Part Two:

Digital Publishing: “From Paper to Pixels”
As the keynote address of the colloquium “The Medium of Publishing: Reading, Writing, and Editing” (Clemson University, April 10, 2003), the essay by Melvin Sterne in Part Two concludes this book with a kind of *apologia*. In point of fact, the talk followed an introduction by Chapman on the rapid progress of CU Digital Press, in three years, toward recognition as a university press for the twenty-first century; and it anticipated several demonstrations to that effect in the recently completed “smart” humanities auditorium in Hardin Hall (oldest university building on campus, now renovated). As the editor notes in the Foreword, a hypermedia anthology of the inaugural colloquium of 2001 is available on our website at www.clemson.edu/caah/cedp/Tech%20Colloquium%202001/Online%Proceedings.htm.

—WKC]
Some time ago I was perusing the shelves of a used bookstore and stumbled across a volume of essays entitled the *Best American Spiritual Writing of 2000*. Now, I’m familiar with *Best American Short Stories* and *Best American Essays*, but I had never heard of *Best American Spiritual Writing*, and I was intrigued. It sounded like my kind of book, so I bought it. Inside I found, among other things, an essay by William H. Gass entitled “In Defense of the Book.” Gass is a fiction writer, philosopher, essayist, and retired director of the International Writers Center at Washington University. The essay had originally been published in *Harper’s Magazine*.

At first glance Gass’ essay appears to be a fond reminiscence of a scholar’s life and his love of books. Gass is insightful, poignant, and sometimes funny. I could scarce read his recollection of smearing jam on the pages of *Treasure Island* “precisely at the place where Billy Bones chased Black Dog out of the Admiral Benbow with a volley of oaths and where his cutlass misses its mark to notch the inn’s wide sign” without breaking into a broad grin recalling my own numerous hours spent—perhaps invested is a better word—reading good books.

Gass was lucky in that he was able to translate his love of books into a career. I share his passion for literature. My love of writing impelled me to return to college to earn a Master’s Degree in English, and to found and edit a fiction magazine.

Like Gass, I have my favorite book story—that while in second grade I was accused of plagiarism for turning in a book report on Homer’s *The Odyssey*. I was remanded to the principal’s office, my grandmother summoned. The meeting was held with appropriate solemnity. But much to the principal’s surprise, my grandmother explained that I had, in fact, read *The Odyssey*, and could read practically any book in her library. A short quiz some of the books I had read confirmed this to the principal’s satisfaction, and I was returned to my class bewildered (and somewhat embarrassed) to find that my reading was
considered unusual, abnormal; and that my efforts to succeed in school were unrewarded and unappreciated.

I don’t recall being taught to read. I must have taken to it naturally, and I suspect that some unpleasant childhood circumstances led me to discover reading as an escape from reality. This experience of reading and writing as an escape is still true for me today. I love losing myself in the limitless possibilities of imagination.

Pulitzer Prize winning author Robert Olen Butler describes this immersion in the creative process as “dependent on maintaining a kind of trance-like state—what the athletes call being “in the zone”—in order to stay deeply in touch with the unconscious self, where all art comes from…I tell my writing students that works of art do not come from the mind, they come from the place where you dream.”

But we were talking about William H. Gass, and Gass is quick to point out that books serve an important role, not only as entertainment, but as a place of intellectual and spiritual enlightenment. The gift of books, Gass says, “gave a million minds a chance at independence.” He is right, of course. When I begin teaching a creative writing class, I point out that writers are quite possibly the most dangerous people alive. When would-be tyrants overthrow a lawful government, the first people they round up are writers. Why? Because writers are able to communicate ideas clearly, and to infuse them with such power and passion as to move people to action, even martyrdom. I have heard that when Abraham Lincoln met Harriet Beecher Stowe he said: “So this is the little lady who started the war.” Slavery had been debated in this country for a hundred years, but it took a novelist to inflame the fires of righteous indignation into the conflagration of civil war.

So far, so good, but I digress. Somewhere in the course of Gass’ essay, I began to sense a change in tone, and it became clear that he and I were on divergent paths. Perhaps I should have been clued in by his title: “In Defense of the Book.” I might have asked myself: what, exactly, about books needs defending?

