

A Brief History of the Page

The Fish-Footman began by producing from under his arm a great letter, nearly as large as himself.

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Chapter 6

THE PAGE LEADS AN UNDERHAND existence. Lost among its brethren within the covers of a book, or singled out to carry, all on its own, a limited piece of scribbling; turned, torn, numbered, dog-eared; lost or recalled, lit up or deleted, skimmed or scrutinized the page comes into our reader's consciousness only as a frame or container of what we mean to read. Its brittle being, barely corporeal in its two dimensions, is dimly perceived by our eyes as they follow the track of the words. Like a skeleton supporting the skin of a text, the page disappears in its very function, and in that unprepossessing nature lies its strength. The page is the reader's space; it is also the reader's time. Like the changing numbers of an electronic clock, the pages mark the numbered hours, a doom to which we, the readers, are called to submit. We can slow down or speed up our reading, but whatever we do as readers, the passing of time will always be clocked by the turning of a page. The page limits, cuts, extends, censors, reshapes, translates, stresses, defuses, bridges, and separates our reading, which we arduously attempt to reclaim. In this sense, the act of reading is a power struggle between reader and page over the dominion of the text. Usually, it is the page that wins.

But what exactly is a page?

According to Jorge Luis Borges, the infinite Library of Babel which he imagined containing all the books in the universe (not only all those that have already been written but all those that may or may not be one day written) could be reduced to no more than one book. In a footnote to the story, Borges suggests that the vast library is useless: one single volume would suffice, if that volume were made up of an infinite number of infinitely thin pages. The

handling of this volume would, of course, be painfully cumbersome: each apparent page would unfold into other pages, and the inconceivable middle page would have no verso.

Here we have, in one nightmarish moment, the page in all its glory and all its horror: as an object that allows or demands a frame for the text it contains so that we, the readers, can address it piecemeal and inquire into its meaning; and also as an object that restricts the text to fit its frame, cutting it down to size, separating it from its whole, changing or circumscribing its sense. Every page is of this double nature.

If we define *page* as the single spatial unit within which a portion of text is contained, then the Sumerian clay tablets and large granite slabs of 5000 to 2000 B.C. count as pages. For practical reasons, the Sumerian page appears to have been considered mainly as a setter of limits. Any given text must fit the space allotted to it: if the text runs on, it must divide itself in units of self-contained sense. The Sumerian tablet doesn't break off in mid-sentence and continue on another tablet. The space of the tablet and the space of the text coincide.

Both the Sumerian stone slabs and clay tablets were conceived as two-sided. The slabs stood as high as monuments, bearing inscriptions on one or both sides. The tablets, like those used by students, for instance, in order to learn how to write in the scribe schools, carried on the recto the teacher's text and on the verso the student's attempt at reproducing that text. The learning system required that the student learn literally to bear in mind the teacher's writing until he reached the tablet's other side.

This dual notion ceased almost entirely with the creation of the scroll around the sixth century B.C. Most scrolls were written on one side only, on which the fibers ran horizontally, but there were also scrolls written on both sides—such a scroll was known as *opisthograph*, and was fairly uncommon. In the scroll, both the idea of frame and the idea of recto-verso seem to disappear. The sheets of papyrus used to form most scrolls were no larger than fifteen inches high by nine inches wide and did not break the text up into something akin to our individual, separate pages. Though the scrolls had margins and were divided into columns, with no space between words, it was the scroll itself that determined the extension of the text (in Greece they were generally twenty to thirty feet long). An ordinary scroll could contain one book of Thucydides or two or three books of the *Iliad*.

The scroll granted both writer and reader apparent freedom: no truncated

lines, except from column to column; no cumulative sense of progression, except as the scroll unfurled and rolled up again; no imposed unit of text, except as the scrolling allowed only one section to be viewed at a time. Trying to demonstrate the paradoxical quality of this freedom, many centuries later, the Spanish writer Juan Benet composed a novel, *Una meditación* (1969), on a single roll of paper attached to his typewriter, which an elaborate mechanism prevented him from reversing—that is to say, whatever he wrote became the final draft, without the guidance or division of pages.

The appearance of the codex lends a new meaning to the concept of page. It has been suggested that the invention of the codex stemmed from the need to produce a more portable container for the text, and that a folded sheet was obviously more easily transportable than a scroll. Clay was cumbersome, papyrus was brittle, so parchment and vellum became the preferred materials for codex-making in Europe until the first paper mills were installed in Italy in the twelfth century. Other materials had been used in other parts of the world: fanlike wooden books in Korea and Egypt, block-printed books on paper in China, cloth books in other parts of Asia. Whatever the material—vellum, parchment, cloth, paper, or wood—all these pages quietly imposed their limits on the text.

