What Does Openness Mean for the Humanities? Redefining Ethical and Reflexive Practices in Open Research

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Abstract: Notions of openness in research have largely been shaped by scientific principles of transparency, efficiency, and replicability, operationalized through standardized workflows, interoperable infrastructures, and measurable impact. Endorsed by funders and policy frameworks, this model often misfits humanities and social science epistemologies in which knowledge is interpretive, historically situated, and ethically entangled with context. This article critiques policy-led definitions of openness by tracing how open access and open science have been implemented through compliance regimes, metrics, and author-facing payment models, with uneven consequences across regions, languages, and institutions. Rather than rejecting open research, the article reinterprets it through a humanities lens. It develops a theory of interpretive openness through Umberto Eco's concept of the open work and extends it through three historical case studies—the cento, scholastic glossing, and Derrida's margins—which show how form-bound reuse, annotation, and participatory reading have long operated as infrastructures of public meaning-making. The article then connects these genealogies to contemporary digital publishing and editorial infrastructures, including preprints, open peer review, and web annotation, and argues for open research designs that value interpretive labor, visible process, and community accountable infrastructures.

Keywords: openness, humanities, social science, open work, cento, glossing, annotation, remix, Umberto Eco

1. Introduction: Rethinking "Openness" Beyond Replicability

Open science has emerged as a broad and evolving policy framework. Benedikt Fecher and Sascha Friesike describe it as a buzzword encompassing "any kind of change in relation to the future of knowledge creation and dissemination," unified primarily by

the call for research to "open up more" (2013, 1). Yet the term accommodates divergent agendas, from democratic access to publications and citizen participation to platform-driven collaboration (Fecher and Friesike 2013).[1] Their typology identifies five dominant schools (infrastructure, public, measurement, democratic, and pragmatic) that now inform global initiatives such as the UNESCO Recommendation on Open Science and funder policies including Plan S and Horizon Europe (UNESCO 2021). While Fecher and Friesike and subsequent policy frameworks focus on open science, I extend this discussion under the broader term *open research*, encompassing both science- and humanities-based implementations of openness.

UNESCO (2023, 15–18, 46–57) frames openness as an equity project aimed at widening participation, increasing transparency and reliability, and supporting inclusive innovation. It defines open science as making knowledge "openly available, accessible and reusable for everyone" and opening research processes "to societal actors beyond the traditional scientific community" (18). In this article, I use *open research* to denote policy-driven practices that operationalize openness through access to outputs and data, standardized workflows, and auditable evaluation (transparency/replicability/efficiency). In contrast, I argue for a humanities modality of openness centered on interpretation, context, and ethical responsibility. For clarity, I distinguish related terms: *open research* as the umbrella framework; *open science* for science-centered applications; *open access* (OA) for access to publications and data; and *openness* for the broader ethos of participatory, interpretive practice.

What, then, does open research mean in a policy context? Across policy frameworks, openness is operationalized through the triad of transparency, replicability, and efficiency, foregrounding open datasets, interoperable infrastructures, and measurable impact (UNESCO 2023, 15–18; OECD 2015), what Liz Lyon (2016) calls the "third dimension" of openness, in which transparency becomes infrastructural. This framing is echoed in empirical and domain-specific studies that seek to standardize good research practice across disciplines (Hardwicke et al. 2020; Powers and Hampton 2019; Maedche et al. 2024; Grant and Khatua 2024). But these ideals are not epistemically neutral. As Christine Borgman argues, "data have no value or meaning in isolation" (2015, 4–5), existing only within specific practices and relationships. Recognizing something as data is itself "a scholarly act." From this perspective, openness is not a fixed state but an interpretive process whose intelligibility depends on context, method, and reuse.

1. Although I discuss the dominant, science-led articulation of openness here, alternative genealogies emphasize its contested and historically situated character. Gary Hall's (2008) *Digitize This Book!* critiques open access as a neoliberal knowledge project entangled with academic labor, digital economies, and the politics of publishing. Nathaniel Tkacz's (2014) *Wikipedia and the Politics of Openness* and Janneke Adema's (2021) *Living Books* likewise foreground openness as a historically situated, contested, and plural practice rather than a universal ideal.

Critics have shown how policy logics often privilege managerial transparency over epistemic reflexivity. Sarah Kember (2014, 2016) demonstrates that open access and open science discourses have become entangled with neoliberal audit cultures, rendering research "open to commercialization" (2016, 350). Janneke Adema and Gary Hall (2013) likewise warn that OA risks reproducing hierarchies it sought to resist, transformed by author-pays models into commodities. They propose instead that openness be understood as processual and antagonistic, "a continuous struggle and critical resistance" (Adema and Hall 2013, 155), a view aligning with humanities-based openness grounded in interpretation, plurality, and ethical responsibility.

Scientific practice itself is heterogeneous. Appeals to "the scientific method" obscure the multiplicity of infrastructures and interpretive conventions across disciplines (Borgman 2015, 94). Big-science collaborations differ profoundly from small-team or field-based research, and community repositories remain unevenly distributed. This article therefore treats open research as a family of practices rather than a monolith; my critique targets policy operationalizations of openness, not scientific inquiry itself.

In data-intensive fields, proprietary control and ethical limits complicate replicability and reuse, and even "public" data demand interpretive labor (Borgman 2015, 136–40). Recent analyses show that infrastructures promising openness often depend on opaque, extractive architectures that reproduce asymmetries of power (Crawford 2021). Such conditions are reinforced by metrics-based policy frameworks that link openness to performance and evaluation. UNESCO (2023, 26, 53–57) cautions that metricization can distract from transformative, context-sensitive change. Against this backdrop, the humanities and social sciences (HSS) occupy a distinct position: encompassed within open research yet not fully represented by open science. Their practices foreground interpretation, contextual judgment, and ethical reflexivity, being modes of openness that exceed transparency, replicability, and efficiency.

Many HSS practices tend toward openness in dialogue and ethical engagement, producing meaning through interpretation rather than replication. As Borgman observes, "The meaning of data is particularly ambiguous in the humanities. . . . Ambiguity and heterogeneity are sources of uncertainty in historical records" (2015, 42–43). This aligns with UNESCO's call for "context-specific insight and analytical judgement" (2023, 26). In this sense, humanities scholarship already realizes the interpretive reflexivity that open science aspires to institutionalize.

