

Marginalia

American Hunt, in his suggestive "Talks about Art," demands that the child shall be encouraged -- or rather permitted, for the natural child needs little encouragement -- to draw when- and whereon-soever he can; for, says he, the child's scribbling on the margin of his school-books is really worth more to him than all he gets out of them, and indeed, "to him the margin is the best part of all books, and he finds in it the soothing influence of a clear sky in a landscape."

Doubtless Sir Benjamin Backbite, though his was not an artist soul, had some dim feeling of this mighty truth when he spoke of that new quarto of his, in which "a neat rivulet of text shall meander through a meadow of margin": boldly granting the margin to be of superior importance to the print. This metaphor is pleasantly expanded in Burton's "Bookhunter": wherein you read of certain folios with "their majestic stream of central print overflowing into rivulets of marginal notes, sedgy with citations." But the good Doctor leaves the main stream for a backwater of error in inferring that the chief use of margins is to be a parading-ground for notes and citations. As if they had not absolute value in themselves, nor served a finer end! In truth, Hunt's child was vastly the wiser man.

For myself, my own early margins chiefly served to note, cite, and illustrate the habits of crocodiles. Along the lower or "tail" edge, the saurian, splendidly serrated as to his back, arose out of old Nile; up one side negroes, swart as sucked lead-pencil could limn

them, let fall their nerveless spears; up the other, monkeys, gibbering with terror, swarmed hastily up palm-trees -- a plant to the untutored hand of easier outline than (say) your British oak.

Meanwhile, all over the unregarded text Balbus slew Caius on the most inadequate provocation, or Hannibal pursued his victorious career, while Roman generals delivered ornate set speeches prior to receiving the usual satisfactory licking. Fabius, Hasdrubal -- all alike were pallid shades with faint, thin voices powerless to pierce the distance. The margins of Cocytus doubtless knew them: mine were dedicated to the more attractive flesh and blood of animal life, the varied phases of the tropic forest. Or, in more practical mood, I would stoop to render certain facts recorded in the text. To these digressions I probably owe what little education I possess. For example, there was one sentence in our Roman history: "By this single battle of Magnesia, Antiochus the Great lost all his conquests in Asia Minor." Serious historians really should not thus forget themselves. 'Twas so easy, by a touch of the pen, to transform "battle" into "bottle"; for "conquests" one could substitute a word for which not even Macaulay's school-boy were at a loss; and the result, depicted with rude vigour in his margin, fixed the name of at least one ancient fight on the illustrator's memory. But this plodding and material art had small charm for me: to whom the happy margin was a "clear sky" ever through which I could sail away at will to more gracious worlds. I was duly qualified by a painfully acquired ignorance of dead languages cautiously to approach my own; and 'twas no better. Along Milton's margins the Gryphon must needs pursue the

Arimaspian -- what a chance, that Arimaspian, for the imaginative pencil! And so it has come about that, while Milton periods are mostly effaced from memory by the sponge of Time, I can still see that vengeful Gryphon, cousin-german to the gentle beast that danced the Lobster Quadrille by a certain shore.

It is by no means insisted upon that the chief end and use of margins is for pictorial illustration, nor yet for furtive games of oughts and crosses, nor (in the case of hymn-books) for amorous missives scrawled against the canticle for the day, to be passed over into an adjacent pew: as used, alas! to happen in days when one was young and godless, and went to church. Nor, again, are the margins of certain poets entrusted to man for the composing thereon of infinitely superior rhymes on the subjects themselves have maltreated: a depraved habit, akin to scalping. What has never been properly recognised is the absolute value of the margin itself -- a value frequently superior to its enclosure. In poetry the popular taste demands its margin, and takes care to get it in "the little verses wot they puts inside the crackers." The special popularity, indeed, of lyric as opposed to epic verse is due to this habit of feeling. A good example maybe found in the work of Mr Swinburne: the latter is the better poetry, the earlier remains the more popular -- because of its eloquence of margin. Mr Tupper might long ago have sat with laureate brow but for his neglect of this first principle. The song of Sigurd, our one epic of the century, is pitiably unmargined, and so has never won the full meed of glory it deserves; while the ingenious gentleman who wrote

“Beowulf,” our other English epic, grasped the great fact from the first, so that his work is much the more popular of the two. The moral is evident. An authority on practical book-making has stated that “margin is a matter to be studied”; also that “to place the print in the centre of the paper is wrong in principle, and to be deprecated.” Now, if it be “wrong in principle,” let us push that principle to its legitimate conclusion, and “deprecate” the placing of print on any part of the paper at all. Without actually suggesting this course to any of our living bards, when, I may ask -- when shall that true poet arise who, disdaining the trivialities of text, shall give the world a book of verse consisting entirely of margin? How we shall shove and jostle for large paper copies!