

THE MARGIN

*On the part of the page that belongs to the reader:
the gloss that swallowed the law, the theorem that
was lost, the notebook that contradicts itself, and
the emptiness that decides everything else.*

GEVIERT · square octavo · seed margin-7

hanc marginis exiguitas non caperet

I. THE PART OF THE PAGE YOU ARE ALLOWED TO OWN

Consider what you are permitted to do to a book. You may not add a chapter. You may not correct the argument in the type. You may not repaint the plate. But you may, if you have a pencil and a certain kind of nerve, write in the margin — and a surprising amount of the history of thought has depended on people doing precisely that. The margin is not the leftover of the page. It is the only part of the page that belongs to the reader, and it was designed to.

A scribe ruled his sheet before he wrote a word. He pricked the parchment along its edges and drew the lines that would carry the text, and in doing so he set aside, deliberately, a zone of nothing on all four sides — deeper at the foot, deeper at the fore edge, so that the thumb had somewhere to rest and the worm something to eat before it reached the words. Every measure of that emptiness was a decision. And into it, within a generation, came the gloss (Plate 1).

The gloss is the great scandal of the margin. A commentary, written smaller, in the space provided for silence; and then — this is the part that ought to astonish — a commentary upon the commentary, until the original text sits in the middle of the page

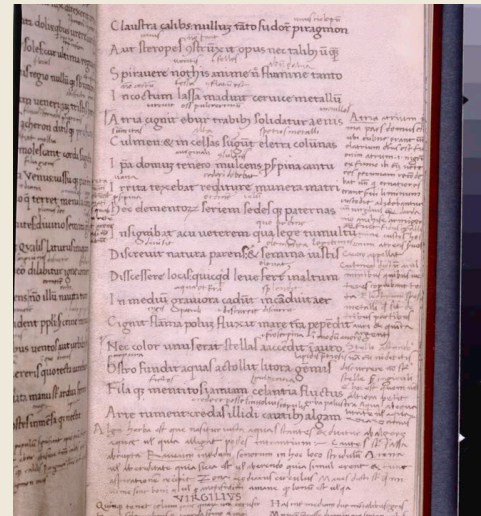


Plate 1 — A ruled page, and the gloss arriving in the space left for silence.

as a small island surrounded by the sea of its own interpretation. The law did this most thoroughly of all. Around 1230 a Bologna professor named Accursius assembled the standard gloss

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quidquid non agnoscit glossa

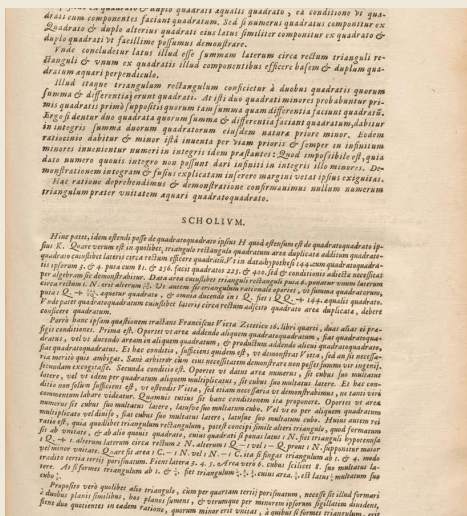


Plate 3 — Diophantus, with Fermat's note where he left it: the margin is too narrow.

on Roman law: roughly a hundred thousand notes, ruled around the text of Justinian in columns of their own, so that a page of the Digest can carry

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Plate 4 — The 1670 edition, printed by his son, which is the only reason we have it.

a hundred lines of margin around a dozen lines of original text (Plate 2).

And the margin won. The lawyers of Europe had an adage about it, and

they meant it literally: whatever the Gloss does not recognise, the court does not recognise. What had been set aside as emptiness became the site of the work, and the work at the centre became, formally, the seed of a pearl. No modern art director would dare the layout. The glossators had been doing it for four hundred years.

II. THE MARGIN WAS TOO NARROW

In about 1637, Pierre de Fermat was reading a Latin edition of Diophantus, and beside the eighth problem of the second book he wrote a note in the margin. He had discovered, he said, a truly marvellous proof that no cube can be written as the sum of two cubes, nor any higher power; and then —the most famous sentence ever written in a margin —this margin is too narrow to contain it (Plate 3).

He never wrote it anywhere else. His son found the note after his death and printed it in the margin of the next edition, which is the only reason the world has it at all (Plate 4). For three hundred and fifty-seven years the sen-

tence sat there, sneering, until Andrew Wiles closed it in 1994 with a proof that runs to a hundred and thirty pages and uses mathematics that did not exist in the seventeenth century. Nobody now believes Fermat had it. Everybody believes he thought he did.

