

A MAP OF HIS MICROCOSM:
JAMES SMETHAM'S *INDEX RERUM*

Mark Jones

A peripheral figure among the Pre-Raphaelites, James Smetham left an important body of correspondence and personal documents that enables us to consider his creative outlook. One document in particular is especially intriguing. Preserved in Manchester's John Rylands Library is a large leather-bound volume bearing on its spine the title *Index Rerum*. On the first of its fibrous, embossed leaves is the following inscription: "Jas. Smetham, 1 Park Lane, Paradise Row, Stoke Newington, London." The pages that follow reveal a profusion of small, hand-inked vignettes, impromptu portraits, charts, pasted Bible clippings, and personal meditations which, according to Smetham's most recent biographer, Susan P. Casteras, amount to "a highly original combination of words and text [that function as] a sort of dual lexicon or dictionary" (41). Beginning with the earliest entries that are dated 1857, and much added to over succeeding years, Smetham's *Index Rerum*, in all its taxonomic intensity, religious ardour, and self-confessional memorializing, is both a rewarding and, at times, elusive document to study.

In compiling an *Index Rerum* or "index of things," Smetham was taking part in a type of literary project which had distinct parallels with the assembling of commonplace books (Moss vii), a practice which first flourished in the Early Modern period and was by the nineteenth century a familiar means of documenting, ordering, and preserving a wide variety of noteworthy information within a single volume (Darnton 150). The type and format of information remained varied, but usually included insightful and sagacious extracts from a wide range of sources. Although commonplace books were often systematically arranged for ease of reference, the *Index Rerum* as a term and as an organizational tool is nominally and conceptually