

Coherence/Incoherence in Stories by S.Y. Agnon

Adina Abadi

Hebrew University of Jerusalem

The issue of whether coherence is an immanent feature of texts, or whether it is a concept pertaining to the process of reading and comprehension, is fundamental to studies on coherence (Verdaasdonk 1976: 182). In his paper *The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse*, Searle points out the absence of universal criteria for coherence, as what may be considered coherent in fiction will not be considered so in a work of science (Searle 1974: 331). Searle explains that, in fiction, the author can create events or characters according to conventions he has invoked or established. The author's consistency is measured by the degree to which he remains within the boundaries of these conventions. Searle adds that coherence is in part a function of an understanding between author and reader about these conventions; in other words, a function of a contract between them (ibid.). It then follows that Searle ascribes coherence to the process of comprehension; nevertheless, by referring to consistency with the conventions invoked by the author, he also attributes it to text.

Van Dijk defines a coherent text as follows: a sequence of sentences that denotes a sequence of facts or courses of events that have "correct conditional relationships holding in such courses of events" in a world that can be imagined (van Dijk 1980: 33). From the above definition it stems that van Dijk considers coherence not only primarily as an immanent feature of texts, but also as a function of the reader's power of imagination.

In his profound inquiry into the concept of coherence, Enkvist analyzes, on the one hand, sentences linked by cohesive elements, such as pronouns or syntactic-semantic connectives, that do not form a coherent text. On the other hand, he examines sentences not linked by cohesive elements, which nevertheless form a coherent text. A striking example cited by Enkvist follows:

Grandmother died twenty years ago.

I shall have lunch with **her** tomorrow.

(Enkvist 1978: 111)

Enkvist points out that the coreferent link between the two sentences in the text notwithstanding, the text is not pragmatically acceptable in our world, and can only be imagined in a spiritualist universe or in science-fiction (ibid. 112).

Enkvist concludes therefore that sentences that do not cohere refer to different universes of discourse (ibid. 120). On this basis then, he defines a coherent text as a text whose "sentences conform to the picture of one single possible world in the experience or imagination of the receiver" (ibid. 126). Thus it is clear that Enkvist addresses both points of view. On one hand, he relies on the reader's imagination, but on the other, the condition that

sentences conform to one single world implies that coherence is also an immanent feature of texts.

In order to further illustrate the intrinsic nature of coherence, I will cite examples from several stories by Hebrew writer S.Y. Agnon.

"Fable of the Goat" concerns a she-goat who periodically disappeared for a few days at a time. Upon her return, her udder was full of milk with curative powers, *the taste of which was as the taste of Eden* (Agnon, *Twenty-One Stories*: 26). In an attempt to decipher the enigma, the owner's son tied a cord to the goat's tail and followed her into a cave. After walking for a short while, they emerged from the cave, whereupon the young man learned from wayfarers that they were in the Land of Israel, near the holy city of Safed (ibid. 27).

In this story, the laws of time and place are suspended by a miraculous shortcut from Europe to Israel via a cave. The story includes other legendary elements as well, such as milk with curative powers and the taste of Eden. Nonetheless, the story is coherent since the author remains within the boundaries of fabulous conventions; in other words, the rules governing the story's universe of discourse are uniform — legendary rules. Even the holy city of Safed, a real city, is interwoven in the legendary world. This is consistent with its historic position as a center of Jewish mysticism — *Kabbalah*. Moreover, in the story, the mystics whom the young man sees praying are described as angels.

In some stories Agnon interweaves legends within realistic contexts. For example, the realistic story "From Heaven" contains ample details about the inhabitants of a certain village and their sources of income. Although legendary elements are interwoven in the story, they do not cause incoherence, since the shifts between the imaginary and empirical worlds are signalled by linguistic markers, such as *The tale is told of a righteous man*, and at the end of the tale — *How great are the deeds of the righteous* (Agnon, *Elu ve-Elu*: 171).

But in some Agnon stories, especially those in the collection published under the title *The Book of Deeds* (*Sefer ha-Ma'asim*), shifts from the empirical world to an imaginary one and back are not signalled by lexical or linguistic means. The following examples illustrate this point.

The story "To Father's House" opens with a realistic description of two painters sent to whitewash the narrator's room, who disturb him in his work. Feeling superfluous, the narrator decides to visit his father. Arriving at his hometown in time for prayer, he goes to a synagogue. In the synagogue courtyard, he sees *a lighted candle suspended in the air in a bottle swinging in the wind but not extinguished* (*Twenty-One Stories*: 61). There he also meets Isaac Euchel, who lived in the eighteenth century. Euchel takes out a cigarette and asks for a light. A child comes over and lights a match, but it is extinguished. He then offers another match. The narrator mocks Euchel, saying, *Your generation, with all its expertise in grammar, didn't know how to adorn this splinter with a word as suitable as a 'match'*. [in Hebrew: *gafrur*] (ibid. 62).

