

***THE SEVEN GOOD YEARS***  
**AS ETGAR KERET'S ROSETTA STONE**

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“Minimalist and small as possible”<sup>1</sup>

Etgar Keret's latest book *The Seven Good Years: A Memoir* (2015) is a unique publication in Keret's oeuvre, not only since it was originally published in English by an American publisher,<sup>2</sup> but also in its featuring a new (for Keret) genre. In this article I will provide a glimpse into Keret's memoir and an interpretation of it, and demonstrate how the memoir enables us to decipher Keret's prominent style-markers. My contention is that *The Seven Good Years* can be read as a memoir centering on the birth of a writer, as a reflexive work in which the author addresses his own writing in behind-the-scenes episodes, and as a script that provides a key to an understanding of Keret's poetics.

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<sup>1</sup> Etgar Keret, *The Seven Good Years: A Memoir*. Trans. Miriam Schlessinger, Sondra Silverston, Jessica Cohen, and Anthony Berris. (New York: Riverhead Books, 2015), 160.

<sup>2</sup> In an interview with Peer Friedman Keret explained why he chose to publish his (then) upcoming book outside of Israel: because the book speaks of very personal issues concerning his family, he felt easier telling it "to someone on the train than to your neighbor." Also, since the book is non-fiction he did not want tales of his father to be exposed to critique. "'Kmo Magevet Keshemoridim Sir Meha'esh': Re'ayon im Etgar Keret (Prague 2014)" ('Like a Towel When You Take a Pot off the Stove': Interview with Etgar Keret (Prague 2014).” *Mikre Makropulos*. July 6, 2014. <http://makropulos.net/?=8652>. Accessed June 27, 2015.

A commonplace criticism is that in Keret's narrative writing the disillusionment is stretched so far that it occasionally subverts the mainstream ethics as much as aesthetics, poking sticks at cultural icons and situations that have acquired a larger-than-life meaning. *The Seven Good Years* allows us to revisit Keret's fiction, to establish the inception of his narratives, and to evaluate the critical debates over his writings. I will establish my argument by analyzing selected chapters from the memoir, occasionally vis-à-vis short fictional pieces from *The Girl on the Fridge*<sup>3</sup> in order to demonstrate how the memoir provides indicators of certain aspects of Keret's poetics.

*The Seven Good Years* has 34 chapters, each comprising an episode in Keret's life, arranged chronologically between year one – when the author's son was born – and year seven – when his father died.

Had we not known that this were a memoir, that the episodes related events in the author's real life and not narrative fiction, we might have mistakenly considered them as yet another compilation of short stories in Keret's distinctive style; more so, since each episode bears a title, making it seem like a short story. The range of the episodes is rather limited – boarding a flight on which it turns out that he has no seat ("Last Man Standing"); meeting mothers in the playground ("Throwdown at the Playground"); talking with a cable company representative ("Call and Response"); attending a Pilates class ("Poser").<sup>4</sup> Some episodes are retrospective, and return to the

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<sup>3</sup> Etgar Keret. *The Girl on the Fridge*. Trans. Miriam Schlessinger, Sondra Silverston. (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux 2008). This book features a translation of stories originally published in Hebrew in 1992-1994, which were included in *Tzinorot* (Pipelines) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1992) and *Ga'agu'ay Lekissinger* (Missing Kissinger) (Tel Aviv: Zmora Bitan, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Many of the titles are based on words or phrases with a double-meaning – literal and figurative, such as in the following examples: 'Poser' refers to Keret's getting into the right pose in a Pilates class, but also to his impersonating as a gymnastics fan; 'Last Man Standing' refers to the author being the last man to board the plane, and to his finding himself standing in the aisle; 'Shit Happens' refers to an incident involving a dog's excrement.

narrator's childhood, with a range of memories centering on his parents, brother and sister. These sections of memories are accompanied by a slight sense of voyeurism; they characterize the family as defying conventions, living life on the edge of cultural norms, and bearing a strong identification with the perception of that life.<sup>5</sup> The tone of these episodes is humorous, often ironic – like the short stories, they reflect a “poetics of minimalist writing.”<sup>6</sup> There are some direct references to Keret's stories, for example the circumstances in which he wrote his first story ("Shit Happens"), characters we know from his stories who unfold as real-life people, such as Uzi<sup>7</sup> in "Requiem for a Dream" and "Defender of the People;" Uzi frequently appears in Keret's short fiction ("The Nimrod Flipout,"<sup>8</sup> "Grab the Cuckoo by the Tail,"<sup>9</sup> "Dinosaur Eggs"<sup>10</sup> and others). Some of the chapter titles recall the titles of his short stories – "Suddenly, the Same Thing" evokes "Suddenly, a Knock on the Door,"<sup>11</sup> "Bemusement Park" calls to mind the graphic story in Hebrew that bears a similar name.<sup>12</sup> And, just as in his fiction, references to popular culture figures and personalities are scattered along the memoir, for example in "Child's Play" and in "A Mustache for my Son." Keret's specific

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<sup>5</sup> Elaine Margolin's impression is that the opposite is true, when she maintains in her critique that Keret seems to have censored himself, and that the recollections are "sanitized and tidy." "Etgar Keret's Not-So-Fearless Memoir." *Jewish Currents*. 10 June 2015. <http://jewishcurrents.org/etgar-kerets-not-so-fearless-memoir/>. Accessed December 12, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Chantal Duris-Massa. "L'écriture 'minimaliste' dans la littérature israélienne: la rupture des années 1990." *Tsafon* 57 (2009), 135.

<sup>7</sup> Keret's early book *Missing Kissinger* was already dedicated "to Uzi and to my brother." *Missing Kissinger*. Trans. Miriam Schlessinger and Sondra Silverston. (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2008). In the original Hebrew publication *Ga'agu'ay Lekissinger* the dedication was more specific: "To my brother Nimrod, and to Uzi" (my translation).

<sup>8</sup> Etgar Keret. "The Nimrod Flipout." In *The Nimrod Flipout*. Trans. Miriam Schlessinger and Sondra Silverston. (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2006), 7-22

<sup>9</sup> Etgar Keret. "Grab the Cuckoo by the Tail." In *Suddenly, A Knock on the Door*. Trans. Miriam Schlessinger, Sondra Silverston and Nathan Englander. (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2012), 69-75.

<sup>10</sup> Etgar Keret. "Dinosaur Eggs." In *Missing Kissinger*, 93-99.

<sup>11</sup> Etgar Keret, "Suddenly, a Knock on the Door." In *Suddenly, A Knock on the Door*, 3-8.

<sup>12</sup> There is a story with the same title in Etgar Keret and Rutu Modan, *Lo Banu Lehenot* (Nobody Said it Was Going to Be Fun). (Tel Aviv: Keter, 1996).

communication code, a playful approach to fiction, emerges in the memoir as a playful approach to life.

In his memoir, Keret focuses on the period starting with becoming a father and ending with the loss of his own father, his orphaning. That time-period between both defining events, the first of which requires crossing the threshold of maturity and assuming responsibility for his offspring, can be defined as the transition from maturation to full maturity. The two characters – the author's son and father – are at the center of most of the memory sections. Although the years are unspecified, the security incidents in the background and biographical information available on the Internet show that it concerns the period between 2006 and 2013. The memoir comprises two systems of time and range. One is a chronological temporal system that focuses on the period from Keret's son's birth until his father's death. Although those seven years are relatively benign in private-familial terms, save for his father's illness and ultimate decease, this is not so in public-political terms. This chronological temporal system has an anecdotal nature. The second system is temporal, moving backwards beyond the time-range of the seven defined years, and engaging with events from the past – chiefly familial ones. Its tone is more nostalgic and sentimental than that of the chronological system, which tends more towards irony.

