

## Borges Via the Dialectics of Berkeley and Hume

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When Kant inquired into the capability of the human mind and drew the conclusion that the entire universe, as we know it, is only appearance and not reality — i.e., *noumena* — “he said nothing absolutely new,” Paul Deussen notes humorously in *Die Philosophie des Upanishads* (204). According to this critic, Kant’s doctrine on the phenomenal world comes down to demonstrating in a more intelligible way a belief that had been in existence long before him. Deussen draws our attention back to ancient philosophy claiming that a basically similar teaching is found in Parmenides’ world of appearances; in Plato’s empirical reality, a mere shadow of the world of Forms<sup>1</sup>; and in the Upanishads’ vision of the universe as *māya* — a sheer illusion. Years later, the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, long committed to metaphysical perplexities, shapes in the confidant and quiet companionship of a Buenos Aires’ library a world of fiction, a fantasy, that curiously endorses Deussen’s view. Borges indeed devotes his writings to portraying the only existence he seems to hold as certain: dreams. This time, however, fiction is not only seen as the object of experience, but fundamentally as the object of mystery, the object of art

Absolute idealism, a prominent feature of *Mahayana* according to Borges, declares that the universe — despite all its constant shapes, colors, tastes, and sounds — is an illusion. No substantial world is to be found beyond appearances, for living is nothing but dreaming: “Vivir es precisamente soñar” (*Qué es el budismo*, OCC 2: 276).

Borges demonstrates throughout his writings that, far from being vanished, this ancient belief reappears sooner or later in the mythical creations of modernity — a view that is obviously open to refutation. In the light of Borges’ works, different philosophers in different periods of time ultimately appear to be sharing the same view. Poets, fiction writers, essayists, theologians, philosophers, and hundreds of names scat-

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<sup>1</sup> Plato elaborates this view in *The Republic* VII, 1, for instance.

tered throughout Borges' erudite writings surprisingly seem to be bound by a common tie. Among them Berkeley, Hume, and Schopenhauer play a significant role. These philosophers, supposedly, corroborate in one way or another the ancient belief that takes the human world to be *māya*. This is so, according to Borges, for Berkeley and Schopenhauer, since both of them elaborated doctrines endorsing that view — "razonaron más tarde esa filosofía de carácter onírico" (OCC 2: 276). Such a remark is not a surprise for Borges' scholars. In fact, an increasingly vast bibliography on this author has emphasized his admiration for Berkeley and Schopenhauer to the point that their impact has practically been taken as unquestionable dogma. There is no doubt that Borges' admiration for Berkeley and Schopenhauer was open and genuine. One may ask, however, how far the alleged affinities among them are to be extended. Does Borges' reading of Berkeley's doctrine fit the limitations prescribed to it by Berkeley himself, or is it rather a reading process performed through Hume's eyes? How is Borges' skepticism related to Berkeley? Are the imaginary inhabitants of Tlön — in Borges' "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" — for instance, a faithful depiction of the Berkeleyan doctrine or rather a Humean extension of it? Finally, how does Hume, the skeptic — Berkeley's alleged "follower" — relate to both Berkeley and Borges? These questions should be addressed in order to understand not only Borges' skepticism but his whole philosophical position, as exemplified in his confession that via the dialectics of Berkeley and Hume, he had arrived at Schopenhauer's dictum — "Por la dialéctica de Berkeley y de Hume he arribado al dictamen de Schopenhauer" ("Nueva refutación del tiempo", OC 2: 148).

Borges' acceptance of the Berkeleyan premise *esse est percipi* was genuine, as his early works show; and it remained so throughout his life. Likewise, the impact this philosophical principle had on Hume is crucial too. In fact, the mark imprinted by Berkeley on Borges' works is no less relevant than it is on David Hume's — *i.e.* Hume's *negative* doctrine. We should keep in mind, however, that Berkeley, unlike Hume and Borges, was far from adopting a skeptical position. On the contrary, he believed that the world presented in his doctrine is neither a dream nor an illusion: "[W]e are not deprived of any one thing in nature. Whatever we see, feel, hear, or anywise conceive or understand, remains as secure as ever," he claims (*Principles*, sec. 34). He named his own doctrine "immaterialism" and used all his skill and effort to show that it was not the opponent, but the ally of common sense against materialism and skepticism. Formulated in a direct and clear language, his ar-

gument was intended as a fatal weapon against the skeptics; but both Hume and Borges thought it failed.