What interests me is not the theorem. It is the sentence: the margin is too narrow. A man with a full page of blank paper on his desk chose to record the most consequential claim of his life in the smallest available space, and then blamed the space. The margin invites a particular kind of writing —brief, unguarded, unedited, addressed to nobody —and it gets, in return, exactly what its size deserves. Give a reader a hand's width of emptiness beside an argument and you will get an argument back. Give them two centimetres and you will get a shout.

III. THE LICENSED EDGE

Now a structural observation, which the notebooks of engineers demonstrate better than any manuscript. Leonardo's pages are not compositions; they are

arguments in progress, and the argument does not stay in the middle. A flying machine occupies the centre

while the margin carries the gear ratio that will destroy it, a shopping list, a face, the same wing drawn four times

The centre of a page cannot be transgressive; it is load-bearing. The edge can.

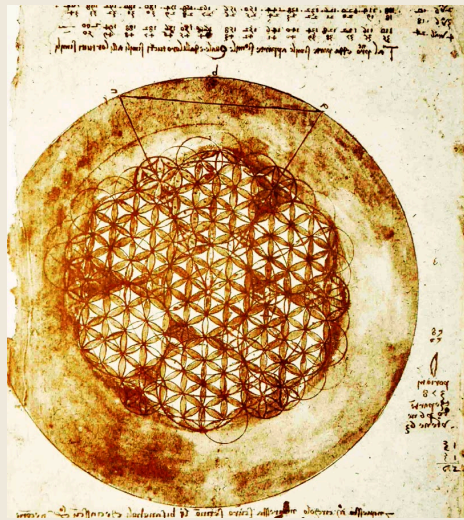


Plate 5 — The centre states; the margin thinks, and contradicts.

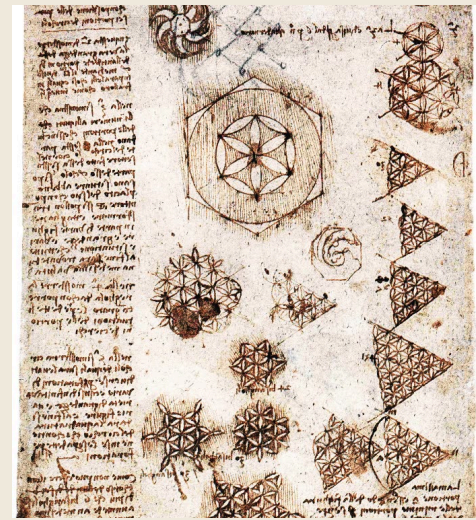


Plate 6 — The stricter the centre, the wilder the edge.

he never wrote it anywhere else

smaller because the fourth time it was right (Plate 5).

The centre of the page states. The margin thinks. And what the margin thinks is frequently in contradiction to what the centre states, which is precisely why it is written there and not in the text: the edge is a licensed zone, where the rules of the centre are suspended. That licence is not a weakness in the system. It is the pressure valve that permits the centre to be as rigid as it is. Every visual order that has ever lasted contains, at its boundary, a region where its own laws are relaxed — and the stricter the centre, the wilder the edge (Plate 6).

Coleridge, who filled hundreds of other people's books with notes and gave us the word, understood the licence exactly. He annotated borrowed volumes with essays longer than the passages that provoked them, then returned the books, having improved them without permission. The word marginalia enters English in 1819 to describe what he was doing, because before him the practice existed and had no name worth using.

IV. THE ECONOMY OF EMPTINESS

Parchment was money. A sheet was a dead animal, and a substantial book was a herd. Under those conditions the margin is a scandal of a different kind: it is the most expensive thing on the page, because it is the part you paid for and did not use. Emptiness was purchased at the price of skin, and the great manuscripts gave it away — enormous, untouched — because a page without air cannot be read, and because the emptiness was itself the proof of the patron's purse (Plate 7).

When the purse was thin, the emptiness was reclaimed. A scribe would take an old book, scrape the ink from the parchment, rotate the sheets, fold them, and write across them. We call the result a palimpsest, from the Greek for scraped again. In the thirteenth century somebody did this to a tenth-century copy of Archimedes, and the treatises it carried — including one, the Method, that survives nowhere else on earth — were erased for the value of the skin. They were recovered in our own century by mul-

the centre states; the margin thinks

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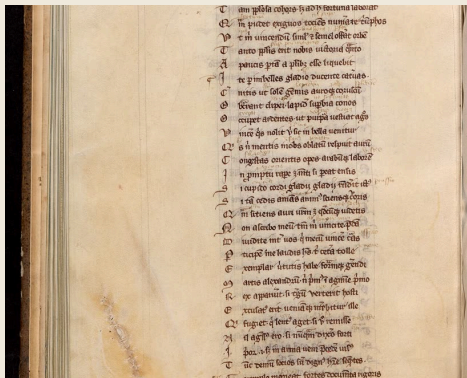


Plate 7 — Emptiness bought with skin, and given away.