Both timeframes of the seven years, bookended by two highly significant events in any individual's life, with their dual-time systems, relate the memoirist's narrative as an author. Many episodes are in fact set in the context of Keret's literary life, as an Israeli global author who frequently participates in promotion tours, readings, various literary events and festivals, residencies in writers' colonies, writing workshop

teaching, and so on. Several episodes take place during his world travels, in the USA, Italy, Sweden, Poland, the Netherlands and elsewhere. Keret's celebrity author status appears in the stories and is dealt with as an experience in itself. Keret deals with the public side of his art and with his various ways of promoting his status in literary life (meetings with readers, readings across the world, and promotional book-signing events).<sup>13</sup> An episode is also devoted to Warsaw's Keret House, the postmodern installation where Keret was invited to take up residence as its first tenant.

Moreover, the memoir describes Keret's birth as a writer, and contains parts of his poetic credo, even if it is not explicitly phrased as an artistic manifesto. Notwithstanding, in its entirety the memoir reveals the behind-the-scenes of Keret's stories and their creative principles. Relying on this, at the very start of the book the author declares, albeit indirectly, the presence in the book of Etgar Keret the *author*: in the opening episode "Suddenly, the Same Thing," the author is in the maternity ward, abandoned by almost all the medical staff, just as his wife is bringing their firstborn son into the world. In the outside world, there had been a terrorist attack, and casualties are brought into the hospital. A journalist hoping to interview witnesses to the attack identifies him: "Are you Etgar Keret? [...] the writer?" (4),<sup>14</sup> and asks him to tell his story. Although Keret says that he wasn't at the site of the terror attack, the journalist

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<sup>13</sup> The emphasis on Keret playing in the international literary arena contributes to the emphasis on the aesthetic cosmopolitanism of his oeuvre (Motti Regev, "Cultural Uniqueness and Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism." *European Journal of Social Theory* 10:1 [2007], 123-138). Keret incorporates global models of cultural expression, consciously drawn from the postmodern tradition, and weaves into them elements from interior sources, namely the tradition of Hebrew thematology, which signifies national cultural uniqueness. Keret is genuinely part of the global cultural industry of aesthetic cosmopolitanism, and this apparently accounts for his large readership overseas.

<sup>14</sup> From here on, page numbers in parenthesis following quotes are taken from Etgar Keret, *The Seven Good Years: A Memoir*. Trans. Miriam Schlesinger, Sondra Silverston, Jessica Cohen, and Anthony Berris. (New York: Riverhead Books, 2015).

still hopes he will have something to say: "Too bad you weren't there. A reaction from a writer would've been good for my article. *Someone original, someone with a little vision.*" (ibid., my emphasis). From the outset Keret's identity-card is foremost that of an author. As a writer whose discourse is privileged, he is requested to produce a viable, original text; this is an expectation we recall from Keret's short fiction in which the protagonist deals with the exigencies to think up stories at his readers' behest.<sup>15</sup> Further, the episode reveals Keret's artifice, as with the journalist describing the miracle of childbirth as "a midget with a cable hanging from his belly button popping out of your wife's vagina" (5). The proposition undergoes a process typical to Keret when this snippet of reality which first appeared as a description is incarnated into fictional detail, and in the next paragraph a midget has already popped out of his wife's belly. This episode, strategically located at the beginning of the memoir, as well as others that have metatextual content, urges us to read the memoir as reflecting Keret's function and nature as a writer.

### Memoir and Fiction

"Reality here is confusing enough as it is" (143)

*The Seven Good Years: a Memoir* is a non-fiction text, written in the autobiographical mode. It comprises sections of recollections that, as the author makes clear, concern himself. The memoir differs from pure autobiography in that generally a memoir presents solid facts delivered as memories, immediate or recollected, and its structure is anecdotal. According to Abrams, "the emphasis is not on the author's developing self

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<sup>15</sup> See Etgar Keret, *Suddenly, a Knock on the Door*, 3-8.

but on the people and events that the author has known or witnessed".<sup>16</sup> But although the memoir does not aspire to give a complete description of a person's life, in the attempt to represent an entire and understandable character through a range of actions and experiences, the writer lays out the motivations that drove him over his lifetime. In the memoir, akin to other autobiographical genres such as confessions, diaries, and the epistolary genre, the self is perceived as relating facts – truth-telling, not fiction-telling. Stanley Eakin maintains, by citing Roland Barthes, that although it is a well-established fact that "the one *who speaks* (in the narrative) is not the one *who writes* (in real life) and the one *who writes* is not the one *who is*"<sup>17</sup> (emphasis in the original), in the memoir the tendency to identify the author with the "I" is pronounced. However, as Eakin shows, autobiographical truth is not nailed immovably into place, but is rather a content that flourishes and develops in a complex process of self-discovery and self-invention. Furthermore, the "I" that is found at the center of an autobiographical narrative is of necessity a fictional structure:

Autobiography in our time is increasingly understood as both an art of memory and an art of the imagination; indeed, memory and imagination become so intimately complementary in the autobiographical act that it is usually impossible for autobiographers and their readers to distinguish between them in practice.<sup>18</sup>

But even if there is fiction in Keret's autobiographical narrative, the para-literary

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<sup>16</sup> M. H. Abrams. *A Glossary of Literary Terms: Sixth Edition*. (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1993), 15.

<sup>17</sup> Paul John Eakin. *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 25.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

materials – chiefly the revealing text on the book's cover – lead us to perceive the text as reflecting facts that really happened. Paul de Man stresses that in autobiographical writing, the reader enters into a relationship with the text, in which he is willing to agree, or accept, that the related events are connected to reality. And he adds:

Autobiography, then, is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts. The autobiographical moment happens as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution."<sup>19</sup>

Principally, Keret's memoir does not see itself as striving with all its power for enlightenment, or as seeking an ending and closure. Hence, from the whole range of autobiographical genres, the memoir is highly suitable for Keret's poetic style.<sup>20</sup> It lacks that moment of defining enlightenment that traps the entirety in depth, and does not provide a principled understanding for the construing the self or its doing. However, Keret's memoir, though it lacks full autobiographic aspirations, and even if we cannot learn about one's poetics from one's own evidence, is presented as an authentic retrospective, allowing us to obtain information about the author's identity and his poetic character. Keret links together the documenting of the self, which occurs in tangible arenas of his life, and the freedom for artistic creation – which occurs in the arena of the imagination. On the one hand he shows the materials with which he

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<sup>19</sup> Paul De Man. "Autobiography as de-facement." In *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 70.

<sup>20</sup> This refers to Keret's endings which are often tenuous and insubstantial, in as much as they assault the readers' complacency, deny validity, and prevent assurance. See Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1984) on narrative endings and disillusion.

structures his self – episodes presenting a capsule of family history, in a pattern that presents the etiology of the self growing to become an adult – the influence exerted on him by his parents, brother and sister; the family habitat; and his parents' history. On the other hand, the materials of reality are mixed with textual strategies that remove them from the real to an aesthetic expanse which reveals coordinates of the absurd, the surreal, and the symbolic, which are familiar to us from his fiction. In the episode "Bombs Away" the issue at stake is Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's "desire to wipe Israel off the face of the earth" (72). In anticipation of the total annihilation of Israel, the author and his wife decide upon implementing a philosophy of "If I'm going up in flames anyway, then I won't go as a sucker" (74) in halting all maintenance of their apartment. This makes the situation improbable and unconvincing as reality. It is, however, wonderful and hilarious fiction; a metaphoric, not concrete, description of the inadequacy and helplessness in facing the Iranian threat, one that illustrates that if nothing can be done than let that nothing prevail everywhere. At times it seems that autobiographical authenticity is abandoned, and that Keret presents an alternative creative shaping of experienced events. Thus, more than revealing the author's personality, *The Seven Good Years* reveals Keret's poetics; that is to say, the relationship between the memoir and Keret's fiction is metatextual, in the sense of a stream of dialogism that takes shape between the memoir and Keret's fiction. Attention to the exchange of meanings and techniques turns the memoir into a metatext that implicitly provides a key to Keret's poetics. While the memoir's episodes are part of a clearly defined space and time, there are recurring themes, dualities and duplications which render noticeable the supporting beams which make up Keret's poetic

infrastructure. The self and experience that the memories relate have an explanatory power for Keret's writing, particularly the predisposition and the infrastructure of his style markers.

