Reviews


As creatures of paradox, medieval marginalia have always been central to discussions of meaning in medieval art, at least in part because they so fiercely resist interpretation. To dismiss their mischief as nothing more than fun and games would be a serious mistake, yet they tenaciously defy our efforts to take them seriously. No less than they resist the exact taxonomies of a biologist, their protein, hybrid forms baffle the iconographer’s classifications and the style historian’s rubrics. Moreover, their riotous antics mock our most hallowed cultural categories, just as they subvert the sacred conventions of medieval culture. At first glance, this topsy-turvy world appears tangential, at best a picturesque gloss to the written word. Yet its inhabitants challenge the logocentric routines of medieval art history. Like the annotations around the edges of a book, these irreverent, ribald images inevitably distract us, disrupting our conventional habits of thought and forcing us to reconsider to what extent their playfulness is an integral part of their power.

No viewer, medieval or modern, felt this power more keenly than Bernard of Clairvaux, who complained, “in short [of] so plentiful and astonishing a variety of contradictory forms . . . that one would rather read in the marble than in books and spend the whole day wondering at every single one of them than in meditating on the law of God.” ¹ In contrast, Michael Camille offers us a book that directs and instructs us simultaneously, in part because images are given as much play as texts. Camille’s pages teem with ideas that, like medieval hybrids, are protean in their inventiveness. Rather than condemning the margins of medieval art, Camille celebrates them in animated, even exuberant prose, arguing in the process that their often overlooked representations pose as many problems as the center that more often has riveted our attention.

The margin offers an ideal opportunity for postmodern theorizing, and Camille’s book capitalizes on a mass of recent literature coming from various disciplines.² The author apes his subject with the same self-conscious mimicry he attributes to medieval artisans and, with a more reminiscent of his previous publications, most notably The Gothic Idol, enacts the very processes he seeks to describe, one of the most appreciable qualities of his writing. Camille presents himself as a hybrid of a scholar, a sort of art history and subverting its center. As drawn by him, that disciplinary core has defined itself in terms of strict distinctions between form and content and High and Low—categories he seeks to break down. In keeping with his contrarian stance, Camille inverts and confounds the rubrics that have dictated the debate over the meaning of marginalia. Polar terms, be they high versus low, sacred versus secular, conscious versus unconscious, are invoked, only to be collapsed and conflated. This is the “edge” to which Camille’s title refers, a border where things meet and mingle, rather than as a clear, categorical boundary. Conceived for a popular as well as a scholarly audience, Image on the Edge aims to break down all sorts of oppositions, not just between text and image or among its eclectic mix of methodologies, but also among various types of reader.

Yet not everything in this enormously successful book is so admirable or persuasive. No matter how legitimate his challenge to conventional patterns of thought, the picture Camille paints, like the creatures he apes, itself is a caricature. Camille’s study is an engaging, yet irritating essay, full of enormous intellectual energy, but showing every sign of having been written too hastily. In part, the author intends to aggravate: like the simian creatures that populate the periphery of medieval art, he is deliberately irrelevant and parodic, placing himself, sometimes rather precariously, beyond conventional historical norms. What we are left with is an essay that, like the imagery it describes, raises issues of central importance, yet also hovers at the edges of its topic.

Curiously, the one polarity left unchallenged by Camille is that between the so-called “old” and “new” art histories. In fact, his work builds productively on the research of a great many predecessors, listed conveniently in his bibliography.³ In contrast, earlier generations of scholars situated the baffling, elusive forms of marginal art somewhere along the spectrum of meaning and non-meaning, with individual interpretations tending to either extreme of the dichotomy, distractive or didactic. Coupled with this polarity stood a second, the freedom or non-freedom of the medieval artist, and, often only by implication, yet a third—popular or elite culture, with the disordered “low life” of the margins opposed to the “high” art of texts and their narrative illustrations. Either marginalia were rooted in texts (and, hence, the dictates of patrons), or else the images, freed of their textual moorings, floated free, all too often to drift entirely out of art-historical view. Violators of aesthetic as well as cultural norms, they escaped the categorizations of style history as well as iconographic analysis. Too unruly to be organized as “ornament,” their fantastic forms were dismissed, either as “jeux d’esprits” or private fantasies, or else as ad-lib creatures of comedy, decorative doodles without significance.

The alternative, making marginalia part of the symbolic codes governing most medieval images, has, in most instances, proven no less misleading.⁴ Moralizing readings grant marginal “half-breds” a peripheral place in a moral universe centered in the Word, rather like the monstrous races inhabiting the debased fringes of Christian creation. By making marginalia dependent on the discipline of coherent, if at times, covert, programs, we deny them any autonomy whatsoever. At best they serve as advocatus diaboli fighting a losing battle against the textual authorities at the center. To interpret marginalia as moralizing exempla reduces their complexity to a deceptive Manichean dualism. Some may be decorative, others didactic, but most, in keeping with their very modus vivendi, inhabit a hybrid realm in which issues of meaning and non-meaning cannot be defined in such categorical terms.

Camille is not the first to recognize that the extremes in this

⁵ For a recent, egregious example, see E. Sniežyska-Stolot, Tajemnice Dekoracji: Pościerka Floralskiego z Dziejów Sredniosłowiańczej Koncepcji Uniwersum, Warsaw, 1992.
exchange represent no more than the opposite faces of the same false coin.6 For example, Creighton Gilbert has collapsed the usual connections between program and patronage, arguing from primary sources that medieval artisans produced images without programmatic meaning at the behest of ecclesiastical patrons.7 The debate seems anachronistic in relation not simply to earlier centuries, but also to our own cultural discourse. At the very least, we are less inclined than a previous generation of medievalists to limit the meaning of images to readings that can be recovered from texts and, in the process, privilege literate over illiterate response (thereby excluding the vast majority of medievalism). Moreover, even if medieval artists were not always under the thumb of patrons and clerics, they could never have been “free” in any modern sense of the word.

