vol. IX. Transl. George Stock. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966.

modified by repetition, he refers the reader to the facts "that a wand will by use bend otherwise than it grew, and that by the use of voice we speak louder and stronger, and that by the use of enduring heat or cold we endure it better, and the like" (p. 260). Aristotle would not deny what Bacon states, he would even agree. Certain qualities can be modified *via* use, or repetition. Aristotle's argument is, however, about existential, substantial change and not qualitative or quantitative change. While the latter changes can be induced by repetitive practice, substantial change would not be arrived at *via* habituation.

Nevertheless, there is indeed some truth in what Bacon finds negligent in Aristotle. This truth does not, however, lie in his argumentation, but precisely in what misled him. In the *Magna Moralia*, Aristotle is very brief on this topic. He provides only one example as an illustration, and adds "[s]imilarly in all other such cases." Bacon, to make his stance clear, lists other examples believing that they are "such cases." But they are not. Had he consulted the *Ethica Nicomachea*, he would not have misunderstood Aristotle.

Aristotle in the *Ethica Nicomachea* adds one more example to make his point distinct and adds further reasons why virtue is not by nature in human beings. His example consists of two natural phenomena. He claims that

[f]or instance, the stone which by nature moves downwards cannot be habituated to move upwards, not even if one tries to train it by throwing it up ten thousand times; nor can fire be habituated to move downwards, nor can anything else that by nature behaves in one way be trained to behave in another.<sup>3</sup>

The reference to fire makes it clear that what is at stake is not quantitative and qualitative change but an exclusively substantial one, and this change cannot be achieved *via* custom.

To foster his aim, Aristotle refers to what human beings are born with, comparing the ability of sense perception to virtue. Aristotle claims that having virtues and the abilities of seeing and hearing differ considerably. In the case of the abilities, the ability must exist before we may use them. First, I can see, and secondly I can use this ability. The process takes place in a reversed order with virtues. First, I carry out virtuous deeds and then I become virtuous. Certainly, at this point Aristotle is rather vague because he does not explain this latter process in detail, only introduces the idea, and leaves the explanation for a later occasion.

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<sup>3</sup> Aristotle. *Ethica Nicomachea*. II.i.1103a19-23. *The Works of Aristotle*. Vol. IX.

It is important to show that Bacon was using the *Magna Moralia* and not the *Ethica Nicomachea* because this is how Bacon may be rescued from undue criticism. The former treatise is much briefer on certain issues that are discussed in more detail in Aristotle's other ethical works. Thus the misunderstanding on Bacon's part is less serious than it may seem at first sight.

This seemingly insignificant philological remark receives importance, because even such a distinguished scholar as Brian Vickers unconsciously misleads the naive reader on this issue. Vickers, in his otherwise extremely high quality commentary on Bacon's works, claims that Bacon's criticism is directed against the relevant part of the *Ethica Nicomachea*.<sup>4</sup> Vickers's comment is odd, because some pages earlier, when explaining Bacon's Latin quotation of Aristotle, he does not only tell that Bacon's quotation pertains to Aristotle's *Magna Moralia*, but also adds that Bacon quotes from Valla's translation of the work.<sup>5</sup> If Bacon used the *Magna Moralia*, *verbatim*, it would require further explanation why Vickers thinks that the critical remarks on Bacon's part aim at the *Ethica Nicomachea*.<sup>6</sup> In the final analysis, thus, Bacon can only be charged with not using the right book of Aristotle, and not with making inappropriate critical remarks.

Though Bacon's critical remarks are based on a misunderstanding, his recognition of areas that Aristotle did not work out in detail suffices his intention. *The Advancement of Learning* Book II does not aim at revising the whole of human learning but rather at classifying it into eligible and manageable parts and at showing where the present state of a particular field of knowledge needs elaboration. So in this case, he has just shown that there have been attempts on this particular field of knowledge, but there are further steps to be taken. And he is right that Aristotle was extremely brief on certain matters. But it is not only Aristotle's sketchiness that bothers Bacon.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Francis Bacon: A Critical Edition*, p. 658.