### Augmented reality

“Our life is one thing, and you always reinvent it to be something more interesting. That's what writers do, right?” (148).

A hallmark of Keret's writing – his immediately recognizable *poncif* – is his renunciation of realism. A realistic situation may gradually become abnormal, and realism is abandoned for the fantastic, the surreal.<sup>21</sup> Keret's fiction exhibits undifferentiation between real and reel and moves unhesitatingly between ontological landscapes.<sup>22</sup> Early scholarship on Keret's poetics already classified him as a

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<sup>21</sup> Some critics have referred to Keret's non-fiction memoir as surreal (Rachel Cooke, "The Seven Good Years Review – Singular, Surreal Tales of Israeli Life." *The Guardian*. July 19, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jul/19/etgar-keret-seven-good-years-review-essay-collection-israeli-life>. Accessed December 12, 2016) and as a parable (Adam Wilson, "Etgar Keret's 'The Seven Good Years: A Memoir.'" *The New York Times*. July 2, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/05/books/review/etgar-kerets-the-seven-good-years-a-memoir.html>. Accessed December 12, 2016), incorporating the same terms used by critics to describe the author's fictional texts (Omri Herzog. "'Pit'om Dfika Badelet' Me'et Etgar Keret: Anahnu Kan Orhim Lerega" [Suddenly, A Knock on the Door' by Etgar Keret: We Are Here Guests for the Moment]. *Haaretz*. June 2, 2010. <https://www.haaretz.co.il/literature/1.1205091>. Accessed October 12, 2012; Arik Glasner. "Ani Kula Stam Ga'on: Bikoret al 'Pit'om Dfika Badelet'" [I Am But a Genius: Criticism of Suddenly, A Knock on the Door]. *Maariv*. May 15, 2010. <http://www.nrg.co.il/online/47/ART2/106/301.html>. Accessed October 12, 2012; Steve Almon. "Who's There?" Suddenly, A Knock On the Door by Etgar Keret." *The New York Times*. April 13, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/15/books/review/suddenly-a-knock-on-the-door-by-etgar-keret.html>. Accessed April 5, 2013; Carolyn Kellog. "Book Review: 'Suddenly, a Knock On the Door' by Etgar Keret". *Los Angeles Times*. April 8, 2012. <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/apr/08/entertainment/la-ca-etgar-keret-20120408>. Accessed April 5, 2013).

<sup>22</sup> See Brian McHale, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 142-156.

postmodern writer, with a propensity to abide by postmodern techniques.<sup>23</sup> That Keret is chiefly motivated by the will to foreground the ontological dominant has been explicated as reflecting a lack of belief in the ability to signify reality.<sup>24</sup>

The memoir reveals the creative process of Keret's distinct style-marker. I propose to refer to this process and intention as *augmented reality*. Taken from computer technology, the term means the integration of virtual elements with the real-world environment – thus creating an enhanced perception of reality. Augmented reality is reality modified, enhanced, and manipulated. Such a principle is activated in the memoir, and discloses the desire to enhance the power of reality as an immanent, generating one. The core of enhanced reality is located within reality itself; it is a fragment from within reality, a word, image or thought which the author gradually develops while continuing with the representation of reality. This fragment, which in fact is an arbitrary signifier, is superimposed upon the reality and takes on life of its

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<sup>23</sup> David Gurewitz. *Postmodernism: Tarbut Vesifrut Besof Hame'a Ha-20* (Postmodernism: Culture and Literature at the End of the Twentieth Century). (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1997); Adia Mendelson-Maoz. "Olamot Efsariyim Bitziratam shel Orly Castel-Bloom Ve'Etgar Keret" (Possible Worlds in the Work of Orly Castel-Bloom and Etgar Keret). *Alei Siach* 38 (Winter 1996), 39-64; "Situatzot Kitzoniot Zva'atit Vegroteskiyot Bitziroteyhem shel Castel-Bloom VeKeret." (Extreme Horrific and Grotesque Situations in the works of Castel-Bloom and Keret). *Dapim L'mehkar Basifrut* 11 (1997-1998), 269; Liza Chudnovsky. "Ha'im Kayamim Horim Shhorim? Al Parodya Besippurim Ktzarim shel Orly Castel-Bloom VeEtgar Keret" (Do Black Holes Exist? On Parody in the Short Stories of Orly Castel-Bloom and Etgar Keret). *Iton* 77 222-223 (August-September 1998), 24-29; Hanna Herzig. *Hakol Omer: Ani: Megamot Basipporet Hayisra'elit shel Shnot Hashmonim* (The Voice Saying "I": Trends in Israeli Prose Fiction of the 1980s). (Tel Aviv: The Open University of Israel, 1998), 71-98; Balaban, Abraham. *Gal Aher Basipporet Ha'ivrit: Sipporet Ivrit Postmodernistit* (A Different Wave in Israeli Fiction: Postmodern Israeli Fiction). (Tel Aviv: Keter, 1995).

<sup>24</sup> Gadi Taub. *Hamered Hashafuf: Al Tarbut Tze'ira Beyisra'el* (A Dispirited Rebellion: Essays on Contemporary Israeli Culture). (Tel Aviv: Hakibutz Hameuchad, 1997); Idan Zivoni. "Ki Micomics Bata ve'el Comics Tashuv: Kama He'arot al Sifrut Hacomics shel Etgar Keret" (For you are comics, and to comics you shall return: some remarks on Etgar Keret's comic literature). *Iton* 77 234-235 (1999), 24-26, 45; Avner Holtzman. "Siporet Ivrit Kayom: Likrat Kinunu shel Kanon?" (Hebrew Literature Today: Toward Establishing a Canon?) In *Canon Vekitvey Hakodesh* (Canon and Holy Scriptures). Yaacov Shavit (Ed.). (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press 2009), 245-268; Eyal Datz. "Masa Etgari" (A Challenging Track) (interview with Gadi Taub). *Walla Culture*. April 28, 2010. <http://e.walla.co.il/item/1668512>. Accessed October 12, 2012.

own: this happens in the episode *Yours, Insincerely*. The author is signing his books at the Hebrew Book Week fair, and composes dedications to buyers of his books whom he meets over that week. For various reasons, he finds the dedications unsatisfactory, and so resolves to create his own genre of "fictitious book dedications" (22). Each of those dedications constitutes a miniature story that cites an event that never happened, that was shared by the dedicator and the dedicatee:

'To Mickey. Your mother called. I hung up on her. Don't you dare show your face around here anymore.'

'To Feige. Where's that tenner I lent you? You said two days and it's a month already. I'm still waiting.'