But once the limiting qualities of the page were recognized by readers and writers, those very qualities called for disruption. Whether through shape, interior space, marginalia, or reshuffling, the page's characteristics were to be constantly altered. In the struggle over the supremacy of the text, the writer and the reader decidedly wanted to be in control.

The first shape of the page was perhaps dictated by the measurements of the human hand. The Sumerian clay tablet fit the hand of a child (the student scribe) or the hand of an adult (that first remote accountant to whom we owe the art of writing). The vagaries of social needs and political propaganda blew the amiable tablet to gigantic proportions: a code of laws from Ashur, for instance, from the twelfth century B.C., measured more than six and a half square feet. But periodically, the page reverted to its manufactured origins: the codex that Julius Caesar is supposed to have created by folding a scroll into pages to send dispatches to his troops; the medieval books of hours, meant for private devotions; Aldus Manutius's pocket classics; the standard-size books decreed by François I in 1527; the paperbacks of the twentieth century. In our time, the French publisher Hubert Nyssen created the elongated format that distinguishes the Actes Sud publications by measuring vertically the distance

between the metacarpal bone and the tip of his index finger and horizontally from the root of his thumb to the far edge of his palm.

All these pocket-size pages give the illusion of being contained in the hand, but that illusion does not carry far. On the page the strings of words are cut off by the blank space of the margins and trail away in order to resurface on the next page, thereby forcing the reader to hold the text's meaning in constant suspense. Widows, hanging lines, irritants to the eye, have caused printers to suggest to the author changes (especially in journalism), so that the text itself is altered to fit the demands of the page's tyranny.

Partly to subvert these special demands, writer and readers created odd-shaped books: round, horizontally elongated "à l'italienne," heart shaped, infolded, and accordion-style, which then in turn imposed their own individual limitations. In our time, the so-called artists' books routinely interfere with the classic shape: they enlarge the text to cross over the gutter, or reduce it to fit in its entirety a given space, or work the text into shapes that overwhelm the shape of the page itself. The shape of a page seems to cry out for counteraction.

When not changing the format or shape, the writer can change the text the page contains, so that the subversion becomes internalized. Laurence Sterne, composing his *Tristram Shandy* in the 1760s, introduced blank pages, pages filled with ellipses, and even a page printed completely in black. Lewis Carroll, in order to provide a limitless map for his Snark-hunters, designed a page that was completely white. And Guillaume Apollinaire with his *Calligrammes*, poems written in the physical shape of their subject, and concrete poets such as the Brazilian Haroldo do Campos, imposed a new shape to the page from inside, drawing the reader's attention away from the straight margins into new and startling textual designs.

This interior restructuring is of course quite ancient. Many are the medieval manuscripts that play with acrostics and crossword-puzzle-like grids, multiplying the use of a page many times. As the broadening of restrictions became apparent, the text began to breed its own commentary. The page metamorphosed into a series of concentric spaces, as when Scripture, for instance, written in a narrow central panel of the page, was carefully surrounded by a gloss, which was in turn surrounded by further annotations, which then received the reader's scribbles on the margins. These spaces are not in themselves protectionist: the comments of the third space, for example, may annotate either the central text or the gloss; the scribbles may refer to the notes,

the gloss, or the central text. To take just one among thousands of possible examples: one of the manuscripts of Aristotle's *Parva naturalia*, now in the British Library (MS Royal 12 G.ii), from the second half of the thirteenth century. The text itself occupies the center top right; it is framed by glosses derived from Averroës and written presumably by a certain Henry de Renham of Kent. In turn, there are interlinear commentaries on both Aristotle and Averroës that look a little like our own proofreader's notes and are written in a smaller hand, filling the spaces left by the glosses. Dante's proposed four possible levels of reading—literal, allegorical, analogical, and anagogical—acquire physical reality on Henry de Renham's page, as text, gloss and commentary on text, and gloss quadruplicate the space allotted by the page to the text.

Sometimes the tyranny of the page is subverted on one level only, but that in a way that is powerfully intimate and personal. Montaigne, whose scribbling habits amounted to a conversation, would continue the dialogue at the back of the book he was reading, including the date on which he had finished it in order to better recall the circumstances of the event. Though Montaigne's books were in various languages, his marginal notes were always in French ("no matter what language is spoken by my books," he tells us, "I speak to them in my own"), and in French he extended the text and its notes through his own critical comments. For Montaigne this reading method was necessary for what he called his "quest for truth": not the story as given by the words within the confines of the page but the reflection of that story, mused upon and retold by the reader Montaigne in spaces reclaimed, there where the page left itself vulnerable to encroachment.