For all their apparent libertinism, be it decorative or ethical, marginals perform within the constraints of conventions, if only by way of inversion and parody. Some craftsmen followed these conventions by rote, others with considerable liberty, but for the majority they allowed for variations on specific themes whose ostinato-like regularity can be measured by thumbing the pages of Lillian Randall’s compendium, Images in the Margin of Gothic Manuscripts. No matter how unbridled they appear, marginals formed part of a relatively stable repertory of images shared by artists and audience alike, and thus they had social as well as private, conscious as well as unconscious, significance. Camille underscores their public currency by emphasizing that these creatures are by no means confined to the borders of personal prayer books and hence are hardly private in their meanings. As borne out by his illustrations, they appear in any number of other contexts, from monumental sculpture to the so-called “decorative” arts, such as ivory and metalwork, prized by medieval patrons above all others.

The interplay of artist and audience gives Camille his opportunity to interpret marginals in social terms. In a wide-ranging introductory chapter, “Making Margins,” the author mimics his own method, displacing what is in essence the heart of his book to its opening edge. The “freedom” of the margins, Camille argues, is illusory: for all their apparent spontaneity, the cavorting apes and convoluted hybrids of this border region lack any autonomy. These parodic anti-illustrations, he argues, are projections from the center, which, instead of subverting or even contradicting the status quo, ultimately bolster its control, much as a counterpart might at first obscure, then amplify, a dominant melody. Rather than the unfettered expression of popular culture, the margins affirm political, religious, and sexual as well as visual hierarchies. Be it hares hunting knights, apes conducting mass, or women riding men, the topsy-turvy world of the margins imagines the “Other” only to ridicule and recoil from it. By placing the play between center and periphery in a political rather than an aesthetic framework, Camille brings to the fore issues of power and cultural control, so that terms such as center and periphery take on political as well as formal significance.

In collapsing these categories, Camille takes his cue from postmodern theory, in particular, the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin as they have been assimilated into contemporary cultural criticism.8 Central to Camille’s analysis, as to Bakhtin’s, is the concept of carnival, the periodic ritual release from social, sexual, and religious norms. In this view, the margins represent a mirror image of normal society, the “world upside down” in which all conventions have been turned on their heads. But whereas for Bakhtin, carnival culture retained the utopian potential to renew and transform the center, in Camille’s analysis, it remains firmly yoked to the status quo. In his own words, the “gambolling Gothic creatures, whose bodies seem so spontaneous and free-floating . . . are tethered to texts which they can ’play’ upon but never replace” (p. 47). Moreover, contrary to Bakhtin, who argued that the margins represent the freedom in the individuals to which the center deprives them, Camille asserts that the marginals were “not to part of the official iconography of the book . . . and left the illuminators room to extemporize” (p. 40)—and with the other he takes this freedom away: “In saying that marginal imagery is conscious I am not suggesting that it was pre-planned, as were most miniatures . . . It was one area where artists could ’do their own thing,’ which was, of course, always already somebody else’s” (p. 43). The artists who populated the margins have no voices of their own; they are reduced to dummies who give voice to the “Other” imagined by the vetriciologist at the center.

Camille, of course, is not obliged to compare with Bakhtin: no less than the Bakhtinian spirit at the heart of Bakhtin’s analysis, Camille’s bawdy irreverence toward modern scholarship is part of a ritual of dissent. Yet it is not always clear that Camille characterizes Bakhtin either consistently or correctly, especially when it comes to the relationship between “High” and “Low” culture, a distinction that, like all others, is essential to Camille’s argument, even as he tries to disable it. Camille recites Bakhtin’s position on his opening pages, only to sound his note of disagreement, arguing that in the Flemish Book of Hours traditionally (if erroneously) associated with Marguerite de Beaujeu,9 the marginia, “rather than revealing her participation in what the Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin described as two distinct aspects of medieval life—one sacred and the other profane—situate her neither outside nor inside, but in-between, on the edge” (p. 12). Aron J. Gurevitch, another Russian theorist of popular culture (and other scholars, such as R. M. Berrong), also have reproached Bakhtin for drawing too sharp a distinction between official and popular culture.10 Yet, as Gábor Klimaczy (elaborating on the work of Peter Burke), has asked, “is not this criticism too hoity? . . . When he [Bakhtin] talks about the culture of popular laughter, he emphasizes that it is a culture belonging to the entire people, in other words everybody, without exception, can have a share in it and participate in its creative development. When


9 Camille, 53, is not the first to reject the attribution to Marguerite de Beaujeu; see, e.g., A. Stones, “Le Ms. Troyes 1905, le recueil et ses enlumineurs,” in Wace, La Vie de Sainte Marguerite, ed. H.-E. Keller, Tübingen, 1990, 196, n. 3.

contrasting the culture of popular laughter with official culture, Bakhtin links it not so much with a social class as with institutions (state, Church, civil service, judiciary, court). Instead of making Bakhtin yet another straw man, Camille might have used him to bolster his argument that “if during the Middle Ages patrons had shared the margins with the monkeys, jongleurs and peasants they in reality lorded over, in later centuries the forms of representations split to demarcate distinct class positions” (p. 158).

Like many other scholarly voices appropriated here, Bakhtin’s voice remains barely audible below the surface of Camille’s prose. In contrast, Camille is unsparring in his sallies against the “blinded generations of scholars” with whom he takes issue (p. 31). Given the general audience for whom this book, at least in part, is intended, the author’s reticence in matters historiographical is understandable, but it would easier to digest were it not that, in boldly staking out new territory, Camille often trespasses on turf that has been surveyed by others, if never with quite as much daring. Camille is catholic in his sources—he draws on an invigorating range of modern methodologies—but less open in acknowledging his art-historical ancestry, a reluctance to admit any legitimate line of descent in inter-disciplines, most notably keeping with the self-styled “new” art history. As issue is nothing so pedantic as a footnote here or there, but the author’s larger, all-embracing attitude towards the past. Although attentive to the illusions of historical scholarship, be it romanticism, or so-called “Victorian rationalism,” his postmodern “presentism” comes uncomfortably close to a contemporary version of similar failacies.