<sup>5</sup> *Francis Bacon: A Critical Edition*, p. 656.

<sup>6</sup> Vickers follows the critical tradition, which without exception refers the reader to the *Ethica Nicomachea*. See also Francis Bacon. *The Advancement of Learning*. Ed. Williams Aldis Wright. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900, p. 320; and Francis Bacon. *The Advancement of Learning*. Ed. G.W. Kitchin. London: J.M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1915, p. 173; and the same edition with the Introduction by Arthur Johnston. London: J.M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1973, p. 173; and Jerry Weinberger. *Science, Faith, and Politics. Francis Bacon and the Utopian Roots of the Modern Age. A Commentary on Bacon's Advancement of Learning*. Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1985, p. 290.

## 2.2 The Need for Precepts

Bacon assumes that Aristotle was right in assigning a significant role to custom in ethics, yet the Greek philosopher failed to provide help how to change customs. This charge is to be accepted, but Aristotle is not necessarily to be blamed for being silent on this issue. Aristotle never wanted to provide a practical guidebook on how to behave well. He discussed the notions and principles of ethics on a level more abstract than that of a collection of practical advice. And it is also true that a text may well be completed or further extended into directions the author never intended to. This is, however, precisely what is at stake for Bacon. If there have been acceptable initial steps taken, then there is the obvious necessity to go further.

Thus, the second thematic part lists and explains precepts, axioms for the acquisition and change of customs. Bacon provides four precepts on how one may change one's customs. The first concerns the selection of the tasks to undertake. The second axiom concerns the mental states for carrying out virtuous deeds. The third repeats Aristotle's precept that one should move towards the contrary direction of one's natural inclinations. Finally, the fourth axiom concerns the natural inclination of the mind to avoid constraints and necessity.

The claim that Aristotle does not give enough practical advice further corroborates the belief that Bacon was using the *Magna Moralia* and not the *Ethica Nicomachea*. In the latter, Aristotle lists precisely four pieces of advice how to hit the mean,<sup>7</sup> but none of them speaks directly about natural inclinations. Natural inclinations, however, do appear both in the *Magna Moralia* and in the *Ethica Nicomachea* in a different context, when discussing which extreme is more contrary to the mean.<sup>8</sup> Bacon may have used these considerations as moral precepts. Nevertheless, the statement in the *Ethica Nicomachea* seems less a precept, as there are *bona fide* precepts following it. This evidence indirectly confirms the hypothesis that Bacon was using the *Magna Moralia*.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Aristotle. *Ethica Nicomachea*, II.ix.3–6, 1109a30–1109b13

<sup>8</sup> The *Ethica Nicomachea* reads as follows: "[...] for the things to which we ourselves more naturally tend seem more contrary to the intermediate" (II.viii.8, 1109a13–14). The *Magna Moralia* similarly states that "[...] those things are more opposed to the mean to which we have a greater natural inclination" (I.ix.4, 1186b25–33).

### 2.3 The Need for Education

The practical part is followed by a concluding section in the *Advancement of Learning*, which forms the third part of the discussion. After having assured the reader that it is possible to continue the list of precepts, Bacon claims that if the acquisition of customs is inevitable, then one should not allow mere chance to govern the appropriation. On the contrary, it should be conducted on purpose, to aim at virtue

#### 3 FROM THE ADVANCEMENT OF LEARNING TO THE ESSAYS

The treatment of custom in *The Advancement of Learning* anticipates the later essay "Of Custom and Education" in three respects. Firstly, the idea that custom may change certain qualities of inanimate objects points toward the image which identifies men with lifeless statues and machines. In *The Advancement of Learning* inanimate objects serve as an opportunity to criticise Aristotle, whereas in the mature essay inanimate objects turn into images standing for men and asserting the overwhelming power of custom. Secondly, the two treatments claim that customs are not only given, but that they are acquired. Thirdly, as a consequence, it is also claimed that it is possible to consciously direct the process of acquisition. In other words, it is implied that there is an element of moral responsibility in the selection of customs. The responsibility is assigned to the individual in *The Advancement of Learning*, whereas it is placed upon institutions in "Of Custom and Education."

