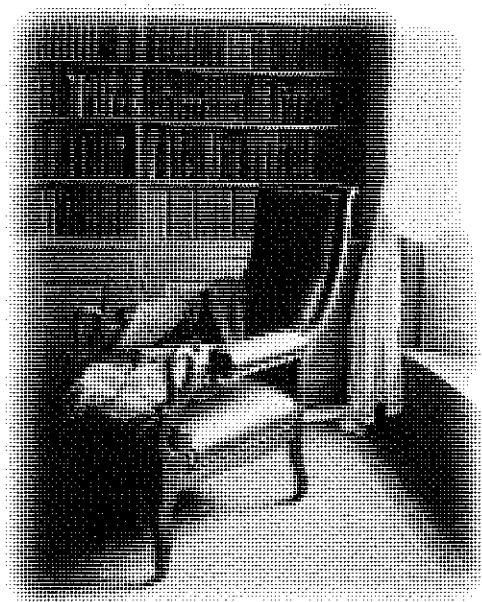# THE
GUTENBERG
ELEGIES

The Fate of Reading
in an Electronic Age

"Birkerts on reading fiction is like M.F.K. Fisher on
eating or Norman Maclean on fly casting.
He makes you want to go do it."
— *The New Yorker*

SVEN BIRKERTS

To our newcomer, Liam Thomas, and to the rest of my family, all three generations.

Reading is different from listening, yes, but in listening's limitations I have found unexpected pleasures. When you read, both eye and ear are engaged; when you listen, the eye is free. Slight though the freedom may seem, it can declare itself resoundingly. The listener can attain a peculiar exaltation—a vivid sense of doubleness, of standing poised on a wire between two different realities.

I felt that exaltation quite recently. I had been to Concord's Walden Pond for an afternoon swim and I was taking my usual back-country route home. I was wet-haired, relaxed from the water, and the speed limit signs were there to be ignored. In this mood, I put a cassette of Thoreau's *Walden* into the player. Said the master (in the voice of Michael O'Keefe):

> Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature herself. I have been as sincere a worshipper of Aurora as the Greeks. I got up early and bathed in the pond: that was a religious exercise, and one of the best things which I did. They say that characters were engraven on the bathing tub of King Tching-thang to this effect: "Renew thyself completely each day; do it again and again, and forever again."

It was high summer. The road was open and the countryside was in bloom. I sped through an arcade of trees as the voice went on to retail the terms of our daily enslavement. I felt myself soaring. The words streamed in unmediated, shot like some kind of whiskey into my soul. I had a parenthesis of open country, then came the sentence of the highway. But the state held long enough to allow a thought: In the beginning was the Word—not the written or printed or processed word, but the *spoken* word. And though it changes its aspect faster than any Proteus, hiding now in letter shapes and now in magnetic emulsion, it remains. It still has the power to lay us bare.

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Hypertext: Of Mouse and Man

I HAVE A FRIEND, R., who is not only an excellent short-story writer and philosopher of the art, but who is also a convert to the sorcery of the microchip. R. has had a nibbling interest in hypertext—for some the cutting edge in writing these days—and he had me over to his studio recently so that I could get a look at this latest revolutionary development. Our text was Stuart Moulthrop's *Victory Garden*, an interactive novel by a writer who has been called one of the leading theoreticians of the genre. R. sat me down in a chair in front of his terminal, booted up, and off we went.

Or did we? In fact it was not one of those off-you-go kinds of things at all. What we had in front of us was a spatialized table of contents in the form of a map of an elaborate garden. There were mazelike paths and benches and nooks, each representing some element, or strand, of the novel. This was the option board. The reader was invited to proceed by inclination, choosing a character, focusing on a relationship, engaging (or not) a relevant subplot, and deciding whether to snap backward or forward in time. A kind of paralysis crept over me. I was reminded of Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch*, where the reader learns that he can follow the chapters in a number of different sequences. But this was stranger, denser. The extent of the text was concealed (and in that sense lifelike). It was also stylistically uninspired. I felt none of the tug I had felt with Cortázar's novel, none of the subtle suction exerted by masterly prose. Still, I did not give up. I tipped up and back in my chair, clicked and clicked again, waiting patiently for the empowering rush that ought to come when worlds open upon other worlds and old limits collapse.

