"HERE" IS A DIFFERENT PLACE:

"LIELAND", SPEECH AND HEBREW LITERARY SPACE[1]

Michal Peles Almagor

In the story "Leiland" (Lieland) from the collection *Pit'om Dfika Badelet* (*Suddenly on Knock on the Door*),[2] Etgar Keret continues to write in the colloquial everyday Hebrew that has marked his work from its beginning.[3] At the heart of the story we find Robbie, the protagonist, who realizes that the lies he has been telling since he was seven years old have materialized into subjects in a parallel world called Lieland. The story, then, uses colloquial speech not only stylistically, but also as an apparatus for the characters to engender an alternative world. Robbie's crossing to Lieland raises questions about the poetics of space in the story: What are the relations between Lieland and Robbie's

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[2] Etgar Keret. *Pit'om Dfika Badelet* (Or-Yehudah: Zmorah Bitan, 2010), 11-18; English translation "Lieland" in *Suddenly, A Knock on the Door*. Trans. Miriam Shlesinger, Sondra Silverston, and Nathan Englander (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 9-19.

[3] On Keret's innovative everyday writing style and his contribution to shaping a postmortem Israeli literature see: Hannan Hever, *Sifrut Shenichtevet Mikan: Kitzur Hasifrut Hayisraelit*. (Tel Aviv: Yedi'ot Aharonot, 1999), 146-149; On Keret's simple, yet grotesque language see: Adia Mendelson Maoz, "Situatzyot Kitzoniyot – Zva'atiyot Vegroteskiyot Bitziratam shel Castel-Bloom Vekeret" (Extreme Situations – The Horrendous and the Grotesque in the Works of Castel-Bloom and Keret). *Dapim Lemehkar Besifrut* 11 (1998), 269-295.

real-fictional world? And equally important, how does this mutually constitutive structure converse with previous spatial tendencies in Hebrew literature?

In this article, I examine the relationship between speech and the production of place as a key to understand the spatial model this story suggests. While Keret's Hebrew is often dismissed as "thin," escapist prose,[4] I follow Rubik Rosenthal's claim that Keret's language exemplifies "spoken-literary Hebrew." I argue that it invokes Jewish spatial paradigms of longing for another place but modifies them to a spatial relationship of dependency: a lie that is told in one world will appear in the other. Furthermore, the realization of the lies changes the characters' behavior and leads to a sense of accountability. Thus, the story uses the materiality of language to engender a *place* that is neither a Zionist utopia nor a dystopia. Rather, it generates a dual structure of oscillating ontology between the two worlds, linked by prescriptive language.

In his review of *Pit'om Dfika Badelet*, Omri Herzog surveys the traits of Keret's fiction, in particular, the lack of a distinct "Israeliness," the absurd situations and the spoken Israeli Hebrew.[5] Herzog's critique joins Avraham Balaban's[6] portrayal of the colloquial writing style in Keret's fiction, its deconstruction of the self, and its resistance to collective Zionist ideology. Rachel Harris, on the other hand, argues that

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[4] For the debate on Keret's colloquial writing style see: Rubik Rosenthal, "Hazira Haleshonit: Juk Barosh" (The Linguistic Arena: A Roach in the Head). *NRG* May, 13, 2010. https://www.makorrishon.co.il/nrg/online/47/ART2/106/836.html. Accessed December 8, 2017. In Rosenthal's account Keret's register is not "thin" but is rather a spoken-literary language, as he coins it, that deals with complex cultural symbols. For Keret's response on the critique of his style see his 2014 interview with Sahar Shalev: "Hakaytana shel Etgar" (Etgar's Happy Campers). *Bet Avi Chai*. March 24, 2014. http://www.bac.org.il/society/article/hakyytnha-shl-atgr. Accessed December 8, 2017.

[5] Omri Herzog. "'Pit'om Dfika Badelet': Anachnu Kann Orchim Lerega" ("Suddenly a Knock on the Door: We are here Momentary Guests). *Ha'aretz*, Musaf Sfarim, June 2, 2010. https://www.haaretz.co.il/literature/1.1205091. Accessed January 14, 2018.