This distinction does not deny interpretive labor in the sciences but clarifies why science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM)–based models often misalign with HSS epistemologies. In many humanities fields, knowledge is situated, performative, and non-replicable (Drucker 2012, 2014; Fitzpatrick 2019). Open access policies designed around scientific publishing logics (Eve 2014; Lyon 2016; Wilkinson et al. 2016) tend to marginalize scholar-led and experimental traditions (Moore 2020).

Such evaluation regimes reproduce audit logics that commodify scholarship (Birchall 2014; Adema 2021) and exacerbate inequities across languages and institutions (Raju 2022; Njagi and Njoroge 2024). While UNESCO (2023, 45–46, 53, 61, 64) advocates structural change, national frameworks such as the UK Finch Report (2012) still frame openness through market efficiency, illustrating its alignment with economic rather than epistemic rationales.

The rhetoric of efficiency also revives the incentive structures that Paul David (2008) traces to early modern science, when the shift from secrecy to disclosure established norms of prestige and priority. From its origins, openness functioned less as a timeless virtue than as an institutional practice tied to hierarchy and reward. Borgman (2015, 12, 131) similarly notes that data operate as academic capital, traded and leveraged within systems of evaluation. These continuities show that openness has long been entangled with reward rather than simply with sharing.

Against this predominantly science-led history, my argument is not to reject open science but to reinterpret its principles through open research for the humanities, developed here via historical and theoretical inquiry. Following Fecher and Friesike's (2013, 6) observation that the core arguments for openness predate the digital age, I examine three humanistic practices of reading and writing practices—the cento, scholastic glossing, and Jacques Derrida's margins—as genealogies of interpretive openness. These examples illuminate a model of openness grounded in participatory meaning-making, ethical responsibility, and form-as-method.

Umberto Eco's (1989) *The Open Work* anchors this reframing. For Eco, openness is "structured indeterminacy": a work "open to a virtually unlimited range of possible readings" yet coherent (1989, 20–21). Form, he insists, "must be a way of thinking" (142). This position aligns with HSS practices in which genre, citation, and reception are constitutive of knowledge and resonates with policy aspirations for pluralism and contextuality (UNESCO 2023, 46–57). Interpretive openness thus offers the situated accountability that policy frameworks invoke but rarely theorize, or even practice.

Recognizing interpretive openness also connects these historical reading and writing practices to contemporary infrastructures of annotation, peer review, and versioned publication that make process visible and collaborative. Such practices show that openness remains a question of form and participation rather than mere access. This article therefore traces, through the cento, scholastic glossing, and Derrida's margins, how openness has long been enacted and how it might inform more equitable and generative designs for open research today. Humanities-led openness, I contend, redefines openness as interpretation in context, an ethic of reflexive, situated participation.

My study's scope remains deliberately comparative rather than encyclopedic. It traces how different moments and forms of humanistic practice articulate openness as interpretation rather than replication. My focus is twofold: first, to show that openness

in the humanities operates as a situated and accountable mode of meaning-making rather than a mere property of data or compliance and, second, to suggest how such interpretive models might enrich policy framings of open research by shifting evaluation from outputs to processes and reframing access as relationship and responsibility, precisely the "systemic cultural change" UNESCO calls for (2023, 46, 53–57).

Some might argue that science is "by definition open," insofar as its aim is to publish results (Fecher and Friesike 2013, 6). The humanities clarify what this presumption omits—to publish is not yet to make meaning public. A more substantive conception of openness requires forms that invite participation, render contexts visible, and keep interpretation in play. This research therefore advances a humanities-led account of openness as an ethical, reflexive, and materially situated practice and demonstrates, through the three case studies, how such openness has long been enacted and how it might guide more equitable and generative designs for open research today. In cases where policy-led open science optimizes verification through standardization and auditability, humanities-led openness instead optimizes interpretation through context, participation, and ethical reflexivity.

2. The Political Economy of Open Access

Within the broader landscape of open research, open access represents one of its earliest and most influential expressions. Emerging from the same ideals of transparency and accessibility, it also reveals how those ideals become entangled with questions of economics, infrastructure, and power. OA did not arrive as a single coherent program; rather, it is "a contested term with a complicated history and a variety of understandings," a richness that "is routinely ignored by institutional, funder and governmental policies that instead enclose the concept and promote narrow approaches to OA" (Moore 2017, 1). Read genealogically, OA inherits multiple lineages "from pre-existing preprint cultures and the emergence of institutional repositories to the free-culture and open-source software movements" (2). This section consolidates three strands of policy genealogy (BOAI to Plan S to Horizon Europe and Open Research Europe), metrics and commodification, and inequality/coloniality into a single backdrop for the humanities reframing of openness.

From the Budapest Open Access Initiative (BOAI; 2002) through the Bethesda and Berlin declarations, early OA was pitched as an ethical and practical response to journal lock-in and subscription tolls.[2] As Martin Eve notes, it emerged from "niche scientific

2. See also Suber (2012) for the canonical consolidation of this phase.

sub-disciplines" before consolidating into a global regime of scholarly communication (2014, 1). That consolidation hardened through funder mandates (e.g., Plan S) and regional frameworks (Horizon Europe, Open Research Europe), each translating "openness" into implementable policy levers, embargo limits, license requirements, and platform standards. Aileen Fyfe and colleagues remind us that none of this unfolds on a blank slate because "the commercialisation of academic publishing is not new but rather the continuation of long-standing entanglements between profit and prestige" (2017, 4). In other words, OA did not so much overturn the political economy of journals as enter it, often on the terms set by commercial publishing. Samuel Moore's genealogy clarifies how this happens: Policy actors standardize one strand of OA while neglecting others, enclosing plural histories within narrow compliance regimes (2017, 1–2). That narrowing sets the stage for the next move, where economic and evaluative instruments translate the rhetoric of access into market form.

Where subscription fees once monetized reading, article processing charges (APCs) now monetize authorship, turning the principle of access into a mechanism of accumulation. Moore (2017, 5) argues that this shift is structural rather than incidental: Open access has come to rely on Creative Commons licensing, particularly CC BY, and on APCs as its main source of revenue, with universities and funders spending millions annually on publication costs. He concludes that open access has effectively been absorbed into the competitive logic of the market, despite its origins as a critique of commercial profiteering.

