Berkeley Newsletter
Introduction to "Berkeley's Crossroads"

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Jorge Luis Borges was born in Buenos Aires just before the start of the 20th century, in 1899. His family belonged to the intellectual middle class and was of English, Spanish and Portuguese origins. He went to school in Geneva and later travelled to Spain, where he became acquainted with new tendencies in literature, such as *ultralism*. Back in Buenos Aires, he published his first book of poetry in 1923, *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, which was followed by *Luna de enfrente* (1925) and *Cuaderno San Martín* (1929). Also in the 1920s he published some collections of essays: *Inquisiciones* (1925), *El tamaño de mi esperanza* (1926) and *El idioma de los argentinos* (1928). In the 1930s he started writing short narrative rather than poetry and essays. In 1935 he published a collection of short stories, *Historia universal de la infamia*. His best known works followed: *Ficciones* (1944), *El Aleph* (1949) and *Otras inquisiciones* (1952). In 1961 he was awarded, together with Samuel Beckett, the International Publishers' Prize and in 1979 he won the Cervantes Prize. His last book, *Los conjurados* was published in 1985. He died in Geneva a year later.

Borges' writings have been said to be "metafiction". This term designates the kind of fiction that is conscious of its status, functioning as a means to pose questions about fiction and reality. The nature of everyday reality, especially its illusory character, is a constant theme in Borges' writings. Concepts such as the self, time and language have a predominant role not only in his essays but also in his short stories and poems. If Borges' metafiction is understood as a preoccupation with such concepts, his literary activity and that of the philosopher share some common ground.

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Borges became interested in philosophical problems from an early stage, through his father’s teachings:

He also, without my being aware of it, gave me my first lessons in philosophy. When I was still quite young, he showed me, with the aid of a chess board, the paradoxes of Zeno-Achilles and the tortoise, the unmoving flight of the arrow, the impossibility of motion. Later, without mentioning Berkeley’s name, he did his best to teach me the rudiments of idealism.

The British empiricists were an important influence on the young Borges, as is later manifest in his writings. He found Berkeley’s and Hume’s works in his father’s library and it is possible that he read them in the original English. Borges was fluent in English and there is an important influence in his works of English writers such as G.K. Chesterton, H.G. Wells and J.W. Dunne. Elements of Irish culture can also be found: there are various references to Joyce, Bernard Shaw, Wilde, and, most importantly, Berkeley. Ireland is also the scene of one of Borges’ stories, Theme of the Traitor and the Hero (1956).

Later he would become interested in German idealism, especially in Schopenhauer, of whom he says:

were I to choose a single philosopher, I would choose him. If the riddle of the universe can be stated in words, I think these words would be in his writings.

Schopenhauer and Berkeley are certainly those philosophers whose presence is strongest in Borges’ works. They are already mentioned in his poem “Dawn”, which appeared in Borges’ first book, Fervor de Buenos Aires (1923):

and intimidated by the threat of dawn, I felt again that tremendous conjecture of Schopenhauer and Berkeley which declares the world an activity of the mind, a dream of souls, without foundation or purpose or volume.

This idea of reality, as a dream or illusion, is the main theme of the essay that follows, and one of the central topics in Borges’ works. As with most of Borges’ main themes, it was borrowed from metaphysics. Philosophy and theology were always important sources of inspiration for his fiction. However, Borges does not subscribe to any particular doctrine. His attitude towards metaphysical enquiry could be described as ironic. He uses philosophical views to bring into question our everyday reality, but, later, this very common sense view of reality will ridicule the metaphysical conclusions. The outcome of this dialectic is precisely a lack of definite conclusions and an acceptance of uncertainty. This contrast between common sense reality and metaphysical explanation is emphasized by situating elaborate speculations in the most banal and common contexts, a practice that is common in Borges’ stories and essays.

Borges suggests in his stories the fictional character of concepts like reality, self and time. The illusory nature of the world, the metaphor of life as a dream without a dreamer, is a constant theme in Borges’ writings. The following essay constitutes an early formulation of this idea that will become so central to Borges’ literary production. Also in this essay the origin of this intuition is made explicit: Berkeley’s idealism. Two other recurrent themes in Borges’ works are already present in this essay: the loss of the self and the fictional nature of time.

