Marot, Hofstadter, index

Professional indexers are sometimes justifiably irritated when authors declare that no one but themselves could have prepared the index to their book. No one could possibly bring to it the same degree of understanding, know the book so well, and so forth, as the author. Many of us have had the experience of sighing and twitching uncontrollably in our seats while listening to an author giving an account of 'how I indexed my own book when I'd never done an index before'. We resent the naive amateur who has just re-invented the wheel and is so anxious to tell us all about it, and even hopes for an approving pat on the back from the professionals.

But such resentment is disarmed in the case of Douglas Hofstadter's index to his book *Le ton beau de Marot: in praise of the music of language* (Hofstadter 1997).

Hazel Bell had told me of Hans Wellisch's enthusiasm for the book, which he described as 'fascinating reading', and this was recommendation enough for me (Wellisch 1998). Its ostensible theme is translation, and the focus is on a very short poem (28 lines of 3 syllables) by the French 16th-century poet Clément Marot, *Ma mignonne*, of which Hofstadter himself produced a number of English translations; he even persuaded some of his friends (clearly an erudite and cultured bunch) to create their own versions. But this is only the framework for a brilliant, discursive text which ranges over a wide field of literature (from Villon's ballades, via Georges Perec's *La disparition*, to Vladimir Nabokov's version of Pushkin's verse novel *Eugene Onegin*), interspersed with personal observations.

Douglas Hofstadter is a professor of cognitive science and computer science and adjunct professor of history and philosophy of science, philosophy, comparative literature, and psychology at Indiana University in Bloomington. His earlier book, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: an eternal golden braid* (Hofstadter 1979), won him a Pulitzer Prize and an American Book Award. Not content with this, for *Le ton beau de Marot* he took charge of the book design, typography, typesetting and copy-editing, and also compiled the index. This covers 23 pages of three columns and is set in a practically illegible 4-point. Of course, this index breaks all the rules, but in a grandiose, masterly fashion. It may well be the most self-indulgent index ever published, but one can only admire its creator's industry as well as his inexhaustible exuberance and wit.

Here are some of the briefer entries (some run to several column inches):

Agrarstrukturverbesserungsmassnahmen, 24 (this word, meaning "measures taken to improve the agricultural structures", is discussed as an example of German compound words)
anglosaxophone, Pushkin performed on, 240
chocolate haters, mystery of, 457-459, 465
FAHQMT (fully automatic high-quality machine translation), 81-82
garlic smell in Paris metro, 230
"guy goes into a bar" jokes, 212
hoops to jump through, *see* constraints
local tweak with global effects, 369
"Moon" becomes "moon", 306
"moon" stays "moon", 447
Muzak at funeral, 462

"No way, Jose", 19, 37; in Chinese, 163
page-breaks, effects on this book's content, xix, 282-283
popebot, 208-209; *see also* fembots; wifebots
women: as anomalous human beings, 201-205, 213
zooming in to land on just one word, 378, 381-388, 632

The expression *control freak* was clearly invented to describe Hofstadter. In his Introduction, he revels in the 'innumerable constraints' he has deliberately imposed upon himself and his success in working within them. He was determined to finish the text by 23 November, 1996, Clément Marot's 500th birthday, and this deadline turned him into 'a kind of obsessed madman'. 'I think one strongly needs deadlines of some sort or other in life; they act as organizers without which one would simply flail about for unlimited amounts of time.' But many other self-imposed constraints had to do with the actual appearance of the text. 'I dearly wanted to be able to control every tiny detail of my book's overall look, ranging from the cover art to the typefaces used to the way displays are indented, and so on. Fortunately, the people at Basic Books have grown used to me and my idiosyncrasies over the years I have worked with them, and they assented to my unusual request. Consequently, I have enjoyed total control over such things as line-breaks, page-breaks, hyphenations, widows, orphans, density of word spacing between lines, fine-grained intercharacter spacing ('kerning') and so forth and so on — things that most people usually are unaware of and simply leave to their publisher or their word processor.' Could one really expect such a self-confessed fanatic to entrust his index to a professional indexer?