APC-driven publishing aligns seamlessly with managerial cultures of transparency and quantification. As Johanna Drucker observes, visualizations produce an illusion of clarity—offering "simplicity and legibility" while concealing the interpretive frameworks that construct them, transforming data into capta, "taken not given" (2014, 125–29). Progress bars, compliance scores, and citation dashboards thus do not merely depict openness; they enact it as a visual and epistemic regime. Drucker calls these tools an "intellectual Trojan horse," smuggling in external assumptions about value. In this sense, the datafication of openness fuels what Clare Birchall (2014, 83) identifies as an audit culture and what Adema (2021, 163) critiques as the conversion of knowledge into capital, exposing how metrics designed to enhance visibility can instead reproduce hierarchy and abstraction.

Within the wider open research policy landscape, OA remains the most visible and economically significant expression of openness. Its development demonstrates how ideals of accessibility and transparency have become entwined with systems of measurement and monetization. The mechanisms of quantification and platform governance that now define OA also intersect with long-standing hierarchies in global knowledge production, hierarchies that privilege particular regions, languages, and epistemic traditions. Ramón Grosfoguel (2013, 74) situates this pattern within the broader history

of the Western academy, where the intellectual canon was largely shaped by a narrow group of European men whose perspectives came to stand for universal knowledge. What appears as neutral or globally applicable in contemporary OA frameworks thus continues to carry the imprint of this provincial yet dominant intellectual lineage.

When openness is operationalized through article processing charges, Anglophone prestige venues, and citation-indexed visibility, it often perpetuates the same structural inequalities it claims to dismantle. This is what Rebekka Kiesewetter terms a "globalising rationale" (2020b, 62) in open access that privileges dominant, often Western, knowledge regimes while sidelining local, bottom-up practices. Grosfoguel (2013, 75) interprets these dynamics as expressions of a deeper epistemic hierarchy that privileges Western and masculinized forms of knowledge. The supposedly neutral stance of transparency policies—the so-called view from nowhere—therefore reinforces existing centers of authority instead of decentralizing them. Grosfoguel traces this configuration to the long 16th century, when intertwined processes of colonization, dispossession, and intellectual domination established enduring hierarchies of epistemic privilege (77). These legacies continue to shape contemporary scholarly production, determining who is able to publish, under what conditions, and with which institutional recognition (87).

This context extends beyond open access to the broader discourse of open science, whose rhetoric of transparency and universality must be read in relation to the histories of exclusion it inherits. The seemingly neutral language of openness can, in practice, obscure its geopolitical and epistemic conditions, shaping whose knowledge becomes visible, whose labor is rendered transparent, and whose authority remains peripheral or unseen. To take openness seriously, then, is to ask not only how knowledge circulates but under what institutional and historical conditions it becomes legible as knowledge at all.

Such dynamics are not merely historical but materially consequential. In contemporary APC regimes, resources determine who and what gets to be "open." As Reggie Raju (2022, 52–54) observes, such systems risk entrenching inequality rather than redressing it. Pauline Ruguru Njagi and George Gitau Njoroge (2024, 1) document how financial and infrastructural constraints limit participation in many African contexts, even as openness is proclaimed as a universal good. Moore's judgment is similarly stark: Open access has "been easily embraced and subsumed by capitalism in the same way as many instances of open-source software have" (2017, 5). As Nathaniel Tkacz suggests, the corrective lies in the empirical and situated, to "look more closely at the specific projects that operate under its name" (2014, 38) and their exclusions.

The inequities embedded in APC regimes and platform governance point to a deeper reconfiguration of what "access" now means. Across these systems, openness is predominantly defined by what can be measured, priced, and platformed. Funders and institutions may rightly pursue transparency and public benefit, yet the infrastructures that implement those aims, APCs, licenses, dashboards, and repositories tilt access toward

economic and technical criteria rather than epistemic ones. I argue that the dominance of quantification in open research reflects not only a procedural bias but a conceptual one: Visualizations construct their own realities by naturalizing the assumptions that underpin them. What appears as objective measurement is, in fact, the result of interpretive labor, labor that quantitative dashboards tend to conceal. Building on Drucker's (2014, 125–29) account of visual epistemology, I show that these systems translate interpretation into data, erasing the situated conditions that make meaning intelligible. The humanities, by contrast, expose this process, treating interpretation as a constitutive rather than an incidental feature of knowledge. For Drucker, humanistic inquiry resists the fantasy of observer-independent truth by foregrounding the relational and experiential dimensions of knowing (126–30). In this view, the task is not simply to acknowledge uncertainty but to design representations that work with ambiguity and indeterminacy. Such an approach challenges the logic of compliance-driven dashboards yet aligns closely with UNESCO's call to privilege processes over outputs and to value context-specific forms of judgment.

This reframing also opens a decolonial horizon. According to Grosfoguel, the "uni-versalism where 'one (Western men from five countries) defines for the rest' what is truthful and valid knowledge" must give way to a pluri-verse that "bring[s] epistemic diversity to the canon of thought" (2013, 89). If open access is to serve that project, its governance must be communal and situated rather than purely market managerial. As Moore reminds us, "OA should therefore be considered and fostered as a community-led initiative; and funders, institutions and governments should be mindful of this in their approach to policymaking" (2017, 2). This kind of community-led emphasis does not reject policy but reorients it from counting outputs to sustaining relationships, from pricing articles to enabling interpretive participation, from abstract universals to locally accountable practices. This is why several scholar-led accounts insist on "scaling small" and on building horizontal, care-based infrastructures that are locally accountable rather than market driven (Adema and Moore 2018; Kiesewetter 2020a, 2020b). This is already being trialed in scholar-led infrastructures such as Copim and open monograph presses that deliberately resist platform consolidation (Adema et al. 2021; Barnes and Gatti 2019). These proposals complement Moore's call to recuperate even high-level policies such as Plan S for socially just forms of openness (Moore 2021).

The political economy of open access reveals how practices of open access and open science have been steered toward what is measurable and replicable, masking the interpretive, ethical, and historical conditions that make knowledge public in the first place. Before turning to how other reading and writing practices have modeled openness as interpretive and collaborative rather than procedural, I outline a theoretical framework around Eco's concept of the open work, which provides the conceptual link between epistemic openness and interpretive participation.