"La encrucijada de Berkeley" ("Berkeley’s Crossroads"), together with "La naderia de la personalidad", are the two metaphysical essays of the volume Inquisiciones (Seix Barral, Barcelona, 1994) which was Borges’ first published work in prose. It appeared in Buenos Aires in 1925 in a limited edition of only 500 copies. It was not reprinted again until 1994 and it has not been translated into English before.

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3 For a full analysis of this story see Jaime Alazraki, La prosa narrativa de Jorge Luis Borges, Madrid, 1974, p.103-106.
4 Ibid. p.147
6 See Didier T. Jaen, op.cit. p.23 and 40.
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Borges' prose is as difficult to translate as poetry. The structure of his language (i.e., extremely long sentences, very unusual words, never-ending succession of adjectives) can be so complex as to make the message hard to grasp in Spanish, let alone express it in another language. My aim has been to be faithful to Borges' style while making the content understandable in English. Sometimes, however, I have been compelled to sacrifice one in order to achieve the other. Lack of clarity is unavoidable in Borges' texts, but I have attempted to limit this obscurity to those paragraphs which are also cryptic in the original: "since Borges' language does not read 'smoothly' in Spanish, there is no reason it should in English."7

I have included the Spanish translations of Berkeley's Principles as an appendix, since they are likely to have been by Borges, given that there seems to be no Spanish translation of that work prior to the 1930s.8


Berkeley's Crossroads

Jorge Luis Borges

In an earlier work entitled La nadería de la personalidad!, I unfolded, in many of its derivations, the identical thought whose account is the object and end of these lines. But that work, excessively punished with literary words, is nothing but a series of suggestions and examples, assembled without a continuous line of argument. In order to mend that blot I have determined to expose, in the lines that follow, the hypothesis that led me to undertake its writing. In this manner, with the reader positioned next to me within the fountain of my reasoning, we can feel hand in hand the difficulties as they arise. Letting our meditations slide down with resolute ease, along one and the same channel, we shall together undertake the eternal adventure of the metaphysical problem.

* * *

Berkeley's idealism was my spur. For the recreation of those readers in whose memory such speculation doesn't emerge with solid prominence (either due to the substantial time gone by since some disbelieving teacher pointed it out to their indifference, or to their never having frequented it) it is convenient to summarize in a few words the most substantial elements of that doctrine.

Esse rerum est percipi: perceptibility is the being of things, they only exist inasmuch as they are noticed. On that brilliant truism lies and from it rises the illustrious fabric of Berkeley's system. With that meagre formula he exorcises the tricks of dualism and shows us that reality is not a remote riddle, elusive and laborious to decipher, but rather an intimate closeness, easy and open all round. Let us scrutinize the details of his argumentation.

Choose any particular idea: for instance, that which the word fig-tree designates. It is clear that the concept thus labelled is nothing but an abbreviation for many diverse perceptions: in our eyes the fig-tree is a diffident and twisted trunk which expands


1 [A possible translation would be The nothingness of personality, although the English word nothingness does not capture the double sense that the word naderia could have in this context: trifle as well as nothingness.]
upwards into clear foliage: for our hands it is the rounded hardness of the log and the roughness of the leaves; while for our palate only the covetable flavour of the fruit exists. There are also the olfactory and hearing perceptions, which I shall purposely leave aside so as not to entangle this matter excessively.

All of these, says the non-metaphysical man, are different qualities of the tree. But if we delve deeper into this plain assertion, we will be appalled by the multitude of mist and contradictions that it hides.

While anybody would admit that greenness is not an essential quality of the tree (since at dusk its glitter expires, the leaves yellow and the trunk becomes blackened and dark) it is agreed that convexity and volume are realities intimate to it. The matter changes regarding taste. No one would claim that the flavour of a fruit does not need our palate in order to exist in its utmost completeness. From distinction to distinction, we approach the dualism sheltered by physics today: a device which (according to the precise definition given by the English Hegelian, Francis Bradley) lies in considering some qualities as nouns of reality and others as adjectives.

