Indexes as fiction and fiction as paper-chase

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This journal has often examined and listed indexers portrayed in fiction, and novels that contain their own indexes. There is another type of overlap of fiction and indexes: the index itself as veritable fiction, or a component thereof.

The most straight-forward example is the last item in J. G. Ballard's volume of short stories, War fever, fittingly entitled `The Index', and described in The Indexer (Bell 1991). This is preceded by a page-long `Editor's note', claiming: `The text printed below is the index to the unpublished and perhaps suppressed autobiography of Henry Rhodes Hamilton', and speculating, `Is it a disguised roman à clef in which the fictional hero exposes the secret identities of his historical contemporaries?'. The five-page soi-disant index then includes such mini-narratives as:

Gandhi, Mahatma, visited in prison by HRH, 251; discusses Bhagavadgita with HRH, 253; has dhoti washed by HRH, 254; denounces HRH, 256

George V, secret visits to Chatsworth, 3, 4-6; rumoured liaison with Mrs Alexander Hamilton, 7; suppresses court circular, 9; denies existence of collateral Battenberg line to Lloyd George, 45

The index/story draws to a conclusion - with page numbers also suggestive of the end:

United Nations Assembly, seized by Perfect Light Movement, 695-9; HRH addresses, 696; HRH calls for world war against US and USSR, 698
Westminster Abbey, arrest of HRH by Special Branch, 704
Younghusband, Lord Chancellor, denies star chamber trial of HRH, 722; denies knowledge of whereabouts of HRH, 724; refuses habeas corpus appeal by Zelda Hamilton, 728; refers to unestablished indentity of HRH, 731

The final entry is a flourishing exit:

Zielinski, Bronislaw, suggests autobiography to HRH, 742; commissioned to prepare index, 748; warns of suppressed threats, 752; disappears, 761

Then there are the `indexes' appearing in Sweet desserts by Lucy Ellmann (Ellmann 1988) and My strange quest for Mensonge by Malcolm Bradbury (Bradbury 1987), designated by Judy Batchelor, `Para-Index and Anti-Index' (Batchelor 1989). The first, Sweet desserts, is the story of two sisters, one the narrator and indexer. The index includes such self-memos as, `Boyfriends, Franny's hand-me-down. see less of' and, `Divorce, cut your losses and go to Las Vegas'. It may be taken as an extension of the text, rather than a locational adjunct. As Batchelor explains, it is `a guide not to the overt topics but to its

subtext and its personal connotations. The main events and characters are not indexed. There are entries with comments but without page-numbers: "Washing-machine, forget it"; entries with no direct reference to the text at all: "Metamorphosis, see Kafka" (no entry under Kafka); and such teasing efforts as "Oyster, the only mention of an, 36". The index is more entertainment than use; but so, after all, is a novel.'

Bradbury's book concerns `the elusive European writer Mensonge, who has brought the Negation of Being to its logical conclusion by probably never existing'. Batchelor calls it `a piece of fictional non-fiction, a glorious skit on post-war philosophical writing and writers', and observes, `Fittingly, the index is an anti-index, in which the signifier refuses absolutely to relate to the signified. All the page-references are incorrect - how could they not be? The index makes jolly reading in its own right: "Sameness, see Difference"; "Nouvelle cuisine, contrasted with food, 23; compared with Mondrian, 27"; "I, is there 1; 38-47".'

Pale fire

But the big one must be the index in (rather than to) Vladimir Nabokov's Pale fire (Nabokov 1962). This index is the second transforming layer covering - or smothering - or totally transforming - a 999-line autobiographical poem (composed on 80 index cards) by John Shade, Nabokov's fictional American Professor and poet. An apparatus criticus surrounds - engulfs - it: a 16-page foreword and 229-page commentary by Charles Kinbote, Shade's neighbour and fellow-lecturer. From these, it becomes apparent that Kinbote is a lunatic fantasising himself to be a European (`Zemblan') king, who escaped from revolution in his country; and that Shade was murdered after finishing the poem in a case of mistaken identity, while Kinbote assumes the bullet to have been intended for his own regal assassination. The entire commentary reinterprets (distorts the meaning of) the poem.

The book itself may be read by a system of cross-referencing dear to indexers. As Brian Boyd writes (Boyd 1992), `More than any other novel, Pale fire is committed to the excitement of discovery. The foreword opens as Kinbote's scholarly summary of John Shade's "Pale fire" ... two pages into the foreword, Kinbote tells us that his poor friend Shade proclaimed to him on the last day of his life that he had reached the end of his labors. Kinbote adds, "See my note to line 991". At this point we can either continue with the foreword, and catch the note when we come to it, or trust the author enough to suppose there is some reason for that suggestion and turn to the note. If we take the second course, we can witness at once Kinbote's curious attachment to Shade. ... He finds Shade on "the arborlike porch or veranda I have mentioned in my note to lines 47-48". Do we continue the note to line 991 ... or do we divert to the earlier note? If we do we are referred almost at once to the note to line 691, and though we are running out of fingers to insert as bookmarks, and though we may wonder whether we will ever reach the foreword again, we may agree to one last try. In the note to line 691, we find that ... the trail of cross-references loses its mazy look and returns us, on our way back to the foreword, to the note to line 991. ... To readers ready to follow this chain of cross-references, Nabokov signals that their curiosity will be well repaid: we are only two and a half pages into the foreword, but already we know ... Nabokov has granted us a glimpse of forbidden knowledge and a foretaste of the delights of discovery. This little excursus can

serve as a paradigm for reading all of Nabokov's book.' Mary McCarthy (McCarthy 1962) deemed this work an elaborate and beautifully engineered piece of machinery, whose separate parts are to be `assembled, according to the manufacturer's directions, and fitted together with the help of clues and cross-references ... hunted down as in a paper-chase'. In the foreword Kinbote himself urges the reader to `consult [the notes] first and then study the poem with their help, rereading them of course as he goes through the text, and perhaps, after having done with the poem, consulting them a third time'. To aid this course, he suggests `cutting out and clipping together the pages with the text of the thing, or, even more simply, purchasing two copies of the same work which can then be placed in adjacent positions on a comfortable table'.