By leapfrogging a generation of art-historical literature, Camille can draw his scholarly battle lines more clearly. The same holds true of his treatment of the historical scholarship on “popular” culture in the Middle Ages. Even if one takes into account that Bakhtin’s thesis on Rabelais, completed in 1941, first saw the light of day in 1965, the following decades have witnessed a veritable explosion of scholarship on the interrelationship between popular and elite cultures in the Middle Ages and early modern Europe, some of it, of course, attributable to the impact of his work, but much of it also exploring divergent directions. In art history, this scholarship has had its greatest impact on studies of peasant imagery in German and Netherlandish art of the late 15th and early 16th centuries. To his credit, Camille extends the reach of this debate back into the previous period. But by overlooking bibliography that has accumulated in later years, most notably lines of thought that have become associated with the idea of the “popularizing” art history of the early 1970s, most notably lines of thought that have become associated with the idea of the “popularizing” art history of the early 1970s, Camille misses the opportunity to explore the implications of this scholarship for the understanding of the medieval past.

11 P. Burke, Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe, New York, 1978, and G. Klimczak, “The Carnival Spirit: Bakhtin’s Theory on the Culture of Popular Laughter,” The Uses of Supernatural Power: The Transformation of Popular Religion in Medieval and Early-Modern Europe, trans. S. Singer, ed. K. Margolis, Princeton, 1990, 22. Elsewhere, Camille recognizes the common nature of so-called “popular” culture, e.g., on p. 69, where he mentions that “Latins literates were part of a broader culture than we tend to think when we separate the religious from the secular.”


18 The same folio, incidentally, serves as the frontispiece to Randall.
defied translation into Latin, by noting that “the discourse of the city was the vernacular babble after Babel” (p. 130). Camille’s (and his editors’) errors, however, turn parts his book into a comparable confusio of tongues.

Camille makes a map of this kind of misreading, arguing that the sexual images scattered in the margins of prayerbooks are based on conscious misprisions, not simply of words, but even of single syllables, which, when isolated from their linguistic context and read in French or English (rather than their original Latin), spell the words for “cunt, ass, or prick” (p. 39). In a fine article, published in 1985, yet another article from Camille’s bibliography, P. F. Gehl offers a vivid reading of a group of scurrilous drawings with sexual and scatalogical subjects in a 14th-century manuscript (University of Chicago, MS 99), arguing that some are “illustrations of single words . . . visual puns, even monsters who shit upon portions of the text.” Gehl’s readings convince where Camille’s often do not, however, in part because he demonstrates that the drawings are consistent in approach and integral to the book’s design, and, more important, that their puns make sense in context: the manuscript is a grammar book, its illustrations a form of subversive anti-gra.

In Camille’s more generalized reading, the medieval illuminator becomes a postmodern punster malgré lui. For example, Camille suggests that the illuminator of the 13th-century Bardolf-Vaux Psalter was prompted to draw a Gryllus—a face with two legs, yet no torso—below the Beatus initial for Psalm 1 by misreading the second verse, “in lege Domini,” as a reference to legs. The spirit of Camille’s reading, however, is killed by the letter: the passage speaks of the delight of the blessed “in the law of the Lord” (pp. 39–40; fig. 18).

Camille’s indifference to “High” or official, institutional culture is a corollary of his attention to “Low” or “popular” traditions. Yet this lack of interest, especially in spirituality and exegesis, distorts his reading of images in what are predominately prayerbooks, just as, in reverse, the immersion of some medieval viewers in currents of “High” culture would have colored their viewing. In his rush to redress the balance between the secular and the sacred, Camille too often reduces the polyomorphic world of the margins to sex and scatology. Even within courtly culture, sex and the body supported a wide range of meanings. Moreover, sexual imagery was not always profane in its significance, witness the erotic metaphors of the mystical tradition sanctioned by the Song of Songs. The most glaring example of such a “ perverse” reading occurs in Camille’s interpretation of the opening folio of the Penitential Psalms in the Grey-Fitzpayn Psalter (p. 38; fig. 17). To the left of the initial with the crucified Christ, a small animal emerges from a burrow in the margin. Camille warns us against misreading this image, even as he does so himself.

When we look at such pages today, we are apt to see them as charming and view the animal “vignettes,” as they are often, erroneously called, as humorous, even childlike. Nothing could be further from their purpose. At the top, and juxtaposed with the Crucifixion, a little squirrel squeezes into its burrow. For French-speaking aristocratic readers such as Joan [Fitzpayn] and her husband, small, furry animals tended to be euphemisms for the sexual organs. . . . The innocent sign in the manuscript page is placed alongside Christ’s crucifixion, which acts as a visual pun, as a hole in the vellum page while, on another level, as a perverse parallel to Christ’s adjacent wound.

Camille’s visual exegesis reads as a bravura gloss on Lucy Sandler’s interpretation of the “bawdy betrothal” in the Ormesby Psalter, where squirrels do, in fact, appear—until, that is, we examine the illustration and recognize the so-called rodent for what it is: the fox of Matthew 8:20 (and Luke 9:58) (“The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air nests, but the son of man hath not where to lay his head.”). At issue is not an arcane symbol accessible only to the learned few, but a commonplace from the Gospels elaborated in late medieval Passion tracts, from which it found its way, directly and indirectly, into panel painting and manuscript illumination. By overlooking this and other traditions of biblical commentary that mediated visual experience for medieval viewers, Camille travesties not only the image, but also any notion of authentic religious aspirations on the part of the patron.