Despite its brilliant and ingenuous formulation, the Berkeleyan doctrine cannot help being “merely skeptical” for, even though it is indeed “unanswerable,” it nevertheless produces “no conviction” (*Inquiry* 163). In “La postulación de la realidad” Borges praises this claim—“sentencia”—for being both well mannered and deadly: “educada y mortal” (*OC* 1: 217). But most important of all is that he incorporates Hume’s famous remark into one of his own well acclaimed masterpieces, the story of “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius.”

It appears to be that, for no specific reason, Borges recalls in “Tlön” Hume’s *reply* to Berkeley. This explicit reference, however, is neither superfluous nor irrelevant. The philosophical controversy about the nature and importance of “common sense” in the making of experience—a view that underlies Hume’s criticisms—is depicted in “Tlön” with subtle humor and a careful blend of erudition and originality.

The Tlönian mind is subject to common sense beliefs diametrically opposed to those of humans. Through this imaginary assumption, Borges then inverts Hume’s doctrine of common sense. In doing so, he addresses with subtlety the contemporary philosophical discussions that underlie W. O. Quine’s concept of “epistemology naturalized,” or the concept of “linguistic naturalism” as applied to Wittgenstein’s epistemological shift in his *Philosophical Investigations* <sup>2</sup>.

Hume—the naturalist—constantly refers to the impossibility of bringing into practice the Pyrrhonian arguments. “Nature,” he claims, “by an absolute and uncontrollable necessity has determin’d us to judge as well as to breathe and feel” (*Treatise* 183). Our “natural thinking” is thus bound to take the existence of a world of objects—*i.e.*, of an external world—for granted. Likewise, Borges illustrates this claim through the ironic invention of Tlön’s unintelligible languages. Neither our minds nor our languages can do without the belief in a world of objects—substances—mirrored in the existence of *nouns*. But curiously, Borges notes, this is *not* the case with Tlön!

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<sup>2</sup> See Quine’s essay “Epistemology Naturalized,” in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (69-90). Both David Pears (*Ludwig Wittgenstein*) and P. F. Strawson (*Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties*) discuss the concept of “linguistic naturalism” which is highly inspiring for the interpretation of “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius.” The reason why we cannot make the Tlönian languages intelligible lies in the “natural disposition” of the mind, as Hume puts it, or in the nature of our linguistic competence, committed to reflect common sense beliefs in both the external and the self.

A mirror of contrasts is created. Whatever we hold as empirically “true,” or “real,” is either “false” or “unthinkable” for the Tlönian mind. The existence of an external world—a world of matter—persisting independently of its being perceived is for Tlön’s alleged “idealist nations” nothing but an inconceivable claim—“[una] tesis inconcebible” (OC 1: 437). Likewise, for Hume—the skeptic—this is not only an unreasonable belief but also a plain, “gross illusion” (*Treatise* 217).

Tlönian common sense defenders—*i.e.*, “los defensores del sentido común”, as the narrative voice records—could not bring themselves to believe what our own common sense instinctively and spontaneously takes for granted: the continued existence of an external world (OC 1: 437). What a “senseless, incredible assumption!” the Tlönians argued. How someone could either understand or put into practice such an “absurd, irrational belief” was simply beyond conception, these inhabitants held. Hume and Borges intend their skepticism to prove exactly the same point; they both show that what the Tlönians regard as an “incredible world” is no other than *our* world—our human, daily, common sense world.

Hume’s positive doctrine on human nature, as exposed in the *Treatise* and in his first *Inquiry*, claims that our common disposition is such that we instinctively grant the external world an independent existence from our own ephemeral and fleeting perceptions. Hume—the naturalist—insists emphatically on this basic trend in human nature. Borges, however, envisions a planet—Tlön—and its inhabitants—the Tlönians—for whom such a natural disposition does not occur. The present fable is then so ingeniously conceived that it presents a subtle counterpart of Hume’s naturalist doctrine. Needless to say, the outcome of Borges’ hypothesis is both as extraordinary and humorous as the hypothesis itself. This ironic and parodic mirror of the human mind leads Borges’ readers to realize how illusory the concept of reality is, and how dependent on a given perspective it is bound to be.