3. Theoretical Framework: Umberto Eco and the "Open Work"

This section establishes Umberto Eco's concept of the open work as the theoretical lens through which I redefine openness as a structured field of interpretation and participation. In *The Open Work*, Eco argues that modern artworks achieve coherence through ambiguity, observing that "a work of art is a complete and closed form in its uniqueness as a balanced organic whole, while at the same time open to a virtually unlimited range of possible readings" (1989, 4, 21). This framework, as I will argue, can provide the conceptual vocabulary needed for understanding openness as both form and process, in which structure enables rather than restricts multiplicity.

Eco develops this argument against aesthetic models that treat form as a neutral container. As he explains, "every reception of a work of art is both an interpretation and a performance of it" (1989, 4), highlighting that openness is not passive reception but active enactment within formal boundaries. He insists therefore that openness is both participatory and procedural. The musical examples that he cites to corroborate his argument—Luciano Berio, Pierre Boulez, and Karlheinz Stockhausen—demonstrate that openness is not formlessness but a mode of *opera in movimento*, works that require interpretive choices within constraints. He makes this clear when he notes that "the 'work in movement' is the possibility of numerous different personal interventions, but it is not an amorphous invitation to indiscriminate participation" (19) and when he cautions that "a work of art can be open only insofar as it remains a work; beyond a certain boundary, it becomes mere noise" (101). In other words, form structures participation, setting boundaries for the interpretive field.

Eco's musical illustrations clarify that openness must be understood as structured variability rather than formless freedom. His examples—Stockhausen's *Klavierstück XI* or Henri Pousseur's *Scambi*—show how a work can invite interpretive participation while preserving coherence (Eco 1989, 1–3). In these compositions, meaning arises through performance: The performer's situated decisions activate the work's potential, making indeterminacy a condition of collaboration rather than disorder. For Eco, openness thus names an aesthetic principle of co-creation in which form generates an interpretive field that is bounded yet unpredictable. This model clarifies how both artistic and scholarly practices can sustain multiplicity without collapsing into relativism, situating openness as a relational process rather than a procedural ideal.

In Eco's model, then, form becomes a site of shared meaning-making, where ambiguity is not a flaw but the generative condition of interpretation, an ontology that aligns openness with human plurality: contingent, relational, and always in formation. The epistemic consequence of this, Eco explains, is that ambiguity can be intentionally designed. This design principle positions form itself as epistemic. As Eco insists, "form must not be a vehicle for thought; it must be a way of thinking" (1989, 144). For Eco,

openness is not opposed to structure but is embedded within it, modeling how knowledge is produced as readers or performers enact the work's possibilities. His brief turn to information theory underscores this point as what appears maximally ordered yields little information because "the more ordered and comprehensible a message, the more predictable it is" (52). Openness, by contrast, enhances a work's "informative" potential by making its organization improbable relative to a code (54). But still, Eco resists relativism, reminding us that "neither openness nor totality is inherent in the objective stimulus . . . they lie in the cognitive relationship that binds them" (39). As Eco concludes, "knowledge is a difficult process of transaction, of negotiation . . . the result of our active participation" (27).

It is precisely this interplay of constraint and possibility that makes Eco's framework so useful for the case studies I discuss next. The cento, the medieval gloss, and Derrida's margins each enact openness not as unlimited freedom but as form-bound participation, where structure generates the conditions for interpretive plurality. Yet my argument moves beyond Eco's aesthetic model to propose openness as an epistemic and ethical practice within the humanities. Whereas Eco situates openness within the ontology of the artwork, I extend it to the social and material practices of scholarship, writing, annotation, and collaboration, as sites where meaning is collectively produced and negotiated. The case studies that follow thus serve not simply as illustrations of Eco's thesis but as demonstrations of how interpretive openness functions as a mode of knowledge-making. They show that in humanistic traditions, openness operates through relation, participation, and design and not only as a property of form but also as a method and ethic of inquiry.

To extend Eco's account of openness, I draw on earlier scholarship: Paul Ricoeur's (1976) reflections on writing and distanciation in *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, which clarify how openness persists through the temporal autonomy of texts and their continual reinterpretation. Ricoeur argues that the act of writing produces distanciation, a separation between the author's original intention and the meaning that the text subsequently acquires. Through inscription, discourse gains a kind of semantic autonomy, detaching itself from its initial context and interlocutors (Ricoeur 1976, 29). What matters, therefore, is not the author's intended sense but the meanings a text continues to generate through reading. Because writing severs speech from a single communicative situation, Ricoeur maintains that texts are inherently open to multiple readers and, by extension, to a plurality of interpretations (31). This distance is not a deficit but the very condition of interpretation where only by acknowledging and working through it can understanding occur (38).

Read alongside Eco, Ricoeur shows how an open work sustains this interpretive dynamism over time with its material form enabling legitimate, situated reinterpretation beyond the author's control. This hermeneutic autonomy helps explain why the

cento, medieval gloss, and Derrida's marginalia all generate meaning through reuse, layering, and re-contextualization as I show in this article, each relying on the productive distance that allows new readings and performances to emerge within inherited forms.

To counter the assumption that interpretive openness belongs only to the humanities, Karin Knorr Cetina's (1999) sociology of science shows that scientific inquiry is likewise structured through interpretive infrastructures. In *Epistemic Cultures: How the Sciences Make Knowledge*, she defines epistemic cultures as "amalgams of arrangements and mechanisms . . . which, in a given field, make up how we know what we know" (1999, 1), emphasizing knowledge as practiced within specific "structures, processes, and environments" (8). Rejecting any notion of a "unity of science," she instead describes multiple "architectures of empirical approaches," each grounded in distinct instruments, objects, and social configurations (3).

Two aspects resonate directly with Eco's poetics of openness. First, scientific practice, like art, is mediated through sign-systems. Knorr Cetina observes that high-energy physics operates in "a world of signs and often fictional reflections, of echoes, footprints, and the shimmering appearances of bygone events" (1999, 46). Data are never self-evident; they gain meaning only through theoretical framing and relational interpretation; what matters "is not the experimental value" itself but its conceptual relation "to the experimental ratio for a given detector configuration" (53). Second, uncertainty functions not as error but as epistemic resource: "[N]egative knowledge is not non-knowledge, but knowledge of the limits of knowing," as high-energy physics "turns these barriers into a principle of knowing" (64).