Most of us are aware that publishing has changed significantly in the last fifty years. Whereas there were once hundreds of magazines and periodicals paying for fiction, today there are only a few dozen. We, as readers and writers, are concerned about the corporatization of pub-
lishing, and the implication that conveys. Publishers place profits ahead of principles. They sacrifice art for entertainment. They replicate successful formulas rather than invest in innovation.

As editor of a literary magazine, I am distressed to learn that the average post-graduate reads fewer than five books a year. As a teacher I am concerned when college students appear in my classroom without ever having finished a novel. As a writer, I am saddened when I read that the remaining literary magazines and independent publishers are in severe financial distress. We live in a changing world, on this we all agree. Books, as we know them, are endangered. What Gass and I do not agree on is the cause of that danger, or the means of their preservation.

One of my points of departure with Gass came when he took what I thought was the peculiar step of defining what a book is. He says that:

We shall not understand what a book is, and why a book has the value many persons have, and is even less replaceable than a person, if we forget how important to it is its body, the building that has been built to hold its lines of language safely together through many adventures and a long time. Words on a screen have visual qualities, to be sure, and these darkly limn their shape, but they have no materiality, they are only shadows, and when the light shifts they’ll be gone. Off the screen they do not exist as words. They do not wait to be reseen, reread; they only wait to be remade, relit. I cannot carry them beneath a tree or onto a side porch; I cannot argue in their margins….

Gass offers us a definition by default: not what a book is but what it isn’t. By inference, Gass attacks the electronic media. He says, in effect, that books are printed on paper, not “limned” on screen, and that increasing fascination with electronics is to be blamed for the book’s impending demise.

What an odd argument. I can almost picture King Nebuchadnezzar berating his scribes saying: “What’s up with this parchment stuff? Why, when I was a boy we wrote on clay tablets with a pointy stick. Now there’s a book that’ll last you a lifetime. A couple of centuries and this
parchment will be dust on the library floor."

What, then, is a book? In the 4th millennium B. C. E., the Babylonians wrote by means of wedgelike strokes impressed with a stylus on wet clay tablets which were then dried or baked. The normal Babylonian and Assyrian writing used a large number (300–600) of arbitrary cuneiform symbols for words and syllables; some had been originally pictographic. There was an alphabetic system, too, making it possible to spell a word out, but because of their adaptation from Sumerian, a different language, there were many ambiguities. A single symbol could be used to represent a concept, an object, a simple sound or syllable, or to indicate the category of words requiring additional definition. Hardly efficient, but close to permanent.

The oldest proper "manuscripts," found in Egyptian tombs, were written on papyrus, and date from about 3500 B. C. E. But parchment, durable, foldable, erasable, and because both sides could be written on; gradually supplanted papyrus, and most surviving ancient manuscripts are parchment. Parchment is made from animal skins. The skins are soaked in water, treated with lime to loosen the hair, scraped, washed, stretched, and dried, and then rubbed with chalk and pumice.

Although paper was invented in China in the 2nd century C. E., it was not known in Europe until the 11th century. Johann Gutenberg is usually credited with the invention of printing from movable type, a method that, with refinements and increased mechanization, remained the principal means of printing until the late 20th century. His hand-set type was printed on handmade paper. Similar printing had been done earlier in China and Korea. In China printing from movable woodblocks was invented by Pi Sheng in 1040, and printing with movable type made of clay was also prevalent. In Korea, movable copper type was invented as early as 1392. Europeans thought to have preceded Gutenberg in printing include Laurens Janszoon Koster, of Holland, and Pamfilo Castaldi, of Italy. In Europe parchment gave way to paper for use in books only after the advent of printing. Parchment is still used for certain documents, diplomas, and bindings.

There you have, in brief, the history of writing from clay tablets to papyrus, to parchment, to paper, spanning the fourth millennium B. C. E. until the fourteenth century of our Common Era. With the invention of the printing press, the mass production of paper, and the rise of the
middle class through the industrial revolution, books became cheap enough to be widely distributed to the general public, and the general public literate enough to appreciate them. Books exist in this particular form as a matter of convenience and economics, not out of some culturally superior imperative. One cannot argue that books were “invented” with the printing press. Books have existed in many forms over the millennia. Gass’ assertion that a book is its body is simply not true. The bodies of many books have passed away, but the information contained therein lives on; to wit: there are no existing copies of any of the original gospel accounts, yet the Bible survives. More accurately, then, we must conclude that a book is the information contained in the body, not the body itself.