For the common mind, Berkeley’s doctrine—further extended in Hume’s skepticism as its natural consequence—appears to be “odd” and “extravagant.” But this is no surprise. We should realize that it was in fact so considered when it first appeared. Most people simply did not understand it. Yet, even though it may appear to be “odd” and “unbelievable” to the common mind, Berkeley’s formulation of immaterialism is founded on solid and sound arguments. The kicking of a stone, as his friend Samuel Johnson jokingly recommended, is indeed no refutation. Hume—the skeptic—was fully aware of this. Immateri-

alism is “unanswerable,” he maintained, but as a naturalist, and as a common man, he could not bring himself to believe it.

In both “La postulación de la realidad” and “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” Borges hints at the irony contained in Hume’s *reply* to Berkeley and, by the same token, to his own skepticism. It is, no doubt about it, a fair reply in Borges’ eyes. Yet in this famous fable he is willing to explore an imaginary hypothesis that would present us with a surprising puzzle: What would our minds be like if not just Berkeley’s doctrine but Hume’s negative doctrine were to be the basis for a new kind of *common sense*? He thus envisions Tlön and inverts with creative humor the historical facts referred to in the story. As a result of this narrative skill, a parodic world starts taking shape.

When materialism first appears in Tlön it encounters a reaction that mirrors the one created by the Berkeleyan doctrine when it came out in 1710. The narrative voice in this story notes that among the doctrines of Tlön none would cause such a turmoil as materialism—“ninguna ha merecido tanto escándalo como el materialismo” (OC 1: 437). Materialism was then viewed as a shocking assumption. Borges’ readers encounter at this point a most interesting hypothesis: In the same way that our common languages cannot possibly translate Tlön’s languages, materialism in turn could hardly be put into words in that planet: “[e]l lenguaje de Tlön se resistía a formular esa paradoja” (OC 1: 437). And the Tlönian heresiarch who indeed manages to formulate that “paradoxical” way of thinking singularly turns into a parodic image of Berkeley; the heresiarch’s doctrine—just as it happened to Berkeley—could not easily be understood: “los más no la entendieron” (437).

The story of “Tlön” rewrites Hume’s *reply* to Berkeley—the famous passage included in a concise, but highly significant footnote in Hume’s *Inquiry concerning Human Understanding*. In this explicit reference to Berkeley, Hume maintains that most of the writings of that “ingenious author” form quite clearly “the best lessons of skepticism” (163). And with no intention of concealing his own perplexity, he remarks that Berkeley’s arguments, “though otherwise intended,” are in reality merely skeptical since “they admit of no answer and produce no conviction” (163, emphasis added by Hume himself). Borges incorporates Hume’s claim and illustrates its validity through the imaginary and unintelligible languages of a fictitious planet. As we read in “Tlön,” it was Hume who once and for all stated that the Berkeleyan doctrine, although logically impeccable, could not convince—“Hume notó para siempre que los argumentos de Berkeley no admiten la me-

nor réplica y no causan la menor convicción" (OC 1: 435). The following reminder is given: "Este dictamen es del todo verídico en su aplicación a la tierra, del todo falso en Tlön" (435). Again, whatever we humans conceive as empirically "real" or "true" is either "unthinkable" or "false" in the fictitious planet.

Borges illustrates imaginatively one of the main tenets of idealism: our world is mind-dependent. The "Copernican Revolution" that Kant encouraged philosophers to perform is a significant and hidden allusion in the story of "Tlön"<sup>3</sup>. What would a mind be like if Berkeley's arguments were to produce in it full conviction?, Borges makes us wonder; what would the Tlönian world be like? These questions entail the common belief that if our minds were shaped differently, we would be exposed to a different world of phenomena.

In "Nueva refutación del tiempo" Borges talks of his own philosophical speculations in terms of "the feeble artifice" of an Argentine lost in the maze of metaphysics (OC 2: 135). If this is so, he is definitely not alone. Hume, Kant, and Wittgenstein, one might add, share the same concern in their attempt to inquire into the human understanding. Kant devotes his *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft* to depict what the human mind is like once the phenomenal world is taken into account. Likewise, Hume tries to detect the limits and operations of the human cognitive make-up, but he focuses on close observation of experience. Borges chooses literary fiction as a means to achieve philosophical discernment. The methods used may vary, but the goal is the same. A common task lies ahead centered on the mind-dependent character of reality.