The shift of orientation seems obvious if we consider what happened to the treatment of custom that appeared in *The Advancement of Learning*. Firstly, Aristotle does not surface in any versions of the essay discussing custom. The precepts, or axioms, are deemed important because they do not disappear altogether, but are located in the essay entitled "Of Nature in Men." The latter essay precedes "Of Custom and Education" in all versions, i.e. the manuscript for the 1612 edition of the essays, the version published in 1612, and the revised edition that came from the press in 1625.<sup>9</sup> What are kept from *The Advancement of Learning*

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<sup>9</sup> In the manuscript version, numbers 30, 31 (in No. 5106 of the Harleian manuscripts in the British Museum, referred to in *The Works of Francis Bacon*. Ed. J. Spedding, R.L. Ellis, D.D. Heath. Vol. 6: *Literary and Professional Works*. London: Longman, Green, Longman and Roberts, 1878, p. 536, and

in "Of Custom and Education" are the ideas of acquisition and moral responsibility with, however, a sharper edge in a different context.

4 "OF CUSTOM AND EDUCATION"

4.1 Different Editions of the Essay<sup>10</sup>

To show the historical change of interest and orientation, the analysis of the final version of the essay will suffice. It will be satisfactory, because on the one hand the manuscript version and the one published in 1612 are seemingly identical. And, on the other hand, the differences between the versions published in 1612 and 1625 are only emphatic, not thematic and can be classified under two headings: style and illustration.<sup>11</sup> The first type is stylistic:

1612	1625
This wee call Education: which is <u>nothing else but</u> an early custome... (p. 73)	This we call education; which is, <u>in effect, but</u> an early custom... (p. 419)
but doe not mende the seeds... (p. 73)	but do not <u>much</u> mend the seeds... (p. 420)
the force of custom copulate & conioind, <u>and in troupe</u> , is far greater... (p. 73)	the force of custom copulate & conjoined <u>and collegiate</u> is far greater... (p. 419)

The first two instances aim at taking the edge of expressions away: instead of saying the emphatic "nothing else but," in 1625 Bacon only states "in effect, but..." Or instead of "doe not mende" without qualification he writes "do not much mend." The third stylistic difference lies in making the flow of the sentence smoother, the rhetorical character more refined. The list of adjectives becomes

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in A. Wigfall Green. *Sir Francis Bacon*. New York: Twayne Publishers Inc., 1966, p. 78); when first published in 1612 numbers 26, 27; in the version of the 1625 edition: numbers 38, 39.

<sup>10</sup> The 1612 version of the essay "Of Custom and Education" can be found in *The Works of Francis Bacon*. Ed. J. Spedding, R.L. Ellis, D.D. Heath. Vol. 6: *Literary and Professional Works*. London: Longman, Green, Longman and Roberts, 1878, p. 73 (from now on "Of Custom and Education" [1612]). The 1625 version of the essay "Of Custom and Education" can be found in *Francis Bacon: A Critical Edition*, pp. 418-20 (from now on "Of Custom and Education" [1625]).

<sup>11</sup> To easily envision the differences between the different editions consult Edward Arber, *The Harmony of the Essays, etc. Of Francis Bacon*. Westminster: A. Constable and Co., 1895, pp. 366-373 though he is not sensitive to stylistic changes.

broken with a phrase: “and in troupe” in the 1612 version. This clumsiness is avoided in the later edition, where the phrase is substituted by an adjective with the same meaning.

The second type of difference lies in illustration.<sup>12</sup> A complete unit of seven sentences appeared in the version of 1625 to exemplify “the reign or tyranny” or “the force of custom” (p. 419) with five strange instances. Furthermore, the version of 1612 was supplemented by an illustration to demonstrate that it is easier to acquire customs at a younger age than later. Besides these stylistic and illustrative changes, the two versions are identical. Thus it will serve our purpose to examine only the last variant.

