From Custom to Freedom, and Back Again

Zsolt Almási, *The Problematics of Custom as Exemplified in Key Texts of the Late English Renaissance*, with an Introduction by Péter Dávidházi (Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2004)

Zsolt Almási tackles an occasionally marginalized discourse of late English Renaissance thinking. His book is an attempt to reconstruct a subtle, but coherent narrative in which John Wilkinson, Michel de Montaigne, Francis Bacon, and William Shakespeare, caught between a stormy political and religious background and the demands of an increasingly pragmatic and individualistic society, cooperate to develop a genuine answer to the problems concerning custom and freedom. They aim to harness the formidable power of habituation, being fully aware "that what is at stake here is nothing else but the formation, or reformation, of the whole psychological construction of the inner self" (53). And indeed, some of their more important results, ideas and unresolved dilemmas played an important part in establishing the theoretical foundations, sometimes the very language of the epistemology and social lore to come.

But what does this so-called 'problem of custom' consist of? Almási's part historical, part conceptual reconstruction formulates it as a neat double bind:

1. Contemporaries regarded the nature of custom with deeply rooted suspicion, here unfolded from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, where it is marked both as a "monster," then an "angel," due to the overwhelming influence custom is capable to exert on human behaviour. It can be employed to develop a proper virtuous character, but has the uncanny potential to deceive "the mind's eye so that it will not be able to discern right or wrong. Once one has acquired the custom of acting viciously, he or she will not be able to see the very behaviour as vicious" (1–2). Custom not only interposes itself between virtue and reason, it might even wrestle the prerogative from the latter unnoticed. If it is so, reason and custom become indiscernible motivators of action. Consequently, not only the exact nature of moral common grounds, but even their existence is called into question, including the very legitimacy of any authority to define, pass on, and enforce them.

2. To a more historically inclined eye, the origins of the problem are to be traced back to the Greek *polis*. For Aristotle, "it is the social structure that makes it possible to speak about and to practise virtue" (13). Neither virtuous

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action, nor moral education could properly be conceived in terms of the individual, as both presuppose an active and unmediated master-disciple relationship, which aims at internalizing the tutor's moral authority into the student's character. Instead of initiating a critical analysis of moral notions and precepts, Aristotle's ethics plays an 'auxiliary' role, providing a justified and systematic account to help his more philosophically inclined audience coming on rational terms with the customs of Athens (so as to become accomplished tutors themselves later on). By the 16th century this form of education practically disappeared, and Almási properly points out that "[t]he entire responsibility of moral advancement cannot be anchored in the dead letters of the book" (66). But a reader who eventually chooses to seek the guidance of letters obviously does so because of the absence of a tacit consensus on values and precepts. The uncertain moral situation calls for the same institution whose disappearance let that uncertainty loose.

Therefore, acquisition of virtue as socialization has to give way to an approach which lays more stress on the mental faculties actively involved in making moral decisions. In contrast with Aristotle, whose "anthropological image represents man as a complex human being, whose whole inner self, with its pleasures and pains, is involved in the theory of right behaviour, and not only his intellect" (53), late Renaissance focuses on the role of reason. But reason is not to be trusted too eagerly anymore, being liable to be subtly influenced, even silently taken over by what it is expected to regulate.

Following the reconstruction of the dilemma, Almási's case studies explain how Wilkinson, Montaigne, and Bacon attempted and eventually failed to find a satisfactory solution. The last chapter, an inspired interpretation of *Hamlet*, "aims at saving everything that has been gained by the previous analyses and at reintroducing reason into the scheme by challenging the presupposed 'continuity' via emphasizing the multi-dimensionality of 'time.' This way the meditation finds a resting point in reconciling 'custom' and 'human freedom' " (4). Below I try to summarize what I see as the main line of argumentation.

As the triad of reason, custom, and 'proper behaviour' had been handed down along the Aristotelian moral tradition, Almási presents his authors' complex attitude towards the Philosopher in meticulous detail, as in the chapter on John Wilkinson's *The Ethiques of Aristotle, that is to saye, preceptes of good behauoure and perfighte honestie, now newly translated into English* (1547), which served as the first complete publication of Aristotelian ethics in vernacular English, and became an influential reading in contemporary moral science. Influenced by a more pragmatic approach to books, reading, and learning, Wilkinson "reshaped Aristotle's continuous meditation into a collection of essays for the interest of the Renaissance English reader" (23), somewhere halfway between a translation and a practical 'handbook' on taking care of one's well-being and character for one's own content. Almási attributes most of the differences to the social transformation resulting in the emergence of a "reading public with less scholastic attitude" (25), an expanding group of readers with a secular upbringing and a more pragmatic approach. For example, the role played by legislators and instructors in the acquisition of virtue was not as important for them than for Aristotle (so Wilkinson abandons these topics), neither are social expectations that much obvious anymore. They are more interested in "how one should feel, how one should act, and that reason is to be applied to find out how one should act" (60). For them, the decisive step towards a proper moral character is to develop a reflection fit to determine the right pattern of behaviour (57). Thus reason becomes prior to 'being good,' and as such, it can motivate towards practically any kinds of goals or actions, immoral ones included. To avoid that, reason has to be determined by the willing habit that stands in the middle—but, unlike Aristotle, Wilkinson can't assert whose (or even what kind of) reason should 'hit the mean.'

