

## What Treatise Concerning the Content and Method of Study Does Bacon Give in his Essay *Of Study*? (part-2)

[BA (Hons.), Part-2, Paper-IV]

Mr. Subrata Kumar Das  
Head, Dept. of English  
VSJ College, Rajnagar  
[subrata.hcu@gmail.com](mailto:subrata.hcu@gmail.com)

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In fact man can choose from an array of subjects to cultivate 'cunning': history will make him full of facts, poetry will enrich him with wits or ideas, mathematics will make him clear-headed and shrewd, natural philosophy or science will enable him to delve into the matters of the physical world, ethics is there to nourish his morality, and finally logic will give him the ability of ratiocination. But such a wide variety of studies generally tends to be confusing and cumbersome, and it is thus advisable to take the guidance of an experienced man.

In his characteristically aphoristic fashion Bacon draws on the effect of studies on human psychology: 'So every defect of the mind, may have a special receipt'. In fact Bacon goes far ahead of his age when no psychotherapist and physiotherapist existed. Like an experienced psychologist Bacon prescribes study for therapeutic use in curing the deficiencies of the human mind. Mathematics, which sharpens the faculties of the brains, can serve to enhance concentration; the study of the School-men's logic which was famous for hair-splitting distinction in the middle ages can give man the ability to differentiate between

things; and finally, since the lawyers are famous for their memory and contending power, a study of their causes will give one the power to illustrate and prove.

Having thus detailed on the uses and benefits of study, the only thing that Bacon can teach the reader is the method of study. And here, too, he is pithy, objective and pragmatic: ‘Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested’. The Renaissance essayist here foreshadows the modern theorists of language who speak of ‘Skimming’ or searching for specific information from a book, ‘Scanning’ or assimilating the tone, theme and style of a book to the heart, ‘Intensive reading’ and ‘Extensive reading’. To Bacon, too, some books which are important only for some information should be read in parts; those whose themes are valuable should be read curiously; and some books are there which are to be ‘digested’ or read wholly, attentively and into the very detail. Books can also be read in summary. But Bacon has a word of caution: only less important books should be read thus, since summarisation is much like distillation of chemistry which separates the taste-giving minerals and gases from natural water.

It is noteworthy that like Shakespeare Bacon draws his images and analogies from the common run of life. But instead of making the essay an ordinary one they make it weighty and precise. It is undeniable that allusion to such a wide-ranging field of knowledge and Bacon’s learned style make the essay itself an epitome of Bacon’s treatise and worthy to be ‘chewed and digested’.