This brings us back to the topic of electronic books. So what if, as Gass says, electronic texts are “remade” every day? Do we not do the same thing with paper books? One begins to question Gass’ hysteria about the evils of this (apparently) natural process of social evolution. Gass, himself, lays the foundation for a counter-argument when he cites 15th century concerns about books saying: “The advent of printing was opposed (as writing was) for a number of mean and self-serving reasons, but the fear that it would lead to the making of a million half-baked brains, and cause the illicit turning of a multitude of untrained heads, as a consequence of the unhindered spread of nonsense was a fear that was also well founded.” In other words, the nay-sayers of Gutenberg’s day decried books, saying that untrained—or inferior—minds could not manage higher thought, that the fast and easily accessible flow of information would corrupt men and divert their technology to illicit means. And this, of course, is exactly what happened.

Not long after publishing the Gutenberg Bible, printers were busy cranking out pornography, romance novels, revolutionary tracts, and advertising for washing machines. The same process that announced the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, Common Sense, the Gettysburg Address, the Charter of the United Nations, Harper’s Magazine, and The Best American Spiritual Writing of 2000 also produced Hustler, Mein Kampf, Gone with the Wind, Daffy Duck, and God knows what all else. With people, it’s a package deal. You take the good with the bad. But on this we agree: that we owe much to the book—or more specifically to the availability of the information con-
So why should we be surprised if it is the same with the internet? Yet this seems to have caught Gass unprepared, for he says:

So there will be books. And if readers shut their minds down the better to stare at pictures that rarely explain themselves; and if readers abandon reading to swivel-hip their way through the interbunk, picking up scraps of juicy data here and there and rambling on the e-mail in that new fashion of grammatical decay, the result will be to make real readers, then chief among the last who are left with an ability to reason, rulers. Books make the rich richer, books will make the smart smarter.

Am I mistaken, or did Gass’ argument just take a decidedly nasty turn? Because I use e-mail, shop, research, and (have mercy) read on the internet, am I supposed to become colonized? Am I to be fitted for shackles? But that’s not all. According to Gass, “at the end of all those digital delivery channels thrives a multitude of pips whose continuous squeaking has created static both loud and distressing.”

Ouch! I feel positively pixilated.

But if we meditate on the matter with compassion, we may come to see that the real issue fueling Gass’ testy response to the internet and electronic publishing is one of control. While Gass argues that the rise of the internet will leave book lovers as “rulers,” I suspect that what he really fears is being left behind by this new technology. To the same extent that Gass experiences a loss of power and control, he lashes out in anger towards what most of us sense will be, must be, the future of publishing. And we know that this future is inevitable for the same sound, fundamental reasons that Gutenberg’s press changed the world. It allows us access to information with unprecedented speed and cost efficiency.

Gass writes that, “[i]n the ideal logotopia, every person would possess his own library and add at least weekly if not daily to it. The walls of each home would seem to be made of books, wherever one looked one would see only spines....” A pleasant thought, but I would be willing to wager my next year’s salary against his that I have more books available online than he has in his home. If you visit the Online Books
Page (http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/), you will find that they have over 16,000 of the world’s great books available online for free, a library that expands, as Gass advises, daily. Want to read Shakespeare? Swift? Joyce? Wordsworth? Shelley? Thoreau? Lao-Tzu? They’re there, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Even supposing one got the bargain basement price of $2.00 per volume (and many of these books are not available at any price), one would spend more than $32,000 to acquire them. Reading one book a day it would take more than 43 years to complete reading my library. No, I’m afraid Mr. Gass’ library doesn’t have a chance, and that might be what galls him the most: that any poor fool with a computer now possesses his or her own rival to the library at Alexandria. And imagine the chaos if all books were someday available online? Perhaps that is Gass’ worst fear. But how could anyone object to the widest distribution of books ever achieved by mankind? It makes Gass’ underlying motives appear suspect, at best.