Camille misreads other images in search of social, not sexual, readings. For example, in the Hours of Jeanne d’Evreux, he characterizes the alteliers on fol. 148v as “beggars . . . inspired by the subjugated ‘marmousets,’ a rabble of empty-bellied and open-mouthed folk . . . covering beneath the feet of victorious saints and Church Fathers,” when, in this scene, they are swordsmen. The paupers are at center stage, having their feet washed by Saint Louis, an inversion of High and Low intelligible to an aristocratic audience (p. 136; fig. 73). Camille, however, sees inversions of other kinds, for example, in the margins of the Petites Heures, where a family of barefoot beggars serves not to remind the patron, Jean, 21 J. F. Hamburger, The Rothschild Canticles: Art and Mythsicon in Flanders and the Rhineland circa 1300, New Haven, 1990, chap. 5. In addition to Camille’s own essay, “Gothic Signs and the Surplus: The Kiss on the Cathedral,” in Contexts: Styles and Values in Medieval Art and Literature (Yale French Studies Special Issue), ed. D. Poirson and N. F. Regalado, New Haven, 1991, 151–170, see K. Scheiner, “Er küsse mich mit dem Kuli seines Mundes” (Osculetur me osculo oris sui, Cant. 1, 1): Metaphorik, kommunikative und herrschaftliche Funktionen eines symbolischen Handlung,” Hofische Repräsentation: Das Zeremoniell und die Zeichen, ed. H. Ragotzky and H. Wenzel, Tübingen, 1990, 89–152.
duc de Berry, “of his Christian duty of charity,” but rather, “to distinguish the haves from the have nots, inverting the usual priorities of access to the divinity” (2) (p. 134; fig. 72). No doubt, the duke’s altruism falls short by modern standards, but wealth was a requisite of the mendicant mentality, if only because without it, there would have been nothing to give away. Camille echoes his own opposite, Saint Bernard, who said of the church, “it serves the eyes of the rich at the expense of the poor.” The duke, however, more likely saw in this image a confirmation of his charity.

By losing sight of the religious texts, images, and rituals at the center of much medieval society, Camille inadvertently restores to the margins a measure of the cultural autonomy he seeks to deny them. To the extent that religion and spirituality play any role in his argument, they are, as in the readings just cited, almost inevitably in “bad faith.” Likewise, the “obscurae” and “figurae scatologicae” that Camille collects are not simply the medieval equivalents of dirty jokes, but form an integral part of a larger ritual system. This is not to insist, with some readers, that these images functioned only as allegorical images “within the framework of Christian morality,” but merely to follow Bakhtin, in whose eyes, to quote Klacznay again, “the portraits and manifestations of sexuality and music—although the subject of taboos—achieved a ritual function. They turned into a sacred breaking of prohibitions, festive profanity, orgiastic ceremony, fertility rites and exorcism. . . .” By relating Rabelais’ images to other medieval creations representing the grotesque body, Bakhtin acquaints us with a system that gives us a better understanding of an enigmatic dimension in European culture: the series of strange illustrations in medieval manuscripts, on column capitals and in the paintings of Breughel and Bosch. Camille echoes the laughter of popular culture, but at the same time he misjudges its larger function.

Despite Camille’s warning in his preface that we should not “think of the medieval margins in Postmodern terms” (p. 10), in the body of his text, postmodern and premodern converge. The author’s relentless presentism goes beyond his style, which is full of facile, if catchy, allusions to contemporary issues and agendas (for example, cathedrals as “mass-machines” or the medieval equivalents of the “shimmering Postmodern towers of today’s corporate headquarters”; p. 77). At issue is the “otherness” of the past, which makes as many claims on us as we make of history. “To this kind of historically insensitive thinking,” to cite Gary Morson, “Bakhtin replies, ‘Everything is relative in its relations and manifestations of sexuality and music.’” Not at all adverse to consigning schools of thought to the dustbin of art history, Camille might at times have taken the time to sift through it more carefully.

What does the dustbin yield? The first author who comes to mind is Meyer Schapiro, whose collected essays on Romanesque sculpture are remarkable by their virtual absence from Camille’s argument. Camille openly takes issue with the most familiar of these articles, “On the Aesthetic Attitude in Romanesque Art,” first published in 1947. Still more strongly felt, however, if only as a subtext, is Schapiro’s earlier essay on the sculpture of Souillac. In this article, published eight years earlier, Schapiro established a dynamic interaction, not between anything so facile as form and content, but rather, between two types of content made concrete through styles, as he construed them, one sacred, the other profane, or, in his words, “a dual character of realism and abstraction, of secularity and dogma, rooted in the historical development and social opposition of the time.” Just as pertinent, yet absent from Camille’s discussion, is Rudolph Berliner’s article, “The Freedom of Medieval Art,” well known in Germany (in spite of having been written in English), but often overlooked in this country. Like Schapiro, Berliner wrote in the shadow of World War II, and his conceptual framework is no less revealing of its historical moment. Although of different political persuasions, Berliner, like Schapiro, celebrated the autonomy of medieval artists as a way of affirming a similar possibility in the present. Whereas Schapiro extolled the possibility of secular resistance, Berliner was more ambitious and, as he phrased it, at least in part, should be viewed with respect to his shifting response to the Stalinism of the 1930s, Berliner affirmed the possibility of individual freedom in the midst of his exile from Nazi Germany. For Berliner, freedom found its outlet in “expression,” measured as deviation from the canons of clerical dogma and sanctioned iconography, and its embodiment in the iconographic idiosyncrasies of late medieval devotional images, which flourished despite the condemnations of commentators such as Bernard of Clairvaux, Lucas of Tuy, or Jean Gerson. Apparently unaware of Berliner’s work, Schapiro also made artistic emancipation the centerpiece of his argument. In concluding his analysis of Bernard’s Apologia, he noted that, “the new art is condemned precisely because it is unreligious and an example of a pagan life-attitude which will ultimately compete with the Christian, an attitude of spontaneous enjoyment and curiosity about the world, expressed through images that stir the senses and the profane imagination.”

