

**“A STORY OR A BULLET BETWEEN THE EYES”
ETGAR KERET: REPETITIVENESS, MORALITY,
AND POSTMODERNISM¹**

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Etgar Keret was born on August 20, 1967 in Ramat Gan. His parents were Orna and Efraim Keret, Holocaust survivors. He graduated from the Multidisciplinary Program for Outstanding Students at Tel Aviv University and is a professor in the creative writing track of the Department of Hebrew Literature at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. Etgar Keret resides in Tel Aviv, is married to the actress, screenwriter, and children's author Shira Gefen (daughter of Yehonatan and Nurit Gefen), and is the father of a son, Lev.

Etgar Keret's first book, *Pipelines*, was published in 1992, and surprised his readers with its unique style. His second book, *Missing Kissinger* (1994) positioned him as a key figure in late-twentieth-century Israeli literature.² His third book, *Kneller's Happy Campers*, was published in 1998, and the short story collection *The Nimrod Flip-Out (Cheap Moon)* in 2002. His last short story collection, *Suddenly, a Knock on the Door*, was published in 2010. Keret's works excel in a unique style that

¹ This article was first published in Hebrew Studies, Volume 58, 2017, Pp. 425-443.

² Many critics and researchers have presented him as a representative of a generation and/or a period in the history of Israeli society. See, among others: G. Taub, *המרד השפוף: על תרבות צעירה*, (A dispirited rebellion: Essays on contemporary Israeli culture; Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1997), pp. 9–21, 137–147; N. Guvrin, “הצעיר הדור של העברית בספרות השואה” (The Holocaust in the Hebrew literature of the younger generation), *Tzafon* 7 (1995): 151–169; Y. Peleg, *Israeli Culture between the Two Intifadas: A Brief Romance* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), pp. 65–66.

has won him many admirers as well as imitators.³ As someone who has been an editor of Israeli literature at several publishing houses for many years, I can confirm that of the hundreds of manuscripts that have crossed my desk in the last fifteen or more years, many dozens have been written in epigonic versions of the “Keret Style.”

As Adia Mendelson-Maoz notes in her exhaustive entry on Keret in *The Heksherim Lexicon of Israeli Authors*, Keret’s style, the visual aspect of his stories, their everyday language, and their compact structures made him a pioneer in the field of graphic novels and short stories as well.⁴ Keret has published two graphic short story collections, one in collaboration with Rutu Modan, called *Nobody Said It was Going to be Fun* (1996), the other, *Streets of Rage*, with Asaf Hanuka. Keret and Asaf Hanuka also adapted Keret’s book *Kneller’s Happy Campers*, which was published as the graphic novel *Pizzeria Kamikaze* (2004). In 2015, his famous story “Breaking the Pig,” which appeared in the collection *Missing Kissinger*, was published in a book accompanied by illustrations by David Polansky. Keret also writes for television and cinema. The skits he composed for the popular satirical program “The Chamber Quintet” in the 1990s are particularly well known. He has also authored screenplays for the films *Boomerang* (1997), *Total Love* (2000), *\$9.99* (with Tatia Rosenthal; 2008), and *Jellyfish* (2007), which he also directed, among others.⁵

³ Nissim Calderon refers in his article “ניגשים אל קו המים” (Approaching the watershed), published in *Yedioth Achronot* on June 23, 1999 (p. 27), to Keret’s great popularity among young people and the significance of this phenomenon. In another article, “בלי פואנטה” (No point), published in *Maariv* on July 19, 2002 (p. 27), he argues, among other things, that Keret has become a cultural hero because he promised readers that there was no lofty culture from which literature began.

⁴ A. Mendelson-Maoz, “אתגר קרת” (Etgar Keret), in לקסיקון הקשרים לסופרים ישראלים (The Heksherim lexicon of Israeli authors; ed. Z. Stav and Y. Schwartz; Or Yehuda: The Heksherim Institute for the Study of Jewish and Israeli Literature and Culture, 2014), pp. 826–828. F. Hefetz, “רק הגיל צעיר” (Only the age is young), *Yedioth Achronot* (March 6, 1992).