[...] 'To Bosmat, even though you're with another guy now, we both know you'll come to me in the end.' (22-23)

In this way the author can rise above the constraints and restrictions of reality, mainly those of boredom and falsehood (22). The episode ends with a play of simultaneous negation and affirmation of augmented reality, after Bosmat's guy slaps him in the face, in a gesture that forcefully separates between reality and its enhancement:

So if that tall guy and Bosmat are reading this, I want them to know that I am truly repentant and would like to offer my belated apologies. And if by chance you're reading this, Feige, I'm still waiting for the tenner. (23)

For Keret, narrative functions as a mode of cognition and perception of experienced reality. Narrative makes it possible not to succumb to the boundaries of the real, and to freely modify and enhance it. Even though the memoir is supposedly controlled more

by the laws of reality than by those of fiction, Keret demonstrates that the narrative model transcends reality by spinning tales. Ontological multiplicity, the pluralism of reality, is for Keret more than a technique in the postmodern repertoire. Augmented reality, from the memoir's perspective, is a means for improving reality, for creatively reshaping experienced reality, for enhancing the power of the experience, and for telling a better story – quoted as the motto of this chapter. The memoir, being a fact-telling text, provided us with that core element that was the stimulus which drove the enhancement narrative. Such revelation is rare in Keret's fiction; in it we see the outcome without the linguistic trigger.

The episode "Fat Cats" opens with a domestic situation: the parents are summoned for a talk with the nursery-school teacher, because of their son's bad behavior there. The father tries to correct his son's ways, but the cat-loving little boy is clever and outsmarts his father:

'Very good,' I said. 'But if kids aren't allowed to eat sweets in school, why do you think you can?'

'Because I'm not a kid.' Lev smiled a pudgy, sneaky smile. 'I'm a cat.'

'You're what?'

'*Meow*,' Lev answered in a soft, purry voice. '*Meow, meow, meow*.'

(98, emphasis in the original)

The episode continues with a different kind of routine domestic situation – the author reads in the morning paper about corruption and graft on the part of elected officials. He asks himself why they risk doing it, and goes on to imagine former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's line of defense. Even though "aware of the fact that forgery and fraud

are against the law" (99), Olmert explains his actions in this manner: "Olmert (licking the cuffs of his Armani suit): *Meow, meow, meow.*" (100, emphasis in the original). Clearly, Olmert's answer would not be understandable had it not been for the boy's answer earlier. Based on a trigger from his private life, and the double meaning of the expression "fat cat," Keret is able to propel the plot line into an augmented space where the story told is far better than what reality can provide. Similarly, Keret enhances the story about how the author met his future wife in the episode "Love at First Whiskey":

I fell in love with my wife in a night-club. She came in as I was about to leave. We'd known each other only very superficially before then. 'I was just leaving,' I shouted, trying to be heard over the noise of the music when we bumped into each other near the door. 'I have to get up early tomorrow.'

'Kiss me,' she shouted back at me. I froze. From the little I knew about her, she had always seemed very shy, and that request was totally unexpected.

'Maybe I'll stay a little longer,' I said.

A week later, we were a couple. A month later, I told her that her 'kiss me' at the night club door was the most daring thing I'd ever heard a girl say. She looked at me and smiled. 'What I said was that you'd never find a taxi,' she said. 'It is a good thing I misheard her.'

(147)

Here, language is propelling the narrative, the mistake made because of the similarity of the phonetic features in "kiss" and "taxi." This must be at least slightly augmented

reality, because the conversation certainly was not conducted in English. In Hebrew the word '*neshika*' does not resemble in sound '*monit*' or even '*taxi*.' But since Keret recognizes no borders between multiple ontologies and is willing to blur the boundaries as a principle of experience, he has a much better story to tell.

In many of the memoir's episodes the core is disclosed – but then Keret abandons reality due to lack of interest and moves to the augmented reality. In several episodes, the memoir discloses the origin of the arbitrary signifiers that augment the narrative (see also the polar bear in "Sleepover," p. 129 and the lizard in "Strange Bedfellow," pp. 32-33). In Keret's fiction, however, the origin is by nature not disclosed, and we encounter fantastic stories without being able to discern the trigger signifiers. Often there are relative, treacherous signifiers whose poetics attests to their arbitrary and ironic existence. But sometimes the source of augmented realities is revealed; one such story is "Devek Metoraf" ("Crazy Glue"),<sup>25</sup> described by Yaron Peleg as a fantastic answer to a threatened relationship.<sup>26</sup> The starting-point is a woman using special glue, whose logo emphasizes its power: "she showed me the picture on the box, with this guy hanging upside down from the ceiling after someone had smeared glue on the soles of his shoes."<sup>27</sup> The story continues with the woman gluing and immobilizing everything in the home, and finally gluing herself to the ceiling. The author reaches her with a pile of books, and kisses her – the pile collapses but he remains glued to her lips, in a vertical scene of coupling. The story abandons realism

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<sup>25</sup> Etgar Keret. "Devek Metoraf." In *Tzinorot*, 166-168; "Crazy Glue" In *The Girl on the Fridge*, 5-8.

<sup>26</sup> Yaron Peleg. "Israeli Identity in a Post-Zionist Age." In *Arguing the Modern Jewish Canon: Essays on Literature and Culture*. Justin Cammy et al. (Eds.). (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 66-67.

<sup>27</sup> Etgar Keret, *The Girl on the Fridge*, 5.

and is understood as symbolic: in her actions the woman reassembles her disintegrating home. Instead of proceeding along realistic lines to describe a marital crisis, Keret prefers an alternative and enhanced emotional reality – to physically glue together the crumbling relationship. In "Crazy Glue" the move of augmenting the narrative by developing a trigger within reality is evident: it is the logo of the glue, which receives an autonomous, continuing development, until the whole nature of the story is constructed and dependent on it.

### Human Interest Stories

When I try to reconstruct those bedtime stories my father told me years ago, I realize that beyond their fascinating plots, they were meant to teach me something. Something about the almost desperate human need to find good in the least likely places. Something about the desire not to beautify reality but to resist in searching for an angle that would *put ugliness in a better light and create affection and empathy* for every wart and wrinkle on its scarred face. (47, my emphasis)

Scholarship on Keret has identified philosophical underpinnings affiliated with a postmodern consciousness in his writing.<sup>28</sup> In trying to analyze his fiction's *modus operandi*, Yigal Schwartz<sup>29</sup> located it in a fundamental moral dimension, whereas

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<sup>28</sup> See Hanna Herzig. *Hakol Omer: Ani*; David Gurewitz. *Postmodernism*; Adi Ophir. "Al Ktiva Postmodernit Ve'efsharut Hatzdakata Hamusarit: Kri'a Be'Sippurim Bilti Retzoniyim' shel Orly Castel Bloom" (On Postmodern Writing and the Possibility of Moral Justification: Reading 'Unbidden Stories' by Orly Castel-Bloom). *Mikan* 1 (2000), 115-134. Here I am inferring from Ophir's description of Orly Castel-Blum's poetics.

<sup>29</sup> Yigal Schwartz. "Nisayon Le'ater et Mangenoney Hape'ula shel Sippurey Etgar Keret" (An Attempt to Locate Etgar Keret's Modus Operandi). *Haaretz*. September, 25 2015. <https://www.haaretz.co.il/literature/study/premium-1.2738391>. Accessed September 14, 2015.