In volume II of *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, Schopenhauer holds that the world must be recognized as "akin to a dream," a *mental creation* (4). No truth is for him more certain than this. "Everything that exists for knowledge," he declares in volume I, "is only object in relation to a subject, perception of the perceiver," *i.e.*, representation (3). *Esse est percipi*, Borges' old voice kept saying to an audience that his tired eyes could not see. But it should be determined once and for all the kind of Berkeleyan doctrine he had in mind.

Although Berkeley did maintain that reality is mind-dependent, his position is nevertheless different. The external world, he insists, is no illusion: "that the things I see with my eyes and touch with my hands

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<sup>3</sup> Kant witnessed in his own metaphysical approach an explicit turning point in philosophy. The second Prologue of his *Critique of Pure Reason* is in this respect quite illuminating.

do exist, really exist, I make not the least question," he claims (*Principles*, sec 35). Does the author of *Ficciones* come to the same conclusion? Obviously not. The hallucinatory character of the world which Borges attributes to idealism is for him, beyond doubt, quite a persistent belief. In "Avatares de la tortuga" he openly admits that the visible world of solid objects displayed to us by the senses is nothing else but fiction: "Nosotros (la divinidad que opera en nosotros) hemos soñado el mundo. Lo hemos soñado resistente, misterioso, visible, ubicuo en el espacio y firme en el tiempo; pero hemos consentido en su arquitectura tenues y eternos intersticios de sinrazón para saber que es falso" (OC 1: 258).

Some of the so-called "idealist philosophers," as Borges refers to them, such as Berkeley, would strongly object that the supposed hallucinatory character of the world is a *non sequitur* in their doctrines. Borges, however, seems to ignore deliberately these scruples and moves on to what he considers to be "the natural consequence" of the idealist argument: the world around us is an illusion; the external world of extended and solid objects is "a fiction of the imagination," as Hume remarks throughout the unusually long and famous section in his *Treatise*, entitled "Scepticism with regard to the Senses."

Like Borges, Hume – the skeptic – plans to bring the Berkeleyan premise to its ultimate conclusion; yet, the road to pyrrhonism neither begins nor ends here. In fact, both Borges and Hume legitimately question whether it really exists. In an interview held in 1985 Borges admits that reason, if left on its own, would end up directing its doubts against itself.<sup>4</sup> Wouldn't then our lives be paralyzed, were our nature capable of allowing this to happen?, Hume asks. Many of Borges' stories go deliberately beyond this point and enter a field in which a strong link between skepticism and art occurs. Fiction takes over. And the human mind, webbed with perplexities, wonders whether the mystery of art can deliver the hints of a revelation.

Unlike Tlön's imaginary metaphysicians, it is quite likely that a significant number of philosophy scholars trained in the Western culture would understandably feel reluctant to regard metaphysics as a "branch of fictional literature," for as we know, Borges makes no distinction between these two fields. And it seems he does so deliberately. Metaphysics and literature become *one* and the *same* discipline. Yet far from betraying the spirit of any of these two disciplines, this claim in-

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<sup>4</sup> *Borges en diálogo* (99). It is interesting to note that Miguel de Unamuno shares this same view in *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida* (83).

creases their worth by expanding significantly their alleged demarcations. In the light of the present view, neither the depth of Borges' philosophical insights nor the artistic value in them should be ignored. On the contrary, more than a playful interest in metaphysics, this author's life-long devotion to philosophy is serious and reflects a distinctive trait in all of his writings.

Hume – the naturalist – serves as a hidden, yet unquestionable inspiration in “Tlön.” Borges borrows the Humean doctrine of the external world and imaginatively illustrates through narrative fiction the question-begging nature of common sense. This fact, as he efficiently shows, is mirrored in language – mirrored in the existence of *nouns* and *personal pronouns*. Ours is a world of extended objects and of personal identities; a world we cannot do without. But *false*, Borges maintains.

If not framed by “natural beliefs” but by Hume's empirical application of the Berkeleyan premise, what specific features would a language have? Borges attempts to carry out this task in “Tlön” and humorously records an imaginary language that is bound to be incomprehensible for the human mind. The alleged absence of nouns and the extensive, compelling use of impersonal verbs in Tlön's languages parallel respectively Hume's criticism of both material substance and personal identity.

