



A final good : indexing as a critical method and as text
by Michelle Lee Wiseman

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English
Montana State University
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Abstract:

Indexing has been overlooked as a method of critical reading and critique. Therefore, it has not received the attention that other critical methods of reading have. Important questions that begin to examine indexing as a critical method include: How does indexing differ from traditional modes of literary critique? What are the implications of indexing for the reader, the author, and the text? Can the index itself be considered a text? Approximately 15 experienced and established indexers were interviewed by phone and e-mail in an attempt to answer these questions. The responses provided to a series of questions, and comments appearing on the Index-L electronic bulletin board resulted in a realization that indexing has been vastly understudied, and that much scholarship remains to be done in this area.

Indexing is a critical method of reading, a method that is far more rigorous and inclusive than traditional modes of critique which result in formats such as journal articles and papers. Indeed, the index itself can even be considered a text, one which merits the scrutiny other critical methods have received thus far. The world of the indexer is often hidden and dismissed, despite the fact that in the Information Age, the crucial skills an indexer must possess are becoming more important than ever.

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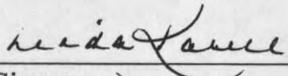
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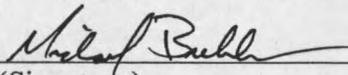
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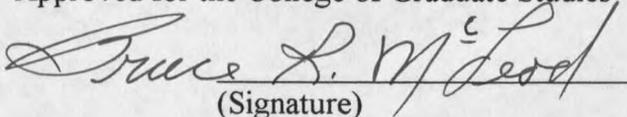
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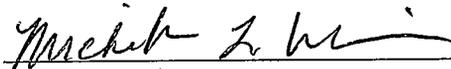
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ABSTRACT

Indexing has been overlooked as a method of critical reading and critique. Therefore, it has not received the attention that other critical methods of reading have. Important questions that begin to examine indexing as a critical method include: How does indexing differ from traditional modes of literary critique? What are the implications of indexing for the reader, the author, and the text? Can the index itself be considered a text?

Approximately 15 experienced and established indexers were interviewed by phone and e-mail in an attempt to answer these questions. The responses provided to a series of questions, and comments appearing on the Index-L electronic bulletin board resulted in a realization that indexing has been vastly understudied, and that much scholarship remains to be done in this area.

Indexing is a critical method of reading, a method that is far more rigorous and inclusive than traditional modes of critique which result in formats such as journal articles and papers. Indeed, the index itself can even be considered a text, one which merits the scrutiny other critical methods have received thus far. The world of the indexer is often hidden and dismissed, despite the fact that in the Information Age, the crucial skills an indexer must possess are becoming more important than ever.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"We see the word index in many contexts," says prominent indexer Nancy Mulvaney, "index of leading economic indicators, consumer price index, indexed database files, the Roman Catholic church's Index Librorum Prohibitorum, index of refraction, index finger".¹ Indeed, even Shakespeare makes note of indexes in Troilus and Cressida saying, "And in such indexes (although small pricks/To their subsequent volumes) there is seen/The baby figure of the giant mass/Of things to come at large".²

Indexes and indexing have been around for quite some time. Mulvaney quotes well-known author of Indexing A to Z Hans Wellisch:

Indexing of books did not begin, as is commonly thought, after the invention of printing. It starting with the rise of the universities in the 13th century. Although no two manuscripts of the same work were exactly alike and folio or page numbers were seldom used, indexes to theological treatises, lives of the saints, medical and legal compendia and, most of all to collections of sermons were compiled, using chapter and section numbers instead of pagination.³

Although indexes, and therefore indexers, have been around for several hundred years, much of the literature on indexing and indexers takes the form of instructional manuals, such as Mulvaney's Indexing Books and Wellisch's Indexing A to Z. The practice and its product has not been submitted to the scrutiny the academy has afforded other genres of literatures and literary critique, and in fact, there is little or no scholarship on the topic. Indexing (and its practitioners) have fallen by the wayside, dismissed by the academy and discussed only in limited circles. Library science professionals are aware of the

importance of indexing, as are lawyers who must locate critical information in the vast numbers of law and case books available. Medical professionals no doubt recognize the importance of an index when making a diagnosis or seeking specific treatment information regarding an ailment. And members of the academy? Indexing is just as crucial, serving to help locate quotes or statistics, among other things.

However, for all of its importance, most readers never think twice about the index. Interestingly, this sentiment is precisely the goal of an indexer. A good index should allow the reader to locate the information he or she needs with no trouble: "Readers turn to an index with a very specific purpose, to locate information about a topic. When that topic is easily located, the readers' needs are satisfied; they can leave the index and return quickly to the text".⁴ By design, the index is the last thing on the reader's mind. In contrast, "when readers are unable to locate their topic, they must stop and more closely examine the structure of the index. At this point the index has failed to provide quick and easy access to information".⁵ As a saying in the indexing world goes, "you only notice the index when it is a bad one." A poor index serves only to confuse the reader and does not allow entry into the text.