[6] Avraham Balaban. *Gal Aḥer Basipporet Ha'ivrit: Sipporet Ivrit Posṭmoderniṣṭit* (Another Wave in Hebrew Fiction: Postmodernist Hebrew Fiction) (Jerusalem: Keter, 1995), 53-54. Balaban coins the term "the other wave" to describe postmodern Israeli authors such as Etgar Keret, Orly Kastel-Bloom, and Gadi Taub, to mention a few.

Keret is rooted in the Israeli landscape and cultural symbols while depicting Tel Aviv as a universalized Israeli city.[7] While these works explore the ways Keret's writing corresponds with the production of place in Israeli literature, they do not fully address the way in which Keret's writing reproduces and modifies familiar spatial tropes in Hebrew literature. As Gershon Shaked,[8] Yigal Schwarz,[9] and Sidra Ezrahi[10] show, Hebrew literature demonstrates a model of longing to imagine the return to Palestine, a model that continues to dominate contemporary Israeli literature. Keret's story, I argue, builds on the familiar Zionist paradigm of imagining the place via words, but at the same time, it resists the notion of arrival, either as a purpose or as a failed experience. Instead, the story portrays a spatial mechanism of mutually constitutive worlds and shifts the emphasis to accountability towards the other. By doing so, it raises the question: What are the ethical consequences of this world-making in language?

The story "Lieland" centers on the creation of place via speech. The lies the characters tell emerge into beings in the other world. In other words, lies told in the fictional world are transformed into speech acts and become actual figures in Lieland. The made-up uncle Igor, the crippled dog, the mean redheaded kid, and the gummy machine all began as figments of the characters' imaginations. They were signifiers

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[7] Rachel Harris. "Decay and Death: Urban Topoi in Literary Depictions of Tel Aviv." *Israel Studies* 14:3 (2009), 75-93. See particularly pp. 90-91. Harris focuses on *Hakaytana shel Kneller* and argues that by depicting death and decay in Tel Aviv, the novel highlights the disparity between the early pioneers' utopian idea of the city and the modern reality. These depictions resist the pioneers' dream of the first Hebrew city on the one hand, but fulfill it on the other: representing Tel Aviv as a modern, full, and complex metropolis signifies the city's ultimate success.

[8] Gershon Shaked. *Hasipporet Ha'ivrit 1880-1980* (Hebrew Fiction 1880-1980) (Tel Aviv: Hakibutz Hameuhad, 1982).

[9] Yigal Schwartz. *Hayada'ata et Ha'aretz sham Halimon Pore'ah* (Do You Know the Land where the Lemon Blooms) (Or Yehuda: Dvir, 2007). See also: Yigal Schwarz, *The Zionist Paradox: Hebrew Literature and Israeli Identity* (Lebanon: Brandeis University Press, 2014).

[10] Sidra Ezrahi. *Booking Passage: Exile and Homecoming in the Modern Jewish Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 3-23.

without an actual referent as they were invented stories made-up by the characters. Lieland, then, functions as a **complementary** world to the fictional world of the text. By creating a complementary relationship between the worlds and the words creating them, the story resists the fundamental spatial paradigm of longing that characterizes Modern Hebrew literature. The characters do not long for another place. Instead, they leap back and forth between the worlds and confront the surplus of their words and the consequences of their false speech in the other world. The model of longing is replaced by a model of surplus.

This essential ontological paradigm in Jewish thought of how the idea of place exists before the physical place is lengthily discussed in Gideon Aran and Zali Gurevitch's seminal article "Al Hamakom" (About the Place).[11] Aran and Gurevitch argue that the ambivalence of the notion of place constitutes a fundamental tension in Israeli society that originates in Jewish thought. The Jew resists the notion of nativism and therefore preserves the gap between what they refer to as *makom katan* (place), the local and practical everyday life, and *makom gadol* (Place), the *idea of Eretz (the Land),* which is the utopian, redemptive Zion. The compatibility between the small place and the big Place is parallel to the rupture between history and myth. The myth of the Promised Land preexisted the physical Israel and as such collides with the actualization of everyday life.[12]

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[11] Gideon Aran and Zali Gurevitch. "Al Hamakom." *Alpayim* 4 (1991), 9-44. The English version of the article was published under the title: "The Land of Israel: Myth and Phenomenon" in *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, vol. X (1994), 195-210.

