

Indexer—poet or pedant?

John A. Vickers

Dena Sher's valiant, but (in my view) misguided and unsuccessful, attempt to demonstrate an affinity between the writing of a poem and the compilation of an index¹ fails because it does less than justice to either activity. Certainly, when I attempt to write poetry, my mental processes—so far as I am capable of examining them—differ completely from those brought into play by my indexing. Perhaps the experience of other indexing poetasters is different, but I remain totally unconvinced by her article. So much so that I would amend her second sentence to read: 'I believe the indexer uses language in a creative way, but quite *unlike* a poet'.

To challenge her sentence by sentence would be tedious; so I will try to concentrate on points that are most germane to our understanding of the indexing process. Poetry is quite capable of fending for itself.

Take the question of creativity. The indexer is surely not so much like a creative artist—say a sculptor—as like someone 'creating' a model from pieces of Meccano. S/he does not so much create something new as rearrange existing components, i.e. the information, concepts and ideas in a given text; and not so much in a creative as in an artificially structured way. So the 'creative process' in writing poetry and in making an index is quite different and involves quite different kinds of 'intense focussing' or 'condensation'. 'Condensed bits of language' may add up to an index, but certainly never in themselves constitute a poem. Words like 'condensed', 'concentrated' and 'focus' are, in fact, ambiguous terms. Another is 'precision' (in the quotation from Oscar Williams). 'Precise meaning' (as distinct from 'precision in choice' of words) is certainly not a major feature of the greatest poetry (with the possible exception of an Augustan poet like Pope). Poetry depends on an evocative, rather than a scientifically accurate, use of language to feed the reader's imagination.

Again, that 'the indexer and the poet both weave a net of words and phrases' is more misleading than true, since the primary arrangement of index entries is sequential (i.e. alphabetical), not logical (i.e. related to meaning), with only occasional intersections in the form of cross-references. In a poem, on the other hand, the relating of ideas and images in new ways is close to the heart of the matter. The indexer, in other words, is involved in analysis, the poet (despite Ms Sher's closing paragraph) in synthesis.

I think Ms Sher might have made a better choice of examples from the realms of poesy. For example,

Rupert Brooke's 'The Great Lover' might have served as a better example of the 'catalogue poem', demonstrating how the selection of items to be included in the 'inventory' and the order in which they are listed are usually decided not by any predetermined principle (as in indexing), but by the exigencies of rhyme and metre. (This is brought out even more clearly in such mnemonic verses as 'Thirty days hath September'.)

Nothing illustrates the superficiality of her examples more clearly than her reference to alliteration. Of course, both the indexer and the poet deal in words which have the same initial consonant, but they do so in entirely different ways and for entirely different reasons. Alphabetization and alliteration are hardly synonymous! Does Ms Sher really mean that an index resembles a poem in those sections in which the words happen to begin with a consonant, but *not* in those sections where the initial letter is a vowel? Surely not! In any case, no poet worth his or her salt would confine alliteration to initial consonants or to the first word of each line, as in an alphabetical list.* In any case, poetry in which alliteration is a prominent and persistent feature is at best second-rate. I would rank the literary qualities of good indexes well above the writings of, say, Swinburne or Edgar Allan Poe.

As for the appearance of a poem on the printed page, the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century provide more, and more illuminating, examples (and, for that matter, proof of its essential irrelevance to poetic quality). Compared with, say, George Herbert's 'Easter Wings' or 'The Altar',† William Carlos Williams' indentions look like a rather unsophisticated attempt to dress up a snatch of prose as poetry. As, indeed, does the quotation from that most prosy of poets, Walt Whitman. Christopher Smart's stanza form, far from being equivalent to the indented sub-entries in an index, illustrates the fundamental difference that underlies any superficial similarity there may be. In content his stanza is a series of six parallel statements (pointed up by the repetition of 'glorious'); its visual appearance does not in any way mirror this simple thought pattern or logical structure, but merely follows a traditional eighteenth century layout,

*The nearest I can suggest to a poetical equivalent of the alphabetical arrangement in indexing is the elaborate acrostic form of Psalm 119 in Hebrew. I offer this all the more readily because I don't think it advances her argument in the slightest!

