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Mirror of Words: Language in Agnon and Borges

ON FIRST READING, the language of Agnon's stories appears lucid. Dreamlike, mystical, detailing the hidden movements of spirit revealed and explored in momentary glimpses—an image in a mirror, the search for a meal after a day without food, desire springing up between man and woman on the day they are divorced—Agnon's language seems a limpid medium leaving behind hardly a trace. And yet, upon subsequent readings, it becomes clear that his words are part of the wonder of his work. They grow organically out of classical Jewish tradition, echo in their syntax the dialectic sentences of the Mishnah and Talmud, and are also suffused in an erotic flush appropriate to writing that often issues into midrashic-like commentaries on desire in the modern world. His language demands attention, like a dream calling attention to itself, or a narrator telling a story about his friends that turns out to be a tale detailing the structure of his own psyche.

This aspect of Agnon's work links him not to Kafka, to whom he has often been compared, but to Borges, in whose work we find a similar interest in language as self-conscious dreaming. Both writers seek to evoke the dreamlike moment in which the symbol-making activity of language is half-hidden yet half-revealed, just as spiritual and psychic events are linked to, discovered in, and articulated by the language-making act. They also share an effort to revitalize their respective languages by connecting them not merely to the spoken argot of the street—a concern of many Argentinian and Israeli writers of this century—but to a classical tradition which is available to Agnon in Jewish sources and to Borges in certain favorite writers who, he claims with good reason, form a dominant tradition in western culture.

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Here is Agnon:

Raphael sat and wrote. He wrote his Torah scroll day and night, interrupting the work only for prayers with the congregation and for the recitation of the kaddish. A prayer shawl was spread over the clean table, its fringes drooping below the table and getting intertwined with the fringes of the little prayer shawl he wore. On the prayer shawl lay a lined sheet of parchment dazzling in its whiteness as the sky itself in its purity.

From morning to evening the quill wrote on the parchment and beautiful black letters glistened and alighted on the parchment as birds upon the snow on the Sabbath when the Song of Moses is read. When he came to the writing of the great and awesome Name he would go down to the ritual bath and immerse himself.

Thus he sat and wrote until he completed the entire Torah scroll.¹

And here is Borges:

Abulgualid Muhammad Ibn-Ahmad ibn-Muhammad ibn-Rushd (a century this long name would take to become Averroes, first becoming Benraist and Avenryz and even Aben-Rassad and Filius Rosadis) was writing the eleventh chapter of his work *Tahafut-ul-Tahafut* (Destruction of Destruction), in which it is maintained, contrary to the Persian ascetic Ghazali, author of the *Tahafut-ul-falasifa* (Destruction of Philosophers), that the divinity knows only the general laws of the universe, those pertaining to the species, not to the individual. He wrote with slow sureness, from right to left; the effort of forming syllogisms and linking vast paragraphs did not keep him from feeling, like a state of well-being, the cool and deep house surrounding him. In the depths of the siesta amorous doves called huskily; from some unseen patio arose the murmur of a fountain; something in Averroes, whose ancestors came from the Arabian deserts, was thankful for the constancy of the water. Down below were the gardens, the orchard; down below, the busy Guadalquivir and then the beloved city of Cordova, no less eminent than Bagdad or Cairo, like a complex and delicate instrument, and all around (this Averroes felt also) stretched out to the limits of the earth the Spanish land, where there are few things, but where each seems to exist in a substantive and eternal way.²

In both stories we encounter scholars whose life is their writing, which in both instances becomes a complicated and highly charged action. Both characters take an erotic pleasure in the act of writing, and both dis-

¹ "The Scribe," in *Twenty-One Stories*, ed. N. Glatzer (New York, 1970), p. 18. The story is translated by I. Franck from the Hebrew of "Agadat Hasofer," in *Elu veElu*, Vol. II of the nine-volume *Kol Sippurav shel S. Y. Agnon*—the collected tales—(Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, 1959), p. 139. Hereafter these two sources will be cited in the text as E (English) and H (Hebrew), respectively.

² "Averroes' Search," in *Labyrinths*, ed. Donald Yates and James Irby (New York, 1964), p. 148; hereafter cited in the text as L. The story is translated by Irby from the Spanish, "La Busca de Averroes," in *El Aleph* of the *Obras completas* (Buenos Aires, 1967), pp. 91-92:

"Abulgualid Muhámmad Ibn-Ahmad ibn-Muhámmad ibn-Rushd (un siglo tardaría ese largo nombre en llegar a Averroes, pasando por Benraist y por Avenryz, y aun por Aben-Rassad y Filius Rosadis) redactaba el undécimo capítulo de la obra *Tahafut-ul-Tahafut* (Destrucción de la Destrucción), en el que se mantiene, contra el asceta persa Ghazali, autor del *Tahafut-ul-falasifa* (Destrucción de filósofos), que la divinidad sólo conoce las leyes generales del universo, lo concerniente a las especies, no al individuo. Escribía con lenta seguridad, de derecha a izquierda;

cover the irony of trying to find fulfillment in writing words in luminous, even mystic symbols in which they are themselves inscribed. Furthermore, Borges and Agnon share a common strategy, bypassing realistic expectations and creating a dreamlike world which moves the reader and the action of the tale into a suspended realm where words and deeds take on all their potential and even contradictory meanings at the same time.