As a rule, substance is only awarded to extension. The rest of the qualities (colour, taste and sound) are considered embedded in a borderland between spirit and matter: an intermediate universe or boundary which is shaped, in continuous and secret collaboration, by spatial reality and our organs of perception. That conjecture suffers from serious flaws. The bare extension, pure concept of the atom, only devised as a defence against the idea of a never-ending divisibility.

Berkeley, in a decisive argument, roots out the problem:

*That neither our thoughts, nor passions, nor ideas formed by the imagination, exist without the mind, is what every body...*
Consider the frailty of memory and you will accept without a
mind that thinks them or takes notice of them, what should be
determines the being of things, if these cannot subsist but in some
feelings whose linking constitutes my life? Where is my past life?
imaginary whole of all the instants of life, leaving alone the order
said, for example, of the succession of pleasant, calm and painful
confusion brought about by this doctrine, for it solely
What turns into smoke are the great metaphysical continuities:
time and life becomes
a dream without a dreamer. We should not grieve over the
mind. The object expires, and together with it, the subject. Both
enormous nouns, spirit and matter, vanish at one and the same
rooted fallacy of Berkeley’s doctrine hides. I shall do this by
want to show where the
apt to be spoken than to be understood,
Becke states: things only exist inasmuch as the mind is
set on them. It is fair to answer: yes, but the mind only exists as
perceptor and mediator of things. In this manner, not only the
unity of the external world becomes thwarted, but also that of the
mind. The object expires, and together with it, the subject. Both
enormous nouns, spirit and matter, vanish at one and the same
time and life becomes an entangled crowd of mindless situations,
a dream without a dreamer. We should not grieve over the
confusion brought about by this doctrine, for it solely concerns the
imaginary whole of all the instants of life, leaving alone the order
and rigour of each of them as well as their small partial groupings.
What turns into smoke are the great metaphysical continuities:
the self, space, time... Indeed, if someone else’s perception
determines the being of things, if these cannot subsist but in some
mind that thinks them or takes notice of them, what should be
said, for example, of the succession of pleasant, painful and painful
feelings whose linking constitutes my life? Where is my past life?
Consider the frailty of memory and you will accept without a
doubt that it is not within me. I am limited to this dizzy present
and it is inadmissible that its minute narrowness could encompass
the frightening number of other isolated instants. If you don’t
want to appeal to miracle and invoke (for the benefit of your
attacked urges for unity) the enigmatic help of an omnipotent God
who embraces and passes through everything that happens like
light through glass, you will agree with me about the absolute
nothingness6 of those wide words: Self, Space, Time...

It will be of little use to defend the first of these, the famous
bulwark cogito ergo sum. I think, therefore I am. If that Latin
meant: I think, therefore there is a thinking (the only logical
conclusion that the premise would carry), its truth would be as
incontestable as it is useless. If employed to mean I think,
therefore there is a thinker, it would be accurate, in the sense that
every activity involves a subject, but deceitful in the ideas of
individuation and continuity that it suggests. The trap is in the
verb to be which, as Schopenhauer said, is merely a link that
joins subject and object in every sentence. But remove both terms
and only an ungrounded word, a sound,7 remains.

And since we are talking about objections, I want to oppose
those that Spencer, in his illustrious Principles of Psychology
(volume two, page 505), raises against the idealist doctrine.
Spencer argues8:

Of the proposition that there is no existence beyond
consciousness, the first implication is that consciousness is
unlimited in extension. For a limit which consciousness
cannot transcend implies an existence which imposes the
limit; and this must either be an existence beyond