Roman Katzman<sup>30</sup> has suggested it is a metaphysical minimal unit, and elsewhere an impetus toward mythopoesis.<sup>31</sup> Others claimed that Keret is basically a writer who writes about romantic love<sup>32</sup> or a trendy-camper who moves around and about the world in circles of endless loops.<sup>33</sup>

The memoir provides an anchor for understanding Keret's stories as more emotionally charged than ideologically-philosophically motivated, namely as expressing positions from a starting-point of emotional identification. Clearly, Keret's propensity for affect has moral roots and moral implications as well as ethical tasks. As Gregg and Seigworth remark, affect ignites thought and reaction, and political positions, but these outcomes emerge "out of muddy, unmediated relatedness and not in some dialectical reconciliation of cleanly oppositional elements or primary units."<sup>34</sup>

In Keret's fiction, irony frequently competes with emotion. It tends to be suspensive postmodernist irony, embracing chaos and signifying awareness and acceptance of the world in all its disorder and the "incapacity to alter in any fundamental way the nature of things."<sup>35</sup> Irony imbues all the pivotal mechanisms in the text, and the neuroses, anxieties, and obsessions of the culture are addressed as

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<sup>30</sup> Roman Katsman. "Etgar Keret: The Minimal Metaphysical Origin." *Symposium* 67:4 (2013), 187-204.

<sup>31</sup> Roman Katsman. "Ga'agu'im Lemitos: Ishiyut, Etika Ve'idi'ologia Bamitopo'esis Hapostmoderni shel Etgar Keret" (Missing Myth: Personality, Ethics and Ideology in Etgar Keret's Postmodernist Mythopoesis). *Mikan* 4 (2005), 20-41.

<sup>32</sup> Yaron Peleg. "Love, Suddenly: Etgar Keret Invents Hebrew Romance." *Hebrew Studies* 49 (2008), 143-166.

<sup>33</sup> Yigal Schwartz. *Ma Shero'im Mikan: Sugiyot Bahistoriographia shel Hasifrut Ha'ivrit Hahadasha* (Vantage Point: Issues in the Historiography of Modern Hebrew Literature). (Or Yehuda: Kinneret, Zmora-Bitan, Dvir, 2005), 235-264.

<sup>34</sup> Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth. "An Inventory of Shimmers." In *The Affect Theory Reader*. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Eds.). (Durham and London: Duke University Press 2010), 1-28. [Kindle version]. Paragraph 6, location No. 91.

<sup>35</sup> Alan Wilde. *Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism and the Ironic Imagination*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), 136.

kitsch, camp or objects of entertainment.<sup>36</sup> While the stories have the more solid infrastructure of a principled postmodern ideological-philosophical position, we should also identify in them an intensive emotional component, whose roots lie in an affective subject-position. I argue that the memoir, in its giving prominence to emotional, emotive and sentimental aspects, foregrounds the fact that in fact Keret's fictions are *human interest stories*, predisposed to tell an emotional tale. It is always a story about a person, and his consciousness or his unconventional actions induce empathy from the reader. *Human interest stories* is a term borrowed from journalism, and implies a type of writing that turns the spotlight on the personal-human-individual angle within a larger story, and presents problems, concerns and anxieties in a way that piques interest and arouses sympathy and empathy. Human interest stories are “softer” for consumption, even when they recount sensational, manipulative and nonconsensual narratives. Similarly, the well-honed critical and intellectual side of Keret's stories, along with the logic of lost authority and the collapse of meaning, is unfailingly juxtaposed with an embodied side of affective themes, habitually of melancholy, solitude, despair and perplexity.

Before moving on, Keret's emotive tone in his memoir will be at the center of attention. By its very nature, the affective is underscored in a memoir that revolves around tangible private-personal life events. Many episodes are saturated with emotion and sentimentality, and contain direct emotive statements about key characters in the author's life. The foci of emotions that well up with sentiments connected to the self are anchored perfectly in circles of identification, from the nuclear family and up to

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<sup>36</sup> David Gurewitz, *Postmodernism*.

Keret's identity as an Israeli and a Jew. These foci of emotion appear and recur in the memoir as a continuous basic pattern that repeats itself through the whole fabric and is embedded in the memoir's infrastructure, above all – the family and Keret's deep connection with his father, mother, and older brother and sister. And, though more diluted with humor, even irony, his wife is another powerful emotional focus. Of his father, the author writes "I have a good dad" (123), to his son he voices "[b]ecause I love you [...], because you're my son. Because a father always has to protect his son" (156), and of his brother he asserts "[t]hat pride in my big brother and the hope that when I grew up, I'd be a little bit like him" (68). In a disorganized way, it is a harmonious family whose members make some unusual and extreme choices. There is an intergenerational transition of concern, understanding and tenderness – from his father to Keret, and from him to his son. The episode "Accident" recounts how the author does not want to tell his wife that he was involved in a car accident, and when she hears an ambulance's siren in the background he explains that an ambulance just happened to drive past. This, the author reminisces, was like years before when his father did not want to reveal he was in hospital, and when the author heard a doctor being paged in the background his father said he was in a supermarket, paging someone whose wallet had been found. In the episode "Idol Worship" Keret discloses his admiration for his older brother. He lists all his brother ever did, which Keret always wanted to emulate. Everything changes, particularly the brother's preferences and choices, save for the permanent seven-year gap between them. A refrain runs through the episode ("when I was x years old, I had a x+7 year old brother") which emphasizes the age gap between them as well as the bond that cannot be untied: "When I was three,

I had a ten-year-old brother, and deep in my heart I hoped that when I grew up, I'd be just like him" (64), and ever since then he had looked up to his brother and admired his adventuresome life. In episodes about his father and son, emotions are prioritized and heightened, involving many depictions of the author crying (see "Boys Don't Cry," 134; "Jam," 162).<sup>37</sup>

Prominent in these scenes is general irony,<sup>38</sup> as opposed to suspensive, postmodern irony, with its sense of embracing chaos. In explaining the concept of general irony Wilde is following Muecke's idea of "one great incongruity."<sup>39</sup> This is the irony of twists of fate, of the tables that are turned on the author despite his good intentions (see "Call and Response," "Bemusement Park," and "A Mustache for My Son," which Keret terminates with the phrase cited before – "reality here is confusing enough as it is" [143]). The emotional input is accentuated when arbitrary universal laughter rolls through, not rooted in specific circumstances, but the prospects of recuperation persist, as in the episode "What Does the Man Say?" in which the cabdriver stubbornly refuses to apologize to the author and thus refutes his teaching to his son that saying sorry is the way to end every dispute. This irony accentuates the emotive tone since it underlies the doubt that sometimes plagues him concerning his positions, intentions, and the correctness of his path.

In some episodes the inner emotional reality overflows, when the sentimental tone clashes with the weighty external factual reality. Such a thing occurs in "Pastrami,"

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<sup>37</sup> With this background it is particularly notable when the son complains that he has never seen his author father cry ("Boys Don't Cry", 133). This is also a marker of an overarching emotive tendency in the memoir.

<sup>38</sup> See Wilde, *Horizons of Assent*, 28-32

<sup>39</sup> In Wilde, 28.

in which the author's family plays a game while missiles are falling, or the play of irony and emotion in "Swede Dreams." Not being in Israel on Yom Kippur is a "real [...] drama" (57) for the author. The appellation "Swede Dreams" is ironic when referring to Swedish-Israeli-made politics, but emotive and straightforward otherwise. Whereas the author describes the holiday's atmosphere to his Swedish audience in intellectual hipster hyper-New-Age terms, the tone is noticeably sentimental when he relates spending the holiday with his family. Keret's profound emotions are replicated and converted into his son's tears of lamentation when that day ends (59). In all these cases, we can say that emotion eclipses irony. And in all of them – before any moral, political or ideological debate – there is a personal emotion-oriented story.