Both writers create a world in which words have ceremonial and ritualistic functions. For them, words articulate fateful questions and thus serve as thematic centers for many of their stories. Both Raphael and Averroes enact traditional word rituals which catch them in the meaning they seek to elicit; their words become their fate in an ironic and oblique act of meaning-making that ultimately is reflexive rather than referential. Thus their word-work becomes a structural principle of the works in which they figure. Symbolic inhabitants, they project the symbol-making activity out of their worlds as the crucial act in and of that world.

As they write, both Raphael and Averroes experience a generalized sensation of sexual well-being. For both Agnon and Borges the dreams of scholars often have a strong erotic component. For Agnon, word-making is linked through eros to that divine love which bestowed its sacred text and language upon Israel, while for Borges language is the divine guarantee of humanity. Both Raphael and Averroes nest in their words. Writers, they are written up. This is the central tension of these stories: the self is defined by the very activity which is predicated of it. This tension of doubling leads to an infinite regression, until we are perplexed as to what is and is not the writer's self, where it begins and language ends. Just as the scholar or writer of these stories is symbolized in his own symbol-making activities, so too the detective of other stories is entangled in his own web, and the reader in the act which defines his role. Words become the vessels of eros. In the worlds of both writers this erotic potential of language issues into dream-actions; their stories tremble on the edge of a revelation about the erotic origins and nature of language.

Their shared concern with dreams as literary theme and narrative

el ejercicio de formar silogismos y de eslabonar vastos párrafos no le impedía sentir, como un bienestar, la fresca y honda casa que lo rodeaba. En el fondo de la siesta se enronquecían amorosas palomas; de algún patio invisible se elevaba el rumor de una fuente; algo en la carne de Averroes, cuyos antepasados procedían de los desiertos árabes, agradecía la constancia del agua. Abajo estaban los jardines, la huerta; abajo, el atareado Guadalquivir y después la querida ciudad de Córdoba, no menos clara que Bagdad o que el Cairo, como un complejo y delicado instrumento, y alrededor (esto Averroes lo sentía también) se dilataba hacia el confín la tierra de España, en la que hay pocas cosas, pero donde cada una parece estar de un modo sustantivo y eterno."

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structure is also a way of signaling their lack of interest in the realist's business of making and matching.³ Neither writer is concerned with world-making on the realistic model; the fiction of both tends to be short, precise, and probing—even inquisitorial, as Borges puts it—rather than sprawling and all-encompassing. Their work lacks the voluminous energy of Balzac or Dickens; it has instead the rapier edge of a Pascalian *pensée*. Borges and Agnon articulate the continuing process of writing in their work, eliciting indirectly the various potentials implicit in this act. Thus a typical character in one of Borges' stories searches for a killer and finds himself in the form of his enemy, while one of Agnon's protagonists seeks a place for the night and finds the alphabet in which his name is written. Both characters, lacking the identifying mark of a personal name—the signature of a realistic novel—yet partake of the mythic naming power latent everywhere in their language which emerges as they try to discover the nature of their identities and being by probing into those of their world and their words.

Scholars who embark on a linguistic adventure (which turns out to be a search for the ultimate secrets of language and naming) figure prominently in the work of both writers. The initial quest becomes central; writer, reader, world, and word are implicated; the tales enact the entanglement of consciousness and language, often concluding in an event that makes character and/or reader aware of the meanings implicit in this process. The writing activity that is a figure in the story as well as its constitutive action becomes both image and mirror. Closer to lyric than to realistic story, these tales do not allow us the experience of completeness and resolution so crucial to the realistic novel which thereby articulates its sense of having encompassed the world. Instead these stories lead to other stories, to the work of other writers, and to imagined, not-yet-realized worlds, thereby allowing us a glimpse of the unending process of word- and language-making that is central to the continuing action and process of consciousness envisaged by both Borges and Agnon.

Two of Agnon's novellas are particularly relevant to this theme. *Betrothed* and *Edo and Enam*, written within a few years of each other and published together in Volume VII of Agnon's collected works as *Ad Hena* (roughly translatable as *To This Point* or *Thus Far*),⁴ are about scholars who collect, analyze, examine—and receive great joy and

³ The phrase and the idea are central to E. H. Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* (New York, 1960), and are particularly well developed in his essay, "The Mask and the Face," in Maurice Mandelbaum, ed., *Art, Perception and Reality* (Baltimore, 1970), esp. pp. 17, 35, 44-45.