The Florio translation (1603) of Montaigne's *Essais*, rooted in a non-Aristotelian sceptic tradition, attempts to short-circuit the question concerning 'whose rationality' by challenging the authority of reason head-on. "Custom belongs to the past, whereas reason to the future. It is reason that follows custom and not the other way round" (80). All prerogative is to be given to custom, which plays the determining role anyway: it channels most layers of the human mind and behaviour, and thus it structures social order. Reason's role is merely to justify and rationalize—therefore its critical potential is null, as it has to presuppose that what it elaborates on is *a priori* right. This positive concept of custom emerges from Montaigne's distrust of change triggered by speculation, and his conviction that adherence to received views and institutions is a promising guarantee for social peace. He does not hesitate to revive the antique authority of the moral instructor, and bestows it on custom itself. Note that he evades the difficulty which forced Wilkinson to omit this element, as there is no need to construct or adopt a paradigmatic character, "because his Pyrrhonian scepticism projects an ideal who does not differ phenomenally from the one who is not the ideal" (97). Therefore, the two chief aims of moral education concern discouraging violent behaviour at a young age, and encouraging political participation (in a narrow, conservative modality). A person who adopts and acts upon both completely fulfils all moral requirements—what he thinks, is of no one's concern. Montaigne thus proposes a strong distinction between a secret subjective and a public conformist self, as "[i]nner freedom and the acceptance of the received social and religious norms are more peaceful and thus more like truth than the unconscious narcissistic and egocentric truth of the competing ideologies" (88). However, his efforts fail exactly at this point. Although Montaigne keeps such a strong focus on stability that he eagerly reduces the four traditional moral maxims of antique scepticism to this single one, any model society (not to mention historical ones) *can* be packed with conflicting values and interests. So what shall one do when confronted with multiple customs equally contributing to peace, but incompatible with each other? At this point referring back to intellect seems inevitable. "By bringing back the idea of the criterion, i.e. social peace, Montaigne implicitly has brought back reason through the back door" (97).

This shift of focus from the sceptical to the institutional perspective is exactly what characterizes Bacon's approach, arriving at the conclusion that "custom is a sovereign, even a tyrant, who demands an unreflected obedience from its subjects even in matters of life and death" (112). However, Bacon does not plan to give away such power as unconditionally as Montaigne intended. Criticism and reform of received structures is not a taboo, but the privilege of a select few and 'their rationality.' Almási locates the first phase of Bacon's proposal in the *Advancement of Learning* (1605), consisting of a critical reevaluation of Aristotle, who "was right in assigning a significant role to custom in ethics, yet the Greek philosopher failed to provide help as how to change customs" (104). Almási highlights fairly the same sources of discontent concerning antique theory as he did in Wilkinson—namely, that radically changed historical circumstances, paired with the lack of tangible precepts, make a straight application of Aristotelian doctrine almost impossible (both of these can be traced back to the fall of the *polis*). Rather, if acquisition is a process that can be guided and directed, more efficiently in communities than in solitary individuals, the focus glides to the responsibility of the society concerning the education of its subordinates (in contrast with Montaigne, who tends to emphasize the responsibility of the *citizens*). "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" (114). However, Almási is not convinced by Bacon, and points out that not even political leaders are protected from the 'mind-bending' influence of custom. The moment of choice is still obscure and hazardous, although intellect might play a solid part during the preparatory phase.