Scientific knowledge, then, is not a linear movement from data to truth but a cultivated openness, which is an organized interplay of constraint, mediation, and interpretation. Knorr Cetina also identifies an organizational analog that echoes Eco's aesthetics in which large collaborations are governed not through hierarchy but through "management by content," which "maintains participants' proximity to objects or to the substance of scientific work," substituting object-oriented relations for social authority (1999, 171). The parallel with Eco is striking. In both cases, form or object becomes agentic, shaping participation and governance (Eco 1989, 144). This convergence positions interpretive openness as a cross-disciplinary epistemic condition and strengthens my argument for reading diverse textual and scholarly practices through Eco's lens. Eco and Ricoeur establish openness as formal and hermeneutic; however, Bent Flyvbjerg (2001) extends it into the ethical domain. His *Making Social Science Matter* argues for phronesis, a mode of inquiry oriented toward judgment, context, and value rather than predictive universals. The real questions of research, he insists, are practical and ethical, asking, "Where are we going? Is it desirable? What should be done?" (2001, 61). Flyvbjerg names the ethical imperative that follows, namely, to exercise judgment within those structured possibilities. This emphasis on situated reasoning provides the ethical

through-line to my historical case studies, where openness is enacted as a practice of responsibility, negotiation, and response to context.

Thus, as a coherent theoretical foundation for the remainder of this article, I want to propose extending Eco's "open work" framework with the insights provided by Ricoeur, Knorr Cetina, and Flyvbjerg that I have outlined above. Across these accounts, openness emerges as a participatory epistemology, a structured field of interpretation, performance, and judgment through which knowledge is continually produced in relation. In Eco's terms, this field constitutes "a field of possibilities" that invites "an expectation of the unpredictable" (1989, 81, 103) while maintaining the formal guardrails that prevent the work from "dissolving into noise" (19, 101). The framework clarifies that form, method, and ethics are not external to openness but constitute its very operation, the organized interplay of constraint and possibility through which meaning becomes public.

Building on this theoretical ground, I turn next to three reading and writing practices that materialize participatory openness—the cento's combinatory reuse, scholastic glossing's layered commentary, and Derrida's margins—each demonstrating how interpretive form functions as a method of making knowledge public.

4. Reading and Writing Practices of Interpretive Openness

4.1 The Ancient Cento: Reuse as Co-Authorship

The cento, from the Latin for "patchwork," is an ancient poetic form composed entirely of lines or fragments from another author's work (Tucker 2013, 4; Okáčová 2009, 1), mostly Virgil's. It emerged in classical antiquity, flourished in late antiquity (fourth–fifth centuries CE), and continued as a compositional and pedagogical practice into the medieval period. Far from a literary curiosity, it exemplifies a compositional logic of reuse central to Roman education and rhetoric. As Scott McGill explains, it is "comprised of unconnected verse units taken from the Eclogues, Georgics, and Aeneid and pieced together to create narratives that differ from Virgil's own" (2005, xv), representing a distinctive method of literary recombination. The poet memorized, selected, and rearranged inherited language to produce new meaning, a process Brian Sowers (2021, 169) defines as compositional method. David Bright describes it as "a task for the memory only . . . to gather up scattered tags and fit these mangled scraps together into a whole" (1984, 81). In late antiquity, such recombination was not seen as plagiarism but as intellect and learning itself performed through recomposition (McGill 2005, xviii; Lefteratou 2019, 333). Its persistence across pagan, Christian, and medieval contexts

shows it was a durable knowledge practice rather than an eccentric literary game (Öyken 2024, 79; Lefteratou 2019, 339).

The cento models openness as constrained reuse, where knowledge emerges through citation and readerly performance, transforming textual authority into a field of collaborative possibility. It is not derivative but methodologically open, presenting a form of co-authorship activated through reuse and response. This reveals that openness in the humanities has long been constituted through shared meaning-making and not necessarily transparency or replicability. It enacts an ontology of plurality in which meaning is continually re-articulated through relational reuse, anticipating the interpretive conditions later theorized by Eco (1989, 104). This compositional logic prefigures contemporary open research practices in which reuse, attribution, and visible revision generate collaborative knowledge, now formalized in preprint circulation, open peer commentary, and margin-based annotation platforms.

Centonists treated the canonical text as pliable material. McGill suggests they acquired "a sense of the openness of Virgilian poetry to acts of secondary authorship" and regarded it as "far from inviolate and capable of being recast" (2005, xxiv–xxv). Marie Okáčová calls this "absolute derivativeness" (2009, 1), since each fragment retains its origin while being re-inscribed with new meaning. The reader bears "considerable and uncontrollable exegetical responsibility" (Sowers 2021, 170), as interpretation is distributed between poet and audience. The cento's openness thus lies not in indeterminacy but in the interplay of structure and interpretation—a model of shared authorship sustained by formal constraint.

As such, the cento anticipates Eco's account of openness as a field of possibilities bounded by form, demonstrating that new knowledge arises through participation, recombination, and citation. The form's adaptability is equally revealing: pagan, Christian, and comic centos on themes from dice-playing to salvation (Harrison 2016; Öyken 2024, 79) show how recombination served divergent ideological and aesthetic ends. Christian Homeric centos re-voiced classical language to reinterpret rather than repudiate antiquity (Lefteratou 2019, 339). Each became a dialogic artifact within communal reading practices, where prefaces, dedications, and apologetic letters acted as paratexts inviting response and situating composition as social exchange rather than solitary authorship (Sowers 2021, 175). The cento was therefore both a text and an infrastructure for commentary.

Eco provides a conceptual vocabulary for this epistemic form. "Open works," he writes, "offer themselves not as finite works which prescribe specific repetition . . . but as 'open' works, brought to their conclusion by the performer as he experiences them" (1989, 3). The cento, composed from inherited fragments, embodies this "configuration of stimuli whose substantial indeterminacy allows for a number of possible readings"

(84). Meaning arises through relation, where "each word stands in a series of possible relations . . . open to new configurations" (10). For Eco, "form must not be a vehicle for thought; it must be a way of thinking" (144). The cento literalizes that principle of constraint generating variation, modeling knowledge as an iterative process of selection and re-alignment. It exemplifies Eco's claim that openness is engineered by limits that license multiple realizations without collapsing into noise (19, 101, 144).