The above section contains two episodes which do not conform to the empirical world. In the first place, the bottle suspended in the air contravenes

the law of gravitation. The candle which is not extinguished, even though its bottle is swinging in the wind, also defies empirical reality. Of course, the light that is not extinguished alludes to a biblical episode. Symbolic meaning inheres in the confrontation between the candle and the match which was extinguished, but this symbolism is outside the scope of this paper's topic, coherence.

In the second episode, the laws of time are suspended, as the narrator speaks with Euchel, who lived several generations earlier. Euchel is offered a match, even though matches did not exist in his time. The incoherence becomes even more striking with the introduction of a realistic element in the remark about the coining of the Hebrew word *gafrur* ('match'). This remark echoes scholarly disputes that ensued in the course of the revival of the Hebrew language.

The story "To the Doctor" opens with a gloomy description of the narrator's father's illness. The father *knows his death is near but doesn't know what will happen to his young sons and daughters* (ibid. 65). The narrator's little sister is ill as well. The narrator must summon the doctor, but he is afraid he will not find him at home, as it is after eight-thirty p.m., and the doctor is in the habit of leaving his house at nine to spend the night drinking with friends. These elements belong to the empirical world; however, they are intermingled with other elements in the story.

For example, the narrator's wife shells peas and puts them in a pot, prior to accompanying her husband to the doctor. Upon leaving the house, the narrator stumbles, since all the peas were scattered on the steps. Here the reader is confronted with a contradiction, as one fact is described by two statements bearing different truth values. If the statement that the peas were put in a pot is true, then the statement that all the peas were scattered is false, and vice versa. In addition, the narrator points out that the peas have turned into lentils. It should be noted that lentils possess symbolic value, as they are traditionally eaten during mourning; thus they reflect the narrator's anxiety. Nevertheless, the suspension of natural laws in the transformation of the peas, and the inherent logical contradiction, render the story incoherent.

The story continues with realistic details, such as the narrator's encounter with an acquaintance on the bridge and the latter's remarks about changes in postal arrangements. However, the story's conclusion does not reflect the empirical world. The narrator tells us that his wife *reached the doctor's house... and stood before the entrance of the house, her shoulders twitching from sorrow and waiting* (ibid. 67). But while depicting her in detail, he is standing on the black bridge — at a great distance. Here the laws of time and place are suspended, as the narrator is in two places at once. Clearly, the intermingling of elements from the empirical world with others which run counter to its laws creates an incoherent story.

The story "The Last Bus" lacks unity of place. The first half of the story seems to take place in Agnon's birthplace, Buczacz in Galicia, whereas the second half contains realistic details compatible with life in Jerusalem at the time the story was written.

The story opens with an unrealistic detail: *I lit the kerosene stove... My neighbor saw me and said: 'You are lighting the stove, but there is no kerosene in it'* (*Samukh ve-Nir'eh* 1966: 108). It then continues with a realistic detailed description of an acquaintance whom the narrator has visited, the acquaintance's family, and the furniture in his home. The subsequent paragraphs contain many realistic details about the bus schedule, and about a group of girls whom the narrator meets at the bus station. At this point an unrealistic detail is interwoven into the episode—the narrator starts talking to a dead grandfather. This detail is not introduced dramatically, but rather as consistent with the rationale of daily life: *Since the bus was not coming, and I was not pressed for time, I started talking to the old grandfather and told him that I had visited the big house* (ibid. 110). It should be noted that only after reading the next page does the reader become aware that the grandfather is dead. Clearly, the introduction of a surrealistic detail by means of an empirical rationale highlights the incoherence.

The story's next two paragraphs refer to the empirical world, but in their description of the narrator's missing the last bus, elements and rules from two different worlds intermingle and even clash. For example:

That old man of mine took my arm and accompanied me to the bus station, where he asked the clerk on duty if any other bus was scheduled to depart for the North End...The clerk smiled maliciously at the old man, who was innocent of the ways of the world...I was sorry to see the old man disparaged - he who had troubled to come from another world, who had left this world before there were buses...the clerk muttered another possibility: there was an old coach that was ready to go...Hearing this, the old man took hold of the table and spurred the clerk to hurry on. Oh, but the old man's innocence. He was convinced that this table was the very coach the clerk had mentioned.

(ibid. 111-112)

In this episode the grandfather is not characterized by features usually ascribed to the dead in legends, such as all-encompassing knowledge or omnipotence. On the contrary, his lack of knowledge is explained by the rules of the empirical world. In this instance, Agnon does not rely on the literary conventions common in legends, but explains the surrealistic in terms of the realistic, thereby rendering the episode incoherent.

The incoherence of the story is accentuated at the end of the episode in which the grandfather participates:

Ahead of me the old man slid and fell. Since he was dead, his fall did not alarm me, for the dead have no physical sensations.

(ibid. 112)

This incident is based on contradictory laws. By the laws of the empirical world, sliding and falling are features of physical beings or entities. Thus if the grandfather fell, it means that he has a body. But the narrator states that the dead have no physical sensations, thus the grandfather has no corporeality. The incoherence in the sentences cited above is accentuated by the use of semantic connectives denoting cause: *since* and *for*.