†Or, one might add, the Mouse's tale in Chapter 3 of *Alice in Wonderland*.

designed merely to help the reader recognise the rhyming scheme: a a b c c b.

Let us suppose for a moment that Christopher Smart had also been an indexer. Is it conceivable that the poet in him would have considered something like the following as having any affinity with poetry:

Glorious

assembled fires, appearance of, 2
almighty stretch'd-out arm, 5
comet's train, the, 3
enraptured main, the, 6
sun in mid-career, the, 1
trumpet and alarm, the, 4

and so on through another similar stanza?

If Ms Sher's thesis were a valid one, it would seem a reasonable corollary that we ought to read through an index in the same way as we do a poem, and expect to get pleasure therefrom. Professional indexers sometimes do this, of course, but they do it from an

interest in technique, not for the content as such. But not the 'common reader', surely.

It occurs to me that most of the parallels Ms Sher claims to find are more applicable to the text of mail-order catalogues than to poetry. But perhaps professional indexers would find *that* comparison rather less to their liking.

In fact, Ms Sher gives the game away in her closing sentences, the only ones in which she seems to me to hit the nail on the head. 'The indexer . . . 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.' Doesn't that negate all that has preceded it?

References

1. Sher, Dena N. Poetry in indexes. *The Indexer* 19 (2) Oct. 1994, 102-4.

Very useful stuff, string

Having offered a defence of and *rationale* for strings of undifferentiated page numbers in a previous issue of this journal,¹ we have seen since only repeated condemnations of them, especially in the criteria of all Indexing Award panels. We delight now to quote the words of two former most distinguished members of the Council of the Society of Indexers further advocating such strings.

First, our one-time Vice-President and Editorial Board member, James Thornton, writing of his indexing of the letters of Charles Dickens:²

What was wanted was a break-down of the material under broad heads. The index sins again and again against the rule that there should be no more than four or five undifferentiated references. To have introduced a great deal more descriptive matter simply out of regard for this rule would often have given a significance which was not borne out by the text nor justified by anticipation of the interests of future readers. It would also frequently have meant that readers would find little more in the text than they already knew from the index . . . [and] would have made the index unbearably long and confusing, with sub-classification carried to the third or fourth degree.

Then let us quote John Shaftesley, our former Chairman, reviewing R. F. Hunnisett's *Indexing for editors*:³

Dr Hunnisett is on the side of those many indexers who believe it to be bad practice to have solid blocks of page numbers, unbroken by modifications, following particular entries. At the risk of a charge of philistinism, I do not wholeheartedly

concur in this. If it is a question merely of aesthetics (which are important, of course, even in the layout of lists), then I believe aesthetics are really not the criterion in the appearance of an index. If it is a question of adequacy, one must remind indexers that very often stern economics—not necessarily publishers' parsimony—may dictate the amount and cost of space to be devoted to it. Nor can every person, place, or subject, however numerous the page numbers their mention may demand, be supplied with enough important subheadings to justify separate treatment, yet the researcher needs every relevant page number that can be discovered. An index can look beautiful typographically, but it is essentially a working tool and one should not officiously strain to turn it into a master work of art visually. As Dr Hunnisett observes in another connection, an index entry is 'not a potted biography', and page numbers, when all is said and done, are its *raison d'être*.

That ties up the matter nicely, we think.

References

1. Bell, Hazel K. The Ah!-factor. *The Indexer* 17 (3) April 1991, 191-2.
2. Thornton, James. How I indexed Dickens's letters. *The Indexer* 4 (4) Autumn 1965, 119-22.
3. Shaftesley, John M. Review. *The Indexer* 8 (2) Oct. 1972, 125-8.

HAZEL K. BELL