⁴ It appears as Vol. VII of *Kol Sippurav shel S. Y. Agnon*. I quote the English translation by Walter Lever, *Two Tales by S. Y. Agnon: Betrothed and Edo and Enam* (New York, 1966).

spiritual reward from their work. Both scholars bring unknown worlds to light and life; both are in love with sleepwalkers, awakening them with magical code words which they have just deciphered; both scholars gain access to the hidden worlds of which these women are the Muse-like entrance and geniuses. *Edo and Enam* ends in a Phoenix-like love-death which results from the scholar's effort to decode the hidden language connecting all its characters. In *Betrothed* the heroine, Shoshana, awakens from her sleep to run a race with her friends (nicknamed "the planets" and associated with various aspects of the zodiac), who are also her rivals for the scholar's love. At the conclusion of the story she regains her power of speech.

Borges' scholars—and in one sense all of his protagonists belong to this class—embark on a quest for meaning that initially produces an expectation of certainty. The strategy of his stories is to enmesh these figures in a labyrinth of ambivalence and ambiguity. The labyrinth comes to represent the ultimate meanings—of life, scholarship, and history—and is finally transformed into an image of the symbolic workings and power of language itself. As the noted sinologist Stephen Albert comments on the riddle of Ts'ui Pên in one of Borges' most famous stories: "[A] governor . . . learned in astronomy, in astrology and in the tireless interpretation of the canonical books, chess player, famous poet and calligrapher—he abandoned all this in order to compose a book and a maze . . . a labyrinth of symbols . . . an invisible labyrinth of time."⁵ The problem Ts'ui Pên solves is that of creating an infinite book, as Albert points out: "I had questioned myself about the ways in which a book can be infinite. I could think of nothing other than a cyclic volume, a circular one. A book whose last page was identical with the first, a book which had the possibility of continuing indefinitely" (*L*, p. 25).⁶ Self-referential, this book is a labyrinth that is infinite because it realizes the potential force of language as a system that can enact all meanings simultaneously. As Albert recognizes in a flash of insight:

These conjectures diverted me; but none seemed to correspond, not even remotely, to the contradictory chapters of Ts'ui Pên. In the midst of this perplexity, I received from Oxford the manuscript you have examined. I lingered, naturally, on

⁵ "The Garden of Forking Paths," *L*, pp. 24-25, trans. Donald Yates from the Spanish, "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan," in *Ficciones: obras completas*, pp. 104-05: "Gobernador de su provincia natal, docto en astronomía, en astrología y en la interpretación infatigable de los libros canónicos, ajedrecista, famoso poeta y calígrafo: todo lo abandonó para componer un libro y un laberinto . . . un laberinto de símbolos . . . un invisible laberinto de tiempo." Hereafter *Ficciones* will be cited as *F*.

⁶ "Yo me había preguntado de qué manera un libro puede ser infinito. No conjeturé otro procedimiento que el de un volumen cíclico, circular. Un volumen cuya última página fuera idéntica a la primera, con posibilidad de continuar indefinidamente" (*F*, p. 106).

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the sentence: *I leave to the various futures (not to all) my garden of forking paths.* Almost instantly, I understood: "the garden of forking paths" was the chaotic novel; the phrase "the various futures (not to all)" suggested to me the forking in time, not in space. A broad rereading of the work confirmed the theory. In all fictional works, each time a man is confronted with several alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the fiction of Ts'ui Pên, he chooses—simultaneously—all of them. *He creates*, in this way, diverse futures, diverse times which themselves also proliferate and fork.⁷ (*L*, p. 26; Borges' italics)

This solution, which functions almost as a mathematical definition of language's power to articulate all potential aspects of existence, becomes as well the pattern of plot action in the story. Instead of encountering a particular world in all its fullness (the realistic novel's strength), we glimpse the instrument of world-making in play. The story contains all possible variations on itself, and self-consciously elicits them simultaneously. As a result, the story is itself "The Garden of Forking Paths," both title and subject; in effect, it is the alphabet in whose forms alone all the permutations of meaning in this fictional world will be realized. This power of self-realization depends upon the labyrinthine ambiguity central to the story, on the sense of total potential that is thereby made actual in the story as it is enacted in our reading of it, parallel to the act of reading which is central to the functioning of its main characters. Here Borges, like Agnon in *Edo and Enani*, focuses on the acts of reading and writing, presenting the world as text, alphabetic labyrinth, library, mystic book, and secret hieroglyph. Both writers' stories are the self-embedding act of releasing the infinite potential of language.