Even if the iconographic and material premises on which Schapiro based his argument are no longer tenable, his essay remains one of the most ambitious attempts, in O. K. Werckmeister’s formulation, to develop a “finite conceptual code for the sociological reading of style.” Camille is not less ambitious, and, like Schapiro, he recognizes the perils of conceiving the study of marginal forms as a choice between the Scylla of style and the Charybdis of content. Yet

26 Rudolph (as in n. 1), 283.
28 R. W. Robertson, cited by Wentsersdorf (as in n. 27), 12.
29 Klacznay (as in n. 11), 17–18.
31 See now M. Schapiro, “On the Aesthetic Attitude in Romanesque Art,” in Romanesque Art, t: Selected Papers, New York, 1977, 1–27. Camille cites it in the bibliography, although misplaced, under “Shapiro.” I noted only two other errors: the article by Kedar, 1986, cited in n. 88, is omitted from the bibliography; the reference on p. 55 to fig. 26 should be to fig. 25.
34 O. K. Werckmeister’s review of Schapiro’s collected essays on Romanesque art in The Art Quarterly, N.S., ii, 1979, 211–218, sets Schapiro’s scholarship in its political context and also takes issue with his interpretation of style.
35 Werckmeister, 217.
36 Schapiro (as in n. 31), 6–7.
37 Werckmeister (as in n. 34), 213. M. Baxandall, Painting and Expresiveness in Fifteenth Century Italian Painting, 1420–1460, London, 1961; idem, The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany, New Haven, 1980, offer sophisticated sociological readings of style in religious images, without, however, situating them in the religious sphere that provided their primary context. See also P. Burke, “The Social History of Art or the History of Images,” Birmingham Review of Books, ii, 1, 1992, 9–12.
it is in these treacherous waters that his argument occasionally runs aground. He appears not to have consulted Ernst Gombrich’s wide-ranging essay on marginalia, published in 1979 as chapter ten of The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art. No matter how unlikely a forerunner, Gombrich anticipates Camille in several respects, not least in his title, “The Edge of Chaos.” Gombrich also warns that, "as long as we divide the field [of art history] between formal analysis and iconography, the area which concerns us here will inevitably elude us." 38 No doubt Camille would disagree with Gombrich on many issues, above all the role of the unconscious in generating marginalia, which he consistently denies. For Camille, "even the most doodle-like line-endings and pen-flourishes" embody "exactly the opposite of spontaneous unconscious associations" (p. 41). Although both authors follow Freud in insisting that jokes be taken in earnest, Camille emphasizes their "socially recuperative" function rather than their foundation in the unconscious (p. 43). In contrast, Gombrich opens his discussion of marginal ornament by referring to Albrecht Dürer’s definition of it as "Traumwerk." 39 Unwilling to write off marginalia as mere decoration, Gombrich, following one of his teachers, Emanuel Löwy, asks what function these elusive images might have served. Camille does his answer—that they had a "弟兄" function—of course, for example, he argues that the strange beasts on the margins of medieval ecclesiastical structures "are entrusted with the protective gaze of deformed forms [emphasis my own]" (p. 75). Gombrich, however, sees the potency of these creatures residing in their coalescence out of the chaos of emergent form, whereas Camille, reversing the process, views them as mutations or parodies of canonical images: "Marginal images are conscious usurpations" (p. 42). Whereas Gombrich makes critical use of the tradition of formal analysis exemplified by Henri Focillon, noting that "it is the merit of Focillon’s approach to have pointed out the peculiar relationship between form and content in the ornamental tradition of the Middle Ages," 40 Camille chastises Focillon’s student, Baltrusaitis, for having "plucked these forms from their context [and] relegating[ing] marginal art to the merinal position of 'pure decoration'" (p. 31). Gombrich is no less critical of Baltrusaitis’s comparative method—but for different reasons: he failed "to distinguish between those instances of 'diffusion' and those of spontaneous generation." 41 In Gombrich’s words: "What is . . . vital to our understanding of these effects is that the uncertainty of response carries over from the perceptual to the emotional sphere. . . . Not only do the limbs of these composite creatures defy our classifications, often we cannot tell where they may begin or end—they are not individuals . . . there is nothing to hold on to, nothing fixed, the deformatas is hard to 'code' and harder still to remember, for everything is in flux." 42 Rather than returning marginalia from the realm of "pure decoration" to "pure content," Gombrich sees them as occupying a border region, an "edge," precisely because their unrehearsed forms escape the formulas of either ornament or culture.

Camille acknowledges that medieval viewers sensed and feared in "marginal monstruity . . . the capacity of the human imagination to create and combine" (p. 65). But by emphasizing the importance of social conventions (or anti-conventions), Camille devalues the sheer visual wit of this imagery, which is intrinsic to its power to disturb and distract and cannot be attributed to the instructions of a patron, no matter how specific. Recent commentators on the working methods of medieval illuminators have drastically circumscribed their freedom, a justifiable reaction to romantic assumptions of creative autonomy. 43 But the dictates of patrons and the prescriptions of model books can only explain so much. Take, for example, the opening from the so-called Hours of Margaret de Beaune which graces Camille’s cover (also fig. 28): at the lower left, a bird perches on a ruling line; opposite, in the right margin, a naked man warming his legs by a fire is propped up by a pen flourished that threatens, like a fuse, to be consumed by the flames and send him plummeting. In the lower margin, a pair of horse’s leg pop through a porthole-like perforation in the page. No doubt my description fails to convey the wit of these impromptu creations, but that is exactly the point; as Gerhard Schmidt puts it in a wide-ranging essay overlooked by Camille: "Beschreibt man diese unsinnigen Tätigkeiten mit Worten, wird kaum jemand darüber lachen wollen; ihr 'Witz' bedarf der Mitarbeit des Auges." 44 Even outside of narrative contexts, the punning forms of medieval hybrids require that they be seen, not heard. Whatever their meaning, in their final configurations many marginal images could not have been conveyed by anyone in advance, even the artist.