Why has indexing been marginalized? Nonfiction, generally speaking, does not enjoy the same attention as does its counterpart. Fictional novels and poetry are the stuff of academia, and indeed, upon which many academic careers are based. However, readers of the following pages will discover that an index is more than a detailed table of contents. In fact, indexing is a type of literary critique, a specific way of reading which results in a particular interpretation of a text—one which takes the form of an index. The power in the relationship between the index, text, author and readers belongs almost solely to the

reader—any reader, a threatening prospect for many. Academic writing, in fact, seems to alienate the reader through the use of exclusive language and also serves to alienate the author of traditional critical pieces through the use of this language. The index, in contrast, is constructed entirely for the reader. It is the job of the indexer to provide a road map of all the entry points into a given text. That is to say that the indexer, by virtue of the particular type of reading called indexing, provides the reader with the power to contextualize the textual experience.

In the following pages, I argue that indexing is, in fact, a critical approach to the text and that the index bears further examination as a text rather than simply a supplement. Readers will note the frequent use of terms which post-structuralist theory has questioned. For purposes of positioning my argument (and because of the limitation of language), those terms are defined below:

text: In some places throughout this piece, I am referring to the physical object. In others, I am referring to the location at which a reader locates something of meaning. The “text,” therefore, is a theoretical term rather than a concrete descriptor.

meaning: Meaning is left entirely up to the reader, and again, is not easy to pinpoint. Meaning exists as a product of the reader’s ability or desire to contextualize, and differs from reader to reader.

unity, stability, coherence: Part of the argument of my thesis is that there is a stability, unity and coherence to the index and the text upon which it is based. It is, however, important to note that I am arguing for a sort of decentered stability, unity or coherence. That is to say that a reader would not necessarily be able to label a text as “stable,” but rather the reader can locate stability in many places (or none) depending on

individual textual experiences with the original manuscript and the index. This decentered unity, stability or coherence originates with the reader, but does not reside in one quote from the text, or one term from the index. Readers will find more on this in the pages of my thesis.

Jonathon Swift notes that:

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 choicer, 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.⁶

Swift believes that the power in the textual relationship should belong to the reader—that the reader should not be subservient to the text. Indeed, Swift goes so far as noting that the index “governs and turns” the entire book, precisely the argument readers will find in the following pages. I, like Jonathan Swift, believe that the reader is the most important part of the textual experience, and that because the index is devoted entirely to the reader, by extension it too gains importance.

The following project began as a discussion on the Index-L online bulletin board. Many of the issues discussed in this thesis were raised by indexers on this bulletin board, and these comments and observations led to the development of a questionnaire which I sent to about 15 experienced indexers. What began as a simple questionnaire with two or three questions evolved into a discussion with various indexers about authorship, ownership, readership, and the making of meaning. Readers will find quotes from these discussions throughout this thesis. The indexers surveyed responded with enthusiasm and a remarkable ability to articulate current issues in indexing, largely a result of the indexing.

population's high level of education. It is evident that these indexers, their voices long silenced, are excited to be heard and considered in the academic world.

The research and interviews conducted are, in some senses, revolutionary, for no such interviews have been conducted with members of the indexing community. The work that remains to be done in this field is a daunting prospect, and I am honored to play a small part in bringing the voices and contributions of indexers to the forefront. I believe, as do many of the indexers who participated in this project, that a proper examination of indexing and indexes can ultimately change the ways in which we read, analyze, interpret and recognize texts.

CHAPTER 1

INDEXING AS A CRITICAL METHOD

I like to think that, when reading for indexing, one is looking for a pattern that I would liken to a jigsaw puzzle design. The puzzle's picture represents the overall meaning of the text. The pieces of information constitute the individual jigsaw pieces. The difference between this conception and an actual jigsaw puzzle is that indexers paint the picture, design and cut out the shapes of the jigsaw puzzle pieces, and solve the puzzle by putting the pieces into their correct places. Once we 'find the grooves' that make up an appropriate pattern, the pieces click easily into place and we can fit all the information into the puzzle pattern. Some might suggest that it is the author who draws the picture, but the picture that is the index is not identical to the picture of the text. The index is a picture of a picture. The index is a surrogate for the document, a surrogate that contains the essence and not the inessentials.⁷

This indexer is describing an interpretive process unique to indexing. When we perform a traditional critical reading of a piece, are we, in effect, creating a "picture of a picture"? One could certainly make the argument that an interpretation that takes the form of a journal article is a representation of the text, but the difference between this type of interpretation and an index is that the index contains all essential elements from the original text. The reader who utilizes one of the traditional models of literary critique chooses only the portions of the text that are relevant to his or her interpretive bias, but the indexer must treat all of the meaningful pieces of information as important—all of these "pieces" must be used to create an interpretation of the original text.