In exploring and comparing the theme of language-making as it shapes and articulates their fictional discourse, we can glimpse the ways in which both Agnon and Borges seek to create sacred texts for their respective cultures—charting like the epics of old the spectrum of their cultures' manifold meanings. Both accept their respective traditions as necessary conditions for their own work. Agnon and Borges are conscious of the ways in which their work depends upon that of others; both writers constantly quote and refer to other writers as part of their fictional strategies while thereby also proposing ways of reading their

⁷ "Esas conjeturas me distrajerón; pero ninguna parecía corresponder, siquiera de un modo remoto, a los contradictorios capítulos de Ts'ui Pên. En esa perplejidad, me remitieron de Oxford el manuscrito que usted ha examinado. Me detuve, como es natural, en la frase: *Dejo a los varios porvenires (no a todos) mi jardín de senderos que se bifurcan.* Casi en el acto comprendí; *el jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* era la novela caótica; la frase *varios porvenires (no a todos)* me sugirió la imagen de la bifurcación en el tiempo, no en el espacio. La relectura general de la obra confirmó esa teoría. En todas las ficciones, cada vez que un hombre se enfrenta con diversas alternativas, opta por una y elimina las otras; en la del casi inextricable Ts'ui Pên, opta—simultáneamente—por todas. *Crea*, así diversos porvenires, diversos tiempos, que también proliferan y se bifurcan." (*F*, pp. 106-07)

favorite works and traditions.⁸ Both accept the mediating functions of their roles, while responding to their respective traditions in playfully ironic and oblique ways. Of course, while Agnon is concerned with Israel, Borges focuses on Argentina and Hispanic culture. The two writers also differ with regard to the point at which each begins his analysis of the symbol-making act of language—in part a function of the differing traditions from which they derive their work and literary program.

Believing that his language is overwhelmed by clichés and the dead forms of the past, Borges breaks with them while building upon them. Similarly, Agnon cannot rest in merely repeating ancient themes and classical forms but, encountering the modern world in all its complexity, explores the possibility of midrash in his time. Starting from a vision of the literary forms of the past but differing as to the vital force yet resident in them, each writer enlists a crucial principle of structural transformation of these forms in his work. As they examine inherited cultural forms, Borges and Agnon both uncover models and touchstones for their writing activity; performing the implicit roles, they move from scholarly detachment to artistic creation. Like Borges, Agnon enacts the process of “reading the new in an old text” and skillfully masks old themes in modern dress. Unlike Borges, Agnon does not begin with “the almost infinite world of literature” though he certainly has a wide knowledge of it. Instead his starting point is “the almost infinite world” of classical Jewish literature, against which he plays his re-presentations of the new that ironically turn out to be old/new versions of ancient themes and tropes, intoned like Borges’ in such a way as to blend many notes into “one unified tone.”⁹ In effect each writer works out for his own culture a theory of language which displays its historical possibilities and modern potential, in a common effort to suggest the wholeness of past and future as continuous aspects of the stream of language captured in the dialectics of style. Breaking with the old forms, Borges’ language liberates his world and makes it new and fresh while still allowing old interpretations that are transformed in his words, just as Agnon’s midrashic sleight-of-hand makes the modern world as full of potential holiness as the classical text. Both writers conceptualize the process of writing the new (sacred) texts of their cultures as they contextualize their respective literary and linguistic traditions through the confrontation with the chaos and unformed experience of the modern world. Thus both explore the idea of culture as language-making.

Both Borges and Agnon establish a linguistic field by means of in-

⁸ See Harold Fisch, “The Dreaming Narrator in S. Y. Agnon,” *Novel*, 4 (1970), 68-69, incorporated in his recent *S. Y. Agnon* (New York, 1975).

⁹ Jaime Alazraki, “Borges and the Kabbalah,” *Triquarterly*, 25 (1972), p. 248.

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numerable references, echoes, and stylistic imitations within which old texts and new worlds encounter each other. This is a dangerous, dialectic activity of mutual confrontation. It is also, however, the very condition by which the old texts can be enacted and put into play, as well as the method by which the new world's possible meanings—perhaps already implicit in received Law (and Literature) but not yet enacted in history—can be realized. It is for this reason that Borges' tales, like Agnon's, are informed by the midrashic idea of commentary as the continuously unfolding and unending process of interpretation.¹⁰

Agnon's achievement is his act of setting his traditional linguistic heritage, the *l'shon hakodesh*, the holy tongue, of the classical Jewish texts, against the disorder and chaos of modern Jewish life and Israeli speech. It is an act that both tests the possible force yet resident in the *l'shon hakodesh* and explores the *kedusha*, the holiness, and ceremonial potential of the modern. Agnon does not play modern and traditional Hebrew vocabularies, Israeli street slang, and mishnaic or Biblical tonalities against each other, as some Israeli writers do. Rather he allows his language—always carefully and appropriately drawn from a particular source in classic Jewish tradition and highlighted in these terms—its traditional syntax, and then in its own terms stretches and probes that particular form by having it encounter a modern situation with its own modern grammar of action. Most of Agnon's major works focus on the encounter with modernity as a testing of the inner vitality and viability of ancient Jewish heritage. That is why so many of his protagonists are scientists, professors, or doctors, who confront situations determined indirectly by the searing events of the last seventy-five years of Jewish history. Then, too, there is the subtle interplay of the Yiddish rhythms of *Shtetl* speech and mishnaic Hebrew in his prose. (In fact, Baruch Hochmann claims that Agnon often writes Hebrew as if it were Yiddish.¹¹) But it would be a mistake to look for direct historical referents in Agnon's work; he is too wily for that, for he has created an oblique method that presents typical events, representative actions suffused in a penumbra of dreams and the process of dreaming. Several critics have commented on Agnon's characteristic habit of turning a seemingly solid reality into a dream landscape. This is due in large part to the fact that many of his stories articulate psychological interactions not easily apparent in the solid world of factuality though indeed terrifyingly real. Furthermore, as Arnold Band points out, these stories are