⁵ The fact that Keret is a multi-talented artist in several fields is connected, I believe, to an important principle of his artistic worldview: free movement between ontological, epistemological, imagined, and poetic worlds.

In a short time, Etgar Keret became an Israeli cultural hero and is considered someone who expresses in a sharp and colorful way the mood of his generation and the next.⁶ His books have been extremely successful in Israel and are reprinted every few years. The fact that the Israeli public, and thus, Israeli publishers, have not completely lost faith in the short story, which, it seemed, the novel had made redundant, can be attributed mainly to him. He has also garnered international acclaim; his books have been translated into some thirty languages, and he has received prestigious awards.⁷

Keret's works have been the subject of many book reviews, and at the same time, considering his prominent position in contemporary fiction and culture, very few

This principle is connected in his eyes to having more than one identity. This is apparent, for example, in comments he made in a lecture at Ben-Gurion University on the work of one of his favorite authors, Kurt Vonnegut: "As a writer, Vonnegut crossed lines all the time and had more than one identity." Keret's closeness to Vonnegut probably also stems from their attraction to genres that are not considered serious. Vonnegut, Keret said in his lecture, "is considered a serious and important writer, but 'sinned' by writing satire and science fiction. In some of his books, he inserts especially childish illustrations and drawings." Keret added that "in the eyes of many scholars, the fact that Vonnegut did not maintain a strictly serious image damaged his institutional reception." (From Etgar Keret, manuscript).

See also D. Gurevich, 20-המאה בסוף וספרות, תרבות וספרות בסוף המאה ה-20 (Postmodernism, culture, and literature at the end of the twentieth century; Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1997), pp. 287–304; L. Chodnovsky, "של אורלי קסטל-בלום ואתגר קרת" (Do black holes exist? On parody in the short stories of Orly Castel-Bloom and Etgar Keret), *Iton* 77 222–223 (1998): 24–29; I. Tzivoni, "הערות על ספרות הקומיקס של אתגר קרת" (Some comments on the comics literature of Etgar Keret), *Iton* 77 234–235 (1999): 26–24, 45.

⁶ See G. Taub, *A Dispirited Rebellion*, pp. 9–21, 47–137; N. Calderon, "Approaching the Watershed," p. 27; N. Calderon, "No Point," p. 27.

⁷ This is the place to note that starting at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the voices of critics who attempted to reassess Keret's work began to be heard. Some critics argued that Keret was repetitive, that he was recycling one trick, that he was basically a "copywriter author," and so on and so forth. Others pointed out precisely the trends of change and development in his work. The first group of critics includes A. Glasner, "בדלת", *Suddenly, A Knock on the Door* (Review of E. Keret, *Suddenly, A Knock on the Door*). NRG May 15, 2010. Online: <http://www.nrg.co.il/online/47/ART2/106/301.html>; R. Yagil, "פתאום דפיקה במוח: על החדש של אתגר קרת" (Suddenly, a knock on the brain: On Etgar Keret's newest). NRG June 6, 2010. Online: <http://www.nrg.co.il/online/47/ART2/106/301.html>; and B. Ziffer, "לא פלא שבאירופה קונים את הבלוף המכונה 'אתגר קרת'" (If a German writer wrote like Etgar Keret, he would be booted out of town). *Haaretz* September 17, 2015. Online: <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.676390>. The second group includes O. Herzog, "אורחים לרגע", *Haaretz*, June 2, 2010; E. A. Shoshan, "הייאוש, בנאדם" (Despair, man). *Haaretz*, May 21, 2010; Y. Schwartz, "קרת ניסיון לאתר את מנגנון הפעולה של סיפורי אתגר" (An attempt to identify the mechanism of action in the stories of Etgar Keret). *Haaretz*, September 25, 2015, and others.