The cento's ethos of reuse finds a structural analog in preprint ecosystems and post-publication review, where dissemination and evaluation are iterative and versioned. Preprint servers and bioscience platforms decouple circulation from journal gatekeeping and invite public critique before formal certification. As Gary Hall notes, this principle of open circulation was already realized in infrastructures such as arXiv.org, founded in 1991 by Paul Ginsparg as a repository where researchers could self-archive preprints before peer review. Hall (2008, 45) explains that the platform institutionalized a "preprint and corrigenda" model after Stevan Harnad and Charles Oppenheim that enabled iterative correction and free access without infringing copyright. This strategy foreshadowed today's open-review systems, treating publication as an ongoing, collaborative process rather than a terminal event. Jonathan Tennant et al. observe that such systems reposition evaluation as an "ongoing and transparent conversation" (2016, 4–5). Overlay journals and platforms such as *F1000Research* and Open Research Europe then attach formal review onto already circulating texts, producing workflows in which knowledge evolves through successive, attributed interventions. This recombinatory logic also resonates with practices such as fan fiction and digital remix, where communities collectively rework established texts through incremental reinterpretation. Both the preprint and the fan-text challenge proprietary authorship by foregrounding process, participation, and revision as the locus of creativity. The challenges, Tennant et al. note—uneven labor, weak credit for reviewers, and a "penguin effect" (3) that slows adoption—do not negate this shift but reveal the need to value collaborative interpretive labor over polished outcomes.

The cento thus reframes openness as interpretive labor grounded in shared textual inheritance. As Okáčová observes, it "can be understood as a sort of verse comment on the communicative function of language" (2009, 5). Its network of quotation anticipates digital remix and collaborative annotation, showing that creative reuse is a mode of critical inquiry. George Tucker describes the cento as "a patchwork of multicoloured rags . . . stitched together from fragments of one or more prestigious source-texts" (2013, 4) that recombine to produce altered meanings in new contexts. The humanities' long engagement with such recomposition shows that openness need not mean unbounded access but structured co-authorship, a practice of reading, rewriting, and negotiating meaning that remains foundational to interpretive scholarship.

4.2 Glossing and Structures of Scholastic Openness

The theological and pedagogical centrality of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, written and circulated in the mid-12th century (c. 1150–1158 CE), in shaping scholastic culture between the 12th and 16th centuries is widely recognized. Scholars such as Gillian Evans (2002a, 2002b), Philipp Rosemann (2005, 133; 2007, 18–19), Constant Mews (2015, 1097), and David Flanagin (2011, 1115) emphasize its status as the foundational textbook for theological instruction and the formal object of academic commentary. From the 12th century onward, it became an institutional requirement that every theologian in the Latin West engage with the *Sentences*, since university statutes in Paris and Oxford mandated public lectures and commentaries on it as part of the path to the master's degree (Madigan 2006, 332; Flanagin 2011, 1115). Over time, more than a thousand commentaries were produced, collectively defining the parameters of scholastic inquiry. Its success, Constant Mews argues, lay "not on its providing the last word as a definition of theology, but on its provision of a systematic framework that raised questions about Christian doctrine and initiated a process of evaluation" (2015, 1097). As a pedagogical text that generated rather than settled debate, the *Sentences* institutionalized interpretive plurality, embedding openness into the very structure of medieval theological education. Crucially, this framework operated through the practice of glossing—the marginal and interlinear annotations that surrounded the authoritative text and invited critique, supplementation, and dispute.

Philipp Rosemann (2007, 18) describes the work as the epicenter of a vast and evolving textual network, in which each commentary produced new theological insight through questioning and re-articulation. Interpretation was not an appendage to the text but its mode of existence, as "every reading [was] a rewriting—[and] quickly supplemented by critical questions and discussions" (Rosemann 2005, 149). This recursive process turns the *Sentences* into what Eco calls a "work in movement," neither closed nor chaotic but a structured space of interpretation. In *The Open Work*, Eco describes such texts as "open works . . . brought to their conclusion by the performer at the same time as he experiences them" (1989, 3). Their "ambiguity is not an accessory to the message: it is its fundamental feature" (196). Through this lens, Lombard's commentary-glossing practice appears as a historically situated form of openness—disciplined, recursive, and institutionally organized.

This epistemic logic materialized in the glossed manuscript itself. Within the schools of Paris and later Oxford, students and masters surrounded authoritative texts with marginal and interlinear notes that functioned as dialogic infrastructures for interpretation. Peter O'Hagan notes that Lombard's own teaching was shaped by the *Glossa Ordinaria*, in which biblical text was "interpreted through the *Glossa* within which it is embedded" (2018, 91). Glosses were not ancillary remarks but architectures of thought,

frameworks through which scholastic method developed and pedagogical exchange was made visible. This layered logic preempts contemporary open-review infrastructures, in which commentary is visible at the point of reading. Yet whereas today's platforms digitize this process, scholastic glossing inscribed it materially into the page. They coordinated layered voices of authorities, teachers, and students into a page designed for argument. As Franklin Harkins observes, students "heard these different lectures differently and annotated their texts differently" (2015, 45), revealing a living record of interpretive variation inside the classroom. Gillian Evans adds that the *Sentences* "always prompted questions" (2002b, xiii), a pedagogic design that made glossing central to theological reasoning.

Glossing, then, was a performative act. The student or master who wrote in the margin did not merely explain Lombard but reconfigured him, creating new relations among authorities. Rosemann describes this process in works such as the *Filia Magistri*, where students "added and dropped material in view of their own interests," producing an "unstable, dynamic" system (2007, 33). Eco's claim that "the message . . . is in itself another source of possible information . . . not a work to be interpreted but an interpreted work" (1989, 67) captures this recursive authorship. Glosses did not fix meaning; they performed it.

Material evidence supports this interpretive mobility. Edmund Silk's study of medieval marginalia shows that glossed volumes bear "telltale marks of their tastes and interests in scribbled nota benes or appreciative pointing fingers" (1950, 60). Each successive hand re-entered the conversation, transforming the manuscript into what Silk calls a "corrected proof" (61) rather than a finalized text. Authority was therefore collective and temporal, emerging from accretion rather than origination. Glossed manuscripts functioned as early knowledge infrastructures, networked records of interpretation that made disagreement and revision visible on the page. They neither dissolve authority nor enshrine it; they situate, test, and recontextualize it.