One may forgive Gass, who published his essay in 1999, for appearing technically behind the times. After all, technology is advancing at exponential rates. When he says that he cannot retire to his favorite shade-tree with a book and write arguments in the margin, he is, as we know, mistaken. Ebooks.org, a non-profit site dedicated to disseminating information about e-books products and services, boasts eleven hand-held devices available to consumers between $149 and $899. Most of these include keyboards that allow readers to annotate their e-texts, and software that allows them to write letters, send and receive e-mail, and surf the web via cellular phone; not to mention search tools computers offer that books cannot.

In all fairness, the site also acknowledges that the e-book is an idea whose time may not have come, news I am certain Gass will greet with enthusiasm. E-books.org cites a recent article in the New York Times (April 22, 2002) to the effect that Microsoft, among others, has withdrawn its support for the annual Frankfurt eBook Awards, that e-books are not big sellers, and that public acceptance is building at a slower rate than businesses and investors anticipated.

But this doesn’t mean it won’t come to pass. No doubt there will be paper books well into the foreseeable future. People—especially those connected with academia, who both read and produce a signifi-
A recent article in *Pop Matters*, by Phoebe Kate Foster, got a lot of circulation among magazine editors. Foster noted that reading materials account for “0.5% of the average American budget.” We spend more money on alcohol, cigarettes, lottery tickets, and chocolate than we do on books and magazines. And this survey does not differentiate between readers purchasing Shakespeare and those subscribing to Sol-
dier of Fortune. She goes on to report that “of all the types of publications facing tight times and the threat of extinction at the beginning of the 21st century, perhaps the most dramatically endangered is the literary journal, the long-standing bastion of free expression and creative endeavor in prose and poetry.”

Foster relied heavily on interviews with editors of many of America’s leading literary journals. Naomi Horii, of Many Mountains Moving, observed that “this is a particularly tough time, with factors such as cuts in funding, increasing postage rates, decreasing readership, and more chain bookstores and distributors refusing to carry lit magazines.” Pam McCully, co-editor of Lynx Eye, says: “the economics of small magazine publishing is brutal.” Howard Junker, of ZYZZYVA, observes that “the future is always grim. Death is always at the door. These times are desperately bleak.”

Magazines may occasionally find wealthy benefactors to bequeath endowments sufficient to support them in perpetuity, but these instances are rare. Most magazines stagger along from grant to grant and never achieve real financial stability. And there are other problems in the industry. Don Lee, of Ploughshares, noted that many of today’s magazines were “founded as shoestring operations thirty of forty years ago by people from the ‘60’s culture who wanted to ‘do their own thing’ creatively as a counterreaction to commercial publications. These people are now retiring, and some are retiring their magazines, as well.”

Recent discussion on the CLMP (Council of Literary Magazines and Presses) listserv has centered on funding problems, and included a suggestion from one editor to require writers to purchase subscriptions before submitting stories for consideration. I’m going to quote this anonymously, for obvious reasons:

Another possible approach that would get rid of the “vanity press” aspect would be to require proof of current subscription to ANY (let’s say) three lit mags, as a condition of submission. These would not have to include the mag being submitted to. This would demonstrate that those submitting were actively supporting the publishing community they want to belong to. Even (especially?) famous writers could reasonably be expected to subscribe to three lit mags. Given the subscription rates of most
CLMP members, it would be a commitment of less than $100 year.

This would probably also have the benefit of discouraging a number of the unusable submissions that nobody wants to spend time on anyway. At the same time, it wouldn’t prevent people who met the three-mag requirement from submitting to many different places, as would be the case if there was a strict “subscribe to us before we consider your submission” policy.

If enough mags went for this in a consortium arrangement, it could also be a good form of promotion. If everyone’s submission guidelines included a list of all the participating magazines with a blurb or a web site address for each, would-be submitters would have an incentive to check out titles they were unfamiliar with in order to make up their quota. They wouldn’t be restricted to those on the list, but just having the list would encourage people to try something new and not just go for (perhaps) *Granta* or some other well-known titles.

My response to this proposal was to ask: How desperate can times be if magazines must resort to what smells like *blackmailing* authors into supporting them? Are magazines to become vanity presses? What’s next? Do we sell publication space like stadium names to the highest bidder? Though there was a murmur of support for this subscription consortium, I do not give it any serious credence. It is, however, a sign of the severe financial distress affecting literary publishing today.