scholarly articles. Most of the book reviews written in Israel and abroad have repeatedly discussed the “moral question” in Keret’s works.⁸ In some of these, the discussion has focused on the question of whether his writing is modernist or postmodernist.⁹ The conclusions that arise from the articles on these two questions are divided into main two groups. The first of these includes mainly those who wrote about Keret’s works in the second half of the 1990s and the first years of the third millennium. Most of them repeatedly complained that the works were characterized by not taking a moral stand and accused Keret of escapism, nihilism, the wholesale slaughter of sacred cows (the IDF, the memory of the Holocaust, the institution of marriage, parenthood, and so on) as well as other moral defects. The one who marked the path for this critical move was Gadi Taub, a member of Keret’s generation, who sees in the authors of his generation, especially Keret, representatives of a “dispirited rebellion.” In his fascinating and foundational book, at least in a contrary way, since his aim was to destroy, and he was not very successful, Taub states, among other things, that “the literature of the last several years, not only young literature, is mainly political. It places the private at the center, as though saying to us that dealing with the private is not only legitimate, but really urgent.”¹⁰ He adds, “[Keret] chose to forget the political, because he felt that there was no other way to save the private...from growing and accumulating dosages of violence.”¹¹ And he

⁸ For example, Y. Orian, “ליצנות מרירה, אופטימיזם מחויך” (Bitter clowning and smiling optimism). *Yedioth Achronoth*, May 6, 1994. R. Shklovsky, “האשר הוא רגע גנוב וחולף” (Happiness is a stolen, passing moment), *Iton* 77 268 (2002): 6; N. Guvrin, “The Holocaust,” pp. 151–169.

⁹ Y. Orian, “Bitter Clowning”; F. Hefetz, “Only the Age is Young”; E. Avrahami, “בקרובים והסרט איננו הרבה” (Many trailers, no movie), *Maariv*, June 22, 1994; Y. Schwartz, “הפוך על הפוך” (Upside-down logic), *Haaretz Books*, May 14, 1997, pp. 6, 13. I. Tzivoni, “Some Comments,” pp. 24–26, 45; and others. Yaron Peleg justifiably makes a connection between Keret’s meteoric reception and the fact that he integrated well with the rise of postmodernism in Israel. See Y. Peleg, *Israeli Culture*, pp. 65–66; G. Taub, *A Dispirited Rebellion*, p. 13.

¹⁰ G. Taub, *A Dispirited Rebellion*, p. 13.

¹¹ G. Taub, *A Dispirited Rebellion*, p. 15.

cautions:

But those who chose to ignore politics—in literature, culture, and journalism—paid a price. The younger generation, which distanced itself from any connection with the political, remained, in a certain way, a despondent, lacking generation. We should make no mistake about the colorful nature of the local papers. Great despair hides behind all of this—the despair of those who gave up on the possibility of shaping their futures. Sharon Kantor phrased this feeling clearly and sharply when she wrote “My children? Who are you talking about? I am the children.”¹²

Taub accuses the writers of this generation, especially Keret, of being “childish”:

This childishness is indeed a prominent characteristic of the way in which an entire generation relates to itself. . . . It is no coincidence that Etgar Keret chose to cling to such a degree to the childlike position of his narrators. There, in the protected domain of childhood, indeed the life of the spirit, clear and simple human emotions, can exist unhindered.¹³

Several critics from the same group of critics who received Keret’s first works with raging suspicion claimed that this was not the literature that should be written in an age of grave existential uncertainty and doubts regarding identity, and demanded a clear and decisive human, political, and moral position. Gabriel Moked makes a connection between the existential despair conveyed by Keret’s stories and his use of “low” literary genres,

¹² G. Taub, *A Dispirited Rebellion*, p. 15.