The final chapter on *Hamlet* aims to elaborate this temporal gap further. After a short excursion touching on Ricouer and Heidegger, Almási develops an interpretation generally structuralist in approach. He defines the play's four layers of time and temporality: *Social* time is rooted in the cultural milieu surrounding Shakespeare, and is presented as the time measured by the routines of everyday work and the ravages of war, while *theatrical* rendering is the way the timeline of the narrative is structured. *Personal attitudes* of the characters serve to complicate matters further. Horatio, the impersonated, yet 'achronological' narrator just cannot synchronize with the pace and time of Elsinore. A more apt attitude exhibited by Claudius, Polonius, and Hamlet himself is to 'manipulate temporal events.' Here I would translate Almási's examples: these characters are actively involved in plotting, plain dealing, preparing political manoeuvres, even spreading propaganda. Hamlet who has returned from his sea-journey alive (which Almási interprets as a near-death experience) develops a completely different relationship with temporality. From there on he lives in a "time which is not used as the possibilities of the past, which is not present any longer, or of the future, which is not yet here, and of the present, which is infinitesimally small. . . . This is the present of the privation of the horizontal extension" (159). The fourth layer, *'alternative' time* collects intricate inferences both to the present and near future of Shakespeare, his actors, and his audience, also to mythical (Hercules), biblical (Adam, Cain), and historical figures (Julius Caesar). After developing this intricate framework, Almási concludes that the problem of freedom can be reconciled by realizing that multiple descriptions can be applied to a situation, and claims that making this decision is ultimately a matter of which 'time' one chooses. "Once the description is finished, there is no time to think, the description itself will result in action. The cognitive element and the image of the human machine, thus, have been reconciled" (183–184). It seems that Almási commits the very same mistake he found in his authors: he 'smuggles back' reason into the scheme. But he claims that this is a *different* use of reason, not the one "that tries to find out truth. This is the almost unconscious description of the situation without explicit evaluation. This type of use of the mental faculty does not so much direct action, but rather makes it possible" (184).

My critical questions chiefly stem from my being quite puzzled by the suggestion that the problems raised by the Philosopher would have been solved by the Playwright. I had the feeling that Almási's work contains two loosely connected narratives: a scholarly reconstruction of an important episode of custom theories, and one consisting of somewhat sporadic remarks and a highly speculative conclusion about a concept of freedom—even if Péter Dávidházi's introduction identifies this latter one as the *leitmotif* (x). Indeed, most chapters *do* refer to the problematics of freedom. Though Almási carefully demonstrates that "morally valuable acts originating from custom do not denote mechanical and mindless acts either in Aristotle's or Wilkinson's books" (3), I miss a vivid background (either drawn from contemporary debates, or recent commentaries) against which his arguments could work effectively. This might be one of the reasons why these remarks seem to remain isolated. Even Montaigne is contrasted only with antique sceptics to demonstrate his views' non-deterministic character. Concerning Bacon and freedom, even the final conclusion is phrased *contra* his "description of man as a human automaton moved by custom in his actions" (121). I have the feeling that this "metaphor that represents man as a machine" (119) is stretched too far, one-sidedly overemphasizing a single aspect of an ambiguous concept. I only refer to the two ways he portrays man in *Novum Organum*: on the one hand, as an absolute victim of *idola*, with few, if any theoretical or methodological loopholes at his disposal; on the other, the conclusion is ripe with a sense of overcoming, supported by an infinite hope in human technology and ambition—thus, both slave and master of natures human and physical, fairly at the same time, but eventually with a promise of freedom. However, Almási neglects both these ambiguities and the pioneering role Bacon played in the characteristically British tradition of attributing philosophical errors to various kinds of bad habit formation.

Also, it is generally agreed upon that "the philosophical debates of determinism versus freedom, or . . . the theological controversies about predestination versus free will" (4) had been conducted by a different set of authors of the Renaissance. Therefore, when discussing his methodology, Almási admits he does not attempt to write a traditional historical narrative, so—aside from a vague historical linearity—he places the main stress on the logical succession of problems and the schemes provided as solutions, and on his "objective . . . to study the texts phenomenologically, that is, the ways the text appeared and represented itself on the basis of expectations generated by other texts" (6). However, this approach would have required a more solid historical backbone, for example the analysis of a lot more contemporary sources. In the absence of these, his thread stretches a bit thin, and I sometimes had the feeling that Almási uses somewhat arbitrary expectations to fill some gaps. Although it is a common practice to refer to contemporary social context in such cases, and I found many of these instances the most inspiring and informative parts of his book, at times his references fail to connect. If Wilkinson's book is a translation of Bruno Latini's excerpt, and not of Aristotle's manuscripts, Almási's decision that "even if the modifications to the Greek original were introduced by Latini, I will attribute these changes to Wilkinson, as . . . this meditation focuses on the ways certain texts established their meaning in the very context they were produced in" (21) seems somewhat contradictory, as he explains most of the differences referring to the English, and not the Italian context, and these explanations make up a considerable part of his interpretation. Here I really missed a comparison of Latini with both Wilkinson and Aristotle.

To conclude, Almási's study is a genuine and inspiring contribution to the history of English Renaissance. What it lacks in coherence of argumentation is more than made up for by the theoretical and historical investigations in the case studies, as well as the intriguing interpretations concerning the functions and representations of 'custom' back then.

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