But before we all fall on our swords, I would like to tell you a story from my years as an undergraduate. The University of Washington sponsors an undergraduate literary magazine called *Bricolage*. They have (or had) an annual budget of less than $1000 dollars. The magazine looked terrible—when last I saw it, it had a construction paper cover—and I have seen high school literary magazines that put it to shame. So when I volunteered to serve on the staff of the *Bricolage*, I suggested that their resources might be better invested in online publication. My proposal was shot down, and nursing my sorely wounded ego, I set out to prove them wrong.

It took me nearly a year to secure funding, and I am greatly indebted to the Mary Gates Foundation, who provided me with a re-
search grant of $4,500 to offset my startup expenses. With their backing, I was able to found *Carve Magazine*, an online journal dedicated to literary fiction in the tradition of *Story Magazine*. Three years later I find myself at the helm of a bimonthly online magazine with a monthly readership of more than 4,000 in forty countries worldwide. We will publish between 70 and 90 stories this year. We also publish an annual printed “best of” anthology, and sponsor a very good writing contest, the Raymond Carver Short Story Award at *Carve Magazine*.

*Carve Magazine* was the second online literary magazine accepted for membership in CLMP. I consider that a sure sign of three things: (1), that online magazines are no longer the domain of high school dropout Nazi skateboarders publishing hate manifestos, (2) that editors of other literary magazines recognize that they must adapt if they are going to survive these troubled financial times, and (3) that online magazines are an integral part of the sorting out process which will determine the shape of publishing for the next one hundred years.

Naomi Horii, of *Many Mountains Moving*, says that “the literary magazines that will survive … are those that can evolve with changing needs.” Hilda Raz, of *Prairie Schooner*, reports that “many print journals are adding an online component to provide depth—interviews with authors, indices to volumes, videos, historical background, and such…” *Harper’s*, like most commercial magazines, has an online presence. Even *Bricolage* went online this year.

Of course, all online magazines are not equal. Some are experimental. They can be good or bad, but that is to be expected as innovators test the waters of a new medium. There are, to be sure, hucksters, shysters, and hoodlums of every sort, but these die almost as quickly as they appear. Interspersed among them are many dedicated, competent, and qualified survivors who plug away with a grim determination to see this revolution through.

Good online magazines, like good print magazines, adhere to certain standards. Their editors do not self-publish. They have editorial committees of qualified readers. They offer regular publication schedules and stick to them. They may or may not charge for subscriptions, but they *never* charge for submissions. Contests are judged fairly by well-known authors. They belong to trade organizations such as CLMP, or associate with writing programs such as the AWP.
And we may not eliminate paper completely. *Carve Magazine* offers both electronic and paper versions of every story we publish. Beginning with our March 1, 2002 edition, we post every story online in HTML and PDF formats. This means that readers may view stories onscreen, or download and print them in booklet format. This, I believe, is the future of magazine publishing, a combination of the best of both worlds. And we do this with an annual budget of less than $3000. How? We have a volunteer staff, *and we publish online*.

The cost effectiveness of electronic publication will virtually eliminate traditional magazines within ten years. A few may survive, as they should, but there is not enough money to support all those currently in existence. *Carve Magazine* publishes the equivalent of about 200 pages of printed fiction every two months. Can you imagine the savings in postage alone as we reach more than 4000 readers in 40 countries? Paper publications cannot compete with electronics in terms of cost effective distribution.

There is something similar afoot in book publishing. You may have heard of POD—print on demand publishing. What this means is that a publisher can acquire a book and store it in a computer. When a customer orders a copy, they purchase it online, and the order goes directly to a printer who prints, binds, and ships the book in a matter of minutes. The technology is in place and commercially available. Small publishers may now offer books without large investment in inventory and storage. It makes small press publishing cost effective again, though high volume sellers are more profitable when published in large runs. I strongly believe that this melding of technology and printing is the intermediate step in the migration of books and periodicals from paper to pixels. Expanding this small press market through POD technology will create opportunities for writers—especially those whose work large, commercial publishers consider too risky for investment.

My grandfather, who steered our family business through the depression, once remarked to me that an ice age might have killed the dinosaurs, but mammals seemed to have done all right. I believe in writers. I believe in publishers, too, and in electronics. What I don’t believe is Professor Gass. Contrary to his fears, electronic publishing does not represent the death of the book. More likely, it represents its salvation, and perhaps that of the writer along with it.
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