¹⁰ See Gershom Scholem, "Reflections on S. Y. Agnon," *Commentary*, 44, No. 6 (1967), esp. pp. 59-60. See also Jaime Alazraki, "Borges, or Style as an Invisible Worker," *Style*, 9 (1975), 325, and his "Borges and the Kabbalah," pp. 266-67.

¹¹ *The Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Ithaca and London, 1970), p. 25. See also Arnold Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1968), p. 49; hereafter cited in the text.

recounted by a narrator in whose consciousness these psychic events often occur (p. 394).

Agnon's narrative method leads him to create tales that involve us in language as a dream-medium in which, as in Borges, all potential can be released. For both Agnon and Borges "consciousness has replaced character." As John Bayley phrases it, "The function of consciousness is to explore, that of character to conserve and to habituate. Consciousness in a novel is demoralizing and disconcerting . . . character belongs to that part of life which fulfills expectations and stock responses, conserves and habituates."¹² Bayley's distinction points to the ways in which both Agnon and Borges seduce the reader into expecting the encounter with good "old-fashioned characters in fiction [so] that by a complex process of rapport between the author and ourselves we know what to think of them." They do not allow us such a "condition of comfort and pleasure [and] the patronage of our appreciation [of a] work in which author and reader agree about the nature of things as they are and people as they behave," in which author and reader are in collusion and together articulate "the charmed circle of characterization . . . pleased and secretly reassured by the smooth and punctual operation of a calculable process" (pp. 226-27). Rather, we leave this ultimately harmonious, middle-class world and have "our sense of collusion compromised or removed"; the "justification of a *character* disappears: all that remains is . . . isolation . . . and consciousness" (p. 230). Or to put it another way, in Maurice Natanson's terms, "complicity displaces collusion."¹³ We leave the Cartesian world where, as Bayley phrases it, "we know what we think, therefore Stiva [Oblonsky as a character] is" (p. 227), for the interplay of solipsism and sociality, the title and subject of Natanson's essay. Now, Natanson continues, "with the Husserlian attitude thematizing the natural attitude, everyday life becomes a problem for the inquirer who hitherto tacitly accepted the taken-for-granted world as real and valid for everyone. And along with this change in attitude there goes a reassessment of the nature of consciousness and a revaluation of its psychological implications" (p. 243). We are in a world where explorations of consciousness function to account for the social world, reversing the realistic novel's procedures, and "the constitution of the social becomes the prime theme" (p. 242).

Language in its original, poetic sense of making (rather than the realistic mode of world-making) is what is at issue for both Borges and Agnon. For them it is the moving force. Dreaming and writing-as-

¹² "Character and Consciousness," *NLH*, 2 (1974), 225; hereafter cited in the text.

¹³ "Solipsism and Sociality," *NLH*, 2 (1974), 243; hereafter cited in the text.

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dreaming are the enabling conditions for their inquiries. By these means words become mirrors that reflect the symbol-making activities of their users, and thereby articulate the shapes of consciousness that function as the narrative *personae* of these tales. Here words (like consciousness) can potentially mirror everything, and the act of writing becomes fateful.

The dream quality of Borges' and Agnon's stories has a peculiar effect. ("After all, writing is nothing more than a guided dream," Borges has written.¹⁴) Playing written against spoken words, suggesting a hidden traditional text while articulating a present action, suspending events in a dream-medium which undoes chronology, these stories release words from the prison of the printed page into the reader's consciousness. Enacted in the reader's mind, turned into the present action of consciousness, these stories realize the constitutive force of words. At the climax of *Edo and Enam*, to take one example, Gemula, the sleepwalker, breaks into song: she chants the ancient texts the scholar has been seeking to decipher. Pronouncing them, she releases their magic and power. For the scholar this is a Pygmalion-like event; mysterious letters and ancient words come alive. The power of these newly recited words produces erotic pleasure and leads inexorably to a *liebestod*. The implication is clear: we release a lesser version of this power in the act of reading. The work of both Agnon and Borges taps the flow of language as infinite interpretability, as the undifferentiated flow of language which is defined and hedged in in writing and made momentarily concrete in speech.¹⁵ It is a reminder on the part of both Borges and Agnon that in writing we work with symbols that contain within themselves the possibility, if they were properly decoded, of reaching back to the original stream of language. Thereby Borges and Agnon engage the reader in the search for what Band terms "the secret of language itself" (p. 387).