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6 [See note 1]
7 In the metaphysics text composed by Jose Campillo y Rodriguez, it is stated
that the dogmatic argument cogito, ergo sum is only the abbreviation of the
idea that the doctor Gomez Pereira published in 1554. The anticipated
paraphrase of Castilian reads as follows: Nosco me aliquid noscere: at
quidquid nescit, est: ergo ego sum. I know that I know something and
everything that knows is, therefore I am.
I have also read - in an old book by the formerly mentioned Gomez Pereira. This book
is the same that includes the previous formula.
8 [Borges took some liberties translating Spencer which, in my opinion,
makes the text gain in style and have a more poetic effect. However his
translation of certain words and the elimination of a number of lines,
probably makes the Spanish version more obscure.]
BORKELEY'S CROSSROADS

consciousness, which is contrary to the hypothesis, or an existence within consciousness other than itself, which is also contrary to the hypothesis. Something which restrains consciousness to a certain sphere, whether it be internal or external, must be something other than consciousness - must be something co-existing, which is contrary to the hypothesis. Hence consciousness being unrestrained in its sphere becomes infinite in space.9

There are various fallacies in the above. Reasoning that the supposition that nothing exists beyond consciousness forces it to be unlimited is like arguing that I have an infinite sum of money in my pocket given that it is full of pennies. There is nothing beyond consciousness amounts to saying: whatever takes place is of a spiritual order, a matter of quality which does not affect in the least the quantity of events whose lining up constitutes life.

As regards the concluding sentence, it is incomprehensible. Space, according to the idealists, does not exist in itself: it is a mental phenomenon, like pain, fear and sight, and being part of consciousness it cannot be said in any sense that consciousness is embedded in space.

Spencer goes on:

A further implication is that consciousness is infinite in time. To conceive any limit to consciousness in the past, is to conceive[...] that preceding this limit there was some other actual existence at the moment when consciousness commenced, which would be contrary to the hypothesis.[...].10

This objection could be answered by pointing out that such an infinity of time does not necessarily comprise an extended duration. Suppose, with some philosophers, that only one subject exists and that everything that happens is nothing but a vision unfolding before his soul. Time will last as long as the vision, which nothing prevents us from imagining as very brief. There would be no time previous to the initiation of the dreaming, nor subsequent to its end, for time is an intellectual fact and does not exist objectively. We would thus have an eternity that would comprise all possible time but that, however, could fit within a few seconds. Also theologians had to translate God's eternity into a duration with neither beginning nor end, without vicissitudes or change, into a pure present.

Spencer concludes:

In the absence of any other existence limiting it in time and space, consciousness must be absolute of unconditioned. [...] - everything within it is self-determined. [...] any state of consciousness, as a pain, is self-produced, and continues only in virtue of conditions which consciousness itself imposes. The ending of any state, say a pleasure, is caused solely by the operation of consciousness on itself.11

The trick of such argument lies in the instrumental, personal, even mythological sense, that Spencer introduces in the word consciousness, a procedure that nothing justifies...

And with this I shall finish my claim. As regards the negation of the autonomous existence of visible and palpable things, it is easy to be reconciled with it by thinking: reality is like that image of us that emerges in every mirror, a simulacrum that exists for us, that comes with us, gestures and leaves with us, but that we only need to go in search of, to always run into.

Translated by Clara Isabel Llamas-Gómez

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10 [Ibid.]
11 [Ibid.]
The following are Borges’ Spanish translations of Berkeley (see above p.7)

I. The first Spanish translation is of section 3 of The Principles of Human Knowledge:

"Cualquiera admite, escribió que ni nuestros pensamientos ni nuestras pasiones ni las ideas formadas por nuestra imaginación existen sin la mente. No es menos cierto a mi entender que las diversas sensaciones o ideas que afectan a los sentidos, de cualquier modo que se mezclen (vale decir, cualesquiera objetos que se formen) sólo pueden subsistir en una mente que las advierta...

Afirmo que la mesa sobre la cual estoy escribiendo, existe; esto es, la miro y la palpo. Si estando fuera de mi gabinete afirmo lo mismo, quiero indicar por ello que si me hallara aquí la advertiría o que la advierte algún otro espíritu. En cuanto a lo que se vocea sobre la existencia de cosas no presentes, sin relación al hecho de si son o no percibidas, confieso no entenderlo. La perceptibilidad es el ser de las cosas, o imposible es que existan fuera de las mentes que las perciben."