These blank spaces, left after the writer has tried to vanquish what Stéphane Mallarmé called "the terrifying whiteness of the page," are the very spaces in which the readers can exercise their power, in those gaps that were for Roland Barthes the essence of the erotic thrill, the interstices in the text (but we can apply this to the physical text on the page as well), which he described as "there where the clothes gape." In those openings between the edge of the paper and the edge of the ink, the reader (let us stretch this image as far as it will go) can cause a quiet revolution and establish a new society in which the creative tension is established no longer between page and text but between text and reader.

This is the distinction made by Jewish medieval scholars regarding the Torah. According to the Midrash, the Torah that God gave Moses on Mount Sinai was both a written text and an oral commentary. During the day, when

it was light, Moses read the text God had written, and in the darkness of the night he studied the commentary God had spoken. The first action submits the reader to the authority of the page; the second forgoes the page and submits the text to the authority of the reader.

Conscious of the danger of the page's supremacy, the great eighteenth-century Hasidic master Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev attempted to explain why the first page of each of the treatises of the Babylonian Talmud was missing, obliging the reader to begin on page 2. "Because however many pages the studious man reads, he must never forget that he has not yet reached the very first page." That is to say, the commentary of the Word of God has no foreseeable beginning, neither on paper nor in the reader's mind. By the elimination of the first page, no page could be said to force the Word of God into an explanation.

Since the page defines the text it contains by marking its beginning, middle, and end, eliminating the first page can be seen as an act of defiance. The nineteenth-century moralist Joseph Joubert went further. According to Chateaubriand, Joubert's library contained only the texts that Joubert was truly fond of. "When he read," says Chateaubriand, "he would tear out of his books the pages he didn't like, thereby achieving a library entirely to his taste, composed of hollowed-out books bound inside covers that were too large for them."

Joubert did not in fact destroy the sequence of pages; he merely interrupted it with moments of silence. In our time, Raymond Queneau tried to destroy the order imposed by the numbered pages by dividing each page into dozens of strips, each carrying a line of text. In this way, readers could construct their own pages by composing (as in the child's game book of mix and match) a near infinity of new texts. Queneau called his book *A Hundred Thousand Billion Poems*. Julio Cortázar, in a better-known example, proposed a book, the novel *Hopscotch*, that had the appearance of submitting to the given sequence of pages but then destroyed that semblance of order by suggesting first that the reader should follow a sequence of chapters other than the one set out in the table of contents and then that the reader allow either chance or personal choice to dictate the order in which the chapters were to be read. Here the reader claims supremacy over both the space and time of the reading.

Flaubert, as he was writing *Madame Bovary*, read certain sections of the novel to his friend Louis Bouilhet, but confessed that as he did the narrative time of those pages (113 pages, from page 139 to page 251) became not his own

but something dictated by the flicking of the pages itself. "This afternoon," he wrote to Louise Colet, "I ended up abandoning my corrections; I no longer understood anything; immersed in my work, it became overwhelming; what seemed now like a mistake, five minutes later no longer seemed like one; it's all a series of corrections and corrections of corrections that are endless." And earlier he had written, "The middle pages of all long books are always awful."

Is our lot, in this electronic age, at all different? Electronic reading alters certain parameters. Reading on the screen precludes (up to a point) the time-restricting quality of reading on paper. The scrolling text (like that of the Roman or Greek scrolls) unfurls at a pace that is not dictated by the dimensions of the page and its margins. In fact, on the screen, each page shifts shape endlessly, remaining the same in size but altering its content, since the first and last line keep changing as we scroll, always within the fixed frame of the screen. Though reading a long text on the screen is thoroughly inconvenient (for physiological reasons that may, no doubt, change as we evolve), it does free us (if we want to be freed) from the very temporal realization of progress illustrated by the thickening bulk of pages held in the left hand and the diminishing bulk of pages held by the right.

In fact, Borges's imaginary book finds its incarnation in the not-quite-infinite pages of the e-book. The e-book page exceeds the nightmarish quality of Borges's book since none of its pages has a verso. Since text can always be added to the "volume," the e-book has no middle. The e-book page is the frame applied by the reader to what is essentially Borges's borderless text. Like every other literary creation, the e-book was foreseen in Borges's Library.

For the common reader, the notion of page becomes confused with the notion of leaf or folio, and the dictionary defines *page* as both "the leaf of a book" and "one side of it." In this sense, a short poem by Goethe on the in-folded leaf of the ginkgo tree perhaps best describes the dual nature of the page. The ginkgo tree is called a living fossil, since it is the only modern representative of a species long vanished and, like the page of a book, does not exist in the wild. Each of its leathery leaves, though born from a single stem, seems double, and this ambiguity led Goethe to write his poem:

This small leaf that traveled eastward
And now in my garden lies,
offers rich and secret meanings
That bear wisdom to the wise.

Is it one green living creature
Split in two and yet left whole?
Are they two that fused together
To become a single soul?

The right answer to these questions
Can be found by everyone.
Can't you tell from my own verses
That I'm also two and one?