

SVEN P. BIRKERTS



# LITERATURE

*The Evolving Canon*

SECOND EDITION

# Literature

## *The Evolving Canon*

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SECOND EDITION

**Sven P. Birkerts**

EMERSON COLLEGE

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# Preface

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The Preface to the first edition of *Literature: The Evolving Canon* sounded the theme of a rapidly changing world, and proposed a fresh approach to reading and responding to literature. The passing of three years has only underscored my sense that the renovation of the old order is the new constant we must live with. The spread of electronic communications continues to advance the cause of global awareness and emphasizes the need for supple and adaptable reflexes. For the teacher and student of literature this means developing a cosmopolitan set of perspectives *and* keeping a grasp on the accumulated legacy of many centuries. This book has been written—and revised—to meet these needs.

*The Teaching Environment for Literature.* Change is, of course, a wind that blows in many directions at once. The negative effects of the transformation—the wholesale shift to a global electronic circuitry—are worrisome. On the largest scale there is a sense that we are becoming uncentered, wandering forth without our traditional sources of wisdom. Teachers routinely lament that their students are no longer interested in the tried and true ways of print culture, further loosening the grasp on traditional contexts. On an institutional level, meanwhile, those traditional contexts themselves are under fire. In colleges and universities all over the country teachers and administrators are locked in fierce struggles over the canon. To ask what texts are essential for the curriculum is really to ask about the purpose of education. The old maps no longer give us the lay of the land.

But there is a positive side to this transformation. Electronic globalization (among many other factors) has made possible great new infusions of energy. It is the kind of energy that is released when old forms and perspectives are shattered. What looks like a battle over the canon—a battle charted in the Casebook at the end of this text—can be seen from another angle as the first growing pains of a multicultural liberation movement. The people are clamoring at the gates; urgent voices insist on getting a hearing. In the long run this can only enrich us.

Nor is the multicultural pressure confined to the domestic front. The world has become the global village that Marshall McLuhan prophesied, and the result is not just a polyglot confusion but a thrilling diversity as well. This cultural variety can no longer go unrepresented or unexamined. To teach any of the humanities in a context that ignores our global culture is to be willfully parochial. It just won't wash. The reader of the second edition of *Literature: The Evolving Canon* will therefore find that the emphasis on domestic as well as global diversity is undiminished. Indeed, changes and new selections have been made with an eye to keeping the mixture fresh—more voices have been included in this continually evolving canon.

## Goals and New Features for This Revision

The changes in this new edition derive from a single imperative: to make the text a more supple and useful teaching tool. All of the new selections are here to add depth to the presentation of the tradition—for example, Melville’s “Bartleby the Scrivener”—or to expand diversity by showcasing new talent, such as fiction by Reginald McKnight.

To engage students more fully—to provoke the kinds of responses that lead to thoughtful writing—I have not only expanded the chapters that deal with writing about fiction, poetry, and drama, but I have also developed new “Responding to” applications for each genre (Chapters 14, 28, and 37). These offer students a chance to work with critical responses as secondary sources, while at the same time demonstrating how students can integrate these materials into their own interpretations. In addition, new questions now accompany every selection in the “elements” chapters in fiction and poetry, as well as every play.

Finally, expanded appendices present not only more detail on incorporating secondary sources in an interpretative paper—reflecting applicable material in the chapters on “Responding to”—but also they enrich discussions of various critical approaches by modeling ways that a student might apply these perspectives in writing. Another new addition, a full Glossary of definitions of literary terms and concepts, rounds out the volume.

*Continuing Goals for This Book.* This text continues to have a two-fold mission. First, it aims not only to represent but also to *celebrate* diversity. I have not set out to design a representative canon. Rather, I have worked in reverse. I have assumed from the outset the richness and variety of a world culture, and I have sought to reflect some part of it in these pages. I have followed my enthusiasms as well as a strong sense, based on my own teaching experience, of works that students would find both interesting and relevant to their own lives.

My second purpose, no less important, has been to assert at every turn the rootedness of all reading experiences in language. Just as line and color are the soul of painting, so are the word, the sentence, the poetic line the heart of literary art. And it is precisely this—the grasp and appreciation of language—that is put under threat in an electronic culture. If this text proclaims a new world in its selections, it also fights a campaign on behalf of language in its approach.