These themes are central to two stories—Agnon's "The Face and the Image" and Borges' "Death and the Compass."¹⁶ Like *Edo and Enam*, "The Face and the Image" is a story focused on the dreaming narrator's consciousness. Ostensibly, the story details the interruptions that make it impossible for the narrator to reach his dying mother. Ironically the telegram which informs him of his mother's request that he come to see her is discovered just at the moment he sits down to the "great work

¹⁴ "Preface to *Doctor Brodie's Report*," trans. N. T. DiGiovanni in collaboration with the author (New York, 1972), p. 11; quoted by Alazraki in "Borges, or Style," n. 28.

¹⁵ See Scholem, p. 59, and Alazraki, "Borges and the Kabbalah," pp. 248, 266-67.

¹⁶ Agnon's story appears in English in *Twenty-One Stories*, pp. 162-68, trans. Misha Louvish; Borges' is in *Labyrinths*, E, pp. 76-87, trans. Donald Yates.

[of writing] down in a book my thoughts about polished mirrors" (E, p. 162).¹⁷

From the beginning the narrator expresses an interest in mirrors that dates from his childhood. As this movement of his consciousness unfolds, mirrors and their mirroring activity gradually become a metaphor for the action of language and his activity of writing. His meditation on polished mirrors reflects his way with words. Like words, "they are flat, and thin, and smooth as ice, and there is nothing inside them." Despite their seeming lack of depth and yet because of their superficiality, so to speak, they function much as words do, storing up "whatever you put before them, and before them there is no cheating, or partiality, or injustice, or deceit. Whatever you show them, they show you. Mirrors are deserving of praise" for, the narrator says, "they reveal the truth of the world. They do not expunge or amplify, add on or take away—like the truth, which neither adds nor takes away. Therefore I said: I will tell of their virtues and their perfect rectitude" (E, p. 162; H, p. 205).

As the story progresses, it catches this dreamy, naïve narrator in the maze of his own words. Like mirrors, they are thin and flat and smooth as ice, and also like them they paradoxically articulate a depth that reveals the truth. As his journey to his mother is interrupted—removing him also from his usual writer's work—the symbolic depths of words begin to work upon him. Thus, several pages later, as he awaits the departure of the train which he expects will take him to his mother, he begins to think of himself. No longer flat and thin like a mirror, he deepens his image of himself by meditating upon it, doubling his face by calling up an image of it. "It is good for a man to think about himself a little, and not think what he is always thinking." Like mirrors, his words have heretofore been flat and unself-conscious. Now he will observe himself and his mirroring image. His words begin to grow into self-referential symbols and, as face and image interact, he is caught in this process and gradually forced to scrutinize himself. "I looked at myself and saw myself standing in the station on the carriage step" (E, p. 165; H, pp. 207-08). The issues of the story are doubled repeatedly, face reflected in image as consciousness doubling back upon itself comes to a discovery of its multiple and multiplying possibilities. With the narrator we enter this maze at the moment he opens the fateful telegram:

For tidiness' sake I took the telegram and laid it on the table. Then I took a knife to open it. At that moment there appeared before me the image of my grandfather, my mother's father, in the year he died, lying in his bed and reading his will all night. His beard was bluish silver and the hair of his beard was not wavy but straight, every single hair hanging by itself and not mingling with the next, but

¹⁷ From "Hapanim Lapanim," in *Samukh Venireh*, Vol. VI of H, p. 205.

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their perfect rectitude uniting them all. I began to calculate how old my grandfather had been when I was born, and how old my mother had been when she bore me, and it turned out that her age today was the same as my grandfather's age at that time, and my age was the same as hers when I was born. (E, p. 163; H, pp. 205-06)

In a startling series of events, the narrator is forced to confront this doubling effect. Unable to travel to his mother without his travel permit, he returns home only to discover that his trivial command to Naomi, his maid, to lock up and take the key with her has left him homeless, since his own key is in the valise he has left on the train. As he looks for the departed Naomi, seeking a way out of the labyrinth he has made for himself with his words, the narrator meets Naomi's uncle, a carpenter, who is busily fitting a mirror into a door.

The narrator is wearing his writing clothes—old, patched trousers—which he thinks makes the carpenter first treat him as of slight consequence. It is as if his work clothes were his work words, the classic words of Hebrew, patched and yet still useful for meditations on mirrors and truth but not very practicable in the modern world of polished middle-class appearances. These pants—and words—are without honor in the modern world, though essential to his work and functional in and for his study where he can celebrate mirrors and words. The classical phrases are sufficient in his meditative writer's world, but they cannot perform in the world outside. Furthermore, they are in some sense without content; they make it possible for him to praise mirrors and truth abstractly, but it is not until they encounter the concrete experience of the world that they can produce the revelation with which the story ends. Amusingly, it is his lack of the proper words of a travel permit, parallel to his lack of a proper traveling outfit, that hinders him from reaching his mother. The entire situation is replete with hidden meanings and in one sense demands allegorical interpretation. The sleight-of-hand of the story depends upon the balance between allegorical and symbolic meanings which are poised against each other as they are gathered together in the narrator's dreamy and perhaps dreaming consciousness.