The four chapters that follow Camille’s opening essay are like so many glosses on its central thesis, and, as if to emulate the scattered forms of marginal art, all four are made up of pithy fragments, each with its own jocular heading. In these sections, on monastery, cathedral, court, and city, Camille makes his claim to contextualism. Yet the claim is illusory, for we are offered little evidence other than the images themselves. Without discounting the broad turn in the humanities towards a history of culture conceived as a history of representations—a development that art historians are bound to welcome—it is worth asking whether the author offers us any evidence that might be taken seriously by a social historian. 45 By and large, the images are treated as if they were hermetic sign systems, an approach no less misleading than an exaggerated formalism. Camille’s rejection of a naive naturalism, his observation that “these illusions cannot . . . be taken as evidence of a direct sort about the reality of social experience,” is readily accepted (p. 131). 46 But it


39 Ibid. (as in n. 38), 251.

40 Ibid., 273.

41 Ibid., 271.

42 Ibid., 256.


the notion that there is “nothing outside the image” any less misleading than that there is “nothing outside the text”? In a book on the margins of medieval art, we are told that they tell us little, if anything, about the margins of medieval society. In Camille’s words: “Those who seek to find in marginal images the pure world of ‘folklore’ and ‘popular culture’ should remember that these works of art were not made from or for peasant perceptions. The few glimpses they give us of folk life . . . are screened through the lens of aristocratic perception” (p. 120). The “edge” — herbed by Camille at the outset of his argument here becomes an insurmountable barrier.47 Camille’s argument becomes especially problematic when it comes to the women who, in his word, are “inscribed” in the borders of medieval prayerbooks: “How they [women] are pictured in the margins might at first seem to free them from this passive specular role of doll or icon. But this, too, is an illusion. . . . Women, like peasants, servants and other subjected groups are, in the end, the ones who have to eat shit” (p. 127). One wonders what Mahaut, countess of Artois and Burgundy, a powerful and prolific patron, would have made of this assertion.48 Women such as she were hardly limited to playing puppets or standing on the proverbial pedestal. Even when their political authority was circumscribed, as patrons of the arts and letters, women, depending on their circumstances, had considerable clout.49 In convents as well as at court, aristocratic women acted as “misters of ceremonies” or self-styled role models (or, at times, anti-models).50 Whether as sponsors or readers, they also played a formative role in the emergence of novel genres, religious as well as courtly, especially, it might be noted, in France and Flanders, the very regions from which Camille culls most of his illustrations.51 The “coincidence” offers an overlooked opportunity for genuine contextual study. To put medieval representations of women, whether verbal or visual, in context, we need to look beyond the book.

For all its would-be iconoclam, Camille’s study remains bound to structures and shibboleths that one would have expected the author to disown. For example, he rehearses without qualification Millard Meiss’s provocative, yet problematic, thesis that the fate of illusionism in turn to painting reflects “the conflicts and crises over space and power in the decades following the Black Death”52 (p. 134). Equally tired and untested is his argument that the chivalric rituals of late medieval courtly culture represent “a dream of a lost order,” the thesis that provides the framework for his analysis of marginalia in romance manuscripts. Elaborating Sandra Hindman’s interpretation of the illustrated romances of Chrétien de Troyes,53 Camille argues that “while they [knights] placed others in the margins, they themselves were already halfway there” (p. 100). In response to this “widespread view, [that] medieval chivalry had passed its prime after the thirteenth and certainly after the first half of the fourteenth century,” and that, “at best the chivalric ideal might linger as a haunting pipe dream, fed by nostalgia rather than conviction,” F. P. van Oostrom, author of a recent, much heralded study of court culture in late medieval France, “thrusts upon us the shadow cast by that celebrated work to take a less blinkered look at late medieval chivalry. All, moreover, come to surprisingly similar conclusions and suggest that the prevailing picture of chivalry in decline must, at the very least, be revised.”54 Given that Camille has proven himself an unabashed and able champion of late medieval art, it is surprising to find him echoing Huizinga’s portrayal of the late Middle Ages as a period of decline and decay, a period of illusions—social and religious as well artistic—“crystallizing into images.” Illusions of all kind dominate Camille’s conclusion, “The End of the Edge,” in many respects the most perplexing part of his argument, if only because it undercuts so much of what precedes it. The “end” to which Camille refers is brought on by perspective, which crowds out the periphery, “making the ‘play’ we have explored defunct. The margins either become a shimmering illusion or an architectural frame, a hole through which one looks towards the center” (p. 154). Camille’s construction recalls Panofsky’s teleological account of late medieval painting, especially his quip that in the 15th century, manuscript illumination “died of an overdose of perspective.”55 But whereas Panofsky viewed the naturalism of Netherlandish painting as a camouflage for symbolism, Camille takes its illusions literally. Echoing John Berger’s Ways of Seeing, Camille makes Alberti’s window into a vitrine, and the image into a fetish of consumption: the accurately rendered objects scattered in the borders of so-called “Ghent-Bruges” manuscripts simulate commodities that mesmerize the mercantile viewer “with a verity that puts a price on them” (p. 137). Why, however, assume that a “naturalistic” image is any more “true to life” than the representation of a peasant in a 14th-century manuscript such as the Luttrell Psalter? Do the baked goods surrounding the suffrage to Saint Bartholomew in the Hours of Catherine of Cleves (fig. 84) imply that her prie-dieu was covered with pretzels? Or do the flowers framing Saint Matthew in the Spinola Hours (fig. 85) compel us to believe that the elaborately entwined acanthus is no less “real”? There is no need to take these images so literally.56 When the coins and tokens of commerce appear in Flemish prayerbooks of the late 15th century, they are, more often than not, distributed in acts of largesse. Moreover, the shower of gold often changes into something more ephemeral, be it manna or blossoms.57 The visual mode may have changed, but the potential for parody remains.58