Skepticism would ultimately lead to silence and inaction, Hume himself admits. What lies beyond our language is impossible either to say or decipher, Borges suggests at the end of his famous fable, therefore illustrating one of the main premises held in contemporary philosophy. The brief proposition closing Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* does indeed sum up the general outcome that ironically crowns most of the metaphysical quests underlying the Borgesian text. The story of “Tlön” is no exception. After taking into account the epistemological framework that shapes this fable, the reader has no choice but granting Wittgenstein the spellbound conclusion of his *Tractatus*: “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence” (74).

Borges and Hume take the Berkeleyan doctrine to be irreproachable, but both hold that it provides “the best lessons of skepticism” (*Inquiry* 163). The young and disappointed author of the *Treatise* saw no reason to modify his views, despite the cold and hostile reception given to his work when it appeared in 1738. “By all that has been said” – Hume admits in the “Abstract” – “the reader will easily perceive that the philosophy contained in this book [the *Treatise*] is very skeptical and tends to give us a notion of the imperfection and narrow limits of human understanding” (193).

After having reviewed and corrected in 1952 the various essays contained in *Otras inquisiciones*, Borges notes in them a tendency to regard both religious and philosophical doctrines as fantastic creations that properly fall under the realm of art: "Una [tendencia] a estimar las ideas religiosas o filosóficas por su valor estético y aun por lo que encierran de singular y maravilloso" (OC 2: 153). And, as he points out, far from being accidental or secondary, this very trend comes from his own skeptical position: "Esto es quizá indicio de un escepticismo *esencial*" (153, emphasis added). Berkeley's voice is quite different. Three years after the publication of *The Principles*, in 1713, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* appears. Again, Berkeley neither withdraws nor modifies any of the views expressed in his earlier work, but this time he decides to highlight his intention in the very title by adding the following reminder: "In Opposition to Sceptics and Atheists." Important as it is, however, Borges' critics have generally failed to notice this fact. We should then keep it in mind, otherwise Borges' affinity with Berkeley can either be carried too far or easily misunderstood.

Skeptics and atheists were regular targets in the arguments of Bishop Berkeley who was sincerely concerned with defeating what he took to be the "irreligious" tendencies of his age. He claimed that both representationism and materialism, in assuming an external, material world, enable the philosopher and the physicist to draw the implication that the vast machine of the universe existed eternally. This theory would render the assumption of a Creator, where no creation took place, entirely superfluous. Yet materialism makes no sense, Berkeley argues. It also *duplicates* the world for no reason: one world of ideas that we actually perceive, and behind it a supposed inaccessible world of "external objects." We might as well use Ockham's *razor* and wonder why is it that we have to multiply beings *sine necessitate*? Once external objects are removed, the actual course of experience remains exactly as it is.

If we were to assume that the causes of our ideas are "external objects," we should then have grounds for this supposition. We would be aware not only of our ideas, but also of the causal operation that external objects cause upon us. But this obviously cannot happen – Berkeley, Hume and Borges argue – since we have no information whatsoever of an unknown world of objects *beyond* our perceptions, nor can we observe its alleged operation on our minds. Why then assume an external world at all?

Berkeley claims to have put an end to the skeptical conclusion that there may be in fact "no actual world"; he denies matter and attributes

to God the external and immediate cause of our perceptions. It may be argued, however, that we have no grounds to assume the existence of a Supreme Being as the ultimate cause of all. If we must suppose that our ideas have causes, since their occurrence is plainly not under our control, why not assume their origin to be internal, as in dreams? Could it well be that we are just dreaming?<sup>5</sup>

The “dream within a dream” theme is a commonplace in the Borgesian text. Let us recall the poem “El Golem” (*El otro, el mismo*) and, standing out as an obvious example in narrative fiction, the story “Las ruinas circulares,” (*OC 1*). In these two cases, dreams project an endless illusion for which there is no way out. The Golem, a clumsy and deficient mirror of his creator, the rabbi Judá León, makes us wonder whether the divinity is not itself a mirror of another. In a similar way, Augusto Pérez looks for his creator, Miguel de Unamuno, who like himself is also tied to a misty world of mirrors in the novel *Niebla*.