[12] Ibid., 35. Aran and Gurevitch mark the gap between the fantasy of arriving to the Promised Land and the actual everyday life as a transition from myth into history. It is equivalent, in their account, to the shift from Moses to Joshua. Moses embodies the idea of arriving to Eretz Canaan (The Land of Canaan) but he needs Joshua to actualize this idea by conquering the land. Thus, Moses's figure constitutes the myth, while Joshua represents the beginning of history.

While Aran and Gurevitch show how language is the ontological mediator of setting up the idea of the place before the actual place, Keret's story points to how speech, in particular, false speech, becomes a speech act that engenders the world of Lieland. The idea of the lie always exists before the lie itself and only when spoken becomes "real" in the world of Lieland. Thus, in the story, the word exists before the place and actualizes it by the telling of a lie. The place is first said to be, and only then comes to be. The two fictional worlds are tied by a linguistic knot: a false utterance that is told in one world will appear as real in the other.

Robbie's visit to Lieland also affects his lying habits. He realizes that every new lie impacts an already existing lie. Consequently, he feels bad for having invented a story about a niece with an abusive husband. When he lies again to get out of something, he consciously makes up a nice story about having to water his aunt's flowers rather than composing another atrocious situation. Robbie, then, develops a sense of responsibility toward his made-up stories. Moreover, when he overhears that his colleague, Natasha, had crafted a heart attack for her made-up uncle Igor, he approaches her. Her made-up uncle Igor had already suffered from a train crash, a strike of lightning, as well as wolf bites, and Robbie feels the need to speak up:

> "It's about the lie you told, earlier, to the head of accounting,"
> Robbie stammered. "I know him."
> "You followed me all the way to my car just to accuse me of being
> a liar?"
> "No," said Robbie. "I didn't mean to accuse you. Really. Your being
> a liar is cool. I'm a liar too. But this Igor from your lie, I met him.

He's one in a million. And you – if you don't mind me saying so –

you've made things pretty hard for him as it is."[13]

Robbie does not employ moral judgment in his conversation with Natasha. Instead, he makes her aware of the consequences of her lies in order to protect the made-up uncle Igor from its maker. He takes Natasha to Lielnad and she, too, immediately becomes emotionally involved because "this Igor wasn't just one of her lies, he was also her uncle. A made-up uncle, but still."[14] Moreover, Natasha decides to skip her plans to go on vacation the following morning so she could return and take care of her uncle. The dual trajectory, then, between Lieland and the "real" world is such that enables recognition, awareness, and a step toward accountability.

While the story is well-rooted in a familiar Israeli landscape, it is initially triggered by the trope of return. Robbie arrives in Lieland through a hole hidden under a white stone in the yard of his childhood home. The description of the old neighborhood exemplifies Rachel Harris's claim regarding Keret's universalized Israeli landscape. On the one hand, Robbie conveys a sense of nostalgia when seeing the economic growth of the old streets that could easily be translated to a different culture and setting. On the other hand, Robbie is looking for a *lira* under the rock, which was the common currency used in the Israeli state between 1954-1980. Robbie's return home is both spatial and temporal, and evokes the notion of return to the

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[13] Etgar Keret, *Suddenly A Know on the Door*, 16-17. In Hebrew:

זה בקשר לשקר שלך, מקודם, למנהל האגף," גמגם רובי, "אני מכיר אותו." "הלכת אחרי כל הדרך לאוטו רק בשביל להאשים"
אותי שאני שקרנית?" סיננה נטשה. "לא," התגונן רובי, "אני לא מאשים, האמת. זה שאת שקרנית זה על הכיפאק. גם אני שקרן.
אבל האיגור הזה, מהשקר שלך, אני פגשתי אותו. הוא בן אדם זהב. ואת, סליחה שאני אומר את זה, אבל את כבר המצאת לו
מספיק צער. (*פתאום דפיקה בדלת*, 16-17)

[14] Ibid., 18.

homeland discussed by scholars such as Sidra Ezrahi. In Ezrahi's account, Hebrew literature is triggered by the trope of homeland and the aspiration to return to Zion.[15] Keret builds on the trope of return that exists in the Israeli-Jewish imagination, yet for Keret home is an actual house with a backyard. Home is no longer an imagined place, but rather an actual setting with history and nostalgia. Moreover, the house/home (*Ba'it*) becomes the threshold between the worlds.[16] It is the site through which the repressed surplus of language can resurface, and characters can address the consequences of their lies.

