

Critical Reading: Outcomes (c) – (d), part III

(Slide 1) Previous lectures introduced Critical Reading outcomes (c) and (d), and discussed some of the conventions for how academic texts are constructed. But understanding how a work is organized doesn't mean that a person can make use of that knowledge. There may be an advantage in looking over an experienced reader's shoulder, and seeing how critical reading works in practice.

(Slide 2) We begin by discussing some of the different types of texts that you are likely to encounter during college and afterwards, and considering some of the reasons why books and articles are designed the way that they are. We then look at brief selections of several texts, mostly on the subject of music history, to illustrate how the critical reader may wish to navigate both the main text and the notes and bibliography.

(Slide 3) Books written for an academic audience may seem somewhat imposing, or simply puzzling, to the casual reader, and as a result many college-educated people may tend to avoid them in favor of more user-friendly books. This is a pity, because some content, and also interpretation, that the casual, educated reader may want is only to be found in academic books, and if you find yourself put off by the format or style of writing of academic books, then you simply won't have access to some of the facts, ideas, and opinions that you might want.

(Slide 4) The term "academic book" as it is used in this course refers to books generally written by, and for, professors, graduate students, people working in think tanks or the field of public policy, professionals like doctors and lawyers, and people with advanced degrees. They tend to be published either by presses affiliated with universities (these are called "university presses") or ones that tend to sell their books to university libraries. But the category is a loose one. Academic presses will publish book written by whoever is most knowledgeable about a subject; in some fields this would include amateur scholars, journalists, or chefs. And most university presses try to publish some books that are intended for a wider audience. For instance they often publish books of regional interest and sell them at places like historical sites, arboreta, and state visitors' centers. Or they will publish books that are less "academic" in appearance or writing style, which may be popularizations of more technical works.

(Slide 5) For example, Cambridge University Press published both Michael Cook's monumental book on Islamic ethics, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought*, and also the shorter version (or "epitome"), titled simply *Forbidding Wrong in Islam*. As he describes the former in the latter:

Its seven hundred pages were weighted down with several thousand footnotes and over fifty pages of bibliography. Moreover, the large-scale organization of the material was according to the various sects and schools that make up the Moslem community, not by topic. In short, the monograph was written primarily for specialists. (p. xii)

In contrast, his shorter version had only 171 pages of main text, and for the most part the brief footnotes simply refer readers to the longer work. It has no bibliography. The shorter version, then, is

designed for a general, educated audience by making the text read more linearly and removing the trappings of an academic book. Without knowing sales figures and marketing strategies for the two books, it is hard to know how successful Cambridge University Press has been in getting this good, and short, account of an important topic in the hands of general readers, but we would argue that, had Cook not produced the shorter epitome, college-educated adults who wish to understand something of Islamic ethics should be able to get something of value from the longer work. Some details of the arguments might require a knowledge of Arabic or Persian, or of Islamic history, but a critical reader should not be deterred by the complexity with which the book is printed, and if the general reader came to this book with particular questions, he should be able to get useful answers without too much agony and without having to read every one of the 595 pages of the main text. Of course, the thematic organization of the epitome might make it more appropriate for answering certain sorts of questions, but even then many critical readers may start here, then decide to use the epitome as a sort of detailed index with which to access the larger work, which is organized by school rather than topic.

(Slide 6) To illustrate what separates an academic book from a similar but more popular book, consider two approaches to endnotes. There is a perception among publishers that some readers find footnotes to be intimidating; endnotes are less intimidating than footnotes, but that some readers are even intimidated by the little superscript numbers that indicate that there's an endnote for a particular passage. So some books do away with the superscript numbers but still have endnotes, which you may never find unless you go looking for them. Ted Gioia, for example, is a jazz pianist and music historian whose highest degree is a professional degree, an MBA. He has taught at his alma mater, Stanford, but he is not a traditional academic. His book on *Delta Blues*, published by the popular press W. W. Norton, has endnotes but no indications in the body of the text to alert readers to the notes.

(Slide 7) When discussing the musician Bo Carter, Gioia says:

Although he survived until the beginnings of the blues revival, Bo Carter did not benefit from the career turnarounds experienced by Son House, Skip James, and others. When researcher Paul Oliver tracked Carter down in 1960, he found the down-and-out bluesman living in an “unfinished slum” in Memphis. Four years later, Carter died penniless at the age of seventy-one. [underlining not in original]

The endnote corresponding to this passage reads as follows:

129 When researcher Paul Oliver tracked Carter down: Paul Oliver, *Conversations with the Blues* (New York: Horizon, 1965), p. 19.

Here's how to read this note: 129 is the page to which the note refers; and the words “When researcher Paul Oliver tracked Carter down” are words from the text, so that the reader knows what part of p. 129 the note refers to. The technical term, by the way, for the words quoted from the text, “When researcher Paul Oliver tracked Carter down,” is *lemma*. Because lemma is a Greek word used in English, its plural is *lemmata*. The arrow indicates that the lemma points to the endnote, but there is no

indication in the text to alert the reader to the existence of a note on this passage. Observe that it's not clear how far into the text this note should extend, since the lemma only identifies the first words of the passage. The superscript identifying a note in some texts does the opposite: it marks the end of the passage, so there is some ambiguity where a passage begins.