¹³ G. Taub, *A Dispirited Rebellion*, p. 15. I believe that Taub is mistaken in every one of the claims that compose this sequence, and I will elaborate upon this below. By the way, some of his errors stem from the supposedly clear and obvious labelling of Keret as belonging to the group of Israeli authors whose first books were published at around the same time as Pipelines, among them Uzi Weill, Gafi Amir, and others. However, actually, from a biographical point of view as well (mainly the fact that Keret is a member of the second generation after the Holocaust), and (and these things are interdependent on one another) from a poetic point of view, there is a connection between him and the group of authors I have called the “Yom Kippur Generation” (David Grossman, Itamar Levy, Lily Perry, Amnon Navot, and others), for whom “childishness” is a significant characteristic. See Y. Schwartz, מה שרואים מכאן: סוגיות בהיסטוריוגרפיה של הספרות החדשה, (Vantage Point: Issues in the Historiography of Modern Hebrew Literature; Or Yehuda: Dvir, 2005), pp. 215–234.

such as graphic novels and stories.¹⁴ According to Moked:

It is possible to understand Keret's world of Shenkin-Street dwellers... [as an expression] of the despair that stems from the Israeli reality or the reality of the late twentieth century in general. And then, as a given, the possibility that the despair that stems from Israeli life in general brings with it both despair and the more festive escape of fiction.¹⁵

According to Moked, Keret's "attempt to broaden the experiences of the younger generation beyond the Israeli panorama, creates only pieces of detached scenery."¹⁶ Aviad Kleinberg concludes his critical piece on *Cheap Moon* (in Hebrew, *אניהו*, literally "I am him") thus¹⁷:

There is something sad about Keret's trickery, and there is a bleak reconciliation, and great pity for us all. The last two stories in the book end with the world disappearing and blowing up. I know that I'm stuffing a pimento into the hole [of] an olive, but maybe irony and even pity are no longer sufficient. Perhaps for many of us, whom Keret's ironic despair expresses, the time for action has come.¹⁸

Yoram Kaniuk follows suit, regarding Etgar Keret with amazement as he sings what he calls the song of the moment, disconnects from the past, ignores collective commands—

¹⁴ G. Moked, "On the Surface" (on Orly Kastel-Blum and Etgar Keret), *Achshav, Literature, Art, and Communications* 67–68 (2002–2003): 302–303.

¹⁵ G. Moked, "On the Surface," p. 305.

¹⁶ G. Moked, "On the Surface," p. 305.

¹⁷ A. Kleinberg, "Existential Seasickness," *Haaretz*, June 13, 2002. Online: <http://www.haaretz.com/life/2.205/existential-seasickness-1.42421>.

¹⁸ A. Kleinberg, "Existential Seasickness."

and all without being harmed at all.¹⁹

This “Tel-Avivness” is, allegedly, “light,” but it is not. It has no country. It has no father or mother. It is its own family. It doesn’t sing about uprooting the rooted and doesn’t know about it. It is here for the life, for the language, because Tel Aviv is the capital of the Israelis, who are its new actors. Keret does not suffer. *He represents nothing but himself*. All he’s looking for in heaven after he dies is a girl called Arga. Not G-d, actually. In the spirit of the story, G-d can be Arga or a black guy from New Zealand or a Bedouin from Sinai, or Arga.²⁰

The second group of critics includes those who presented a different, sometimes completely opposite, position from those discussed above. They claim that it is not true that Keret is an escapist, a nihilist, amoral, and so on and so forth. Some even emphasize that they see him as an author with extreme, sharp social and moral sensitivity. A minority of them sees a connection between his moral position and his poetic “tool box” and claims that he is an author with modernist values who uses postmodern stratagems only as a “means” or “scaffolding” that allows him to expose ethical shortcomings and injustices in sophisticated, light, and seemingly noncommittal ways.

¹⁹ Y. Kaniuk, “כמו-אדישות שמחה שכועסת עמוק בשורשים, אך לא נואמת” (A sort of happy indifference that has anger deep in its roots, but does not sermonize), *Haaretz Books*, December 16, 1998. This is not at all in line with the reservations of all the critics whose essays I have related to above.