The internal and dizzy duplication of dreams within the Berkeleyan concept of “mind” stresses a feature in Borges’ works totally alien to the Bishop’s doctrine. The concept of God becomes deficient and is ultimately undermined by extending the parallelism that we find depicted in “El Golem.” In *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, Hume addresses possible ways to both justify and question the belief in an alleged Supreme Being. In this posthumous work, Philo—probably its most important and puzzling character—holds a critical attitude against the more conventional Cleanthes by questioning the attribution of anthropomorphic qualities to the divinity. Despite Hume’s admiration for Berkeley and Malebranche, he does not hesitate to criticize their views on account of their theological conclusions<sup>6</sup>. By maintaining that everything is “full of God” and that nothing exists but by His will, philosophers are not aware of the implications that can be drawn from their claims, for what they are actually doing is “[to] diminish, instead of magnifying, the grandeur of those attributes which they affect so much to celebrate,” Hume argues (*Inquiry 82*). Since the theo-

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<sup>5</sup> Kant seems to acknowledge this possibility, although he himself is far from adopting its consequences. In presenting the fourth paralogism of pure reason, “Of Ideality,” he notes that “the inference from a given effect to a determinate cause is always uncertain”—that is why “as regards the relation of perception to its cause, it always remains doubtful whether the cause be internal or external” (*Critique of Pure Reason 345*).

<sup>6</sup> Hume’s admiration for both Berkeley and Malebranche was genuine but, from a critical position, he could not grant them their theological assumptions. See Malebranche’s *Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion*.

logical assumptions drawn by both Malebranche and Berkeley go beyond the reach of our faculties, they end up leading to conclusions so remote from common life and experience that they seem to enter into a land of dreams and fantasy. By not taking sufficiently into account the weakness of human reason and the narrow limits to which it is confined, we end up bordering and even finally diving into the realm of fiction, or as Hume himself puts it “[w]e are got into fairyland” (83). This type of observation matches Borges’ position and spirit quite well.

On several occasions and using different literary genres, Borges plunges his discourse into the realm of theological speculation—or fantasy—therefore surpassing the domain of common experience; but his skepticism marks a clear difference from Berkeley’s doctrine. As G. J. Warnock insists, the Irish philosopher took the greatest pains to deny that he was portraying the world as a dream (*Berkeley* 91). In fact, he made sure to contrast realities and chimeras claiming that the distinction retained its full force in his doctrine and arguing that sense impressions, as the immediate effect of God’s will upon our minds, are less chaotic, more coherent and vivid than dreams (*Principles*, sec. 34). Far from being an illusion, then, the firm, solid yet immaterial world around us, whose being is to be perceived or known, subsists “in the mind of some Eternal Spirit” (*Principles*, sec. 6).

There is no doubt that Borges accepts and modifies Berkeley’s doctrine. He likes quoting sections 3 and 6 of the *Principles* and seems to agree wholeheartedly with every word, every expression that he patiently translates into clear and elegant Spanish. He does so in 1925 when he writes “La encrucijada de Berkeley,” included in his first collection of essays, *Inquisiciones*; and later, in 1944 and 1946 when he publishes the two essays that compose “Nueva refutación del tiempo.”

Borges’ skepticism leaves room to assume, together with Berkeley, that we depend absolutely and immediately upon “God,” but it also leaves room to reject that assumption. On the one hand, it is indeed possible to conceive that the world is saved from annihilation by an act of the divine will. The young writer of *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923) presents this idea in the poem “Amanecer:”

[Y] acobardado por la amenaza del alba  
 reviví la tremenda conjetura  
 de Schopenhauer y de Berkeley  
 que declara que el mundo  
 es una actividad de la mente,  
 un sueño de las almas,  
 sin base ni propósito ni volumen

(...)  
 ¡Hora en que el sueño pertinaz de la vida  
 corre peligro de quebranto,  
 hora en que sería fácil a Dios  
 matar del todo su obra! (OP 51-52)

At dawn, when not present to the dreaming minds, the world could vanish from existence if it were not for an eternal spirit in which it subsists. Years later, another poem written at age 73, evokes the same idea: “las cosas / Que nadie mira, salvo el Dios de Berkeley” (OP 384). On the other hand, Borges—unlike Berkeley—is beyond any doubt more willing to address the postulation of a Supreme Being as *fiction*. For this reason, even though it is clear that Berkeley’s impact on Borges was quite significant and permanent, the author of *Ficciones* and *El Aleph* does not always meet Berkeley’s claims. Nor does Hume.