It was hard, I confess, to square my experience with the hype surrounding hypertext and multimedia. Extremists—I meet more and more of them—argue that the printed page has been but a temporary habitation for the word. The book, they say, is no longer the axis of our intellectual culture. There is a kind of aggressiveness in their proselytizing. The stationary arrangement of language on a page is outmoded. The word, they say, has broken from that corral, is already galloping in its new element, jumping with the speed of electricity from screen to screen. Indeed, the revolution is taking place even as I type with the antediluvian typewriter onto the superseded sheet of paper. I am proof of the fact that many of us are still habit-bound, unable to grasp the scope of the transformation that is underway all around us. But rest assured, we will adjust to these changes, as we do to all others, by increments; we will continue to do so until everything about the way we do business is different. So they say. Those with a lesser stake in the printed word, for whom the technologies are exciting means to necessary ends—to speed and efficiency—will scarcely notice what they are leaving behind. But those of us who live by the word, who are still embedded in the ancient and formerly stable reader-writer relationship, will have to make our difficult peace.

In a widely-discussed essay in the *New York Times Book Review*—entitled, terrifyingly, "The End of Books" (June 21, 1992)—Robert Coover addressed the new situation. He began boldly:

> In the real world nowadays, that is to say, in the world of video transmissions, cellular phones, fax machines, computer networks, and in particular out in the humming digitalized precincts of avant-garde computer hackers, cyberpunks and hyperspace freaks, you will often hear it said that the print medium is a doomed and outdated technology, a mere curiosity of bygone days and destined soon to be consigned forever to those dusty unattended museums we now call libraries. Indeed, the very proliferation of books and other print-based media, so prevalent in this forest-harvesting, paper-wasting age, is held to be a sign of its feverish moribundity, the last futile gasp of a once-vital form before it finally passes away forever, dead as God.

His ground set out, Coover soon focuses his attention on hypertext, which is, in this newly enormous landscape, focus enough. Here is his description of the term:

> "Hypertext" is not a system but a generic term, coined a quarter of a century ago by a computer populist named Ted Nelson to describe the writing done in the nonlinear or nonsequential space made possible by the computer. Moreover, unlike print text, hypertext provides multiple paths between text segments, now often called "lexias" in a borrowing from the pre-hypertextual but prescient Roland Barthes. With its webs of linked lexias, its networks of alternate routes (as opposed to print's fixed unidirectional page-turning) hypertext presents a radically divergent technology, interactive and polyvocal, favoring a plurality of discourses over definitive utterance and freeing the reader from domination by the author. Hypertext reader and writer are said to become co-learners or co-writers, as it were, fellow travelers in the mapping and remapping of textual (and visual, kinetic, and aural) components, not all of which are provided by what used to be called the author.

This is the new picture, background and foreground, and we members of the literary community had better stop thinking of it as a science-fiction fantasy.

Ground zero: The transformation of the media of communication maps a larger transformation of consciousness—maps it, but also speeds it along; it changes the terms of our experience and our ways of offering response. Transmission determines reception determines reaction. Looking broadly at the way we live—on many simultaneous levels, under massive stimulus loads—it is clear that mechanical-linear technologies are insufficient. We require swift and obedient tools with vast capacities for moving messages through networks. As the tools proliferate, however, more and more of what we do involves network interaction. The processes that we created to serve our evolving needs have not only begun to redefine our experience, but they are fast becoming our new cognitive paradigm. It is ever more difficult for us to imagine how people ever got along before fax, e-mail, mobile phones, computer networks, etc.

What is the relevance of all this to reading and writing? This must now be established—from scratch.

