

## Para-Index and Anti-Index

*the indexes to Sweet desserts by Lucy Ellmann (London, Virago 1988); and to My strange quest for Mensonge by Malcolm Bradbury (London, Deutsch 1987; paperback, Arena, 1989).*

*Sweet desserts*, a first novel by an American émigrée in Britain, is concerned with love and the deprivation of love, and with eating and over-eating. The narrative is illuminated, and at times advanced, by extracts from advertisements, instruction leaflets, art criticism and *King Lear*; at first I found it confusing and self-indulgent but was finally won over. Not for your maiden aunt, who will be shocked; still less for your maiden uncle, who may be baffled as well.

Prepared to applaud the idea of a novel with an index, we may, maidenly or not, be shocked and baffled by its realization in this case. The main characters and events are not indexed (unless 'Happenings, check your filofax' fills the bill). Such conventional entries as 'Rubens, Peter Paul, 16, 42, 45; see also Roger de Piles' (and its partner 'Piles, Roger de, 45; see also Rubens) deal only with the most peripheral of topics. 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'. On the whole, the index is more entertainment than use; but so, after all, is a novel.

We might call this a *para-index*; a guide not to the overt topics of a narrative, but to its subtext and its personal connotations. When we look through a family album ('Auntie at Cannes in 1930'; 'Peter in the Park, aged 2') our mental linkages may throw up quite different captions: 'Extraordinary hats! . . .'; 'Before he got his tricycle . . .' If a novel aims to provide a sort of fictional family album to engage our minds and emotions in reaction and comparison, perhaps this is just the sort of index a novel should have.

*Mensonge*, by the established British novelist and critic, Malcolm Bradbury, is a piece of fictional non-fiction, a glorious skit on post-war philosophical writing and writers ('from Saussure to not saussure at all'). Since the elusive European writer Mensonge has brought the Negation of Being to its logical conclusion by probably never existing, the researcher must naturally follow his putative trail all the more earnestly. The fearsome smoothness of the academic style is sustained through puns and bathos, ironies and polysyllabic sillinesses to create a Deconstructionist romp which made me laugh aloud. I assume that those who have more knowledge of the field than my gleanings from a few indexings have given me, will derive even greater joy from the book.

Fittingly, the index is an *anti-index*, in which the signifier refuses absolutely to relate to the signified. Here is 'Bardot, Brigitte, non-relationship with M. of, 41'; but the non-incident referred to is not on page 41. In fact 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' . . . [In case there is not a journal for those who compile end-of-book bibliographies, I hope I may be allowed to borrow these columns to mention that *Mensonge* has an anti-bibliography which is a masterpiece of parody; the last entry reads: 'Yves Zylot, *Fin*, Paris, PUF, 1975'. I was disappointed to find no reference here to publications from the 'His-and-Her-Meneutics Series' (*Mensonge*, page 39); though 'a third-person work of self-biography shyly titled *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*', referred to on page 30 of the text, is included.]

Innovation in indexing is powerfully to be encouraged; the non-index and the sub-index have been with us for many years, and we may now perhaps look forward to the meta-index, the *sur-index* and who knows what further developments. Perhaps other readers have already discovered examples of these, and await only the invitation (here extended) to describe them to the Editor. And I don't mind *too* much having to re-read several chapters of either of these books to find out where Suzy's baby was born or when it was that Bardot did not have a relationship with Mensonge.

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### Indexing cartoons

'Sixty years of Gotham's sidewalks, lonely drinkers in empty bars, Manhattan soirées, and al fresco luncheon parties in Nantucket pose the hazard of repetition. Before acceptance, the week's drawings are taken to the library to be checked against the ledgers in which every single cartoon is elaborately indexed and cross-referenced. Under A and again under E, for instance, lies Lee Lorenz's classic linking of two stalwart clichés in which a couple of alligators converse in the murk of a sewer. Remarks one: "Like so many New Yorkers, I have lived here all my life and never been to the top of the Empire State Building." Repetition would be impossible as well as improbable. The seal only barks once.'

—report in *The Times*, 7 May 1988, on the opening of an exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum on 'The Art of the *New Yorker*'.