## 4.2 “Custom” in the Edition of 1625

The essay entitled “Of Custom and Education” has a symmetrical well-balanced structure. Though Wigfall Green is right in stating that the “impressive opening, smooth transition, and climactic end impress the reader of the essays,”<sup>13</sup> this particular essay has two thematic divisions. The first structural unit discusses the function and overwhelming power of custom in a pessimistic, anthropological image. The second half presents custom in another light, dealing with the forms of acquisition of customs from an institutional point of view.

### 4.2.1 *The Power of Custom*

The first structural unit of the essay can be further divided into two parts. The first half provides the “impressive opening” establishing the anthropological aspect of the discussion. The second half of the first division furnishes particular examples. The unity of the first part is reached through the strict central idea, or image, proposing that men’s actions are lead exclusively by custom.

The opening unit locates “custom” among other psychological factors of human life, and makes this initial idea impressive through the use of rhetoric rather than a logical inference, contrast and variation, and parallelism. The very first two sentences pretend to offer a logical inference, providing statements connected with commas, and laying emphasis on the idea that men’s “deeds are

<sup>12</sup> Vickers demonstrates that the extension of the essays of 1612 was a characteristic way of developing the essays in his *Francis Bacon and Renaissance Prose*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968, p. 218. Extensions most of the time point towards “concrete reference to either natural or human situations” (p. 227).

<sup>13</sup> A. Wigfall Green, p. 85.

after as they have been accustomed" through starting the latter clause with a "but." After the seeming premises, a conclusion is introduced with a "therefore." I think, however, that Lisa Jardine's observation, pondering about the opening of another essay, is true for this one as well: "the progression is not reasoned but suggested."<sup>14</sup> The sequence is not reasoned, or logical, because the pretended conclusion merely restates the divisions introduced in the preceding statements with a reference to an authority, namely Machiavelli. The divisions introduced in the first sentence are the following. Men's activities are divided into three fields: mental activity ("thoughts"), verbal activity ("discourse and speeches" or "words"), and physical activity ("deeds"). The different types of activities have diverse psychological movers. Mental activity is led by "inclination" or "nature," verbal activity by "learning and infused opinions" and physical activity by "custom."

To be convincing, Bacon restates, from different angles, the difference between thoughts and words on the one hand, and deeds on the other throughout the rest of the first structural unit. The second sentence recapitulates the idea with a reference to an authority, namely Machiavelli. The third sentence illustrates the thesis with Machiavelli's example. The fourth sentence lists counter examples and then reiterates the thesis through asserting that the counter examples do not refute the thesis, but are only exceptions. The fifth sentence recaptures the initial thought by naming the opposing opinion as "superstition." The last sentence rephrases the thesis once again, and asserts finally "the predominance of custom" over human physical activity. A fine pattern of variation, repetition and contrast adds to the emotional load and the implicit moral judgement:<sup>15</sup> "to hear men profess, protest, engage, give great words, and then do just as they have done before" (p. 419).

Men's physical activity is represented as irrational, or at least unreflected on two layers. The first layer is notional. Once physical activity, i.e. deeds, are distinguished from mental activity (thoughts) and from verbal activity (words), and custom is differentiated from nature and learning, then deeds and custom cannot be related to reflection, or reason. The irrational, unreflected quality of physical action and custom is made emphatic through the imagery of the text, which is the second layer. If human action is bereft of thought and language, it is

<sup>14</sup> Lisa Jardine. *Francis Bacon: Discovery and the Art of Discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974, p. 228.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Brian Vickers. *Francis Bacon and Renaissance Prose*, pp. 139-140.

natural to depict men as “dead images, and engines moved only by the wheels of custom” (p. 419).