This campaign is carried out on all fronts. The selections, which I’ve already discussed, were made on the basis of literary excellence. I looked for texts in which the language is vivid and the perspectives are challenging. Second, the discussions of elements and instructional examples all insist upon the importance of close-focus reading. Skimming over a work of literature is like listening to music with wax plugs in your ears—it makes no sense.

Finally, I have tried to underscore the importance of this attentiveness by building a strong link between reading and writing. My own belief is that writing completes what reading begins. It not only teaches the skills of coherent and graceful expression, but also marks the truest path to the meaning of a work. There is no better way to think about a text—or maybe anything—than to write about it. In this edition, even more than in its predecessor, I have tried to make the necessary bridges

between reading, response, and written expression. There is more discussion of writing strategies in the three “Writing about” chapters; questions designed to quicken reflection and response have been added throughout; and “Responding to” chapters now emphasize continuity between reading and writing using specific text groupings and assignment suggestions.

One final observation. Literature is not, to crib from the political speechwriters, a business of smoke and mirrors. It functions according to very specific principles. These may undergo modification from one era to another, but they do not disappear. They are the artistic laws that guide and constrain the imagination and we discover them in every culture and every genre, whether in the stories of Toni Cade Bambara or William Faulkner, the poems of Thomas Hardy or Lorna Dee Cervantes. We are not moved to laughter, outrage, sorrow, or enlightenment by accident. This should become increasingly clear as you work through this text. Canons are nothing but groupings of works that come alive for us. If I have a single hope for this particular grouping it is that it will help students see just how it is that words on the page can interact to make a dance in the mind.

## **A Focus on “Reading into Writing”**

To carry out a major objective of the book and to further the idea that “writing completes what reading begins,” the text stresses the importance of a written response from the very first chapter. The many discussions and samples of writing in response all emphasize the link between close and careful reading and the formulation of ideas and arguments.

Each genre unit includes its own “Writing about” chapter (Chapters 10, 24, 36)—a detailed “case study” presentation of how a typical student might go about the process of reading, responding, formulating, and then writing to communicate ideas to peers or instructors. These chapters offer step-by-step models that illuminate the complete writing encounter. First sketches and early drafts are shown, as are examples of student-peer critiques. New discussions in each section focus on strategies for incorporating text summaries into the larger presentation of the student’s own original ideas. The final version is included to illustrate how suggestions and new insights can be incorporated.

The questions that accompany the various selections have all been designed not only to encourage close reading, but also to provoke the kind of thinking that leads to the formulation of ideas for writing. There are now questions for all of the works in the elements chapters, a major addition that enforces my insistence on the link between attentiveness and response.

Users will notice, too, an amplification of critical contexts. An array of new essays in the “Responding to” chapters (14, 28, and 37) encourages students to find a deeper engagement with the selected works, not only developing their insights, but also testing them against those of various critics. Writing examples show how other students have made use of critics and outside sources in building their arguments. The expansion of Appendix B, “Researching and Documenting a Paper about Literature,” will help the writer make proper use of quotations and source materials; materials on attribution as well as the avoidance of plagiarism have likewise been added.

Appendix A, “Critical Perspectives,” offers compact but informative discussions of the major approaches to literary criticism that have evolved in recent decades. These context-rich presentations will help the student to understand the fundamental assumptions underlying these approaches. Critical Perspectives are linked to illustrative materials throughout the book (explanations of New Critical close-reading, for example, are keyed to appropriate applications of close-reading technique in the text). Each discussion is now accompanied by a short writing sample that suggests how that approach might be used in a student essay. Also, for students who are especially interested in exploring some of these perspectives, brief reading lists are included.

## The Organization of the Literature Chapters

*Literature: The Evolving Canon* is built around the three traditional genres: fiction, poetry, and drama. A unit for each includes some introductory chapters, literary texts in various groupings, and a separate “Responding to” chapter providing critical material on key works from that genre. In addition, the text includes a comprehensive Casebook on the evolving canon. Added to the selections that assess this core issue from various vantages is an essay of my own that explores some of the implications of computers and CD-ROM packages on traditional learning procedures.

*Literature Selected for Breadth and Depth.* The Fiction and Poetry units both begin with elements-based chapters that investigate the key components of the genre (Character, Plot, Sound and Sense in Poetry, Voice in Poetry, etc.) and make extensive use of examples. Questions are posed to involve the student more deeply in an array of works and to pave the way toward the writing response. Both units offer comprehensive anthologies of additional readings. In Fiction as in Poetry, the selections have been made to reflect global and multicultural perspectives, as well as to provide an appealing mix of traditional and contemporary readings. New selections for this edition have followed the same principle, adding, for instance, Melville’s classic story, “Bartleby the Scrivener” and Ralph Lombreglia’s postmodern humoresque “Men under Water.” The sections of additional readings continue to be arranged chronologically to provide the student with a sense of historical context.