Words read from a screen or written onto a screen—words which appear and disappear, even if they can be retrieved and fixed into place with a keystroke—have a different status and affect us differently from words held immobile on the accessible space of a page. Marshall McLuhan set out the principles decades ago, charting the major media shifts from orality to print and from print to electronic as cultural watersheds. The basic premise holds. But McLuhan's analysis of the print-to-electronics transformation centered upon television and the displacement of the printed word by transmissions of image and voice. But what about the difference between print on a page and print on a screen? Are we dealing with a change of degree, or a change of kind? It may be too early to tell. At present, while we are still poised with one foot in each realm, it would seem a difference of degree. But as electronic communications eventually supplant the mechanical, degree may attain critical mass and become kind. Or less than kind.

Reading over Coover's description of hypertext, we have to wonder: Are our myriad technological innovations to be seen as responses to collective needs and desires, or are they simply logical developments in the inexorable evolution of technology itself? Do the hypertext options arrive because we want out of the prison-house of tradition (linearity, univocality, stylistic individuality), or are they a by-product of break-throughs in the field? Is hypertext a Hula-Hoop fad or the first surging of a wave that will swell until it sweeps away everything in its path? If it is indeed a need-driven development—a reflection of a will to break out of a long confinement, to redefine the terms and processes of expression—then we may be in for an epic battle that will transform everything about reading, writing, and publishing.

The subject comes up a great deal in conversation these days. Disputants, many of them writers, say to me, "Words are still words—on a page, on a screen—what's the difference?" There is much shrugging of the shoulders. But this will never do. The changes are profound and the differences are consequential. Nearly weightless though it is, the word printed on a page is a thing. The configuration of impulses on a screen is not—it is a manifestation, an indeterminate entity both particle and

wave, an ectoplasmic arrival and departure. The former occupies a position in space—on a page, in a book—and is verifiably there. The latter, once dematerialized, digitalized back into storage, into memory, cannot be said to exist in quite the same way. It has potential, not actual, locus. (Purists would insist that the coded bit, too, exists and can be found, but its location is not evident to the unassisted and uninstructed senses.) And although one could argue that the word, the passage, is present in the software memory as surely as it sits on page x, the fact is that we register a profound difference. One is outside and visible, the other "inside" and invisible. A thing and, in a sense, the idea of a thing. The words on the page, however ethereal their designation, partake of matter. The words removed to storage, rendered invisible, seem to have reversed expressive direction and to have gone back into thought. Their entity dissolves into a kind of neural potentiality. This fact—or, rather, this perception on the part of the screen reader—cannot but affect the way the words are registered when present. They may not be less, but they are as different as the nearly identical pieces of paper currency, the one secured by bullion-holdings at Fort Knox, the other by the abstract guarantees of the Federal Reserve System.

The shape of a word—its physical look—is only its outer garb. The impulse, the pulse of its meaning, is the same whether that word is incised in marble, scratched into mud, inscribed onto papyrus, printed onto a page, or flickered forth on a screen. Or is it? Wouldn't we say that the word cannot really exist outside the perception and translation by its reader? If this is the case, then the mode of transmission cannot be disregarded. The word cut into stone carries the implicit weight of the carver's intention; it is decoded into sense under the aspect of its imperishability. It has weight, grandeur—it vies with time. The same word, when it appears on the screen, must be received with a sense of its weightlessness—the weightlessness of its presentation. The same sign, but not the same.

Seeing is believing—or so they say. In fact, the proposition is nonsensical. Seeing is knowing, whereas believing is trusting to the existence of something we cannot see. But belief can be stronger than knowing. When we trust to the unseen, we confer power. Dieties and subatomic particles and, more recently, the silicon pathways webbed into mi-

crochips—all of these we invest with a potency that we do not always grant to more objectively verifiable phenomena. Thus, the words on the page, though they issue from the invisible force field of another's mind, are insulated between covers, while the words on the screen seem to arrive from some collective elsewhere that seems more profound, deeper than a mere writer's subjectivity. But this does not necessarily invest the words themselves with a greater potency, for the unseen creative self of the writer is conflated with the unseen depth of the technology and, in the process, the writer's independent authority is subtly undermined. The site of veneration shifts; in the reader's subliminal perception some measure of the power belonging to the writer is handed over to the machine. The words on the screen, in other words, are felt to issue from a void deeper than language, and this, not the maker of the sentences, claims any remnant impulse to belief.