Going back to Keret's short fiction, the memoir urges us to appreciate the human interest story within them as central and decisive, and to seek the affective dimension as leading the interpretation. In the memoir, the episode "Fare and Good" foregrounds affective reasoning by recounting an argument Keret had with his wife, after inviting home his cabdriver to use the bathroom out of consideration of the cabbie's needs and feelings. This episode might be the ancestor of the short story "Hahaver Hachi Tov Sheli" ("My Best Friend")<sup>40</sup> and provides a key to reading it. In the story, the narrator's friend pees on the mat by the front door, because he cannot wait, and the narrator sees this as proving that he really is his best friend. The story can be read cultural-ideologically as conveying the postmodern sensitivity of a refusal to succumb to the meta-structures of signification, and a mockery of modernist poetics. In an attempt to justify the friend's lack of self-restraint, the narrator infiltrates his consciousness, and

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<sup>40</sup> Etgar Keret. "Hahaver Hachi Tov Sheli" *Ga'aguay LeKissinger*, 90-91; "My Best Friend." In *Missing Kissinger*, 141-142.

provides an arcane psychological description of his friend's inner dilemma. He anchors the incident within the framework of male friendship and camaraderie. All of these obviously do not fit the context, and create a mock-heroic effect. The girl in the apartment adds her attempts to inject meaning into the act of peeing at the door: for her it is abjection directed at both the narrator and his friend. Moreover, 'dog' is polysemic, with its dual signification as man's best friend and as a popular slur.<sup>41</sup> This interpretation underscores the disintegration of the sense of meaning, and anomie. With its emphasis on emotions and human interest stories, Keret's memoir opens up the option of reading the affective aspect of the story. At whatever cost, the narrator wants to avoid reading anything into his friend's action, not because meanings are impossible but because whatever they might, or might not be, they are less important to his having a best friend. The profoundness of the story is not in the sphere of ideas but rather in emotional existence, the need for circles of loyalty and alliance. From this perspective, the girl he has just met who attempts to dismantle the sentiment of friendship is ironized. Explanations might be unsatisfactory, even impossible, but the feeling of friendship is solid and dominant.

### Phyletist Fusion

After all, I know this sea very well; it's the same Mediterranean that's only a five-minute walk from my house in Tel Aviv, but the peace and tranquility projected by the locals here are something I have never encountered before. *The same sea, but without the frightening, black, existential cloud I'm used to seeing hanging over it.* (45, emphasis added)

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<sup>41</sup> The word 'dog' also connotes the biblical expression "him that pisseth against the wall" (Kings I, 14:10) which is used to denote small-mindedness and dropping on the human scale.

Most episodes in the memoir depict the personal intermingled, by the nature of things, with events in Israel's political reality of threatened security. Because of the geographic region where the author's life is lived, those events are terror attacks, the threat of incoming missiles, small-scale wars and those pending, and government corruption. Added to these are episodes in which the author identifies as being a second generation to Holocaust survivors, and discloses deep identification with his parents' suffering ("Defender of the People," "Requiem for a Dream"). Already in the first episode, which related his son's birth, the two contexts conjoined. Beneath the tremendous excitement of his son's birth, anxiety is already bubbling up with the perpetual existential fear. When the author cannot calm down his crying newborn he humorously tries "to convince him that there's nothing to worry about" ("Suddenly, the Same Thing," 5).

The memoir manifests a mixture of presences and identities that burden the Jewish/Israeli/Diasporic/cosmopolitan/transnational author, and every aspect of each such identity exists and is present in its full intensity. In episodes such as "Jam," "Requiem for a Dream," "Strange Bedfellows" and "Defender of the People" the approach lurches between existential anxiety and postmodern nihilism: the contemporary Israeli reality and its ties with Jewish history have emotional expressions, and are presented as a real complex that triggers emotional reactions. In tandem, Israeli identity appears allied with existential anxieties over survival, and conditions of threat and war. Hand-in-hand with it is the author's post-national and global identity – a citizen of the world, whose attribution group is the literary sphere, which can be conducted anywhere and from everywhere and is unconnected to the

author's Israeliness or Jewishness.

In the beginning of the episode "Defender of the People" Keret claims that "There's nothing like a few days in Eastern Europe to bring out the Jew in you" (33), whereas toward the end he maintains that

There's nothing like a couple of good November khamsins to put the Jew in you back in its place. The direct Middle Eastern sunlight burns all traces of the Diaspora right out of you. My best friend, Uzi, and I are sitting on Gordon Beach in Tel-Aviv. Sitting next to him are Krista and Renate. 'Don't tell me, Uzi says, trying to cover up his ballooning horniness with some unsuccessful telepathy. 'you're both from Sweden'.

'No,' Renate says, laughing, 'we're from Dusseldorf. Germany. You know Germany?'

'Sure', Uzi says, nodding enthusiastically, 'Kraftwerk, Modern Talking, Nietzsche, BMW, Bayern München.....' (36)

Three identities have a presence in the excerpt above: the Jewish identity, whose full power the narrator feels when he is outside of Israel; its implied contrast, the Israeli identity – represented by the khamsins and the beach, and the consciousness of native-born Tel-Avivians; and finally the global postnational identity in which Germany has nothing to do with Jews and Israelis, and simply elicits a string of cosmopolitan global associations.

*The Seven Good Years* reflects a soft ideology, not the dichotomous and rigid all-or-nothing, and a fusion of identities. Keret presents a phyletist formulation of

Jewish identity: this draws on the term *phyle* meaning 'tribe' in ancient Greek; the phyletist approach reflects an acknowledgment of a particular contemporary Jewish collective identity which identifies in principle with the Jewish People (*Clal Yisrael*) assuming it to be one complex entity, existing simultaneously.<sup>42</sup> As his non-fiction memoir demonstrates, within his recognition and understanding of nationhood Keret also encompasses the ultra-orthodoxy, to which his beloved sister belongs. There is a sense of closeness to Israelis and Jews, the feeling of a shared destiny and common aims, mutual accords and arrangements understood by all members of the tribe:

In the Middle East, people feel their mortality more than anywhere else on the planet, which causes most of the population to develop aggressive tendencies toward strangers who try to waste the little time they have left on earth. (12)

And in regard to the Day of Atonement, secular Keret maintains: "I always did everything I could to be in Israel on Yom Kippur. All these years, all my life" (57).

Keret's iconoclastic fiction writing has been attributed to a post-nationalist dismantling approach which subverts and casts doubt, which problematizes conventional thought which underlies an ideological awareness and moral thinking. Also contributing to the nihilistic image of Keret's poetics is his postmodern style and his use of ploys that push out the boundaries of interpretation of his stories towards extreme dimensions. The stories are situated in a context of undermining and

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<sup>42</sup> According to Ben-Rafael and Ben Haim-Rafael the Jewish collective identity comprises three streams: the *orthodox stream*, which views the strict observation of religion as its core; the *ethno-cultural stream*, which sees the existence of the People of Israel as a collective, and creates a particular culture whose distinctive feature is Jewishness; and the *national stream*, which above all emphasizes the relation to the Land of Israel as a foundation for the establishment of a Jewish nation-state. Eliezer Ben-Rafael and Lior Ben Haim-Rafael. "Zehuyot Yehudiyot Bnot Zmanenu: Adayim 'Am Yehudi' Ehad?" (Contemporary Jewish Cultures: Still One 'Jewish People?') *Iyunim Bitkumat Israel* 16 (2006), 463-497.

dismantling the Great Zionist Narrative. Some researchers contend that Keret has contributed to the modification of the Israeli Zionist narrative,<sup>43</sup> that he has escapist and decadent qualities<sup>44</sup> (Harris 2009), and displays confusion and loss of direction.<sup>45</sup> *The Seven Good Years* adds another aspect to the iconoclasm, the distortions, and the absurd. In the memoir, such a dismantling or undermining position is accompanied by pieces that give prominence and importance to reliance on the family, the state, on “our forces” while all around, the Middle East is going nuclear and arming. According to the memoir, Keret’s anxiety undoubtedly originates in the Israeli narrative and his family story which, at least in part, is the outcome of the national; he describes himself

