Poetry in indexes

Dena N. Sher

Compares indexers to poets: for both groups the basic tool of trade is language, including the relationships of words, ideas and concepts. Emphasized is the creativity of both groups in extracting, condensing and arranging language to guide their audiences to their objectives.

When invitations to seminars or conferences on the arts are sent out, indexers are rarely included. Nevertheless, I believe the indexer uses language in a creative way, not unlike a poet. The indexer also brings into existence something new which previously did not exist, fitting Webster’s Dictionary definition of the act of creation. Carolyn McGovern wrote in Key Words on elegance as an important attribute of a well written index:

‘the indexer judiciously draws from the text what the user needs and presents it in a pleasing new form with simplicity and grace.’

The creative process in writing a poem and creating an index

The indexer, like the poet, focuses intensely on his subject in order to extract its essence. A word or a brief phrase can elicit an image in a poem and must suffice to present a concept in an index. Using language in a condensed form is a skill common to the indexer and the poet. In his book teaching the art of poetry writing, Michael Carey states as a first rule, ‘Say the most you can in the fewest words.’

Poets of the imagist movement, T. E. Hulme, Ezra Pound, and Hilda Doolittle (H.D.), who strongly influenced poetry in the 20th century, declared as one of their principles, ‘Concentration is of the very essence of poetry.’ An example is this clear, brief image in the poem Song by Hilda Doolittle.

You are as gold
As the half-ripe grain
That merges to gold again.

Accuracy in the use of language, as every good indexer knows, is a basic requirement in the preparation of indexes. Surprisingly, Oscar Williams in his introduction to A Little Treasury of Modern Poetry admonishes the poet to be accurate.

‘The poet is,... under a compulsion to be fully accurate in his medium of words when he puts into form his response to a concept. . . . This compelling need for precision also causes a condensation of thought and feeling which loads the poem with its emotional charge.’

When condensed bits of language are arranged in an index or a poem, the relationship of those bits to the entire subject must remain clear and consistent. The whole index, like the whole poem, has to have a logic or an integrated view of the subject. An example is a very simple index to a book of recipes for light desserts in which the indexer has chosen to use the content of the dessert (fruit, chocolate, etc.) rather than the form (strudel, cheesecake, etc.) to compose terms.

Apple & Almond Strudel Mocha Pots
Apple & Ginger Crisp Mocha Whip
Berry Cheesecake Plum & Apple Mousses
Berry Ring Plum Batter Pudding

The following stanzas from the poem Autumn by Roy Campbell illustrate how a poet's images focus consistently on a theme—the changes in nature portending the coming of winter.

I love to see, when leaves depart,
The clear anatomy arrive,
Winter, the paragon of art,
That kills all forms of life and feeling
Save what is pure and will survive.

Soon on our hearth's reviving pyre
Their rotted stems will crumble up:
And like a ruby, panting fire
The grape will redden on your fingers
Through the lit crystal of the cup.

One can say that the indexer and the poet both weave a net of words and phrases in the exercise of their craft. In this process, relationships of facts, ideas, concepts, or impressions are revealed which may appear as new to the user of the index as to the reader of the poem.

Comparing an index to a poem

A very old form of poetry is known as the list or catalogue poem. It consists of an itemization of things or events and can be of any length, rhymed or unrhymed. Could it be considered as the forerunner to the index since the original purpose of this descriptive, repetitive verse was often functional? In The Iliad, Homer lists the major Greek heroes that fought in the
POETRY IN INDEXES

Trojan War: the Polynesians used list poems as an inventory of all the islands in Polynesia.8

Modern poets have found the list poem to be a poetic structure compatible with their impulse for expression.9 For example, Going to the Funeral by Robert Francis.

Death hushes all the bigwigs the big shots
the top brass the bashaws the bullet-proof
bosses the shoguns in long black dreadnaughts
come purring the magnates shipping oil
the magnificoes Oh my God the unimpeachable

the homburgs the silk hats the sucked cigars
death hushes death hushes the czars the nabobs
and still they come purring the moguls the mugwumps
the high-muck-a-mucks Oh my God Oh my God!

Before rhyme came into English, poetry was created using an entirely different system of sound-correspondence. Alliteration, as this system is called, is the repetition of initial consonants or vowels placed close together. Another non-rhyming sound device used in poetry is assonance, the repetition of vowel sounds within different words placed close together. There is some alliteration in most poetry, as in the following poem, Spring Morning by A. E. Housman, although it is no longer used as a system.4-8

Now the old come out to look,
Winter past and winter's pains,
How the sky in pool and brook
Glitters on the grassy plains.