The page is flat, opaque. The screen is of indeterminate depth—the word floats on the surface like a leaf on a river. Phenomenologically, that word is less absolute. The leaf on the river is not the leaf plucked out and held in the hand. The words that appear and disappear on the screen are naturally perceived less as isolated counters and more as the constituent elements of some larger, more fluid process. This is not a matter of one being better or worse, but different.

There is a paradox lurking in this metamorphosis of the word. The earlier historical transition from orality to script—a transition greeted with considerable alarm by Socrates and his followers—changed the rules of intellectual procedure completely. Written texts could be transmitted, studied, and annotated; knowledge could rear itself upon a stable base. And the shift from script to mechanical type and the consequent spread of literacy among the laity is said by many to have made the Enlightenment possible. Yet now it is computers, in one sense the very apotheosis of applied rationality, that are destabilizing the authority of the printed word and returning us, although at a different part of the spiral, to the process orientation that characterized oral cultures.

Process. As a noun, "a series of actions, changes, or functions that bring about an end or result." As a verb, "to put through the steps of a prescribed procedure." Although the word is both noun and verb, in this context its verbal attributes are dominant. The difference between

words on a page and words on a screen is the difference between product and process, noun and verb. The word processor is not, never mind what some writers say, "just a better typewriter." It is a modification of the relation between the writer and the language.

The dual function of print is the immobilization and preservation of language. To make a mark on a page is to gesture toward permanence; it is to make a choice from an array of expressive possibilities. In former days, the writer, en route to a product that could be edited, typeset, and more or less permanently imprinted on paper, wrestled incessantly with this primary attribute of the medium. If he wrote with pencil or pen, then he had to erase or scratch out his mistakes; if he typed, then he either had to retype or use some correcting tool. The path between impulse and inscription was made thornier by the knowledge that errors meant having to retrace steps and do more work. The writer was more likely to test the phrasing on the ear, to edit mentally before committing to the paper. The underlying momentum was toward the right, irrevocable expression.

This ever-present awareness of fixity, of indelibility, is no longer so pressing a part of the writer's daily struggle. That is, the writing technology no longer enforces it. Words now arrive onto the screen under the aspect of provisionality. They can be transferred with a stroke or deleted altogether. And when they are deleted it is as if they had never been. There is no physical reminder of the wrong turn, the failure. At a very fundamental and obvious level, the consequentiality of bringing forth language has been altered. Where the limitations of the medium once encouraged a very practical resistance to the spewing out of the unformulated expression, that responsibility has now passed to the writer.

To theorize along these lines is to court ridicule. Present the average reader with prose originally written onto the screen and prose typed onto the page, and he will wonder what is the difference. *The words are the same, of course. More or less.* Yet at some level, perhaps molecular, they are not the same. The difference? It must originate in the writer, more precisely in the writer in the act of composition. A change in procedure must be at least subtly reflected in the result. How could it not? More than a few writers have explained to me just how the fluidity and alterability made possible by the medium have freed them to write

more, to venture their sentences with less inhibition. And the fact that one can readily move sentences, paragraphs, even whole sections, from one place to another has allowed them to conceive of their work—the process of it—in more spatial terms. These would seem to be gains; but gains, we know, always come with a price. Which in this case would be the removal of focus from the line and a sacrifice of some of the line-driven refinements of style. With a change in potential, an incorporation of a greater awareness of the whole, the tendency of stylistic attention to be local and detail-oriented decreases. I'm talking about abstract tendencies, not about the practice of individual writers. One can still be a consummate fabricator of phrases and sentences—but one must be willing to work against the grain of the technology.