Medieval glossing thus prefigures the logics of today's open research infrastructures, especially later humanities practices of critical editions, commentaries, and peer review, in which knowledge is produced through recursive interpretation rather than replicable procedure. Layered commentary around a canonical text finds a direct analog in open peer review and post-publication commentary. Where the cento's analog lies in versioning and reuse, the gloss finds its closest contemporary echo in open peer review and threaded commentary systems that expose interpretation as a layered, dialogic process. Tony Ross-Hellauer (2017, 3) defines open peer review as a spectrum of practices, from revealed identities to published reports and community participation—designed to make assessment traceable and accountable. His mapping of 22 configurations underscores that "openness" is a flexible architecture (3–4). Platforms such as Open Research Europe exemplify this scholastic logic, as the published article becomes a hub to which commentaries,

revisions, and rebuttals are added, just as medieval glosses accumulated around Lombard's *Sentences*. Evaluation is no longer a hidden verdict but a visible, multi-voiced discourse. The continuity is epistemic as glossing made disagreement and reinterpretation visible in the margins; open peer review performs the same work in digital space.

The practice also illustrates Eco's principle that "form must not be a vehicle for thought; it must be a way of thinking" (1989, 144). Meaning emerges through form with the physical layout of margins, the cross-referencing of authorities, the recursive motion of the *quaestio*. Luigi Pareyson's aesthetics, which Eco developed, helps clarify this dynamic; to interpret is to retrace the act of formation itself. Glossing enacts this principle materially, turning the page into a space of co-creation. Within the classroom and the scriptorium, interpretation was a communal discipline that bound intellectual labor to ethical responsibility—what Harkins (2015, 44) describes as a dialogic reconstruction shaped by the lived realities of monastic and scholastic life. This practice therefore illuminates the social and collaborative conditions of openness. Classroom delivery, disputation, and manuscript copying bound glosses to communal performance; each new commentary presupposed prior ones and invited future response, making openness an inheritance-in-motion, a continuous, negotiable relation to the authoritative text that neither closes nor fragments meaning.

Eco's assertion that "the work lives only in the interpretations that are given of it" (1989, 165) captures this pedagogy of openness. Each commentary on the *Sentences* was an autonomous interpretive event, as Steven Livesey's (2001, 12) digital database now makes evident, cataloging over a thousand distinct re-articulations of Lombard's work. Far from seeking closure, scholastic culture valued what Eco called "continuous tension and permanent methodological doubt" (1989, 232), a discipline of endless interpretation bounded by form and community.

Therefore, the glossing and commentary systems around the *Sentences* model a form of openness rooted in interpretive labor and ethical dialogue. Where contemporary open science prioritizes transparency and data traceability, scholastic openness privileged participation and responsibility to texts and communities. Both share a commitment to visibility and collective knowledge-making, though they formalize openness differently: through replication and instrumentation in the sciences and through performance and paratext in the humanities.

4.3 Margins as Platform: Authorship and Iterability

As I have outlined, the conceptualization of openness in the humanities and social sciences must be rethought beyond the prevailing ideals of transparency, efficiency, and replicability that underpin open science. These ideals, shaped by the epistemic

frameworks of the experimental sciences, define openness as the capacity for verification through access to standardized data and procedures. But such models are inadequate for disciplines in which knowledge is interpretive, situated, and relational rather than purely procedural. As Drucker argues, "logocentric and numero-centric attitudes prevail" (2014, 16), marginalizing visual, embodied, and performative modes of knowing that cannot be reduced to reproducible outcomes. Similarly, James Dobson cautions that "there cannot be an automated reading of a text that is free of the 'taint' of subjectivity" (2015, 543). These critiques expose the limits of current infrastructures of open science where they sustain a fantasy of neutrality while concealing the interpretive labor embedded in all acts of reading, cataloging, and publishing. If openness is to have meaning within the humanities, it must be reframed as an ethical and reflexive practice of interpretation, a process that foregrounds context, relationality, and the plurality of meaning rather than its stabilization.

Derrida's deconstructive philosophy provides a strong foundation for such a reconceptualization. His insistence on *différance*, the continual deferral and difference through which meaning is produced, undermines the assumption that knowledge can ever be closed or transparent. Meaning is constituted by relations among signs, temporal intervals, and interpretive acts. As A. T. Nuyen observes, "each part owes its existence to other parts which it is not" (1989, 30), a statement that captures the fundamentally relational nature of knowledge. Derrida's claim that "no context can enclose it" (1982, 317) reveals that openness is not a matter of releasing content but of acknowledging the instability and contextual multiplicity of meaning. Openness, therefore, entails vulnerability; to open a text is to expose it to reinterpretation, to misreading, to the unpredictable afterlives of citation.

This theoretical vision of openness finds material instantiation in the Derrida's Margins project, a contemporary digital humanities initiative by the Center for Digital Humanities at Princeton University in collaboration with Princeton University Library. Directed by Katie Chenoweth, the project digitizes Derrida's personal library, including his Post-it notes, bookmarks, index cards, and annotations, transforming them into a public resource for interpretive engagement (Chenoweth et al. 2024; Adema et al. 2021, 4). As Thompson et al. (2016, 153) explain, this initiative also develops vocabularies and best practices for item-level metadata, focusing on the relationships encoded in the personal dedications Derrida inscribed in his books. These linked data practices make explicit the interpretive work that traditional cataloging conceals. Instead of producing static bibliographic records, linked data create "individual, queryable statements whose provenance and motivation can be made explicit" (151). The shift from monolithic description to relational metadata enacts Derrida's insight that context is constitutive rather than supplementary.

By digitizing Derrida's marginalia, the project materializes his philosophy of openness. It transforms the private space of the reader's annotation into a shared infrastructure for collective interpretation. As Claire Scanlon points out, these annotations enable scholars "to study the development of Derrida's philosophy" (2018, 116) by tracing his engagement with texts as a living dialogue. Traditionally, marginalia were considered a solitary act; in digital form, they become collaborative, allowing scholars to respond, annotate, and recontextualize Derrida's traces. The project therefore redefines openness as an iterative reactivation by which meaning is kept alive through visible, participatory rereading. In this way, Derrida's library exemplifies a mode of openness grounded in interpretive labor and historical specificity rather than in reproducibility or transparency.