²⁰ Emphasis added. Y. Kaniuk, “A Sort of Happy Indifference.” Kaniuk writes the last paragraph of the article in a typical revealing, personal tone: “I read and am jealous. When I did similar things, I was torn apart. Keret is taught in universities, and he will receive the Israel Prize. Keret is a star for those who love to read him, and they are many. For my part, Keret’s ability to express himself, like others of his age, is also a victory over my failure. Soon, when I get to the next world, I won’t get to where Keret’s protagonist does. Perhaps also because Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the *Chazon Ish* of current Mizrahi Jewry, said that those who voted for Shas would get to heaven, and I voted for Keret” (Y. Kaniuk, “A Sort of Happy Indifference”).

Rachel Shklovsky claims that “Etgar Keret, it seems, chooses to rebel against the world, life, and society. Indeed, in his books, as in the collection before us (*Cheap Moon*, 2002), he continues to carry the banner of the sense of life of the counterculture of the nineteen sixties and the social protest movement that saw with love the motivating force of human acts.”²¹

Nurit Guvrin writes of the story “צפירה” (Siren) (from *Pipelines*) that it is “a story of protest against apathy, disregard, and lack of knowledge regarding everything connected to the Holocaust in the very young generation. This indifference brings with it emotional inflexibility and immorality.”²² This story contains, Guvrin claims:

a protest against the stale annual ceremonies that take place in schools and around the country on Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Day. The story contains a protest against the world of adults, parents and educators, for not bequeathing awareness of the Holocaust to the young. The story contains a protest against the lack of knowledge and desire of young people to know what happened in the story of the Holocaust. The story contains a protest against the fact that the Holocaust is distant from them, does not occupy them, and does not comprise a part of their identity and character.²³

And regarding the author’s position on this issue, Guvrin argues that “there is no doubt that the protest itself testifies to the sensitivity, caring, involvement, and desire to change

²¹ R. Shklovsky, “האושר הוא רגע גנוב וחולף” (Happiness is a stolen, passing moment), *Iton* 77 268 (2002): 6.

²² N. Guvrin, “The Holocaust,” pp. 151–169. “Siren” was published in English in E. Keret, *The Bus Driver Who Wanted to be God: And Other Stories* (trans. M. Shlesinger; New York: Toby Press, 2004), pp. 72–76.

²³ N. Guvrin, “The Holocaust,” p. 157.

the reality of one who himself is part of this generation.”²⁴ Guvrin explains that the story’s style is light because Keret had to “speak their language, to express their mood, and to ensure at all costs that it would not turn into a pathetic didactic story colored by those responsible for education.”²⁵ Chaim Nagid, referring to *Streets of Rage*, by Etgar Keret and illustrator Asaf Hanuka, says that the story is seemingly disconnected, but its creative imagination, which flows between gray routine and rivers of blood, aptly reflects the Israel of 1997, much more than any direct political statement.²⁶ Idan Tzivoni and I have made similar statements regarding the ethical position that this brilliant story presents, from other perspectives.²⁷

Critics who have discussed Keret’s works therefore focused on the “ethical question,” which is a thematic issue. This is perhaps due to the nature of things, that is, because of the fact that they were addressing a general and relatively wide audience. Scholars, in contrast, have focused upon Keret’s narrative art, again, perhaps naturally, that is, because of the nature of their field, which aims at a relatively small, professional audience. Almost all of them have linked the poetic characteristics of Keret’s works to the phenomenon of modernism and postmodernism.²⁸ For some, Keret’s stories have been used as a case study through which they have attempted to describe what they define as a postmodernist move in Israeli literature.²⁹ Others have made connections

²⁴ N. Guvrin, “The Holocaust,” p. 157.

²⁵ N. Guvrin, “The Holocaust,” p. 157.

²⁶ C. Nagid, “הפרברים שירת” (Song of the Suburbs), Yedioth Achronoth, January 24, 1997, P. 29.