The last of his endnotes (on page 598) is a discussion of the index, which at the time of writing the note he had actually not yet completed. 'This tiny-print behemoth', he writes, 'was a labor of love that took me a full month of fifteen-hour days to carry off.' Creating the index provided him with the sort of insights acquired in the course of this work which usually come too late to serve any useful purpose. 'Doing this index,' Hofstadter continues, 'painful though it was, afforded me one last pass back through the text, tying things together for a final time, saying goodbye to a work created out of love, and with love, for words, ideas, people ... For instance, there was one giant index entry that came entirely out of the blue, catching me very much off guard. That was the entry for "conflation". I'm not even sure I'm using the word in a standard way, in fact. What it means to me is "taking one thing for another", as in the sentence, "Don't conflate the meanings of 'conflate' and 'confound', please!" I noticed one instance of conflation (in this sense, at least), indexed it, then saw another, and pretty soon it dawned on me that this theme was omnipresent in my book, and so I spent several hours just searching for instances of conflation — not the *word*, mind you, but the *concept*. It was a revelation to me how pervasive it was, even though the word itself occurred only a handful of time.

'There were other entries, too, whose size surprised me, such as "Chopin", "colliding cultures", "Paris", and "splicing-together". Once the index was essentially done (I hedge with this "essentially" because as I write these words, I still have to index these very Notes — only then will the Index be *really* done), I

found it interesting to flip through it and, by comparing the sheer sizes of various entries, to get new perceptions of what my book is most centrally about — a very curious activity, and perhaps overly introspective in some people's eyes, but irresistible for at least a little while.'

The long entry for conflation in the index (without quotation marks as printed) is followed by a brief one for "conflation" (in double quotes):

"conflation": DRH's personal usage, 598; lengthy index entry for, 598, 613

This entry, therefore, refers both to the endnote quoted above, and to the entry which immediately precedes it in the index. Self-referentiality can surely go no further.

Can Hofstadter have read the long essay by William S Heckscher (1982), describing the index he, Heckscher, created to his own edition of, and commentary to, a 16th-century Latin text by Joachim Camerarius the Elder, an analysis of Albrecht Dürer's engraving *Melencolia I*? The late John Gordon (1982) described this index by Heckscher as a 'substantial and unusual index, which probes beyond the generally accepted limits of indexing theory and practice'.

Heckscher writes in conclusion to his essay: 'I have indicated that for me there should be a carefully attuned balance between Index on one side and Text, Notes, Illustrations, on the other ... Ideally, then, a good Index should be more than merely a taciturn sign-post erected after all the rest has been done and is immutably crystallized. ... I pre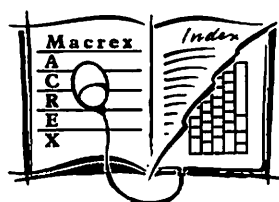fer the Index which has a life of its own, which may pride itself on being the child of imagination, and which should enable us to spend a peaceful evening in bed, reading such an Index, as if we were reading a good novel.'

I don't know whether anyone told Douglas Hofstadter about the persistent myth that every index must contain a joke; his index contains many. But here is a particularly playful example which may annoy many people as much as it delights me. Under 'index' in the index, a subheading reads 'typo in, 631' (the index extends over pages 599 to 632). On page 631 we find a further index entry, 'typo in index, 633'. There is, of course, no page 633.

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References

Gordon, J A (1982) Review of '*Melancholia* (1541): an essay in the rhetoric of description by Joachim Camerarius. Translation with commentaries and notes, by William S. Heckscher, in "Joachim Camerarius (1500-1574): Essays on the history of humanism during the Reformation, ed. by Frank Baron" '. *The Indexer*, 13 (1), April 1982, pp. 58-9

Heckscher, W S (1982) The unconventional index and its merits. *The Indexer*, 13 (1), April 1982, pp. 6-25)

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Wellisch, Hans (1998) Private communication to Hazel K Bell.