The ten-page index/glossary is clearly the work of the commentator. It is preceded by a note stating:`The italicized numerals refer to the lines in the poem and the comments thereon'. In fact the majority of the entries refer to the commentary, and are difficult to locate - comments may run to several pages. The note goes on: `The capital letters G, K, S stand for the three main characters in the work'. S (Shade) is the author/subject of the poem; K (Kinbote) its editor/commentator, and G (Gradus) the mistaken murderer; neither of the last two appears makes any appearance in the poem. Nevertheless, the editor's own entry (`Kinbote, Charles, Dr., an intimate friend of S, his literary adviser, editor and commentator') takes fully two of the index's ten and a half pages. Shade himself gets just over one.

`Bias' would be too weak a word to apply to this indexer's selection and terminology: it gives a fine example of power corrupting. Enemies are disdainfully dismissed, not even accorded naming: mentioned in subheadings, hated `Prof. C', `E.' and `Prof. H.' are each followed by a parenthesis, `(not in Index); while Shade's beloved wife, Sybil, to whom the poem is addressed throughout, and whom the commentary bitterly denigrates, receives from the vindictive homosexual Kinbote the sole entry: `Shade, Sybil, S's wife, passim'.

Teasing games are played. A recurrent theme of the commentary is the failure of the Zemblan rebels to find the crown jewels artfully concealed by Kinbote (*qua* King Charles II). The index includes the trail:

> Crown Jewels see Hiding Place.
> Hiding place, potaynik (q.v.)
> Potaynik, taynik (q.v.)
> Taynik, Russ., secret place; see Crown Jewels.

In the absence of any reference to Zembla and its Royal Family in the poem, their story is retailed in commentary and index. Below are sample narrative entries, complete with their line references (in fact there is only one line reference in these three entries, under Acht):

> Acht, Iris, celebrated actress, d. 1888, a passionate and powerful woman, favourite of Thurgus the Third (q.v.), 130. She died officially by her own hand; unofficially,
> strangled in her dressing room by a fellow actor, a jealous young Gothlander, now, at ninety, the oldest, and least important, members of the Shadows (q.v.) group.

Igor II, reigned 1800-1845, a wise and benevolent king, son of Queen Yaruga (q.v.) and father of Thurgus III (q.v.): a very private section of the picture gallery in the Palace, accessible only to the reigning monarch, but easily broken into through Bower P by an inquisitive pubescent, contained the statues of Igor's four hundred favorite catamites, in pink marble, with inset glass eyes and various touched up details, an outstanding exhibition of verisimilitude and bad art, later presented by K. to an Asiatic potentate.

Shadows, the, a regicidal organization which commissioned
Gradus (q.v.) to assassinate the self-banished king; its leader's terrible name cannot be mentioned, even in the Index to the obscure work of a scholar; his maternal grandfather, a well-known and very courageous master builder, was hired by Thurgus the Turgid, around 1885, to make certain repairs in his quarters, and soon after that perished, poisoned in the royal kitchens, under mysterious circumstances, together with his three young apprentices whose pretty first names Yan, Yonny, and Angeling, are preserved in a ballad still to be heard in some of our wilder valleys.

But there is a further theory about this complex structure (Boyd 1992): that the poet Shade himself is to be taken as author of all the parts, including the recording of his own death and the fate of his manuscript thereafter; that his `murder' and the burlesque commentary by the fictive, insane Kinbote were a part of his literary plan from the outset. Shade is thus enabled to play games with his own life, calling up a mirror-image of his own comfortable world, and to play the part of Kinbote, his antithesis. The index holds its share of such hidden clues. For one, Kinbote (qua commentator) describes Shade as having `a childish predeliction for word games', particularly word golf. So, the index includes the following example entries:

Lass, see Mass
Mass, Mars, Mare, see Male
Male, see Word Golf
Word Golf, S's predeliction for ...; see Lass

Nabokov seems to intend Shade to be identifiable as the compiler of the index, and by implication also author of the foreword and commentary. In a draft foreword to the revised edition of his autobiography, Speak, Memory, he commented:

As John Shade says somewhere:
Nobody will heed my index,
I suppose
But through it a gentle wind ex
Ponto blows.

Nabokov's attitude to indexes, particularly to works of fiction, is revealed in a letter he

wrote to William McGuire, proposing to undertake the preparation of an index to Alexandr Pushkin's verse-novel, Eugene Onegin (which Nabokov had translated and provided a massive commentray for): `An index to a work like this should reflect its virtues and shortcomings, its tone and personality (as I have proved in Pale Fire). It should be an afterglow and not a yawn.'

Kinbote intimates that he intends to kill himself when his editorial work is complete. In his diary for 1962 Nabokov left a note that Kinbote `commits suicide before completing his index, leaving the last entry without page references'. The index's final alphabetical entry, `Zembla, a distant northern land.', does indeed lack page reference (as do other entries, though - Igor II and Shadows, the, quoted above; Kobaltana; Marrowsky, a).

The integration of events described in the index into the text of Pale fire clearly qualifies this index as our fourth example of indexes as fiction. The complex trail of cross-references by which the whole book may be alternatively read
makes it possible also to regard this novel as an example of fiction as index.

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