II. The second translation is of Principles, section 23:

"Mas, me diréis, nada es tan fácil para mí como imaginar un jardín en un prado o libros en una biblioteca, y nadie cercano para advertirlos. En efecto, no hay dificultad alguna en ello. ¿Pero qué es tal cosa, os preguntó, sino formar en vuestra mente ciertas ideas que llamáis árboles y libros, y al mismo tiempo no formar la idea de alguien que los percibe? ¿Y mientras tanto, no los advirtió o no pensáis en ellos vosotros mismos?"

III. And, finally, the third is of Principles, section 6:

"Verdades hay tan cercanas y tan palmarias que bastaría a un hombre abrir los ojos para verlas. Una de ellas es la importante verdad: Todo el coro del cielo y los aditamentos de la tierra - los cuerpos todos que componen la poderosa fábrica del mundo - no tienan subsistencia allende las mentes; su ser estríba en que los noten y mientras yo no los advierta o no se hallen en mi alma o en la del algún otro espíritu creado, hay dos alternativas; o carecen de todo vivir o subsisten en la mente de algún espíritu eterno."
BERKELEY'S SERVENTS

and the other:

Dr Berkley [sic] the good Bishop of Cloyne in Ireland, advising Mrs Wilson who has got a Cancer in her Breast to Drink Tarwater, and he is likewise sending Patrick Norway his Servant with a Pitcher of Tarwater to a poor woman in Schoolhouse-lane that has got an Ague and Fever.

Among the questions, which these cards raise, are: what, if any, was the source of Mrs Johnson's information concerning Berkeley's servants? Were there indeed two such people as Enoch Martyr and Patrick Norway in the bishop's service in Cloyne in the 1740s to which period the information presumably relates? No light is shed on the matter by Berkeley's surviving correspondence nor by A. A. Luce or any of his other biographers. The names would seem somewhat unusual for the south of Ireland in the eighteenth century, prompting Professor William Lyons to raise the possibility of the bearers of these names having perhaps been former slaves, who had come with Berkeley from America. Can any reader throw further light on this intriguing matter?

Grateful acknowledgement is made to the leaflet prepared by the FitzWilliam Museum for the exhibition "Handmade Readings: an Eighteenth-Century Mother's Nursery Library", 4 April - 21 May 1995, for the information relating to Jane Johnson and her family.

Reviews


In his 1889 book, A History of Eighteenth Century Literature, the prominent English critic Edmund Gosse remarked in the section devoted to Berkeley that,

In this place no attempt can be made to sketch Berkeley's contributions to thought. We have only to deal with him as a writer. In this capacity we may note that the abstruse nature of his contributions to literature has unduly concealed the fact that Berkeley is one of the most exquisite of all writers of English prose. Among the authors who will find a place in the present volume, it may perhaps be said that there is not one who is quite his equal in style.

Given the talents of Berkeley's competitors here - Addison, Defoe, Swift, Fielding, Johnson, Goldsmith, Gibbon, Burke, etc. - this is immense praise indeed from Gosse; but he is perfectly correct about the matter of recognition. Berkeley's talent as a writer has been "unduly concealed". Peter Walmsley's The Rhetoric of Berkeley's Philosophy, originally a 1988 Ph.D thesis for the Department of English in Cambridge, and now published as a title in the series Cambridge Studies in Eighteenth-Century English Literature and Thought, is actually the very first book-length assessment of Berkeley as a writer. There have, until now, been only essays, particularly those by Donald Davie, and the odd section of a book, such as that in John Richetti's Philosophical Writing: Locke, Berkeley, Hume (1983). This despite the fact that, as Walmsley points out in his Introduction, Berkeley was welcomed as a man of letters by London's literary circle in 1712, was courted by such luminaries as Swift, Pope, Addison and Steele, the latter of whom persuaded him to contribute some papers to The Guardian, and was throughout his life considered a knowledgeable literary critic. Walmsley's book is a well researched, scrupulously detailed analysis of Berkeley's four major texts - the Principles, the Three Dialogues, Alciphron, and
Siris. Each is analysed in terms of its form, its mode of presentation, its style and its rhetorical method. In analysing these published texts he also draws upon early manuscript drafts, the Philosophical Commentaries, the correspondence, the literature of the period, the curricula of Trinity College Dublin, and details of Berkeley's private library. It is all highly informative, and impresses upon the reader that Berkeley was at all times and on all points a prose stylist, who understood that "...in Metaphysiques & Ethiques... the dry strigose way will not suffice", and that he should "...correct my Language & make it as Philosophically nice as possible". (p. 16)