The overwhelming power of custom can also be extended to intellectual life, as Bacon notes in *The Advancement of Learning*. When listing and refuting the charges brought against learning by politicians, he at one point relates custom to blind obedience. The charge that “learning should undermine the reverence of laws and government” is refuted not with a logical inference, but with a seductive analogy taking away the credit of the thesis:

to say that a blind custom of obedience should be a surer obligation than duty taught and understood, it is to affirm that a blind man may tread surer by a guide than a seeing man by a light.

(p. 130)

Seeing and blindness as images of intellectual activity are opposed to each other to strengthen Bacon’s point. The man having the ability to see knows what he has to do, what kind of relationship he should have with laws and government, for he sees the significance of factors and thus can weigh things properly. In contrast with him, however, the blind man, who has just been tamed, cannot see through appearances, and does not know why he does things like this or that. This type of blindness qualifies custom in the adjectival phrase, casting light on the authority of custom from another angle than that of the essay itself.

The predominance of custom in human activity is further substantiated in the second structural unit of the first major division of the essay “Of Custom and Education,” with a collection of *exempla*. Custom does not only dominate human physical activity: at the same time one can also speak of the “reign and tyranny of custom” (p. 419). Custom appears here as a sovereign who, through various rituals, can give or take away life without the obligation to give reasons for the same. We read about Indians sacrificing themselves by fire, wives striving “to be burned with the corpses of their husbands” (p. 419), about Spartan youngsters whipping themselves at the altar of Diana, about Russian monks as a penitence spending the night in a vessel of water, which becomes frozen by the morning. But not only rituals of remote countries and ancient times are referred to, but a contemporary event is recalled as well. It was not all the same for an Irish rebel what kind of rope was to be used to hang him, because rebels had been hanged with one type of rope and not with another.

It is significant in the *exempla* that they are all about physical suffering in political or religious contexts. This is important, because it is not necessary to use suffering to illustrate the force of "custom." In Montaigne's essay "Of Custome, and How a Received Law Should Not Easily Be Changed"<sup>16</sup> the majority of the examples to demonstrate the power of custom have nothing to do with suffering. In the Henkel-Schöne collection of emblems the two emblems that are concerned with custom are not preoccupied with anguish to communicate the might of custom.<sup>17</sup> The significance of the painful side of custom may lie in the fact that the reference to suffering makes the power of custom more tangible and impressive.

#### 4.2.2 *The Institutional Perspective*

We have seen so far the dominance of custom over human deeds. It has also been suggested that custom is a sovereign, even a tyrant, who demands an unreflected obedience from its subjects even in matters of life and death. If, however, this is true, then "let men by all means endeavour to obtain good customs" (p. 419). This idea forms the turning point of the essay, introducing its second structural unit.

Similarly to the first thematic part, the second is also divided into two halves according to the when and how of the learning of customs. The first half ponders about whether the appropriation of customs should be started at an early age or later. The answer is that "custom is most perfect when it beginneth in young years" (p. 419). The thesis is substantiated through two sentences of demonstration. The first example suggests that the bodily organs are more flexible at a younger age. The second example claims that learning is more difficult at an older age, and although there are counter examples, these are very rare. This unit consists of unreasoned, rhetorical corroboration as well as counter examples, similarly to the opening unit of the essay. This provides a symmetrical structure

<sup>16</sup> Montaigne, Michel de Eyquen. *Essays*. Vol. I. Trans. John Florio, introd. and ed. L. C. Harmer. London: Everyman's Library, 1965, pp. 105-123.

<sup>17</sup> *Emblemata, Handbuch zur Sinnbildkunst des XVI. und XVII. Jahrhunderts*. Herausgegeben von Arthur Henkel und Albrecht Schöne. Stuttgart: J.B. Metzlesche Verlagbuchshandlung, 1978. The two emblems are from Dionysius Lebeus-Batillius. *Dionysii Lebei-Batillii Regii Mediomatricum Praesidis Emblemata* (1546) Nr. 40 "Gravissimum Imperium Consuetudinis" (p. 755) and the other is in Sambucus Joannes, *Emblemata, et ALIQVOT NVMMI ANTIQVI OPERIS*. Antwerp, 1564, S. 110, "CONSUETUDO PRAUA" (pp. 1321-22). For the influence of Sambucus (Sámboky) in Renaissance England consult László Varga. *Sámboky (Sambucus) János emblémái*. Budapest: Tankönyvkiadó, 1964, p. 221.

for the whole piece. In other words the third part of the essay serves as a second opening for a second discussion.

