NOT-QUITE-INDEXERS IN FICTION II

Since Judy Batchelor wrote in this journal of a motley assembly, fictitious and otherwise, of 'apparently kindred spirits . . . holding fleeting mirrors up to a common indexerly nature' (The Indexer 14 (4) Oct. 1985, 277–8), further examples of such quasi-indexers in books have come to our attention.

David, in A. N. Wilson's Unguarded hours (Secker & Warburg, 1986) may surely command all our sympathy in his state of list-dependency:

Norman had known for some time that David was entirely dependent, if he was to get through the day in anything like the right order, on his 'list', a document which he compiled just before going to sleep each night and which reminded him, in the most painstaking detail, of what he had been hoping to do on the morrow. This, if it did not get lost in the course of the night, was guarded jealously and consulted at half-hourly intervals. Norman had once found one in the rack in the hall labelled 'Letters for posting'. The basic nature of David's absent-mindedness was clearly demonstrated by a perusal of this document, which began 'Get dressed' and, having chronicled the meals that it would be necessary to eat and the books that he had wanted to read, ended, bafflingly, 'Gussy' and 'Write another list'.

The cross-referencing mentality is seen as age-related in Margaret Drabble's The middle ground (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980):

The middle years, caught between children and parents, free of neither: the past stretches back too densely, it is too thickly populated, the future has not yet thinned out. No wonder a pattern is slow to emerge from such a thick clutter of cross-references, from such trivia, from such serious but hidden connections. Everything has too much history . . . When one was younger, one saw patterns everywhere, for the process of selection was so simple. One simply did not notice most things, having no means of noticing them. So they selected themselves.

There is a disquieting tendency in several novelists to cast sinister aspersions upon the information-organizing bent. Indeed, we find in Iris Murdoch’s Under the net (Chatto and Windus, 1954), the shocking implication that classifiers were deceivers ever:

It was as if his very mode of being revealed to me how hopelessly my own vision of the world was blurred by generality . . . Hugo noticed only details. He never classified. It was as if his vision were sharpened to the point where even classification was impossible, for each thing was seen as absolutely unique. I had the feeling that I was meeting for the first time an almost completely truthful man . . .

The movement away from theory and generality is the movement towards truth.

We may wonder just why the poor teacher in Duet for three by Joan Barfoot (The Women’s Press, 1986; Macmillan of Canada, 1985) should merit such disapproval:

The teacher . . . was also a man who preferred darkness to light, and whose desire was for order . . . 'He was,' she said another time when Frances asked, 'a man who arranged all his books in alphabetical order. By author.'

'Yeah,' Frances nodded, 'I see.'

'What’s that supposed to mean?' asked June.

'What’s wrong with that?'

. . .

Something was odd about the shelves in the front room. So many books: had he read them all? . . . Hungry, she made herself a sandwich in the kitchen and wondered what had struck her as odd, 'Oh, for heaven's sake,' she thought, and went to check. Something had been strange, all right: all in alphabetical order.

('He'd get so angry if I put one back in the wrong place,' she told Frances.)

Similarly short shrift is given to the laudable impulse to impose order upon the written word in P. G. Wodehouse's Leave it to Psmith (Penguin, 1923), where the following exchange occurs between Lord Emsworth and his secretary:

'Miss Halliday is the young lady who is coming to Blandings to catalogue the library.'

'Catalogue the library? What does it want cataloguing for?'

'It has not been done since the year 1885.'

'Well, and look how splendidly we've got along without it,' said Lord Emsworth acutely.

Evelyn Waugh, in Brideshead revisited (Chapman & Hall, 1945), clearly holds but little regard for Lord Brideshead's predilections:

. . . Bridewell was a mystery; a creature from underground; a hard-souled, burrowing, hibernating animal who shunned the light . . . All that he was known with certainty to have done—and this because in a season of scant news it had formed the subject of a newspaper article entitled 'Peer's Unusual Hobby'—was to form a collection of match-boxes; he kept them mounted on boards, card-indexed, yearly occupying a larger and larger space in his small house in Westminster. At first he was bashful about the notoriety which the newspaper caused, but later greatly pleased, for he found it the means of his getting into touch with other collectors in all parts of the world with whom he now corresponded and swapped duplicates. Other than this he was not known to have any interests.

While accusation is darkly specific in The go-between by L. P. Hartley (Hamilton, 1953):
'Why have you grown up such a dull dog...? Why have you spent your time in dusty libraries, cataloguing other people's books instead of writing your own?'

But let us rather look to Francis Bacon, writing in 1620 (in Novum Organum), to shed light on the type of mentalities apt for indexers:

The steady and acute mind can fix its contemplations and dwell and fasten on the subject distinctions: the lofty and discursive mind recognizes and puts together the finest and most general resemblances. Both kinds however easily err in excess, by catching the one at gradations the other at shadows.

—Should, we wonder, the ideal indexer have a 'steady and acute mind' or a 'lofty and discursive mind'? Perhaps if Bacon had known an indexer he would have added that some people can have elements of both minds.

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**indexes Past**

*Notes and Queries* was a periodical intended as 'A medium of inter-communication for literarymen, artists, antiquaries, genealogists, etc.' Its first issue appeared on Saturday, 1 November 1849, cost 3d—stamped edition 4d—with an editorial hoping that it would prove 'A medium by which much valuable information may become a sort of common property among those who can appreciate and use it.' Volume I, 1849-50, of 496 pages, was provided with a 14-page, triple-column index. The inclusion in the index of titles and headings exactly as cited in the text, and of the curious *noms de plume* of the correspondents, as well as the strange nature of some of the queries sent in, result in the following charming entries in the index:

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Anecdote of a peal of bells  
Bald head, defence of  
Beetle mythology  
Bive and chute lambs  
B. (J.M.) on finkle or finkel  
on howkey or horkey  
—St. Winifreda  
Black broth, Lacedaemonian, was it coffee?  
Capture of the Duke of Monmouth  
Curious custom  
—symbolic custom  
Dee's (Dr.) petition to James I  
—why did he quit Manchester?  
Depinges, what are they?  
Ed., what are deepenings?  
Errors corrected ['in Pope's Homer's Odyssey' in text  
heading, but only thus in index]  
Extracts from old records [book of Exchequer entries,  
temp. Charles I, in text]  
Few words to our friends

Few words of explanation  
Five Queries  
Hints to intending editors  
Legour on grog and Bishop Barnaby  
Limb of the Law on a maiden assize and white gloves  
Man in a garret, on M. de Gournay  
Mess (A), meaning of  
Mosquito country, origin of the name, early connection  
of the Mosquito Indians with the English  
Mother of Thomas a Becket  
Passage from an old play  
—from Pope  
Roasted mouse  
Roger Bacon, hints and queries for a new edition of  
his works  
Salting (college) and tucking of freshmen  
—something else about  
Shakespeare, Malone's blunder in  
Singer (S.W.) on the Dodo queries  
—Dodo replies  
Singular motto  
St. Valentine in Norwich—Cook-eels  
Times, when first established  
Times, Herald, Chronicle, when first established  
Times paper, history of  
To endeavour oneself  
Tom Brown, lines attributed to  
Treatise upon the microscope  
Use of coffins