When he informs the carpenter that he is Naomi's employer, the carpenter and his wife ignore his shabby appearance and treat him as befits an important guest. Their sudden hospitality keeps him from finding Naomi, as well as the key to his home and his travel permit. Invited to partake of the food traditionally made available to an honored guest, the narrator discovers his hunger. At the same time the feeling that he is missing his mother's burial overwhelms him. The image of her coffin rises before him as the memory of a coffin he has seen borne through a courtyard he passed on his way to the train. He turns and sees his image

in the mirror which the carpenter had set in the door—and suddenly realizes how mirrors (and words), though flat, enable us to see in the round by means of their dialectic force, propelling consciousness between face and image. The story concludes with this marvelous doubling:

So there I sat against my will, eating and drinking whatever Naomi's relatives gave me. At first I ate and drank against my will, without enjoyment, and then willingly, for hunger had begun to torment me. My house was locked, the key in the valise, the valise in the railway carriage, and the carriage on the way to its destination, and all my thoughts were with my mother; perhaps while I was filling my gullet they were sealing her grave. I turned my head aside so as not to look at what I saw. My image rose before me from the mirror in the wardrobe, which the carpenter had been fixing an hour before. The mirror stared at me face to face reflecting back every movement of the hand and quiver of the lips, like all polished mirrors, which show you whatever you show them, without partiality or deceit. And it, namely the revelation of the thing, surprised me more than the thing itself, perhaps more than it had surprised me in my childhood, perhaps more than it had ever surprised me before. (E, p. 168; H, p. 210)

With this final doubling the hermeneutic circle of mirrors and words is complete. It is worth noting that all the characters in the tale double and reflect each other's function, as they might in a dream, thus allowing us to experience the dream situation along with the narrator. We can try out its multiple meanings as both participants and observers, and thus move ourselves not to a conclusion of plot—the narrator never gets to his mother—but to the reflexive mirroring moment. Mirrors and words prepared, polished, and set, and the flow of everyday life interrupted, we look into the mirror of words and discover its old/new truths of face and image. This revelatory moment is set in a web of allusions and cryptic hints of quotations which take on surprising new meanings through the encounter with previously unarticulated experience.¹⁸

We find a similar strategy in "Death and the Compass," one of Borges' classic stories of detection. Like so many of them, it turns on a discovery of and about language which, ironically treated, expands into an image of the general process of creating language, meaning, and reality. In this story the detective-scholar discovers what he believes to be the solution of a crime by reading the kabbalistic books of the dead man and deciphering a mystical code. The process of seeking is doubled; Lönnrot, in searching for the Secret Name of God as the solution to the mystery, discovers he has been caught in the labyrinth of words. Though the story concludes with his murder, it is clear that at the same time it begins with that cyclic event: we discover that the process of searching

¹⁸ See Band, p. 332. It is worth noting that the story's title and theme of seeing God face to face allude to at least three different Biblical passages: Gen. xxxi.20, Gen. xxxiii.11, and Exod. xxxiii.11.

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for the Secret Name—part of the maze created by the criminal Scharlach to ensnare Lönnrot—is an unending one. This labyrinth of words becomes an image both of man's capacity to share in the more-than-human powers of angels and demons, as well as of culture as the ceaseless and universal language in and by which man has his being.

Like Agnon's, this story teases us into finding allegorical meanings. The place-names sound mythic—Triste-le-Roy, Hôtel du Nord—and the names of the characters, as well as their characterizing epithets, suggest that they are not individuals but general types who repeat and reenact ancient rituals. Jewish references abound, but they are part of the same iterative process in which events are doubled and themes are repeated until their very redundancy forces us to look at the process of symbolism and language-making by which they are brought into multiple existence.

"To that tower . . . there came on the third day of December the delegate from Podolsk to the Third Talmudic Congress, Doctor Marcel Yarmolinsky, a gray-bearded man with gray eyes. We shall never know whether the Hôtel du Nord pleased him; he accepted it with the ancient resignation which had allowed him to endure three years of war in the Carpathians and three thousand years of oppression and pogroms" (*L*, p. 76).¹⁹ As the process of detection unfolds we become aware of the narrator's presence. At one point he is beside Lönnrot eagerly seeking the solution to the mystery; he loses himself in the delight of describing the marvelous ambiguities of a place or situation; he marvels at what he cannot know or tells us everything as if the story were his own. This narrative voice is in tension with the dramatic portions of the story, although it is clear that the narrator is self-consciously playing all the roles. In effect, the story deals with the process of artistic creation as a labyrinth-making activity in which the narrator embeds himself at the same moment that he expresses it. By this process the narrator reveals some of the same wiliness as Agnon's *persona* in "The Face and the Image." Each speaker fills a symbol-making role simultaneously with the symbolic role he plays in the tale.