The second half of the second major division, thus, considers the role of social institutions in the process of the acquisition of customs. The first sentence introduces a partition, i.e. customs may be obtained either individually or in company. The distinction is significant because the latter process is much more efficient. The second sentence confirms the thesis with parallel structures, and restates it. The next sentence reasserts the idea with an emphasis on the role of institutions in making men virtuous, or at least planting the seeds of virtue in men. For morality cannot much be improved by political institutions later, "for commonwealths and governments do nourish virtue grown, but do not much mend the seeds" (p. 420).

The sentence that refers to the role of political institutions has a triple function. It places the discussion into a socio-political context, while the transition is made attractive through the imagery of gardening. The smooth and suggestive shift of context prepares the way for the "climactic close"<sup>18</sup> of the essay.

The individualising, anthropological attitude of the essay has now been placed into a wider context. What is at stake now is not only the individual's virtue but the whole political state. The moral discussion has now been opened to a socio-political perspective in which the individual's virtue is formed first by an educational institution and then by the governing system of the country. The virtues that are planted by the educational institution can be strengthened by the governing system. The seeds, however, can hardly be changed.<sup>19</sup> Seemingly, Bacon, the statesman has brought his preoccupation into the discussion through the new dimension.

The widening of the perspective has been made smoother via the extremely popular gardening imagery mentioned above. Men of letters used gardening imagery for a wide range of purposes in the Renaissance. As Ilva Beretta notes,<sup>20</sup> the garden could stand for "a prelapsarian Eden," for "a false paradise with all the habitual implications of temptation and sin," or for "a garden of love." The physical Renaissance garden supplemented the literary works with "new motifs

<sup>18</sup> I have borrowed the phrase from A. Wigfall Green, p. 85.

<sup>19</sup> Though the wording is more optimistic in the version of 1625 than it was in the earlier variants, still it presupposes the achievements of the educational institutions.

<sup>20</sup> Ilva Beretta. "The World's a Garden." *Garden Poetry of the English Renaissance*. Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, Studia Anglistica Upsaliensia, 84, 1993, p. 12.

such as the garden as a philosophical retreat, the interplay between Art and Nature, and the garden as a reflection of man's spiritual life." For Bacon, the idea that the garden was a philosophical retreat and a reflection of man in plants was especially important.<sup>21</sup> He even assigned an entire essay to the creation of gardens. It is also significant that the garden and gardening were frequently compared to the state and to the governing of the state. The customary analogies fell into three categories according to Peter Ure:<sup>22</sup> 1, when the "elements of disorder in a state" are compared to "weeds;"<sup>23</sup> 2 the analogies of state and garden;<sup>24</sup> 3, "the uses of garden in ceremonies and pageants."<sup>25</sup> Bacon, thus, has made use of a very popular association in his essay "Of Custom and Education." He – intertextually – combined Beretta's and Ure's classification in which the philosophically ideal garden stands for the state or country in his image.

The garden or gardening imagery when considering the active side of the idea of custom is not unique in the Baconian *oeuvre* though. When meditating about travelling in foreign countries in his essay "Of Travel" (pp. 374–376), Bacon claims that "[...] let it appear that he doth not change his country manners for those of foreign parts, but only prick in some flowers of that he hath learned abroad into the customs of his own country" (p. 376). This last piece of advice for those who visit other countries proposes that the traveller should keep his eyes open to acquire only the worthy customs of another country. Some years earlier the same imagery in approximately the same context (travelling and custom) was applied by Bacon.