As a stressed-out Jew who considers his momentary survival to be exceptional and not the least bit trivial, and whose daily Google Alerts are confined to the narrow territory between 'Iranian nuclear development' and 'Jews + genocide.' (52)

Critics have taught us that in his short fiction Keret poses many essential questions with which Israeli society struggles, but ultimately offers no answers, simply leaving the reader stranded in awe, confronted with a distorted and discomfiting version of the reality he, in all probability – and often willingly – takes for granted. His iconoclasm is prevented from being too scarring, and the shock-value from being destructive via the quality of human interest stories, discussed earlier. *The Seven Good Years* might also suggest that Keret's fiction, being patently conscious and self-aware of its role in

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<sup>43</sup> Yaron Peleg. "Israeli Identity in a Post-Zionist Age"; Adia Mendelson-Maoz. "Keret's 'Living Dead' and the Sacrifice of Israeli Masculinity." Paper presented at *Keret's Happy Campers Conference*, University of Chicago, October 14-16, 2015.

<sup>44</sup> Rachel Harris. "Decay and Death: Urban Topoi in Literary Depictions of Tel Aviv." *Israel Studies* 14:3 (2009), 75-93.

<sup>45</sup> Gadi Taub, *Hamered Hashafuf*; David Gurewitz, *Postmodernism*.

the cultural psyche, contains an overarching compassion that extends to society, not merely to individuals.

This phyletist fusion of identities is visible in the episode "Throwdown at the Playground" where the question of military service comes up through the personal and the domestic. In one of the longer episodes in the book, a fellow mother in the playground asks whether Keret would let his three-year-old enlist in the military. Just thinking about this arouses repulsion in him, augmenting reality with an image of a diapered baby soldier that recalls to some extent the fighting rabbits from the story "Kochi."<sup>46</sup> The question sparks off an argument with his wife on the topic; like the mother in the playground, she doesn't want her son to join up. Initially the author's contention is in the sphere of post-national identity; he defies his wife with the argument that deciding for your son sounds controlling. But as the quarrel proceeds, other themes enter, and his identity as a Jew and Israeli is amplified:

'Listen to yourself [his wife],' I said. 'You're talking as if serving in the army is an extreme sport. But what can we do? We live in a part of the world where our lives depend on it. So what you're actually saying is that you'd rather have other people's children go into the army and sacrifice their lives, while Lev enjoys his life without taking any risks or shouldering the obligations the situation calls for.' (54)

Encapsulated in the story is the issue of the army in the Israeli state: justification for its actions, the need for it, and its perceived legitimacy by citizens as a theme under dispute. Here, the author's position is acceptance that every Jew must help maintain a

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<sup>46</sup> The short story "Kochi" taken from *Tzinorot* has not been translated into English.

sovereign Jewish nation. Squabbling is an over-strong interpellation, as his wife points out, that will remove the child's ability to choose, and the awareness from the history of the Jews that conscription is necessary – and so maybe an interpellation as well. Keret doesn't engage with general morality or universal justice in this episode, rather with an existential need that he understands as one of principle, and that he accepts.

This episode sheds light on a commonly used topos in Keret's stories, that of the military and the Israeli soldier.<sup>47</sup> These stories have been read as reflecting Keret's undermining of the myth of self-sacrifice, the brotherhood of comrades, the sanctification of bereavement. The military is one of the most sacred cows of Israeliness, so taking issue with accepted conventions could be perceived as post-Zionist thinking. But alongside this subversive trajectory is a powerful foundation of interest in the Zionist discourse, which in the memoir is expressed in tandem with episodes revealing a noticeable global identity position. According to the memoir, it seems that Keret's attraction to these themes actually reflects an emphasis on historical awareness to the destiny of the Jewish people. Through his family's personal mythology, we can discern awareness to the nation-state, to its objective, the responsibility cast on all Jews to uphold renewed sovereignty in Israel. The memoir reveals that together with the iconoclasm, there is identification with tribal symbols of Jewishness and Israeliness.

The postmodern spoof "Af Ehad Lo Mevin Et Hakvantim" ("Quanta")<sup>48</sup> exemplifies how the phyletist fusion works in Keret's fiction. Set as a nihilist tale in

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<sup>47</sup> Stories about the military and aspects of militarism in Israeli society have mostly not been translated into English. One that was translated is "Simyon" in *Suddenly, A Knock on the Door*.

<sup>48</sup> Etgar Keret. "Af Ehad Lo Mevin Et Hakvantim" In *Tzinorot*, 150-151; "Quanta." In *Missing Kissinger*, 69-70.

which there is no solid ground of value and significance from which to decipher and evaluate events, it vigorously relays relativism as its central point. Nobody gets not just quantum theory but also its cultural ramifications – the disintegration of knowledge, authority, and metanarratives. Further debasement occurs with the personification of the quanta and vehicle of language at the forefront of narrative development, with the semantic double-screen of *not getting* them in the sense of not understanding their behavior and personality – the mock-version of the habitual human interest story.<sup>49</sup> Hence, the story basically reflects a globalized post-national identity, ironic and devaluating, stirring together Hiroshima and Intifada, the media and politicians. Roiling beneath the surface, however, is Jewish-Israeli existential angst, comprised of the significant fundamentals, both to the author personally and nation-wise – the Day of Atonement – Yom Kippur, the atomic bomb and the threat of war, the military, Israel's borders and security, the state's Jewish nature. Quantum evokes a whole series of themes, icons and characters imbued in the Jewish-Israeli awareness. Those themes flow and counter-flow much like atoms, without ever landing in formation. Quantum here is a visual image, a graphic representation in a consciousness preoccupied with Israeli fundamentals. It might relate to Keret's acknowledgment in the memoir that appears below, which alongside harsh critique of Israeli policy reasserts his phyletist attitude:

And no, it's not that we Israelis long for war or death or grief, but we do long for those 'old days' the taxi driver talked about. We long for a real war to take the place of all those exhausting years of Intifada,

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<sup>49</sup> In Hebrew there is also a phonetic double-screen with the homograph "atom" (physics) and "atum" (Hebrew slang for people who do not get things explained to them).

when there was no black or white, only grey; when we were confronted not by armed forces, but only resolute young people wearing explosive belts; years when the aura of bravery ceased to exist, replaced by long lines of people waiting at our checkpoints, women about to give birth and elderly people struggling to endure the stifling heat. (16)

### Birth of an Author

When I try to reconstruct those bedtime stories my father told me years ago, I realize that beyond their fascinating plots, they were meant to teach me something. Something about the almost desperate human need to find good in the least likely places. Something about the desire not to beautify reality but to persist in searching for an angle that would put ugliness in better light and create affection and empathy for every wart and wrinkle on its scarred face. (47)

*The Seven Good Years* affirmed that for Keret narrative is also a modus of cognition, the way in which he conceives and rationalizes his life's events. An assortment of anecdotes, constructed out of fragments without causal structures, reflect in their way the conformism of bourgeois life, the lack of order in a family comedy that often borders on the unlikely. From Keret's perspective as an author, experienced reality becomes inseparable from its mirroring in narrative form. Thus, the dual time structure of the memoir is in fact one anecdotal system that delineates a series of case-studies that are essentially a breeding ground for the future author and the present-day experiences of he who is now de facto – an author. All anecdotes demonstrate how

Keret transforms his random, coincidental, and emotionally-charged life into a permanent presence as an author. The temporal system that rolls backwards in time focuses on the question – how did Keret become an author? His childhood as the son of a dreaming father, a wunderkind brother, and the sister who is more or less an infidel (ironically, she is the child who becomes religious). We can understand the anecdotes as an example of how the author defines himself through his ties with the family context and the historical situation he was born into; and how the crystallizing repertoire of the experiences and approaches which the family members display put in place the foundation for his work.