Whereas a Marxist reading, for example, is a "picture of a picture" (or a representation of the text), what it really does is capture the reflected image of the

interpreter—the Marxist interpreter is essentially creating a picture of the picture that is the text, but the image of the Marxist interpreter himself is indelibly included as well. This type of interpretation, is, after all, not so much about what the original text has to say, or has left out, but about what the interpreter chooses to include in the interpretation. The indexer, on the other hand, is asking critical questions of the text in order to locate not just the information relevant to one reader (the indexer) but to all readers. The indexer does not simply pluck a number of quotes and apply a theoretical model to them, all pieces fitting nicely into an interpretation. For the indexer, it is the essential content of the text that dictates what appears in the interpretation, all of the essential content, in fact. The substance of this essential content will be addressed in detail later in this paper.

One could also argue that indexing is a far more rigorous method of critical inquiry than most because it forces the reader to not only read closely, but to read for every piece of meaning and information, and to represent these meanings and information in the interpretation. While a reader who chooses to utilize one particular school of literary criticism is concerned with the entry points he or she located into the text, the indexer is concerned with all entry points into the text.

On the surface these two critical methods seem similar—the traditional approach recognizes one set of entry points and the indexer's approach another. However, it is important to note that traditional modes of critique, which appear in traditional formats such as journal articles and papers, begin and end with the text. That is to say the interpretive act takes place after a reader makes contact with the text, and the resultant interpretation exists solely in the context of this text. Readers who subsequently come into contact with the same text may or may not have use for previously generated

interpretive materials. Those who come into contact with the interpretation are, in a sense, limited by the interpretation to the one text upon which the interpretation itself is based—the textual experience in this case cannot extend beyond this relationship. Thus, traditional modes of interpretation become exclusive, denying access to a broad base of readers by maintaining relevance only to those who are familiar with the text.

These traditional modes of interpretation are also exclusive in that the text and the interpretation are inextricably bound. That is to say that the two pieces do not and cannot exist independently, in effect excluding the reader from locating more entry points into the text (See Figure 1.1). In Figure 1.1, the text, represented by the circle, and the traditional interpretation, represented by the rectangle, illustrate this exclusive relationship. The entry points located within the rectangle are accessible only through the text (or the circle) or the interpretation (the rectangle). In this way, entry points into the text that may appear on the outside of this figure (the star) are inaccessible, and therefore excluded.

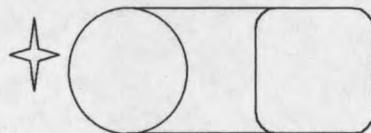


Figure 1.1 Exclusivity of Traditional Modes of Interpretation

This exclusivity extends to the intervention of other texts as well. For example, consider the text To Kill A Mockingbird. Numerous examples of traditional modes of interpretation exist in the form of journal articles. Each of these critiques exists in a partnership with the text, each critique excluding the others from sharing the same entry points, or, put another way, from following the same interpretive path. Each interpretive

piece exists independently of other interpretive pieces (one journal article exists separately from another journal article, even if bound together in a volume). That is to say that it is impossible for any reader to view the sum of the entry points to a given text simultaneously because each journal article must be read independently of one another. This is exclusive because each journal article contains entry points which are contextualized by the content of the journal article. In addition, these entry points are bound by the journal article in such a way that there is little overlap between journal articles (See Figure 1.2). After all, we do not see the same critical piece published over and over.

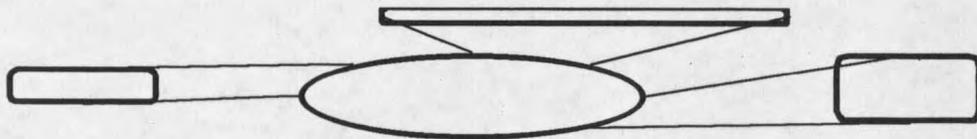


Figure 1.2 Relationship Between Critiques and Critiques and Text

Figure 1.2 illustrates the relationships between critiques (rectangles and squares) of a particular text (the circle) and the relationships of these critiques to the text itself. Note that the individual critical pieces do not overlap, and indeed, do not even take the same shape. The rectangular shapes, which represent interpretations which take traditional forms such as journal articles, contain entry points to the text. These entry points do not overlap because they are entirely bound by the context of the interpretive piece in which they appear, and, again, are accessible only through either the text itself, or the interpretive piece itself. These critical pieces exclude each other through their relationship to the text. In practice, interpretive literature often makes reference to other pieces of interpretive literature. Rather than cementing a bond between the two critical pieces, rather this serves