(Slide 8) So we may wonder whether the fact that Carter died in 1964 at the age of 71 also comes from Oliver? Oliver's book was published in 1965, so it could. Or Gioia could be relying on another source, which he trusts sufficiently that he doesn't see the need to cite it. If, as a reader, this particular detail mattered to you, you'd have to locate Oliver's book to know for sure. And if this fact does not come from Oliver, you might have reason to dispute Gioia's dating of Carter's death. In general Gioia seems to only cite material when he uses quotation marks to set off words that are not his, or refers to a source by name in his text. This doesn't give us reason to think that the dating isn't derived from Oliver, but it doesn't give us reason to think it is. If, as many authors do, Gioia gave sources in his notes for random facts, we could assume that (1) a note of this kind indicates that the author is not willing to take responsibility for the truth of the fact being stated, and (2) when the author doesn't provide a note, it means that he thinks the fact is common knowledge or otherwise reliable.

The reader who wishes to get a feel for what kind of sources an author is using has to do more work in a case like this: if the book had footnotes, critical reading would require less turning of pages, and if endnotes were marked in the text, it would be easy to know when to turn to the back of the book. As it is, the attentive reader needs to either turn to the back every couple of pages and scan the notes for anything interesting, or figure out Gioia's method of citation so as to be able to anticipate endnotes.

(Slide 9) Contrast this with Rob Jovanovic's biography of the British musician Kate Bush, which does not have any foot- or endnotes. Consider this passage, which explains which take of the guitar solo is used at the end of the song "James and the Cold Gun" on the album *The Kick Inside*:

The solo was actually ad-libbed to some extent when Jon Kelly in the mixing room heard something he liked. "I remember that while setting up my guitar sound for the solo, I got a note to feed back to the amplifier," recalls Ian Bairnston. "When we realised that it was the same note Kate ended her vocal, Jon Kelly, shouted, "Go for it. I'll fade you into the track." And that's what happened. (p. 64)

Without notes, we don't know Jovanovic's source. We can't check to make sure he's right, or assess his source independently.

(Slide 10) In the history of music, this is perhaps a minor fact. Even if we set aside the question of who is more important in the history of music, Bo Carter or Kate Bush, some people might think that the date of Carter's death is more important than the origin of particular track that went into a particular song in one of its recorded versions. This would rely on a certain theory of history, according to which encyclopedic information like dates is of primary importance. But philosophers of music rely on evidence like this in developing general theories of aesthetics, so such facts aren't necessarily just of

importance for the obsessive fan. Theodore Gracyk, for example, in his book *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock*, relied largely on interviews with musicians and rock criticism in approaching questions about the ontology of music, such as the question of why a particular recording is an instance of one song and not another. He gives as an example (p. 50) the Booker T. and the MG's hit "Hip Hugger" from 1967. He thinks his CD player "mechanically replicates a performance that occurred thirty years" earlier, and perhaps some of the aesthetic pleasure he derives from listening to this song comes from the immediacy of that experience. But, he then goes on to say, in 1967 the Memphis label Stax/Volt got a four-track machine, and consequently the recording may be of several distinct performances done over a period of days.

In any case, presumably the readers of these books think these facts matter – that's the reason why someone would continue reading this far into a book, after all. Given that the facts matter, their truth also matters, and any reader should care about the reliability of sources. Jovanovic offers a brief, two-page bibliography that only identifies the books he consulted and gives the names of periodicals, fanzines, and online sources that he consulted. There's no way to know what his source is for a particular fact without recreating all his research. And he says in his acknowledgements that he also relied heavily on interviews, which would be impossible for anyone else to recreate.

(Slide 11) Details matter to fans, and it quickly becomes clear by looking at popular books written by people who are not traditional scholars how much the apparatus we typically associate with academic books can actually help the interested reader. Daniel Ekeroth, for example, who played in the Swedish bands Insision, Tyrant, Dellamorte and Diskonto, began his book on Swedish Death Metal with a careful discussion of his use of sources:

The main problem in dealing with a teenage-driven underground phenomenon like death metal is the unreliable sources. . . . So rather than rummaging through metal books I have scoured the massive corpus of fan-made 'zines, where the actual history of the genre is hidden. Still, fanzines hardly give the undisputed truth, since the core of these publications is teenage energy rather than scientific accuracy. . . . I have tried to compare the "facts" presented in different 'zines to a great extent, but even this proved risky, since they frequently tended to steal information from one another. (p. 1)

Ekeroth then goes on to discuss his method of collecting fanzines and also oral histories from musicians themselves, and he ends his volume with a twenty-page bibliography of fanzines, which even includes details about the size of paper used in printing. Yet he includes no notes, and never discusses the way that he reconciled conflicting sources.

(Slide 12) He simply gives a linear narrative, apparently assuming readers will trust his judgment in every case. In doing so he follows the lead of Thucydides, the fourth-century B.C. Greek historian of the Peloponnesian War, who says in the introduction to his work:

In investigating past history, and in forming the conclusions which I have formed, it must be admitted that one cannot rely on every detail which has come down to us by way of tradition. People are inclined to accept all stories of ancient times in an uncritical way. . . . However, I do not think that one will be far wrong in accepting the conclusions I have reached . . . (I, 20-22, trans. Warner)

Thucydides generally gives just one account and rarely discusses sources. This may make the casual reader inclined to trust his judgment, but the savvy reader will immediately realize that a book that fairly identifies its sources and lays out its arguments is more useful, because this approach facilitates critical reading. Of course, the critical reader must be more active than the naïve reader who accepts everything he is told, but he will end up getting more out of his effort.

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