Assuredly, the indexer never intentionally uses alliteration or assonance in the creation of the index, yet the subject matter may naturally fall into such sound correspondences. Examples are the following excerpts from the index to Neoplasms with Eccrine Differentiation.™

Melanin Hidradenocarcinoma
embryology of biologic considerations of histopathologic findings in apocrine type
in eccrine ducts eccrine type
in nail units historical perspective on metastases of
Melanocytes melanoma(s), malignant synonyms for Hidradenoma(s)
in eccrine ducts in nail units
Melanonychia striata apocrine differentiaion in

Another way in which an index may be compared to a poem is the arrangement of the words and phrases. Rules exist for the structure of an index affecting its appearance on the page including indentation of subheadings and punctuation. Poetry does not have such rules, yet the appearance of a poem contributes to its message. In An introduction to poetry Louis Simpson states, 'a line of poetry is like dancing—the words have definite positions in time and space.'4 The Sparrow, by William Carlos Williams, is indented like a hierarchical index.

This sparrow
who comes to sit at my window
is a poetic truth
more than a natural one.

His voice,
his movements,
his habits—
how he loves to
flutter his wings
in the dust—
all attest it;

An example of a poem using indentation as well as repetition to accentuate rhythmic structure is A Song to David by Christopher Smart.

Glorious the sun in mid-career;
Glorious th'assembled fires appear;
Glorious the comet's train;
Glorious the trumpet and alarm;
Glorious th'almighty stretch'd-out arm;
Glorious th' enraptured'd main.

The hierarchical structure of the index with principal subject headings followed by secondary subheadings has its counterpart in poems. Excerpts from Walt Whitman's There Was a Child Went Forth demonstrate this structure.

And the field-sprouts of April and May became part of him
... wintergrain sprouts,
and those of the light-yellow corn, and of the esculent roots of the garden,
The family usages, the language, the company, the furniture
... the yearning and swelling heart,

Comparing an indexer to a poet

Professionally, indexers may be as rare as poets, but what else do they have in common? 'Poets are original. Each poet has to some extent his own ways of using figurative and rhetorical devices, tones, and patterns of sound.'4 The indexer is original as well, for rarely will individual indexers given the same body of information produce exactly the same index.

Like the poet, the indexer has a love of language, a gift for analysis, and a tendency to enjoy wrapping ideas into neat packages. The indexer, however, is forever tethered to his text, compelled to represent it in the index accurately and completely. In contrast, the poet flies freely away in the balloon of his imagination to explore the landscape of experience.
References


Dena Sher has worked as a Science writer for SmithKline Beecham, Biological Abstracts, and Franklin Research Center, and is currently director of a freelance technical writing and indexing service, ATELIER.

Colourful retrieval methods

The Edwin Smith Surgical Papyrus (‘P. Smith’) was acquired by Edwin Smith (1822–1906), an American who went to Egypt and lived for a time at Luxor. There he became involved in forging antiquities, such as scarabs, and eventually went to Naples, where he died. He acquired P. Smith in 1862 for £12; its previous provenance is unknown but it is undoubtedly genuine. After his death his daughter gave it to the New York Historical Society, which in 1947 donated it to the Library of the New York Academy of Medicine.

The papyrus is a roll 4.68 m. long and 33 cm. wide, and contains 17 columns of text, written in hieratic script, which was derivative of hieroglyphs developed for faster writing. It was made probably in the 17th century B.C. and is a copy of a text probably written originally in the 25th century B.C. It deals with the treatment of various medical conditions, and is very systematically arranged; it has been described as the only ancient medical book arranged according to a system. In the first place, the ailments are arranged in order of parts of the body from head to foot; secondly, within each ailment there are five sections. These deal with (1) the title, (2) the examination, (3) the diagnosis, (4) the treatment, and (5) glosses explaining various phrases and giving supplementary information. Sections 1, 2 and 3 always start with standard expressions, so that they are easily identifiable.

A particular feature of the papyrus is the use of red ink to make certain sections stand out. There is usually an alternation between red and black through the five sections, so that the title and diagnosis are always in red. Five other Egyptian papyri, made between the 19th and the 13th centuries B.C., use the same method. It was also employed in some Arabic and Latin books but was never common. The advent of printing in the 15th century made it less easy to mix two colours in a book, and in any case by this time it was easier to produce a conventional index. In the 20th century, with the advent of the ‘electronic book’, we can see increased use of colour to improve screen displays and facilitate the finding of information.


Serendipitous indexing

‘After a short selection of hors d’œuvres the extracts are arranged chronologically rather than by topic to foster serendipity. But a short subject index will be found at the end for those prepared to cheat.’


Serendipitous indexing

‘After a short selection of hors d’œuvres the extracts are arranged chronologically rather than by topic to foster serendipity. But a short subject index will be found at the end for those prepared to cheat.’


A Russian’s England by Elisaveta Fen (Paul Gordon Books, 1976) has one of the most useless contents lists imaginable. Spread over two pages, this lists the book’s 54 chapters by first page numbers but without chapter titles, thus:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>culminating eventually in</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54</td>
<td>453</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>