As well as the episodes that inferentially help us decipher the basic logic in Keret's poetic perception, there are two episodes directly engaging with his logicalness. In "Shit Happens" (108) Keret describes the circumstances in which he wrote the first story he ever wrote. If in the whole memoir there is no attempt to look somewhere in his childhood for his vocation for writing, this episode proves that there is even a demystification of that vocation. Nevertheless, the story reveals the crucial moment of choice, in which an individual chose the project that would constitute his substantive selfhood as an adult. He is a soldier doing long shifts in what seems to be a computer room, and it's there that he writes his first story on the computer and prints it out. Excited, he hurries to his brother to have him read it. After reading it, the brother uses the sheet of paper to get rid of his dog's excrement. To this gesture Keret reacts:

That was the moment I realized that I wanted to be a writer.

Unintentionally, my brother had told me something: the story

I had written wasn't the creased, shit-smear'd paper now

sitting in the bottom of the trash can on the street. That page was just *a pipeline through which I could transmit my feelings from my mind to his*. I don't know how a wizard feels the first time he manages *to cast a spell*, but it's probably something similar to what I felt at that moment; I had discovered *magic* that I needed to help me survive the two long years until my discharge. (110, emphasis added)

Surviving is the starting-point of writing for Keret – it lets him “survive” and from this viewpoint it is writing that is a constant satellite for his life, at least in terms of his emotional life. At the heart of writing's significance for him is its inherent “magic,” a “spell” that is understood as helping overcome reality, not simply making do with the real surrounding. Magic is a term that recurs in his relationship with his father, and in his relationship with his son – what he tells him as he looks at a black-and-white photograph is that “it's magic” (95). And for Keret, writing is a transmission channel; the pipeline is a metaphor for the medium in which author-reader communication takes place. Note that Keret's emphasis is not on the urge to compose a sophisticated linguistic game, or to express a worldview, but to convey emotion. The refusal to make do with reality and the urgency to convey emotion are translated into his poetic features of augmented reality and human interest stories, discussed earlier. Also, in a metatextual stance, Keret explicates, by implication, the title of his first published book, *Tzinorot* (Pipelines). Thus, *The Seven Good Years* provides an alternative motivation for the assumption that the book was titled after one of its stories (whose plot revolves around the construction of a huge pipeline).

Another episode dealing with Keret's concept of literature and the significance of writing for him is "Just another Sinner." In essence, the truth of writing is perceived as a shield against evil, darkness, and injustice; not in the abstract or general sense, but where it concerns individual human suffering. Paraphrasing Albert Camus, Keret's view is that it is incumbent upon a writer not to increase suffering in the world. In "Just another Sinner" the author resides in an artists' colony in New Hampshire and there he listens to a story written by a novice author, who is also spending time there. Her story inspires extreme authorial envy, which leads to very clear-cut conclusions about his nature as a writer and the ultimate goal of literature:

Such is the way of the world. The writer didn't create it, but *he's here to say what needs to be said*. There is a line that separates killing bugs from killing frogs, and even if the writer has crossed it during his life, he still has to point it out. The writer is neither saint nor tsaddik nor prophet standing at the gate; he's just another sinner who has somewhat sharper awareness and uses slightly more precise language to describe the inconceivable reality of our world. He doesn't invent a single feeling or thought – all of them existed long before him. He's not the least bit better than his readers – sometimes he's a lot worse – and so it should be. If the writer were an angel, the abyss that separates him from us would be so great that his writing couldn't get close enough to touch us. But because he's here, at our side, buried up to his neck in mud and filth, he's

the one who, more than anyone else can share with us everything that's going on in his mind, in the lit-up areas and especially in the dark recesses. He won't take us to the Promised Land, he won't bring peace to the world or heal the sick. *But if he does his work right, a few more virtual frogs will get to live.* (106, emphasis added)

This statement is expressed as the “truth” about writing (106, 107) in a context of opposition to authors who have forgotten that truth: "someone who creates without support or reinforcement, who can write only after working hours, surrounded by people who aren't even sure he has talent, will always remember that truth" (107). Keret is explicitly formulating his writing path here. And like his tendency to tell human stories, he does not discuss the abstract concept of “writing,” its nature and objectives, but rather the role of the writing subject. He emphasizes that a writer's responsibility is to the actual use of the text, to its significance for the readers – with a direct affinity to his perception of the text as a “pipeline” through which his selfhood as a writer flows towards the readers. And here – although Keret maintains specifically that the author is not “a prophet standing at the gate” – his words imply that the author has a mission, if he performs his role faithfully. Thus, Keret's perception of the truth of writing comprises involvement and responsibility – approving of a free debate, and taking issue directly with sacred cows, but not deleting meaning and forgetting.

On many counts, *The Seven Good Years* draws our attention to the author's personal tendencies in his narrative work. Even if his fictions contain no explicit autobiographical components, and do not aspire to record personal events, and although

they are perceived as a poetics that does not reflect Keret's intimate personality, I suggest that the memoir opens up an option to think about Keret as belonging to the dynasties of storytellers whose writing is considered as expressing the self, but not as philosophical in nature, and that Keret's fiction writing borders loosely on the confessional.<sup>50</sup> Keret's habitual protagonist in his fiction writing, the storyteller with a self-ridiculing tone, a victim of a world that has lost causal and principled control, is modeled on the author. The stories have an inherent almost confessional truth and sincerity, because they are based on experienced emotional reality. Furthermore, the moment of truth of Keret's writing as confessional is grounded on the minimalist linguistic code of communication that Keret criticism explicates as one<sup>51</sup> that preserves the link between language and experienced contemporary reality without opening up the divide between them. *The Seven Good Years* indicates that this code equally does not open up a wide divide between the author and his fiction.

Keret's memoir, beyond being an initial introduction into the tangible Keret, the son, the father, the brother, and husband, also provides an option to see the deep flows in his literary writing. It shows how people, places, and incidents in his life created the basis for his artistic praxis. Inherent in it, I believe, is a suggestion to read additional, sometimes surprising sides, to those illuminated by literary criticism thus far. The fiction in Keret's autobiography and the emphasis on his life *as an author*

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<sup>50</sup> In Keret's graphic literature traces of autobiographical foundations are more evident, accentuated by the visual dimension. The stories "Ani Ve'ima Sheli" (Me and My Mother) in *Lo Banu Lehenot* and "Simta'ot Haza'am" (Streets of Rage) and "Yom Kadur Ha'aretz" (Earth Day) in Etgar Keret and Assaf Hanuka, *Simta'ot Haza'am* (Streets of Rage). (Tel Aviv: Zmora-Bitan, 1997) particularly illustrate the author's mother and brother.

<sup>51</sup> Gadi Taub, *Hamered Hashafuf*; Chantal Duris-Massa, "L'écriture 'minimaliste' dans la littérature israélienne."

indicate that although ostensibly there are two separate modi, the autobiographical modus and the literary creation modus – one of them may attest to the other. There is affinity between the two, and the ability to infer one from the other. Keret does not totally subordinate the memoir to the autobiographical pattern, and I believe it would be useful to read *The Seven Good Years* as a metatextual text, in which the individual experience described traces the individual who writes it, as much as it traces the writing of that individual.

Further Reading:

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