The plays in the Drama unit are arranged in chronological sequence with interspersed discussions of key historical developments. These discussions emphasize the diverse social contexts out of which the plays have emerged. The text provides a generous selection of full-length plays as well as several shorter works that can be compactly examined (or perhaps even staged) in one class sitting.

Since a major feature of this text is its global and multicultural vantage, a number of works originally written in other languages are featured. The translation issue is addressed head-on in a chapter (23) in the Poetry unit. Not only are students introduced to the problem of translatability, but they are challenged to examine several translated versions of poems originally written in foreign languages (one Spanish, one French, one Italian, and one German). A more thorough “case study”—this of a Chinese poem by Wang Wei—shows how the small decisions made by translators can change the overall effect of the translation.

Each of the three units showcases two authors, giving the student a chance to experience a literary sensibility (and the genre) at greater depth. The Fiction unit has special sections on the careers of Alice Munro and James Baldwin. Poetry, similarly, explores the developing styles of Adrienne Rich and Gary Snyder. Pairs of plays by Sophocles and Shakespeare bring added dimension to the Drama unit.

*Comparisons and Perspectives.* Although the formal arrangement of the literature selections is by element or according to chronology, the readings have been chosen to encourage the making of comparisons and contrasts in terms of theme, style, the handling of literary devices, and so forth. The “Responding to” chapters implement this directly—allowing students to compare, say, Nabokov’s reading of a Chekhov story with Joyce Carol Oates’s contemporary re-imagining of the same story—but selections throughout have been made on the basis of how they might be taught alongside other selections. The “Instructor’s Resource Manual” offers many suggestions about interesting or instructive comparisons and contrasts. Linkages are further enhanced by the inclusion of critical perspectives in Appendix A. The student can not only establish a web of textual connections, but also interpret these connections according to one or another of the dominant critical traditions (Formalism, Reader-Response Theory, Psychoanalytical criticism, etc.).

*Teaching Aids for the Texts.* All the literary texts have been carefully glossed, a boon to the many students who need help with historical references or obscure terms. Depending on need, glosses are placed either at the foot of the page or in the margin. To facilitate quick reference, prose paragraphs are numbered at every fifth paragraph, while poems and plays in verse form are numbered at five-line intervals.

The new questions that have been added for all works in the various elements sections are meant to focus discussion and give the student a stronger understanding of the complex engagement that reading represents.

## Chapter Discussions and Study Apparatus

The chapter texts in the Fiction and Poetry units are arranged to call attention to the key concepts and elements that form the basis of any understanding of these genres. The chapter texts in Drama are rooted in an extensive discussion of the origins of Greek drama. Subsequent changes and departures are examined in a historical context, with close attention paid to the connections between social realities and expressive styles. Contemporary drama selections (including a new play by Maria Irene Fornes) are especially focused on issues of race and gender.

The text supplies biographical information about each author in the Fiction and Drama units. Dates of birth and death are provided for the poets. In addition, drawings or photographs of selected authors are included to satisfy student curiosity.

Key terms and concepts are italicized in chapter text. These concepts are treated in brief summary form in the Glossary, which is indexed to provide locations and cross-references separately from the other indexes of first lines of poetry and authors and titles.

## **Instructor's Resource Manual**

A comprehensive Instructor's Resource Manual offers extensive teaching suggestions and supplemental information. Every story, poem, and play is discussed, usually in terms of useful areas of analysis and writing suggestions. Works are consistently cross-referenced with other works to promote stylistic and other kinds of comparisons, and to permit reading assignments to be made in thematic clusters. All of the questions in the text are addressed in the Manual, along with suggested lines of discussion and ideas for collaborative work in groups. Another new feature is the inclusion of relevant contextual material from the previous edition and some biographical notes on selected poets. A media resource listing at the end of the Manual provides all sorts of suggested options for enhanced presentation of materials, and teaching notes are included for key videotapes available to adopters of this text. The Manual also includes my essay on the experience of teaching students who are alienated from literary texts. "Teaching in a Video Age" outlines a number of strategies to intensify links between reading, responding, and writing.

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S. P. B.

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