Writing on the computer promotes process over product and favors the whole over the execution of the part. As the writer grows accustomed to moving words, sentences, and paragraphs around—to opening his lines to insertions—his sense of linkage and necessity is affected. Less thought may be given to the ideal of inevitable expression. The expectation is no longer that there should be a single best way to say something; the writer accepts variability and is more inclined to view the work as a version. The Flaubertian tyranny of *le mot juste* is eclipsed, and with it, gradually, the idea of the author as a sovereign maker.

Roland Barthes once wrote an influential essay entitled "The Death of the Author" (which chimes, I see, with Coover's "End of the Book") in which he argued, in essence, that the individual writer is not so much the creative originator as he is the site for certain proliferations of language; that the text, by the same token, is a variegated weaving of strands from prior texts and not a freestanding entity. Barthes's pitch was extreme, calculated to provoke, and he did not really have electronic communications in mind—but it is in part the arrival of the new technologies that has made his writings so prescient.

The changes brought about by the wholesale implementation of the word processor and, more radically, the various hypertext options, are really just part of a much larger set of societal circumstances, all of which are modifying the traditional roles of writer and reader. The decline of the prestige of authorship—something all writers feel and lament—has much to do with the climate of our current intellectual

culture, a climate in which all manifestations of *author*-ity are seen as suspect. Deconstruction and multiculturalism advance arm in arm, the former bent upon undermining the ideological base upon which aesthetic and cultural hierarchies have been erected, the latter proposing a lateral and egalitarian renovation of the canon. Together they convincingly expose the "greatness" of authors and works as complex constructs, not so much unimpeachable artistic attainments as triumphs of one set of cultural forces over others.

The idea of individual authorship—that one person would create an original work and have historical title to it—did not really become entrenched in the public mind until print superseded orality as the basis of cultural communication (and maybe this "public mind" only came into being at this point). So long as there was a spoken economy, the process, the transmission, had precedence over the thing transmitted. The speaker passed along what had been gathered and distilled from other oral sources. As the print technology gained ground, however, all that changed. Fixity brought imprimatur. Verbal perfectability, style, and the idea of ownership followed. The words on the page, chiseled and refined by a single author, aspired to permanence. The more perfect, the more inevitable the expression seemed, the greater the claim that the author could lay upon posterity. Think of the bold boasting in Shakespeare's sonnets, born of the recognition that so long as words survived (were read) the subject and the poet would both enjoy a kind of afterlife. Everything hinged upon the artistic power of the work itself.

In literary legend, Gustave Flaubert is seen as the paradigmatic maker and his *Madame Bovary* as the ultimate made thing. His contortions on the way to writing the perfect book, a book meditated down to its least syllable, a book that would suffer from the slightest modification of word order or punctuation, are legendary. His belief in the adequacy of language to experience had to be absolute; without it he would have had to go mad from the contemplation of unrealized possibility. Style—word order, word sound, periodic rhythm, etc.—was arbitrariness surmounted. The printed page was an objective, immutable thing; the book was an artifact. With the divestment of the creator's authority and the attenuation of the stylistic ideal, the emphasis in writing has naturally moved from product to process. The work is not intended to

be absolute, nor is it received as such. Writing tends to be seen not so much as an objective realization as an expressive instance. A version. Looking from the larger historical vantage, it almost appears as if we are returning to the verbal orientation that preceded the triumph of print.

The word processor can be seen as a kind of ice-breaker for that inchoate thing that is hypertext—which is, as Coover notes, a "generic" term for writing on a computer that avails itself of some of the capacities of that technology. Hypertext is more than just an end run around paper; it is a way of giving the screen, the computer software, and the modem a significant role in the writing process.