The Derridean margin finds its contemporary counterpart in networked annotation platforms that treat the paratext as a site of meaning-making. CommentPress, developed in 2007 by Kathleen Fitzpatrick and the Institute for the Future of the Book, enables paragraph-level discussion directly alongside digital texts, "from the document as a whole to the individual paragraph," turning reading into a co-interpretive and temporal process (Fitzpatrick 2007, 1). Hypothes.is (https://web.hypothes.is), an open-source web annotation tool launched in 2013, similarly transforms the margin into a shared public space, allowing overlapping reader communities to comment, layer interpretations, and debate within the text's digital edges (Kennedy 2016). These systems materialize Derrida's insight that meaning is produced through the frame, the margin where the text encounters its readers.

Remi Kalir's (2025) *Re/Marks on Power* deepens this connection between textual margin and social space. For Kalir, annotation is "a collective act and accomplishment . . . a social endeavour co-authored by groups of mark-makers" (12), through which readers "critique and change their worlds" (13). His notion of re/marks traces collectively written annotations that advance counter-narratives and extends Derrida's iterability into the civic domain. Kalir's examples of "figurative highlighting" on monuments, such as paint, graffiti, projections, and signs (75–79), show how publics annotate material texts of memory, turning the plaza into a page. Such practices reveal that the margin, whether digital or urban, is a site of participatory openness where authority is reconfigured through collective performance.

The ethical dimension of this openness lies in exposure rather than transparency. Both Derrida and Eco treat form as responsibility; to open a text is to acknowledge its vulnerability to transformation. Together, they propose that openness is not a condition of access but an ethic of engagement, grounded in the recognition that knowledge is relational and accountable. This ethic resists the reduction of openness to procedural compliance or algorithmic metrics. As Dobson notes, algorithms "resist and reduce

disturbance" (2015, 560), while interpretation accommodates disturbance as a generative force. Disturbance, being pricked by a text, is precisely the experience through which new meaning arises.

Materiality, too, remains central to this humanistic model of openness. Drucker argues for "a fully humanistic system for visualizing interpretation" (2014, 55) that presupposes ambiguity and contradiction. H. J. Jackson's historical study of marginalia shows that reading "was more often than not a social activity," with annotations serving as "a means for introducing a new voice in a particularly direct and personal way" (2001, 65). Annotation, whether in manuscript or digital form, makes interpretation visible and thus collective. The Derrida's Margins project, like modern platforms, preserves this visibility. It makes the trace of thought itself an object of study and participation.

The stakes of such visibility are ethical as well as epistemic. Michael Roland Hernandez describes subversion as "a commitment to a life of freedom; though a freedom that is already conditioned by its responsibility for the plight of the other" (2014, 117). For Derrida, to interpret is always to respond to another, to recognize alterity within the text. Steven Burik echoes this when he argues that "all research and knowledge are 'committed,' but we can be responsibly aware of the implications of this possible commitment" (2009, 299). Openness, then, is not neutral dissemination but accountable dialogue. Allen Brizee's participatory, iterative, empirical, and resilient (PIER) model of public digital humanities similarly calls for "moving beyond binary models that place researchers' expertise above community members' lived experiences" (2025, 129). These perspectives collectively point toward an ethics of scholarly openness that values interpretive participation over control, acknowledging that plurality is not a weakness but the condition of intellectual vitality.

Thus, openness in HSS emerges as a practice of continual negotiation among text, context, and community. This formulation rejects the notion that knowledge can be standardized without remainder and instead embraces the productive instability of interpretation. The Derridean margin, extended through digital infrastructures and public annotation, reveals openness as a generative field of relation, where meaning arises through co-authorship and contestation.

5. Conclusion: Toward Reflexive and Situated Openness

The reading and writing practices examined in this article, that is, the cento, scholastic glossing, and Derrida's margins, demonstrate that the humanities have long enacted openness as an interpretive, participatory, and relational activity. Through

reuse, commentary, and annotation, these practices realize what Umberto Eco called "the open work": a structure that enables multiple realizations while remaining intelligible through constraint. Eco's insight that "form must be a way of thinking" (1989, 144) clarifies the unifying principle across these examples. Openness here is neither randomness nor transparency, but a mode of structured indeterminacy that provides a space in which meaning is produced through performance, negotiation, and response.

This vision stands in productive contrast to policy-led models of open science, which define openness through transparency, standardization, and reproducibility. Such models serve fields that depend on procedural clarity and verifiable outcomes. Yet, as Knorr Cetina has shown, even the sciences rely on interpretive infrastructures that organize uncertainty rather than eliminate it (1999, 64). Consequently, science is less epistemically "closed" than its policies imply. Conversely, the humanities openly acknowledge interpretation as constitutive of knowledge. Following Eco and Ricoeur, openness arises not only from access but from distanciation, plurality, and rereading, the text being a field of possibilities rather than a container of results.

Recognizing this epistemic divergence does not produce opposition but clarity. Open science safeguards reliability by making processes inspectable; humanistic openness sustains relevance by making meanings contestable. Both depend on structured interpretation, though they formalize it differently. Eco offers the conceptual bridge, indicating that interpretation is neither arbitrary nor mechanical, but a disciplined collaboration between form and reader. Through this lens, the humanities are not exceptions to openness but exemplars of a distinct modality of it that is grounded in performance, dialogue, and ethical responsibility.

The contemporary echoes explored in this work—preprints, open peer review, and digital margin annotation—show that interpretive openness already re-emerges as infrastructure. These systems, like the ancient cento and the medieval gloss, make process visible and invite co-authorship. What remains is for policy to value this interpretive labor rather than treat it as accessory. This emphasis echoes calls in community-led open access scholarship to center care, relation, and small-scale infrastructures over compliance (Adema and Moore 2018, 2021). To open research, then, is not simply to expose material to view but to invite others into a structured encounter with it. Openness becomes an ethic of responsiveness in which knowledge is made as an ongoing practice of meaning-making, answerable to context, community, and form. Eco helps us see why this matters, because a work "lives only in the interpretations that are given of it" (1989, 165). Openness must, therefore, be designed not only as access but as relation.

Open Peer Review Reports

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