Berkeley firmly believes that the world we perceive is real and exists in both our minds and in God’s mind. Borges, however, insists on reading him quite differently for, in his view, both Berkeley and Schopenhauer appear to be making the same claim, *i.e.*, that the world is a representation of the mind—“que el mundo / es una actividad de la mente”—ultimately reduced to “a purposeless dream”—“un sueño sin propósito”—or a labyrinth of illusions repeating itself *ad infinitum* (OP 51). Furthermore, he does not hesitate in moving on and deliberately plunges his thoughts into what Hume called “fairylan,” for his theological conclusions would have probably shocked Bishop Berkeley, who was seriously concerned with defending religious orthodoxy.

In *Inquisiciones* Borges makes us note how significant it is to distinguish in Berkeley the philosopher from the Bishop: “La demarcación mucho importa, pues si Berkeley en ejercicio de hombre pensante podía desmenuzar el universo a su antojo, tal desahogo era insufrible a su calidad de serio prelado” (114). He then lets his readers envision the godless, atomistic view presented in Hume’s negative doctrine when he humorously remarks that God was a type of mortar that put the world’s scattered pieces together: “Dios le sirvió a manera de argamasa para empalmar los trozos dispersos del mundo” (114).

The constant threat that underlies the Berkeleyan premise is certainly a dispersed world of fleeting perceptions. Yet Hume, the skeptic, welcomes this feared implication with calm, intellectual honesty. Given no assumption of an unknown and unperceived mind, and of a no less unknown and unperceived God, the cohesiveness alleged in the Berkeleyan doctrine collapses; the compact structure of the universe disinte-

grates into a successive flux of perceptions. World, mind, and God turn out to be illusions vanishing in a stream of consciousness.

In the case of the inappropriately called “British” empiricist tradition, for instance, Borges’ reading of both Berkeley and Hume casts light on their views of experience and on the nature of perception. “*Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*” and “*Nueva refutación del tiempo*” are good examples to start with. Hume’s epistemological tenets are not only presupposed in the imaginary languages of *Tlön*. They are also brought to their ultimate consequences in the *Tlönians*’ acceptance of pantheistic idealism—the anonymous ocean where perceptions have an eternal present. It is a doctrine that supposedly resembles Schopenhauer’s and that finally achieves complete victory in the alleged imaginary planet (*OC* 1: 438).

Plurality and the atomized, discrete flux of perceptions become the Oneness. In this sense, reading the history of philosophy—no longer a passive act—entails rewriting it. The essay “*Nueva refutación del tiempo*” stands as a good example, since to certain extent it displays Borges’ philosophical links: “*Por la dialéctica de Berkeley y de Hume he arribado al dictamen de Schopenhauer*” (*OC* 2: 148). This is, no doubt, an intriguing statement. It not only shows how important both the Irish and the Scottish philosophers are in his writings, but also gives a subtle hint at how he reads their doctrines into Schopenhauer’s—a most surprising and innovative reading.

Borges—the skeptic—joins forces with Hume and draws the same implications from the Berkeleyan principles, but decides to go further and adds one more illusion: temporal succession. Can time really be perceived? How can we separate one instant from the previous one? Only the present appears to be real—i.e., the undeniable presence of perceptions to which Hume gave ontological priority. If we could possibly grasp the idea of time, we would have to conclude it does not make sense. “*El tiempo—Borges holds—si podemos intuir esa identidad, es una delusión: la indiferencia e inseparabilidad de un momento de su aparente ayer y otro de su aparente hoy basta para desintegrarlo*” (*OC* 2: 143). The ever current and immediate flux of perceptions arrived at in Hume’s philosophy has conceivably neither a beginning nor an end, according to Borges. The *presence* of perceptions, installed into what theologians define as “*eternity*,” becomes a mystery that feeds constantly the Borgesian text displaying a web of both convictions and perplexities.