Summing up the incoherent features in the stories from *The Book of Deeds* analyzed above, the contradictions and the intermingling of laws from different

worlds for example, we can aver that incoherence is an immanent feature of the texts. Yet there are texts whose coherence or incoherence depends on the reader's consciousness or beliefs. In other words, readers possessing different conceptions of the world will comprehend such texts differently — some will read them as coherent, whereas others will view them as incoherent.

The novelette *In the Heart of the Seas* is an example of such a text. Two plots are interwoven in the novelette: The story of ten men who leave their hometown — Buczacz in Galicia — to settle in the Land of Israel, and the story of Hananiah — a pious man who joined them, but eventually travelled separately, arriving in Jerusalem before them. Hananiah appears in only a few chapters. In several others he is present solely through the other characters' consciousness, but his centrality to the novelette is clear from the outset.

The novelette's entire first chapter is devoted to Hananiah, who is depicted as a person whose actions are related to holy matters.

So he took the lamp and all the other vessels for light in the House of Study...and rubbed them and polished them until they shone like new...But it was not only the illuminating vessels that Hananiah rubbed and polished. He also took the ewer and the pitcher and the holy vessels and all those vessels and implements within which the Shekhinah, the Divine Presence, conceals herself; and made them all shine.

(*In the Heart of the Seas*: 11-12)

These actions have been interpreted as *tikkun*, the repair of the vessels in Jewish mysticism (Band 1968: 265), yet they do not deviate from acts performed in the empirical world.

Most of the other ten men are portrayed in ample realistic detail; we are told their names, marital status, professions, etc. Some of the wives are also depicted. The departure from their hometown Buczacz is described in detail, and geographical accuracy characterizes the itinerary from Galicia to the Black Sea port of Vilkof, from whence they embarked to Istanbul en route to Jaffa. These details, and the geographical authenticity in particular, provide the novelette with a realistic universe of discourse.

However, during the sea voyage the travellers see a man sitting on a kerchief and floating on the sea: *No wave of the sea rose to drown him, nor did any sea beast swallow him* (ibid. 64). Later on the travellers realize that this is Hananiah, whereas Rabbi Shmuel Yosef (who is a projection of the author in the story) suggests that *It is the Divine Presence, which is bringing back the people of Israel to their own place* (ibid. 65). It should be mentioned that the shift from the realistic episodes to the surrealistic one proceeds gradually. The links inhere in allusions to beliefs cultivated in Jewish mysticism:

The ship went on, the waters moved as usual, and a still small voice rose from the ship. It was the sound of song and praise rising from one firmament to another, till they reached the Gateway of White Sapphire where the prayers of Israel gather and join together until such time as the dawn comes to the Land of Israel.

(ibid. 61)

The narrator introduces beliefs in supernatural miracles as well:

Suddenly a huge bird appeared and lifted him to his house, a distance it would have taken several years to journey. But no bird came to Hananiah...even in the generation before our own miracles were performed upon the water, such as that of the holy sage Rabbi Shmelke of Nikolsburg...who crossed the Danube in a trough in a dangerous season. But where is such a trough to be found nowadays?

(ibid. 106)

However, as far as Hananiah is concerned, the narrator implies that his floating on the kerchief was not a miracle, but rather the answer to his prayer when he was in distress:

Thereupon the Holy One, blessed be he, gave Hananiah the idea of spreading out his kerchief on the sea and sitting upon it. So he spread his kerchief upon the sea and sat down upon it. The kerchief floated off to sea, carrying him upon it all the way to the Land of Israel.

(ibid. 106-107)

Here the narrator counterpoises two opposites. On the one hand, he stresses that unlike the other stories he has recounted, the story of Hananiah is not miraculous. Rather it is the outcome of the answer to Hananiah's prayer — a possibility that pertains to some religious people's empirical world. On the other hand, he stresses the fact that in comparison to the other travellers, whose boat was endangered in stormy seas, Hananiah floated safely and peacefully on his kerchief, even preceding the others to the Land of Israel.

It seems then that Agnon has created an ambiguous text, one that can be comprehended differently by two kinds of readers. A reader who does not believe in supernatural events will ascribe the story of Hananiah to a legendary world, thereby reading the story as a mixture of realistic and legendary elements — in other words, as an incoherent story. Whereas a religious reader who believes in miracles may find the idea given by God to Hananiah to spread his kerchief on the water, and Hananiah's safe journey on it, as consistent with his 'empirical' world; thus he may perceive the story as coherent.

At the novelette's conclusion, Agnon indeed implies that he has written the story with two kinds of readers in mind: *Some will read my book as a man reads legends, while others will read it and derive benefit for themselves* (ibid. 126).

In summation, following this brief analysis of several stories by Agnon, we can again address the problem of coherence/incoherence introduced at the beginning of this paper. Based on the examples presented in this paper, I conclude that coherence or incoherence is usually an immanent feature of texts. Nevertheless some texts are perceived differently by individual readers, depending on the scope of their 'empirical' worlds, on their experiences or beliefs. The coherence or incoherence of such texts is determined in the process of reading and comprehension.

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