47 Cf. Schapiro (as in n. 31), 10.

By insisting that so-called "Ghent-Bruges" illumination presents us with a "vacuous mirror, not a beacon of the imagination" (p. 156), Camille contradicts himself by celebrating the imaginative play he previously was at such pains to deny. Earlier we were told that the ludic liberty in the margins was merely an illusion. Now illusionism itself brings play to an end: "What Otto Pächt saw... as profound and playful illusion, I would see as less liberating" (p. 157). The artist as well as his audience become automatons, transfixed by the image. The visual pun is defunct and you stare forever" (p. 156). Falling back on an objective notion of realism rooted in the 19th century, Camille bypasses recent reevaluations of Netherlandish painting, which, no matter how dissimilar in their concerns, see models in its images, not mirrors. In this view, far from providing an "objective" record of reality, Netherlandish panels transform the relationship between artist and audience by injecting the artist's self-consciousness into the work.59 In contrast, Camille argues that in the Middle Ages, "the artist played games with representation that... were deeply self-conscious," but that "by the fifteenth century these games had become more literal illusions" (p. 154).

Camille's characterization of Flemish Books of Hours as "Eyckian mirrors in which the personal paraphernalia of the owner is reflected" (p. 154), conjures up the celebrated image in the Vienna Hours of Mary of Burgundy, in which the patron, reading her prayerbook, contemplates an image of herself in the presence of the Virgin, seen through a window whose silla—a substitute for the margin—is scattered with devotionalia and other precious objects. In this miniature, a self-conscious commentary on Jan van Eyck's Berlin Madonna or the Burgundian Day of Judgment is conveyed. Camille may simply speculate on the ostentation of her surroundings, including, presumably, the prayerbook itself,60 nor, for that matter, the cult image of Virgin and Child in the church at the center. Instead, she confronts a simulacrum of herself at prayer, which makes the process of devotion the image's predominant theme.61 Rather than the proverbial "mirror held up to nature," the image provides a model for the viewer, shaping, not simply "reflecting," her experience. In similar fashion, the convex glass in the so-called Arnolfini Wedding Portrait distorts as much as it mirrors, offering us an image of how we might best understand the function of "realism" in the work. With it, Jan van Eyck reminds us that what at first appears to be little more than a "slice of life," an objective transcript of the visible world, offers a more subjective vision, first his, then the viewer's. Like the borders in Mary of Burgundy's prayerbook, van Eyck's frames, partly real, partly painted, break down the boundary between the natural and the supernatural, the empirical and the supra-sensory, and are among the most sophisticated evocations of the "edge" that Camille takes as his theme.62

Camille's argument that the verisimilitude of late medieval painting offers little more than a materialistic travesty of spiritual realities is consistent with the rest of his argument only so far as it further debunks any notion of authentic religious experience. The idea that the naturalism of Netherlandish painting "reflects" the material concerns of 15th-century mercantile society has long hindered an adequate understanding of the interplay between "realism" and religion, or, as I have formulated it elsewhere, between the visual and the visionary.63 "Naturalism," however, need not be attributed to a process of vulgarization or, in this case, commercialization.64 The exchange of worldly wealth for spiritual salvation was hardly new to the 15th century, even if the "ways and means" had changed. Rather than "reflecting" the material concerns of 15th-century mercantile society, the interplay between "realism" and religion can be traced, at least in part, to traditions of spirituality reaching back as far as the 12th and 13th centuries.65 By condemning late medieval art as a "carnal" corruption of spiritual ideals, Camille not only echoes Saint Bernard but resurrects Huizinga, in turn lending new life to the "High-Low" scheme he ostensibly rejects.

Like Huizinga, Camille concludes by sounding a dirge for the Middle Ages: "Focusing all representation in the middle, where the center of the representation of the world is turned to the other, unless it be the new edges of the world being discovered by Columbus." Lest this sound too nostalgic, Camille hastens to add: "All this may sound as if I am privileging, perhaps even idealizing, a free and open medieval gaze over a more tyrannical modern visual system." Realizing that he has written himself into a bind, Camille tries to free himself from it with a gesture to contemporary culture: "Representation has to be policed more thoroughly in the modern world. I would argue, precisely because the truths being articulated are no longer so fixed and stable as they once appeared to be. Today's senators and conservative watchdogs have made the human being into a species of breadbasket. No one can campaign on behalf of such a species. Only the other, or all the victims of inquisitorial interrogation and torture, or, for that matter, Galileo, only recently rehabilitated by the Catholic Church. If anything, the Reformations made the personal "other" loom larger than ever: one has only to look at the vicious visual polemics generated by the Catholics and Protestants.66 Having freed himself from the constraints of the debate over "the freedom of medieval art," Camille inexplicably reinstates freedom as the central issue. But now, he implies, freedom of expression (including representation) is inversely related to agnosticism, a formula, that, if it held true, would imply that in the Middle Ages, truths were, in fact, more stable and representation less thoroughly policed, tenets that contradict the entire tenor of his argument. Current debates over censorship are of considerable consequence, but to compare the restrictions imposed on artists today with the sufferings of the early modern period or, for that matter, the Middle Ages, trivializes the past, aggrandizes the present, and misrepresents them both. Today, when we speak of people having been pilloried for their opinions, we usually mean it metaphorically.

With characteristic wit, Camille concludes his preface in the "hope my book will stimulate... one or two doodles of disagreement from its readers, eager to make images on the edge." In playing Lent to Camille's Carnival and criticizing his book for its historical licentiousness, I may have gone further than the author had in mind. Perhaps the best way to put Camille's accomplishment in perspective is to compare him, once again, with Meyer Schapiro as seen by a sympathetic, yet critical, reviewer. In his assessment of Schapiro's essays, O. K. Werckmeister cites Rimbau: "It faut être absolument moderne," then asks, "Can our European historians comply with this demand, and at the same time with that of objective scholarship? Schapiro is one of the exceptional few who have (sic) attempted both."67 The same can be said of Camille; the results,
however, are mixed. Camille seeks to present his work as an essay on the edge and himself as a hybrid, occupying the margins of art history and assaulting the sober discipline at its center. Yet, for all its ambition, style, and scope, his book often misses its mark. Rather than liberating himself from the historical illusions he decries, he often reinforces them, above all the notion of the late Middle Ages as a period of inevitable decadence and decline. And for all its apparent iconoclasm, Camille’s essay grapples with topics, issues, and approaches that have long been central in the historiography of medieval art. Context and historiography are invoked, only to be ignored in too many instances. Camille celebrates the periphery, but ends up by marginalizing it still further.

