

# An scholarly analysis of a scholar's analysis



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Every day we encounter bodies of text. Whether it be in articles in the daily newspaper or updated blogs from our favorite person on the internet we are surrounded by words and sentences. With each body of text we grow and broaden our capacity of thinking. Things are written with purpose and when we read them we gain the perspective of what has been bothering the author. But the question is, how do we take what we read and use it to come out of it a more knowledgeable and learned person? It is not enough to merely read what is presented before us and accept it as fact for that is too passive and doesn't require any participation of the reader. Neither can we simply refute every argument that the author has the say, for that is a quality of an arrogant fool. So what do we do?

In Francis Bacon's "Of Studies", Bacon broaches this very topic of how a scholar becomes a scholar by the way he reads. He explores the paradox of approaching a piece of text and eloquently states "read not to contradict and confute, nor to believe and take for granted, [...] but to weigh and consider" (Bacon 9). He believes that to truly grow from a piece of literature is to take it apart and project our own perspectives unto it. To get the most out of studies of writing requires an active role by the reader. We ourselves must not only question and qualify pieces of the text we read, but also reflect. The way to maximize the potential we can glean off a piece of writing is not just through an assertive reading, which questions each character, nor a passive reading, which takes in all without bias, but an active conscious reading that requires not just the readers input of opinions nor an output of the authors explorations but a conversation between the two. Only in this way can we avoid the common follies in where "to spend too much time in

studies is sloth; to use them too much for ornament is affectation; to make judgment wholly by their rules is the humor of a scholar” (9). Bacon here shows what becomes of people who fail to heed his advice on the way to read and work (with studies). Those who fail to reflect on what they’re reading and pass them through a sieve of their own consciousness and sift out valuable insights will not only fail to become scholars but become something even shallower: a sloth, a person of affectation, the end of a joke.

However, following Bacon’s teachings is a statement that is much easier said than done. It is easy to warn someone not to fall into a trap, but actually avoiding the trap itself is a much more complicated task; the reason it is a trap is due to the deceptive ease with which it can be fallen into. So how does one traverse the booby-trap laden fields of literary information and sidestep the things Bacon warns of? How do we find the balance between a reader intensive-reading and an author-dominating reading, and start a productive conversation between the two? And how can we prevent ourselves from falling into either side of this problem?

In Adam Gopnik’s “The Corrections”, Gopnik puts into review abridgements of various novels. The novels Gopnik reviews are critically acclaimed pieces of literature that are thought to be unanimously approved classics. These texts transcend the field of literature and are thought of more as a paradigm of artistic perfection. Despite this fact, Gopnik almost criticizes the writers of these universal stories critiquing them for being at times “not merely digressive but ‘sentimental’” in certain passages of the story (Gopnik 563). He laments the writers of prominent novels such as “Moby Dick” for having portions of the story where the author is going on “philosophical

meanderings” with moments of “ metaphysical huffing and puffing” (561). Gopnik doesn't simply accept the greatness that others have proclaimed and does not go along with the depths the authors of these novels try to explore in the margins of their stories but rather questions their relevance to the story. Although he does stray away from the danger of “[believing] and [taking] for granted” that Bacon forebodes of, he does seem to fall prey to the naiveté of “[reading] to contradict and confute” as many of his criticisms can seem arrogant (Bacon 9). His support for abridgments that tell the plot and avoid the “ too much digression and extraneous learning” which he finds unfavorable might show a temperament that refuses to acknowledge the other side but stick the problems that he seems to find. His disposition to contradict and confute the texts he reads might put him in a position where he is not learning from what he is reading but simply affirming what he already holds to be true.

However, Gopnik eventually comes around and switches positions with the author and tries to realize the reasons behind the author's “ little jokes and warm asides” (Gopnik 563). He realizes that these things are what make these pieces of literature unique. The personality of the text reflects that of the author and he sees the positive in what he initially held as a detractor from the novel. He views what he saw as an author's “ fussing over [the] shoulders” and the constant “ commenting on [the] behaviors” of the characters as maybe a humanizing trait. He thinks for a minute and reflects that maybe this gripe he initially held with the text is in fact a parallel to “ the way we do with real people who obsess over us” (563). He takes something that he initially thought hurt the story and tried to see it from

another perspective where the author's wording was an intentional commentary on the way we live our own lives and was successfully able to gain new comprehension. His mature reflection of what the author has to say despite his previous personal bent shows his trial of sifting for the truth and objectivity. Through this he was able to grow and learn that "masterpieces are inherently a little loony" and that is their beauty. He is able to come to the conclusion that the narration isn't everything and a text that is often times "too on the message" detracts from the creativity and strength of the story; it isn't the "transparency of action" but the "self-consciousness of purpose" in where we learn. The experiences of the narrator rather than the trials of the character is what truly resonate with our own philosophies and us to garner new outlooks (567). By reading these "hysterical, half mad masterpieces" we are able to peer into the bizarre minds of the authors of these great works and learn something new ourselves (562).

Although Gopnik is a person that believes in the concision of a text, as shown for his proclivity for an abridged text that cuts to the plot and is free of an author's indulgences, he can also take a moment to appreciate the other side and see its worth and as a result see its greater value, leading to a reassessment of what reading is about. Taking the time to be open-minded and see where the other side is coming from is the way to start the conversation between the writer and reader. But it is also important to be conscious of what we value out of reading as well to make sure that we do not fall to the whim of the writer. Acknowledging the arguments of those who disagree with us while also contending them with our own grievances is the way we can broaden our spectrum of thinking and grow as future scholars.

Gopnik shows us that while our initial reactions to a text is helpless as it is what is instinct to us, taking the moments afterwards to see what we have read and try to give the other side their due credit is how we can avoid narrow-mindedly falling into one of the two sides of the spectrums Bacon has laid out.

## **Works Cited**

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