In a letter to the Earl of Rutland dating from 4<sup>th</sup> Jan 1596, Bacon referred to the similar aspects of custom with the imagery alluding to nature. He claims that "where these active virtues are but budding, they must be ripened by

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Ilva Beretta, pp. 73, 164.

<sup>22</sup> Peter Ure. "The Garden Scene." William Shakespeare. *King Richard II*. The Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare Ed. and Introd. Peter Ure. Cambridge (Mass.), London: Methuen & Harvard University Press, Fifth Edition, 1961, pp. LI–LVII.

<sup>23</sup> Peter Ure, p. LII. He refers the reader to Henry Brinklow. *Complaynt of Roderyck Mors* (1546); Traiano Boccalini. *Advertisements from Parnassus*. Trans. Earl of Monmouth. (1657); Sir Thomas Elyot. *Governour* (1531); Plutarch. "Of Delay in Divine Punishment;" Matthew XIII; Shakespeare. *King Richard II* (III.4.48–52); *King Henry VI* (2, III.1.31–3; 3, II.4.21); furthermore in other historical plays such as *Troublesome Raigne of King John* (1, xiii.90–91) (1590); Peele. *Edward I* (I.2581) (1593); *A Knacke to Know a Knaue* (VI.543) (1592); *The True Tragedy of Richard III* (II.1687–95).

<sup>24</sup> Peter Ure, p. LII. He refers the reader to Thomas Dekker. *The Seven Deadly Sinnes of London* (1606); Shakespeare. *King Henry V* (II.2.36–60), *King Richard II* (III.4).

<sup>25</sup> Peter Ure, p. LV.

clearness of judgement and custom of well-doing" (p. 71). Whereas in the preceding quotation the tenor was custom and the vehicle was the flower, here the metaphor changes. The tenor becomes virtue and the vehicle becomes the future flower. Custom becomes one of the particular means through which the potential flower becomes actual. Within the same letter, the negative aspect of custom is also revealed:

In manners and behaviour, your Lordship must not caught with novelty, which is pleasing to young men; nor infected with custom, which makes us keep our own ill graces, and participate of those we see every day...

(p. 72)

Here custom, instead of being the means of flourishing, is revealed as something that infects and causes destruction. This metaphor becomes even graver if it is recalled that only two years had passed after the plague attacked the Londoners in 1593–1594. The metaphor of decease and destruction is very similar to the ending of the essay "Of Custom and Education."

The function of the easily acceptable shift of context makes the criticism of the contemporary educational institutions sharper. Once the perspective has been opened to the state, the failure of the schools to teach morality is more striking. "But the misery is, that the most effectual means are now applied to the ends least to be desired" (p. 420). If only the individual's virtue had been at stake, the failure of educational institutions would have remained a personal problem, but here the inadequacy has much larger consequences.

The "climactic" end is, however, not the end of the meditation. Scholars agree that though Bacon's moral standpoint was made extremely clear and firm in his essays on morality, yet he did not make explicit what man ought to do.<sup>26</sup> He only identifies and analyses the problems, but does not provide an explicit solution to them. He leaves the readers free to decide for themselves. This freedom is not absolute though, as at least the direction into which steps are to be taken is encoded in the analyses. The reader has been convinced that the deeds of men are according to their customs. He is also persuaded that the educational institutions have a major

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<sup>26</sup> Though the similar conclusions are arrived through different premises, consult A. Wigfall Green, p. 85; Lisa Jardine, p. 244; Ann E. Imbrie. "Defining Nonfiction Genres." *Renaissance Genres: Essays on Theory, History, and Interpretation*. Ed. Barbara Kiefer Lewalski. Cambridge (Mass.), London: Harvard University Press, 1986, 45–69, p. 67.

role in the formation of those customs. Furthermore, he understands that if the present state of these institutions is not sufficient, then he can hardly go on sending his children to those schools without trying to do something about changing the institutions somehow. This freedom is similar to the one that one has, when one wants to cross the road, and listens to someone who assures him that the colour of the traffic light is red, and that traffic is heavy on the road. Certainly, he can cross the road, but actually few people would do so.

