

Review of a nonexistent book

by Flash qFiasco

This article first appeared in Man And World, Vol. 21: pp. 236-239 (1988). The Editors added the following note: "We do not normally accept reviews of books we have not seen but in this instance were willing to risk an exception."

One might, at first, think that it would be difficult to review a nonexistent book, for, to misquote Nietzsche, the text would seem to keep disappearing beneath the interpretation. But, as any student who has ever taken shortcuts to meet a deadline will tell you, it is quite possible to write a paper on a book one has not yet read—so what difference should it make if the author has not yet written it either? We have, after all, Kant's *Prolegomena To Any As Yet Unwritten Metaphysics*. The chess master Tartakover once said about the difficulty of making the first move that "the mistakes are all there waiting to be made," and in this sense it may be more difficult to review a nonexistent book than an actual one: there are so many, just waiting to be written. Given an infinite number of monkeys pecking for an infinite amount of time on an infinite number of word processors, it would be incredible if the complete Shakespeare were not produced. I am therefore confident that the book of which this is the review is out there somewhere, perhaps in some Meinong dimension. The subject of the book in this case is time, and in case the reader thinks I am hasty to review it before it is written, I beg his indulgence, if only for a moment, for he is about to learn that events which are not cotemporaneous may yet turn out to have been so.

The book is divided into four natural parts, each corresponding to a development of the line of argument. **Part I** concerns Berkeley's refutation of material substance, of primary qualities, and so on, and his assertion "that neither our thoughts, nor passions, nor ideas formed by the imagination, exist without the mind..." [*Principles of Human Knowledge*, 3] From Berkeley's *New Theory of Vision* are adapted the passages denying space: there is, strictly speaking, no such thing as distance, there is only the sensation of reaching. But the reader is familiar with this already.

Part II concerns Hume's 'improvements' on Berkeley, namely the denial of immaterial substance. Not only is there no 'out there', neither is there any 'in here'—the mind is a bucketful of sensations, without the bucket. We have, therefore, lost both the object perceived and the perceiving subject—we are left with only a "bundle of impressions."

Part III concerns Borges 'improvements' on Berkeley and Hume in the article *A New Refutation of Time* [*Labyrinths*, Penguin, 1970]. The author recapitulates Borges' recapitulation of Berkeley and Hume (and Schopenhauer, just for good measure), then recapitulates Borges on Borges. The reviewer is loth but compelled to, too. Borges maintains that if an object behind our perception of it is a superfluous metaphysical posit, a mere redundancy (after Berkeley), and if a self behind our perception of 'objects' is also a superfluous metaphysical posit (after Hume), then the supposition of *time* as a metaphysical *process* going on behind all this is likewise a superfluous—and ultimately unintelligible—duplication.

Borges: "Once matter and spirit, which are continuities, are negated, once space too has been negated [Berkeley: no out there; Hume: no in here], then I do not know what right we have to the continuity which is time." Then later, "Hume denied the existence of an absolute space, in which all things have their place; I deny the existence of a single time, in which all things are linked as in a chain. The denial of coexistence is no less arduous than the denial of succession. ... The lover who thinks 'while I was so happy, thinking of the fidelity of my love, she was deceiving me,' deceives himself: if every state we experience is absolute, such happiness was not contemporary with the betrayal; the discovery of that

betrayal is another state, which cannot modify the 'previous' ones, though it can modify their recollection. ... In the first part of August 1824, Captain Isidoro Suarez, at the head of a squadron of Peruvian hussars, decided the victory of Junin; in the first part of August 1824, de Quincey published a diatribe against *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*; these events were no cotemporary (they are now), since the two men died—one in the city of Montevideo, the other in Edinburgh—without knowing about each other. ... Each moment is autonomous.” Q.E.D.

The first two parts of the work are pedestrian. They merely recall without raising the dead arguments. This is just as well, since no one cares to go into those arguments in detail again anyway. The third part, with its paraphrases of paraphrases (the reviewer *refuses* to use the word or its cognates, which Borges contrives to work, fit, codge, coax, or bash into every second page) fairly crawls, like Achilles pursuing the tortoise, grinding, but not yet ground, to a halt.

In the **fourth** and final part, the author reminds us that, as Berkeley in no way denied feeling hardness (table tops and so on) in his refutation of matter, so Borges in his refutation of time does not mean to suggest that calendar dates are nonexistent or meaningless hieroglyphs, that train schedules are all wrong, that no one need ever hurry to finish his supper in order to catch 'Coronation Street' on the telly. The author then states that Borges had not gone far enough (as neither Hume nor Berkeley had). So long as one is eliminating superfluous—and ultimately unintelligible—duplicate realities, since perception is all that is ever known to be occurring, then one must, so the author continues, not only negate space and substance, internal and external (i.e., subject and object), and not only time and succession and contemporaneity, externally, but further, the *internal illusion* of time and succession and contemporaneity.

One has, strictly speaking, no succession of impressions, as Hume supposed and as Borges did not deny. One has *one* impression, always only one. One may have impression of just having had one—i.e., a memory. Or one may have impression that one will have one; one has impression that it will be another one, a different one—i.e., an intention or plan or expectation. Or one may have the complex impression that what one is planning, one has already planned before. And so on. But, the author maintains, there is, strictly speaking, no such thing as the next impression. There is the impression *next*. There was never any previous impression. There *is* rather the impression *again*. One may have the impression of a change, of a process, of a succession, but this is always the *one* impression itself. The impression of a change does not itself undergo any change. Moreover, there is no such thing as having or noting the same impression twice, for there are not *two* impressions which might either resemble each other or differ.

One has the impression upon reading this that one's whole life is lived in a flash—nay less, that the entire history of the universe since the Big Bang (or whatever) is momentaneous. Russell's idea, that everything could have been created five minutes ago, including fossils and memories of six minutes ago, tediously drags things out.

Hume's 'bundle of sensations' turns out to be sheer nonsense—not, that is, for the reason we had always suspected, but because there is no bundle and no plural. Schopenhauer's single World-Will, all in all, comes close, but misses the mark—misses the final consequence of Idealism. It is not the single universal willing-perceiving subject who exists, but rather the single universal idea.

One thought exists, all in all—a complex thought, to be sure, but in its *dasein* perfectly simplistic, ubiquitously absent, an embodied dispresence. At this point the author even ventures to assert that this thought can be asserted; it is no sort of Wittgensteinian proposition No. 8 nor Platonic beastly which we mere shadows could not comprehend, for it

is being thought, being perceived, being remembered, being planned—all the same, all the time, it is tautologous to add. The thought is *esse ist percipi*—all else is redundant, mere metaphysical illusion. Having reached this point, the work breaks off in mid

fin

Dedication: To Mark Engel, friend, scholar, author of a nonexistent book.

Flash qFiasco

<http://www.flashq.org>

email: moonbus@web.de