In some ways hypertext resembles the now-familiar word processor operation. Text does not visibly accumulate, but scrolls in from and back out to oblivion. Words do not lie fixed against the opaque page but float in the quasidimensional hyperspace. Not only can they be moved or altered at will, but any part of the text can theoretically mark the beginning of another narrative or expository path. The text can be programmed to accommodate branching departures or to incorporate visual elements and documents. The lone user can sculpt texts as she wishes, breaking up narratives, arranging lines in diverse patterns, or creating "windows" that allow readers to choose how much information or description they want. And on and on.

No less significantly, the hypertext writer need not work alone. The technology affords the option of interactive or collaborative writing. And this, even more than the fluidity or the candy-store array of choices offered by the medium, promises to change our ideas about reading and writing enormously in the years to come. Already users can create texts in all manner of collaborative ways—trading lines, writing parallel texts that merge, moving independently created sets of characters in and out of communal fictional space. Coover described in his essay how he and his students established a "hypertext hotel," a place where the writers were free to "check in, to open new rooms, new corridors, new intrigues, to unlink texts or create new links, to intrude upon or subvert the texts of others, to alter plot trajectories, manipulate time and space, to engage in dialogue through invented characters, then kill off one another's characters or even sabotage the hotel's plumbing."

But while Coover sustains an attitude of exploratory optimism

throughout, he does concede that he is himself enough a creature of the book to feel a certain skepticism about this brave new world. He notes what he sees as certain obvious problems:

> Navigational procedures: how do you move around in infinity without getting lost? The structuring of the space can be so compelling and confusing as to utterly absorb the narrator and to exhaust the reader. And there is the related problem of filtering. With an unstable text that can be intruded upon by other author-readers, how do you, caught in the maze, avoid the trivial? How do you duck the garbage? Venerable novelistic values like unity, integrity, coherence, vision, voice, seem to be in danger. Eloquence is being redefined. "Text" has lost its canonical certainty. How does one judge, analyze, write about a work that never reads the same way twice?

Worthy, commonsensical questions. The problem is similar to that uncovered by Nietzsche: How do we ascertain or uphold values if God is dead and everything is permitted? In the case of hypertext it is not God who is gone, but the author, the traditional originator of structure and engineer of meanings. The creator who derived his essential prestige from the power of fiat: Let there be no world but this. If the game is wide open, if everything is possible between reader and writer, then how do we begin to define that game? Or do we define it at all? Does the idea of literature vanish altogether in the new gratification system of exchanged and shared impulses?

I sat in R.'s studio and did my dutiful best to get in past the wall of my resistance to hypertext. But I was still stymied. The battery of directions and option signals all but short-circuited any capacity I may have had to enter the life of the words on the screen. I was made so fidgety by the knowledge that I was positioned in a designed environment, with the freedom to rocket from one place to another with a keystroke, that I could scarcely hold still long enough to read what was there in front of me. Granted, what prose I did browse was not of a quality to compel entry by itself—it needed the enticement of its "hyper" element—but I realized that it would be the same if Pynchon or Gass had written the

sentences. For the effect of the hypertext environment, the ever-present awareness of possibility and the need to either make or refuse choice, was to preempt my creating any meditative space for myself. When I read I do not just obediently move the eyes back and forth, ingesting verbal signals, I also sink myself into a receptivity. But sitting at my friend's terminal I experienced constant interruption—the reading surface was fractured, rendered collagelike by the appearance of starred keywords and suddenly materialized menu boxes. I did not feel the exhilarating freedom I had hoped to feel. I felt, rather, an assault upon what I had unreflectingly assumed to be my reader's prerogatives.

This is a matter that has not been sufficiently addressed—the *ungainliness* of the interaction. Not only is the user affronted aesthetically at every moment by ugly type fonts and crude display options, but he has to wheel and click the cumbersome mouse to keep the interaction going. This user, at least, has not been able to get past the feeling of being infantilized. No matter how serious the transaction taking place, I feel as though my reflexes are being tested in a video arcade. I have been assured that this will pass, but it hasn't yet. I still register viscerally the differential between the silken flow of information within the circuits and the fumbles and fidgets required to keep it from damming up. The interactive text, I suppose, cannot be any better than its reader's capabilities allow it to be.