Nevertheless, it is true that Bacon does not specify what should be done. Not doing so, he has become very similar to Aristotle who he criticised in *The Advancement of Learning*. Bacon blamed Aristotle there, for not having provided enough number of precepts. And now some twenty years later, he acts in accordance with Aristotle in this respect. There can be at least two reasons why Bacon denied his earlier convictions.

The first reason for not relating precepts or particular directions in the essay lies in the generic determination of the essay itself. The essays of Bacon are of approximately the same size. This size – two or three pages – cannot be exceeded once one is as conscious of structure as Bacon is. To maintain lucid structural symmetry, the elegant analysis of a problem, and preparing for a striking ending excludes the possibility of composing longer essays than two or three pages. But to relate precepts he would have been compelled to exceed this size, and, consequently, the structural advantages of his essay, but especially the elegant and shocking ending would have been damaged. Without the well-prepared shock at the end, the essay loses being effective. Bacon, however, is aiming at effect and not at exhausting the reader with long meditations.

The second reason for being silent about specific moral instruction lies in the difference between general ideas and particular pieces of advice. One can imply general directions without having to define the goal of human behaviour. If, however, one sets out particular precepts, one should be able to define the goal of human activity first in terms of general ideas, e.g. defining what the good is for everybody. But this could not have been done in the culturally and socially fragmented late Renaissance England. Once there can be no agreement on what the general goal would be, then particular precepts cannot be provided either. The precepts are to be modified according to the particular needs, interests, and moral stances of the particular institutions. So the author, having shown the general defects of educational institutions, passes on the responsibility to the readers and especially to those who are in a position to effect changes in institutions.

## 5 CONCLUSION

So far we have accounted for how the change of perspective took place and shape in Bacon's writings. First we have seen how he started to meditate upon custom in his embryonic essay in *The Advancement of Learning*. Then it has also been shown how he treated the same topic in his "Of Custom and Education" some twenty years later.

It has been shown that Bacon makes room for a new perspective for the discussion of custom with a contextual shift, from the humanist, who develops Aristotle's ideas, to the statesman. His starting point is similar to that of the sceptic. Reason does not give light in practical matters, as the only thing that directs people at the moment of action is nothing else but custom. Once one has understood the power of custom upon human deeds, one should also accept that forming the right customs is of great importance. The most enduring and effective formation of customs is to take place in educational institutions. The results of education are later on to be strengthened by the whole of the social structure.

The sceptical problem concerning the role of reason in action is solved here through a distinction between the moment of action and the preparation for action. Reason is unable to help at the moment of action, because custom overrides its force, so we should forget about every form of ethical intellectualism. Reason has no place in guiding action on the spur of the moment of the action itself. But this does not necessarily mean that reason should absolutely be banished from the territory of action. The task of reason is to prepare the conditions under which good customs can be formed. This is the task of politicians, leaders of institutions, i.e. of those who are in a position to make decisions that affect the whole of society. So reason does have a place in practical matters, not in its actuality, but in the phase of preparation. When there is time to think and ponder about the right way of behaviour, it must be used well.

Thus, we have seen the method of the ethical discussion of the idea of custom. The method of presentation consists in setting into motion the different faces, notions of custom, and the contexts for the discussion. Both the angelic and the monster faces of custom have been depicted. We have also encountered the different notions of custom, namely when it is deemed to be something given, and when it has a significant role in the acquisition of virtues. Furthermore, both the individual, anthropological and the socio-politico-institutional contexts have been elucidated. It is precisely the concise unity of the motion of these factors that makes Bacon's writing fruitful and still valid.

If it is still valid, then there is one more question that we have to ask. If the essay is to identify and analyse a problem so as to direct the readers' thoughts, then it is in harmony with the essay itself to end the present analysis with a question. Are the most effectual means applied now to the ends most or least to be desired in educational institutions?