The narrative voice in “*Tlön*” also makes us note that one of the philosophical schools in this imaginary planet “*denies time*.” And the arguments used in the story resemble not only the many hints scattered

throughout Borges' writings, but also the remarks he himself makes in his famous essay "Nueva refutación del tiempo." By reasoning that the present is "undefined," the metaphysicians of Tlön come to the same conclusions held in "Nueva refutación del tiempo." Their "extreme idealism" is committed to the *immediacy* inherent in every perception. For this reason, the school referred to in Tlön holds that the future is nothing but present hope, and the past no more than present memory.

Borges claims, then, that he has applied the Berkeleyan principle *esse est percipi* to the idea of *time*. In this case, one important third step has been taken within a given philosophical tradition. To Berkeley's denial of material substance and Hume's refutation of personal identity, Borges adds one more: the refutation of temporal succession. Time, then, evolves into another illusion, another fiction, for supposedly only the present is real. Following this line of thought, and widely spread out in Borges' writings, Berkeley's epistemological principle and Hume's doctrine eventually find refuge in the volumes of *Die Welt as Wille und Vorstellung*.

In regarding the *present* as the only form of life, Schopenhauer formulates a theory that, according to Borges, comes close to Buddhism. Again, a basic and similar teaching seems to underlie a set of doctrines. And Borges not only appears to endorse it himself, but also invites his readers to question what we commonly take for granted, the world around us—" [a]dmitamos lo que todos los idealistas admiten: el carácter alucinatorio del mundo" (OC 1: 258). Although many idealist philosophers, such as Kant and Berkeley, would deny that this conclusion follows from their doctrines, it is clear that Borges deliberately reads them that way.

Diverse philosophic trends find unforeseen connections in the Borgesian text. The Argentine writer seems to have no difficulty in relating the doctrine of the "British" empiricist tradition with German idealism. In his eyes, Berkeley and Hume seem to have deep similarities with Schopenhauer—and even perhaps with Hegel? Such unexpected parallelisms are most likely to be criticized by orthodox philosophy as "fallacious" and "heretic" interpretations. But we know how tolerant Borges was with heresies ... and how amused by them.

Through a concise and condensed language, filled with suggestions and hints, Borges manages to ridicule efficiently the endless disputes and phobias among philosophers and theologians. One of his most overlooked accomplishments is his ability to detect the common doctrines that emerge from diverse philosophical positions. After all, as he points out humorously, literature is the expression of "a common Au-

thor.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, he looks back to Ancient and Eastern philosophies in search of shared beliefs repeatedly formulated in history. And new, stimulating relations appear. He, for instance, calls our attention to Hume’s negative doctrine and its striking similarities with Buddhism—a fact that has been surprisingly neglected by the vast literature devoted to the Scottish philosopher. We encounter a quite unusual and unorthodox reading that, however, deserves full attention. The Borgesian text carries along an act of awareness. We wonder why Eastern philosophy has been generally subject to oblivion in Western culture. We also wonder how it is that the similarities between Hume’s doctrine and the teachings of Buddhism have been ignored by the voluminous bibliography devoted to Hume. In *Qué es el budismo* and in *Siete noches* Borges calls our attention to this parallelism several times. There is indeed an intriguing likeness between Hume’s dissolution of both the external and the internal world and that undertaken by the Buddhists; especially those of the *Theravada* persuasion, as Yoel Hoffmann states in his comparative study of both philosophies (*The Idea of Self - East and West*).

The *Mahayana* doctrine, to which Borges attributes an “absolute idealism,” instructs us about the illusory status of the universe—“la total irrealidad del universo” (OCC 2: 277). No other doctrine seems to be expressed in *Treatise* 1. 4. 2—namely, Hume’s *negative* views. What is, then, left from the application of the Berkeleyan premise to experience? If we look for an answer we are most likely to find it in “Tlön” and in “Nueva refutación del tiempo.” The Borgesian reading of Berkeley and Hume concludes that pantheistic idealism can be drawn from the epistemological principles those philosophers share. Even though a view like this is bound to be highly controversial within orthodox philosophy, there is no question that Borges provides a most stimulating interpretation of both Berkeley and Hume. And daring too, for he ultimately relates their views to the idealist doctrine attributed to Schopenhauer and the teachings of Buddhism. But one more evil *heresy* among many does not really make a difference in a world of blindness... “Does it?” Borges would remark with a smile.

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<sup>7</sup> The essay “La flor de Coleridge” in *Otras inquisiciones* discloses that view.

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