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Readings

Sven Birkerts
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Birkerts is a secular prophet, a voice in the wilderness preaching the virtues of the printed word to a society mesmerized by electronic glitz. This volume is fittingly titled—a collection of essays whose common theme is that serious reading still matters; it is a source of beauty and fulfillment available nowhere else. Some of the pieces appeared previously in publications such as The Atlantic Monthly and Boston Review, while others are new. All, however, are remarkable for the depth and originality of the author's thoughts and the eloquence with which he expresses them.

In addition to being a social and literary critic, Birkerts is a teacher at Mount Holyoke College and member of the core faculty of the Bennington Writing Seminars. Not surprisingly, some of his essays deal with specific writers and works in almost professorial fashion, such as his dissection of the opening stanza of Keats' "To Autumn" and Anne Tyler's novel Breathing Lessons. By themselves, their analytical tone might deter some readers. But in this context, their specificity provides a helpful counterweight to Birkerts' cosmic musings on reading and writing in the electronic age.

In "Sense and Semblance," he laments the damage wrought to language as television and computers increasingly dominate the realm of communication:"We are losing our grip, collectively, on the logic of complex utterance, on syntax; we are abandoning the rhythmic, poetic undercurrents of expression…" Equally insidious, he argues in "Against the Current," is the erosion of our ability to concentrate amid the flood of disjointed information that pours forth from electronic media. Offsetting these grim pronouncements are Birkerts' lyric commentaries on the likes of *The Great Gatsby* and Kerouac's *On the Road*. More than simple criticism, these essays are celebrations, virtually shouting the writer's passion for top-grade literature: "No matter how often I return to (Madame Bovary)…no matter how well or poorly I am disposed toward Emma…Flaubert's serene-seeming world is waiting to receive me."

Although not lengthy, this is not a quick read. Like individual courses of a gourmet meal, each essay should be savored and slowly digested. They serve to remind even the avid reader, who surely needs no persuading, just why reading books is among life's great joys—and will always be so.
JOHN FLESHER (January / February 1999)

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