The book does more, however, than establish that Berkeley was an accomplished author of lucid prose, who built structures of effective imagery and who proved a master of each of the literary genres he turned his hand to - the treatise, the dialogue, and the essay. It also argues for a deeper understanding of Berkeley's theory of language, and the manner in which Berkeley put it to use. As is known, Berkeley broke free of Locke's ideational theory of language, arguing in the Principles that language had ends other than the communication of ideas, such as "the raising of some passion, the exciting to, or deterring from an action, the putting of the mind in some particular disposition" (p.18). Walmsley argues that this is an "explicitly rhetorical" (p.29) theory of language, and throughout the book he tries to show that Berkeley used the forms and devices of classical rhetoric and disputation in his works. The different sections of the Principles, for example, roughly fall into the conventional 'parts' of classical rhetoric: the "Introduction" is the exordium, which establishes Berkeley's persona. The "Idealism" section is the first half of the amplificatio, or positive proof. The "Objections and replies" section is the refutatio, or extensive passage of refutation. The "Consequences of idealism" section, is the second half of the amplificatio. And throughout the work, Berkeley uses the device of prolepsis, or the anticipation of an objection. The Three Dialogues and Alciphron, to provide another example, are both modelled on the Platonic form of dialogue, which, as Walmsley points out, was unpopular at the time (in general, Ciceronian models prevailed.) They both use the device of elenchus, which is outlined as follows: "One student, who accepts the role of answerer, states a thesis. Another then attempts to refute this thesis, not by direct argument or evidence, but by asking a series of simple questions. To each question the answerer may only reply 'yes' or 'no'. The questioner's aim is to force the answerer to contradict his initial statement." (p. 69) Berkeley had been trained in the use of this device as an undergraduate, and was to preside over students' use of it as a Junior Greek Lecturer in Trinity.

The book could perhaps have done with a short chapter dealing with the Guardian "papers" and occasional essays (e.g. An Essay towards preventing the Ruin of Great Britain), as opposed to merely discussing aspects of them in the course of other chapters, and there appears to be no reason for the absence of chapters on the Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision, The Querist, The Analyst, or A Defense of Free-Thinking in Mathematics, other than considerations of length and the possibility of repetition. It is, however, a valuable contribution to the scholarship, and hopefully should result in Berkeley being granted his long overdue place in the literary pantheon.

James Edwin Mahon
Duke University
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Recent Publications on Berkeley


Colin and Ailsa Turbayne International Berkeley Essay Prize Competition

Professor and the late Mrs. Colin Turbayne established an International Berkeley Essay Prize competition in conjunction with the Philosophy Department at the University of Rochester.

The next deadline for submitting papers is November 1, 1996. Submissions on any aspect of Berkeley's philosophy are welcome. Essays should be new and unpublished and should be written in English and not exceed 5000 words in length. All references to Berkeley should be to Luce/Jessop, and a MLA or similar standard for notes should be followed. Submissions will be judged by members of a review board selected by the Department of Philosophy at the University of Rochester. The winner will be announced March 1, 1997 and will receive a prize of $2000. Copies of the winning essays are to be sent to the George Berkeley Library Study Center located in Berkeley's home in Whitehall, Newport, RI. Submissions should be sent to

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University of Rochester
Lattimore 532
Rochester, NY 14627-0078.