The irony, of course, is that some historians of the Middle Ages, and, to a lesser extent, of medieval art, have long practiced the kind of interdisciplinary and contextual art history espoused by Camille, if often, it must be admitted, with a less theoretical bent. By reading images as embedded in, yet shaping, their circumstances, medievalists have themselves been marginalized within a discipline traditionally defined by received ideas about representation, the aesthetic, High Culture, and the Fine Arts, all terms and categories derived from Renaissance paradigms and of limited applicability to medieval art.67 The study of medieval art and of its historiography has the potential to challenge the entire discipline’s conception of itself. The book that will bring medieval studies from the margins into the mainstream, however, remains to be written.

JEFFREY F. HAMBURGER
Oberlin College
Oberlin, Ohio 44074


Richard Brilliant opens his book on portraiture with the proposition that the portrait is fundamentally different from other art objects in the specificity and reality of its referent. Abstract art may deny any mimetic content. Cubist or Impressionist or Neo-classical art may be mimetic of perceptual objects or general or ideal or even fictional objects. Magritte may depict non-objects (“Ceci n’est pas une pipe”). But for a portrait to be a portrait, there must be a specific and real person out there somewhere.

This is true not by proof but by definition. A portrait has such a referent not because in all cases we have already identified the referent but because “portraiture” is constituted from the outset as that class of objects with such referents. So the definition is merely a setting-out point, which, for all its clarity, or precisely because of its clarity, instantly produces a set of doubts, qualifications, and marginal cases. How direct must the referential link be between portrait and portrayed? What if we can’t be sure there is or was such a person, or the identity of the portrayed is uncertain or mistaken? What if the portrait doesn’t “look like” the portrayed? What aspect of “self,” “being,” or “identity” forms a reliable foundation either for likeness or for a licensed departure from likeness? Do “self,” “being,” or “identity” really come from some place that is securely outside the representational process that purports to reflect it? Doesn’t a portrait have as much to do with other portraits and with the nature of painting than with the appearance or being of its overt subject? Doesn’t the creation or perception of a “likeness” tell us more about the artist or the viewer than about the sitter? Why does portrayal so often end up looking like betrayal? Is the definition that stands as the setting-out point for the inquiry into portraiture itself so historically determinate and so riddled with fallacies that the inquiry must inevitably return to and consume its own point of origin and thus collapse?

This list of questions is enough to suggest what is at stake in a definition of portraiture and why there should be such a spate of books on the subject. The issues of how the artwork relates to objects, to perceptual moments, to words, to other artistic practice, and to social practice, the issues of artistic intention and audience interpretation, the issue of disciplinary adequacy, all add up to the same list of questions that have animated the theory crisis that has consumed art history with mounting intensity for a decade now. The portrait is different not in kind but in degree from other art, and the criticism of portraiture is a micro-conflict with shock troops in the long night-war over the relationship of art history to philosophy, to literature, to social history, and to its own history.

Brilliant’s speculative essay places portraiture within this range of issues large and small by examining both familiar artworks and a series of odd cases, such as gigantic propaganda images of Lenin and American passport photos at a transatlantic level of time and by Indian woodcutters to ward off Bengal tigers. Through these examples he sets as his main subject the “oscillation” between art object and human subject, an oscillation that seems to him implicit in “the concepts that generate ideas of personal identity and lead to their fabrication in the imagery of portraits” (p. 8).

Although Brilliant’s procedure of working through examples makes it difficult to outline his argument neatly, three major axes of oscillation might be identified, each leading to a different conceptual site. First is the interplay between the denotated subject and representational scheme, so that the artwork becomes a play between a making-visible of the subject and a making evident of the essential invisibility of the subject. This interplay locates itself within the sign-structure of the artwork as a tension between its signer and signified. Second is the interplay between subject and social role or mask, so that the artwork “captures” or reflects this play within the being of the subject, including the possibilities that there is no self except in the role or mask. And third is the interplay between the artwork and the imputed gaze of a real or imagined audience, an interplay that Brilliant works out most forcefully through proleptic cases of the self-portrait, in which the artist portrays himself looking at himself, and imagines himself and others looking at this looking. Brilliant’s study is a fundamental text for any future discussion of the artist, stretching out its structures to create an anecdotes for the play of mind. Its core strength comes from turning the embarrassing referentiality of the portrait into a wellspring of tension, nuance, and critical interest. The limits of his analysis are directly related to its strengths. He promises to ground his discussion in the conceptual, and he brings in striking passages from Gadamer and other metaphysicians, but because he instinctively thinks through the images themselves, philosophy is finally treated as anecdotal. Brilliant’s argument shows how a consideration of the forms of portraiture must in some way correlate with the history of constructions of the self, of modes of visibility, and of patterns of reception, but it’s own discussion stays at a transhistorical level that seems at moments to essentialize the form and that does not always acknowledge the historical relativity of his conclusions. Most important, Brilliant does not quite come to grips with the problem of language, the ways in which audience response, including his own, has its own grammar, and runs along the rules of that grammar without direct reference to the object it purports to represent. That is to say, neither ekphrasis nor the criticism of portraiture can be said to represent the nature of a portrait any more surely than the portrait can be said to represent its subject.

The problem of language, which has over the last decade been recognized as the endemic virus in art history, is especially acute in relation to portraiture precisely because portraits, as the most representational form of art image, are as tied to referentiality as words are. This semiotic link is the axiom underlying Richard