Described as "stark white, no walls, no floor, no ceiling, no sunshine," Lieland mostly resembles a white sheet of paper that has the ability to absorb and implement fictional words. In similarity to the literary text, the figures of Lieland are engendered solely by words. However, two main ontological differences occur: first, while the reader is aware that he or she is reading fiction from the outset, Robbie's auditors, such as his mother and boss, believe his lies to be true. Second, the literary text constructs the fictional world via writing. Lieland, in contrast, is created by vocal utterances.[17]

In that sense, the story joins the Hebrew literary tradition of engendering a place by prescriptive language, such as Avraham Mappo's *Ahavat Zion* (*Love of Zion*, 1853), the first Hebrew novel that imagined a utopian Jerusalem.[18] Lieland, however,

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[15] Sidra Ezrahi, *Booking Passages*, 7-23.

[16] The word *Ba'it* in Hebrew is both "house" and "home." Therefore, the return to the Ba'it invokes both the return to the physical house and to the idea of home.

[17] The ambiguity between text and speech has troubled Keret's fiction from its beginning. This tension is exemplified already in Keret's first book, *Tzinorot* (*Pipelines*), in the Khokhi stories sequence. Khokhi continues to talk compulsively despite his untimely death and goes as far as to claim that even the author of the story can't keep him from speaking. The sequence finally ends in Kokhi 3 when Keret stops writing.

[18] For a detailed account of how *Ahavat Zion* exemplifies the model of longing see: Yigal Schwartz, "*Ahavat Zion*, Avraham Mappo," in: *Hayada'ata et Ha'aretz sham Halimon Pore'ah*, 29-81.

illustrates neither a utopia superior to everyday life nor an apocalyptic dystopia. Instead, Lieland constitutes a *non-utopia* of accountability. It functions as a dependent clause that houses false speech, which falls through the cracks and fractures of everyday life to be carried out elsewhere.

The linguistic structure of the story, which performs the possibility of the word to exit separately from its speaker, brings to mind Gershom Scholem's understanding of the Hebrew language.[19] Scholem articulates a model in which Hebrew words encapsulate a surplus that remains despite the ignorance of its speaker. Language is materialized and the surplus is repressed to the bottom of the word. Building on this logic, Keret's "Lieland" conveys a version in which language can exist independently from its speaker. The words create subjects without the knowledge of their speakers in the parallel world. While for Scholem it is the holiness that is repressed to the bottom of the word, tempted to burst against its speakers, for Keret the lies are those that are compressed, only they reappear to haunt their speakers. However, the return of the lie results in awareness, as well as accountability, as Robbie and Natasha return to take care of their figments of imagination and begin to tell only nice, joyful lies.[20]

The story "Lieland" follows the spatial construction imagining another place that is preeminent in both Jewish thought and Modern Hebrew literature. However, Keret's story turns away from the model of longing and replaces it with a model of

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[19] Gershom Scholem, "Confession on the Subject of Our Language [Bekenntnis über unsere Sprche]," in: Jacque Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Andijar. (London & New York: Routledge, 2002), 226-227.

[20] While Scholem's letter renders deep anxiety about the secularization of the Hebrew language, Hamutal Tzamir argues that the actualization of the language for Scholem is not solely negative but also carries the possibility of redemption, as it connects the speakers to God. Building on this analogy, I find that Keret generates a similar linguistic structure of repressed meanings that materialize elsewhere, but unlike Scholem the story portrays a model of redemption through accountability.

See: Hamutal Tzamir, "Ben Tehom Le'ivaron: Teologia Politit Vehilun Hasafa Ha'ivrit Etzel Gershom Scholem Vehaim Nachman Bialik." *Mikan* 14 (2014), 82-119.

surplus and accountability. The linguistic knot between the worlds generates a mutually constitutive dependency. The lies function as speech acts that do not only engender subjects in Lieland, but also affect the character's behavior in their everyday life. Through the movement between the worlds the characters not only realize the consequences of their lies, but also develop a sense of responsibility to their subject-lies and as well to their fellow human-liars. Ultimately, the return of the lie carries a possibility for change via accountability, and raises the question regarding the forcefulness and consequences of everyday speech.