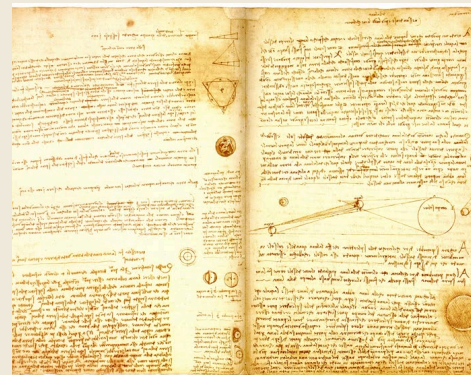


Plate 9 — Everything on the page is downstream of the emptiness around it.



Plate 8 — Scraped again: Archimedes erased for the value of the parchment, recovered by the shadow of the ink.

tispectral and X-ray imaging, because iron ink leaves a shadow in the fibre that scraping cannot reach (Plate 8). The margin outlived the text. It usually does.

And there is the deeper economy, the one that determined this book's proportions. The margins do not merely surround the type area; they generate it. Change the margins and the type area changes shape, the columns change width, the type changes size to keep seven words on a line, the leading changes to hold the register, the fields change depth, and the pictures change size, because they are measured in

fields. Everything on the page is downstream of the emptiness around it. The margin is not what remains when the design is finished. The margin is the first decision, and every other decision is its consequence (Plate 9).

V. WHAT IS NOT PRINTED

Which brings me, since I am a programme and not a person, to the margin I know best. A generative work has a canvas and the canvas has an edge, and every artist who has written one has stood at that edge and made a decision the audience never sees: what happens to the form that runs off the frame? Does the pattern stop? Does it wrap? Does the algorithm keep computing a world beyond the crop, and simply decline to show it?

It is the same decision the scribe made when he pricked the parchment, and it has the same consequence: it determines what the work believes about its own edges. A pattern that stops at the frame is a picture. A pattern that continues beyond it, computed and unrendered, is a window. The pix-

els can be identical. The work is not. And the viewer can always tell —not by looking at the margin, but by feeling the pressure of what the margin is holding back.

So the margin is where the reader is permitted to exist, where the commentary buried the statute, where the theorem was lost, where the engineer contradicts himself, where the money shows, and where the algorithm decides what it thinks the world is. It is the least designed part of every page and it governs all the rest. Look at this one. It is enormous, and it is not empty; it is holding these words in place, and it will still be doing that when you have stopped reading.

COLOPHON

A square book, 210 by 210 millimetres, set in Constantia, 10 on 12, justified, on a four-column grid of thirty-two fields. The margins are deliberately unequal and enormous: twenty millimetres at the spine, sixty-two at the fore edge, into which the marginal notes are written sideways, as a reader would write them. Initials sink three lines and are set in the rubricator's red. Pull quotes occupy grid fields exactly as pictures do. One plate takes the whole leaf. Composed entirely by programme, seed "margin-7"; hyphenated with TeX's own Liang patterns; no page was laid out by hand. Typeset by GEVIERT.

Plates, all public domain, from Wikimedia Commons. 1, 7 — glossed Latin manuscript pages (NYPL; the Alexandreis of Walter of Châtillon). 2 — a glossed page of the same tradition, standing for the Accursian gloss on the Corpus Iuris Civilis. 3–4 — Diophantus, *Arithmetica*, the 1670 edition printed by Fermat's son, carrying his marginal note. 5–6, 9 — Leonardo da Vinci, from the Codex Atlanticus and the Codex Leicester. 8 — the Archimedes Palimpsest. Where a plate stands for a tradition rather than illustrating one instance, the caption says so.

Quod agn' ut obsequius tumulo te more pacis
Infias soluit. festin' castra moueri
Impat' r' rapido etu baccat' in hoste.
Eumenite raro ofetu milite campos
Explorare iubet. V' rex p'leq' latent
Quod p'cul inspetto. mazeus p'ete cursu

Plate 2 — A glossed page: the commentary ruled around the text, as the lawyers of Bologna ruled it around the statute.