Granted, the technology is still in its infancy. Many of the irritants will in time be refined away, and skilled writers will generate works of great cunning and suggestiveness. And readers will eventually acclimate themselves to texts encoded with signals. But even then, when trained reader encounters skilled writer, will that reader ever achieve that meditative immersion that is, for me, one of the main incentives for reading?

My guess is that the "revolution" scenarios, staple features of the New-Age "hacker" magazines, are premature and do not take into account the conservative retraction of the elastic. Innumerable possibilities will be tested—vast interactive collaborations, video inserts, much entrepreneurial fizz—but most of them will blow away like smoke in the wind. Remaining behind will be the incentives that really work—the brilliant, ingenious, artistic productions that are not merely technical *tours de force* but which have something to communicate, which reach

the interactive reader in something more than just a cerebral way. As with all systemic processes, a natural ecology will assert itself, preserving what is useful and eliminating what is not.

Still, if the shift from typewriter to word processor altered the writer's sense of stylistic imperative, then hypertext can be seen as delivering a mighty blow to the long-static writer-reader relationship. It changes the entire system of power upon which the literary experience has been predicated; it rewrites the contract from start to finish. Coover states that hypertext "presents a radically divergent technology, interactive and polyvocal, favoring a plurality of discourses over definitive utterance and freeing the reader from domination by the author," but his tonal matter-of-factness belies the monumentality of the assertion. This "domination by the author" has been, at least until now, the *point* of writing and reading. The author masters the resources of language to create a vision that will engage and in some way overpower the reader; the reader goes to the work to be subjected to the creative will of another. The premise behind the textual interchange is that the author possesses wisdom, an insight, a way of looking at experience, that the reader wants.

A change in this relation is therefore not superficial. Once a reader is enabled to collaborate, participate, or in any way engage the text as an empowered player who has some say in the outcome of the game, the core assumptions of reading are called into question. The imagination is liberated from the constraint of being guided at every step by the author. Necessity is dethroned and arbitrariness is installed in its place.

Consider the difference. Text A, old-style, composed by a single author on a typewriter, edited, typeset, published, distributed through bookstores, where it is purchased by the reader, who ingests it the old way, turning pages, front to back, assembling a structure of sense deemed to be the necessary structure because from among the myriad existing possibilities the author selected it. Now look at Text B, the hypertext product composed by one writer, or several, on a computer, using a software program that facilitates options. The work can be read in linear fashion (the missionary position of reading), but it is also open. That is, the reader can choose to follow any number of subnarrative paths, can call up photographic supplements to certain key descrip-

tions, can select from among a number of different kinds of possible endings. What is it that we do with B? Do we still call it reading? Or would we do better to coin a new term, something like "texting" or "word-piloting"?

We do not know yet whether hypertext will ever be accepted by a mass readership as something more than a sophisticated Nintendo game played with language. It could be that, faced with the choice between univocal and polyvocal, linear and "open," readers will opt for the more traditional package; that the reading act will remain rooted in the original giver-receiver premise because this offers readers something they want: a chance to subject the anarchic subjectivity to another's disciplined imagination, a chance to be taken in unsuspected directions under the guidance of some singular sensibility.

I stare at the textual field on my friend's screen and I am unpersuaded. Indeed, this glimpse of the future—if it is the future—has me clinging all the more tightly to my books, the very idea of them. If I ever took them for granted, I do no longer. I now see each one as a portable enclosure, a place I can repair to to release the private, unsocialized, dreaming self. A book is solitude, privacy; it is a way of holding the self apart from the crush of the outer world. Hypertext—at least the spirit of hypertext, which I see as the spirit of the times—promises to deliver me from this, to free me from the "liberating domination" of the author. It promises to spring me from the univocal linearity which is precisely the constraint that fills me with a sense of possibility as I read my way across fixed acres of print.

PART III

Critical Mass:
Three Meditations