If Agnon draws upon classical Jewish sources to articulate this situation, and adds to it themes and tonalities from the great masters of European literature, Borges draws upon similar classic sources while referring to the long Spanish perspectivist tradition from Cervantes to Unamuno. Their confluence becomes clear when Lönnrot answers self-

¹⁹ "La muerte y la brújula," in *F*, pp. 143-44: "A esa torre . . . arribó el día tres de diciembre el delegado de Podólsk al Tercer Congreso Talmúdico, doctor Marcelo Yarmolinsky, hombre de barba gris y ojos grises. Nunca sabremos si el Hôtel du Nord le agradó: lo aceptó con la antigua resignación que le había permitido tolerar tres años de guerra en los Cárpatos y tres mil años de opresión y de pogroms."

consciously a suggestion of police inspector Treviranus. The dead man, Treviranus claims, was killed because he had been mistaken for the Tetrarch of Galilee who "owns the finest sapphires in the world." That is a possible but uninteresting solution, Lönnrot responds: "You'll reply that reality hasn't the least obligation to be interesting. And I'll answer you that reality may avoid that obligation but that hypotheses may not. In the hypothesis that you propose, chance intervenes copiously. Here we have a dead rabbi; I would prefer a purely rabbinical explanation, not the imaginary mischances of an imaginary robber." Like a sensible policeman Treviranus replies, "I'm not interested in rabbinical explanations. I am interested in capturing the man who stabbed this unknown person." What Treviranus seeks to keep separate—world and words—Lönnrot insists on linking. "Not so unknown," corrects Lönnrot. "Here are his complete works" (*L*, p. 77).²⁰ Thus Lönnrot is launched on his course of reading, that is, of world-making, from which his life and death issue.

Amusingly and yet crucially, the books in Yarmolinsky's library are his but not his alone. They are his personal copies of classical Jewish kabbalistic works. Yarmolinsky, like Lönnrot, is merely one of the avatars of this cyclic activity of language-making, one of the figures in the dance, as are Borges and Agnon as well. When Treviranus comments that he has no time for "those musty volumes" since he is too busy to waste it "on Jewish superstitions," Lönnrot's murmured answer—"Maybe the crime belongs to the history of Jewish superstitions"—is triumphantly vindicated with respect to both theology and plot by succeeding events. After all, as the editor of the *Yidische Zeitung* comments shyly, Christianity belongs to "the history of Jewish superstitions" (note the doubling here). Then one of the policemen finds in Yarmolinsky's typewriter a cryptic message: "The first letter of the Name has been uttered" (*L*, p. 78).²¹

²⁰ "Todos sabemos que el Tetrarca de Galilea posee los mejores zafiros del mundo. Alguien, para robarlos, habrá penetrado aquí por error. Yarmolinsky se ha levantado; el ladrón ha tenido que matarlo. ¿Qué le parece?"

—Posible, pero no interesante—respondió Lönnrot—. Usted replicará que la realidad no tiene la menor obligación de ser interesante. Yo le replicaré que la realidad puede prescindir de esa obligación, pero no las hipótesis. En la que usted ha improvisado, interviene copiosamente el azar. He aquí un rabino muerto; yo preferiría una explicación puramente rabínica, no los imaginarios percances de un imaginario ladrón.

Treviranus repuso con mal humor:

—No me interesan las explicaciones rabínicas; me interesa la captura del hombre que apuñaló a este desconocido.

—No tan desconocido—corrigió Lönnrot—. Aquí están sus obras completas." (*F*, pp. 144-45)

²¹ "—Soy un pobre cristiano—repuso—. Llévase todos esos mamotretos, si quiere; no tengo tiempo que perder en supersticiones judías.

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It is clear that Lönnrot's quest will thus articulate the very nature of that time which Treviranus refuses to waste. Furthermore, when we note that the letters of God's name have been uttered in the scattered messages and clues that follow like punctuation marks in and of the story, we realize that the act of reading and decoding of a text is being imagined for us as it creates reading (and writing) time. Here reader, narrator, and writer join in the complicitous acts of making, of consciousness, and of literature. Thus like Agnon's, Borges' stories eschew the realistic idea of harmony, completeness, and self-sufficiency in favor of commentary on—which is also revelation of—the nature of things and words. For both writers this is a cyclic and unending process, individual as well as impersonal, new yet always old. As writers, they are inscribed in it as they write out the unending permutations of the Name—perhaps not only of God but also of Language.

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—Quizá este crimen pertenece a la historia de las supersticiones judías—murmuró Lönnrot.

—Como el cristianismo—se atrevió a completar el redactor de la *Yidische Zeitung*. Era miope, ateo y muy tímido.

Nadie le contestó. Uno de los agentes había encontrado en la pequeña máquina de escribir una hoja de papel con esta sentencia inconclusa:

La primera letra del Nombre ha sido articulada." (F, pp. 144-45)

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