Saints and indexers

Ernest Rubinstein

Assistant editor for Religion Index Two: Multi-author works, 1970-1975

L. P. Hartley, the English novelist, says of one of his fictional characters that he has the accompanist instinct. Carl Haas, host of the syndicated radio series, 'Adventures in Good Music', devoted one whole programme last summer to Gerald Moore, the famous piano accompanist. What these two facts suggest to one who is groping about for an approach to the topic, 'what makes a good indexer?' is that accompanists constitute a genus of human being of which indexers are a species. If this is so, an infallible logic will lead me comfortably through to the end of my essay:

1. All good accompanists have qualities x, y and z.
2. All good indexers are good accompanists.
3. All good indexers have qualities x, y and z.

It remains only to determine what makes a good accompanist.

If only I were a literary critic, or a music critic, or both, I would set forth all the best qualities of Gerald Moore, the pianist, and all those of L. P. Hartley's fictional creations, and take their intersection to define a good accompanist, and by extension, a good indexer. Unfortunately, I am no critic either of music or literature, but a student of religion, and must limit myself to the field I know. Happily for me, however, religion contains within its bounds the highest species of accompanist known to mankind: I mean, the saint. If I can assume that what makes a good saint also makes a good accompanist, I will have the defining marks of a good indexer.

But first, what exactly is an accompanist? An accompanist brings to light, improves, or simply heightens the best of what exists outside himself. In a sense, we are all accompanists of each other and produce thereby a mutual accompanying of souls that answers to a profound spiritual need. This, at any rate, is what I expect we would hear from that supreme accompanist of God and all humanity, the religious saint.

As a highly respectable guide to saintliness, I take the 19th century philosopher and psychologist, William James. In his book The varieties of religious experience, James lists eight indispensable qualities of the good saint:

(1) 'A feeling of being in a wider life than that of this world's selfish little interests.'
(2) 'A sense of the friendly continuity of an ideal power with our own life.'
(3) 'An immense elation and freedom.'
(4) 'A shifting of the emotional centre towards loving and harmonious affections.'
(5) 'Asceticism.'
(6) 'Charity.'
(7) 'Purity.'
(8) 'Strength of soul.'

I want, now, to discuss the bibliographic analogs to each of these qualities.

1. 'A feeling of being in a wider life than that of this world's selfish little interests.'

The wider life in which the indexer participates is that of writers and readers. It is the accompanist function of indexers to link producers and pursuers of information. This is accomplished by a simultaneous immersion in and withdrawal from the book or article to be indexed: immersion, to know the writer's ideas; withdrawal, to simulate the unsuspecting user; in all, a mild exercise in schizophrenia that nicely balances those more grotesque forms of psychological disturbance to be found among some of the world's great saints.

2. 'A sense of the friendly continuity of an ideal power with our own life.'

The key word here is 'ideal', for it is a world of ideas that both writer and indexer serve. Indeed, it is less the writer than the idea he expresses which the indexer accompanies, draping it in some abbreviated, standardized, linguistic form that renders its presence in a book or article accessible to other human minds.

3. 'An immense elation and freedom.'

Here, so far as I can tell, the saints are in a class by themselves. Immense happiness is their reward for taking the accompanist instinct to its absolute and paradoxical limit, where self-abandonment and self-fulfilment are one.

4. 'A shifting of the emotional centre towards loving and harmonious affections.'

Harmony is the important aspect of this saintly characteristic. Its bibliographic analog is consistency. The indexer, most especially the periodical indexer, strives to
match consistently the same basic idea, however differently expressed, with the same indexing term or terms. A passage or article on saints and indexers is not one day listed under 'saints and indexers' and the next day under 'indexers and saints'. Further, articles or passages written at a particular level of specificity consistently receive indexing terms of corresponding specificity. If I, as a periodical indexer, were to index this essay under 'hyperbole', I would produce an unharmonious union of broad indexing term with more narrowly focused article. For however much my topic exemplifies hyperbole, it in no way addresses the general concept of hyperbole. And if I were to index it under 'Gerald Moore', whom I have mentioned only twice and rather peripherally, the disharmony would be of very specific indexing term matched to more broadly focused article.

(5) 'Asceticism' and (6) 'Charity.'

Just as the saint finely balances these two seemingly disparate qualities, so does the indexer. An ascetic restraint forbids listing the same concept or article under many different very closely related terms. And a charitable regard for the many different ways of approach to the same idea, argues for a generous system of cross-references. Indeed, these cross-references, which force a small amount of page-turning work upon the hard copy user, gently chasten his characteristically 20th-century lusting after an instant and effortless satisfaction of desire for information.

(7) 'Purity.'

The bibliographic analog is objectivity. Personal biases must not taint the aim of harmoniously matching concept to indexing term, as would occur, say, if a religiously skeptical indexer were to list an article on the Bible under 'folklore'.

(8) 'Strength of soul.'

This quality needs no bibliographic translation. It is the quality we all exhibit in the face of trite, poorly written, shabbily structured material and transports us all if not to sainthood, at least to martyrdom. But of indexers and martyrs, let us speak another day.

Forthcoming conferences

The 24th Annual Conference of the National Federation of Abstracting and Indexing Services (NFAIS) will be held at Arlington, Va., 1-3 March 1982. The conference theme is 'Conflict in the information environment: opportunities and risks.' Details from NFAIS, 112 South 16th Street, 11th Floor, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19102, USA.

The 5th International Online Information Meeting is to be held at the Cunard Hotel, London, 8-10 December 1981. Details from Organizing Secretary, Online Review, Learned Information (Europe) Ltd, Besselsleigh Road, Abingdon, Oxford, OX13 6EF.

Aslib

Aslib describes itself as 'an association for promoting the effective management and use of information in industry and commerce, central and local government, education and the professions'. Its members, individual and corporate, come from all these fields, and Aslib tries to promote their interests internationally as well as nationally. Its activities include providing a library and information service, running an appointments register, organizing courses and conferences, carrying out consultative assignments and doing research. It also publishes periodicals, books and reports. One third of its 700 members are outside the U.K., and it is itself a member of the International Federation for Documentation and of the International Federation of Library Associations.

On 1 October 1981, the post of Director of Aslib was taken up by Mr Dennis Lewis, formerly of ICI.

Mansell Publishing, founded in 1966, has now been acquired by the H.W. Wilson Company. It will maintain its own imprint and is expected to produce between 25 and 30 titles a year. Marketing in North America will be done through the H.W. Wilson Company, in New York.

Domestic help

The Consumers' Association magazine Which? has made a survey of home computers in two issues this summer. The July issue deals in general terms with what can be done with the machines, extra equipment needed, costs, and descriptive literature. The August issue gives brand by brand verdicts on fourteen models which have been tested.


Indexes as fish-tails

The most accomplished way of using books at present is twofold: either, first, to serve them as men do lords—learn their titles exactly and then brag of their acquaintance; or, secondly, which is, indeed, the chooser, the profounder and politer method, to get a thorough insight into the index, by which the whole book is governed and turned, like fishes by the tail. For to enter the palace of learning at the great gate requires an expense of time and forms, therefore men of much haste and little ceremony are content to get in by the back door.—Jonathan Swift, A tale of a tub (1701).