²⁷ I. Tzivoni, “Some Comments,” pp. 24–26, 45. Y. Schwartz, “Upside-down Logic,” pp. 6, 13.

²⁸ T. Akimoto, “Etgar Keret, Haruki Murakami and World Literature: The Possibility of Translation”, BGU Review - A Journal of Israeli Culture, Issue 5, Winter 2018.

²⁹ A. Balaban, *גל חדש בסיפורת העברית: סיפורת עברית פוסט-מודרנית* (A new wave in Hebrew fiction: Postmodern Hebrew fiction; Jerusalem: Keter, 1995), pp. 54-56; D. Gurevich, “Recycled Dreams,” *Iton* 77 194 (1996): 38–43; D. Gurevich, *Postmodernism, Culture, and Literature*, pp. 287– 304; N.

between prominent features of Keret's narrative art, often with similar prominent features in the works of other Israeli authors, and the "Israeli situation." And indeed, unlike most of the critics, the majority of scholars, in fact almost all of them, have avoided participation in the dispute concerning the "moral question" in Keret's works.³⁰ In the following section, I attempt to build a bridge between these two approaches. I would like to point out what I see as the philosophical-artistic axis of Keret's unique enterprise. In simpler and more human terms, I would like to attempt to trace the nature of the interrelationship between what I see as Keret's central poetic strategy and his ethical-moral position.³¹

Keret's main strategy in his entire artistic oeuvre is based, in my opinion, on the combination of the confrontation between two poetic and philosophical moves that are interrelated and, at the same time, "hostile" toward one another. The first philosophical poetic move is the repetition of some phrase, as it is or almost as it is, a kind of "echo," which may be called, with certain reservations, following Walter Benjamin, "mechanical reproduction."³² Jean Cohen differentiates in this context between the repetition of the sign, the signifier, and the signified. The first type of repetition includes the repetition of words, phrases, sentences, refrains, stanzas of

Buchweitz, "The Evacuation of Character in Postmodernist Prose: The Case of Keret and Castel-Blum" (paper presented at the NAPH conference in Stanford, California in June 2005).

B. McHale, "A Map of Misreading, or, How Etgar Keret Got Postmodernism Wrong and Reinvented Israeli Fiction" (paper presented at the "Keret's Happy Campers" conference at the University of Chicago, October 10–14, 2015).

³⁰ V. K. Shemtov, "Being Stuck in the Continuous Present: Etgar Keret and Contemporary Hebrew Literature" (paper presented at the "Keret's Happy Campers" conference at the University of Chicago, October 10–14, 2015); R. Katsman, "Etgar Keret's Laughter: The Unbearable Lightness of Banality, or What is Israeli Humor?," *BGU Review - A Journal of Israeli Culture*, Issue 5, Winter 2018.

³¹ An exception that proves the rule is Roman Katsman. See his "Mythopoesis, Ethics and Ideology: Stories by Etgar Keret" in *Poetics of Becoming: Dynamic Processes of Mythopoesis in Modern and Postmodern Hebrew and Slavic Literature* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2005), pp. 71–97.

³² W. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations* (ed. H. Arendt; New York: Schocken, 1968), pp. 217–251.

poems, or whole sections of stories. The second type includes homonyms, alliteration, assonance, rhythm, weight, and syntactic structures. The third type includes synonym and pleonasm.³³ Keret's tool box includes all of these options, which he enhances in hundreds of variations.

To all of these—and I will discuss some of the types of repetition of which Keret makes use in what follows—we should add repetition at the level of imaginary worlds (some of the events in his stories take place both in a world like ours and in the afterlife, at the same time or consecutively³⁴) or at the level of medium, especially in his graphic novels, which include dozens of repetitions, some exact, some not, between linguistic occurrences and the events they illustrate. The second poetical-philosophical move is the deviation from “mechanical reproduction” or “mechanical repetition,” which always seems “accidental” or “random.”³⁵

This two-sided, Janus-faced strategy is based on an internal contradiction that is the dominant of the Etgar Keret text, and consequently is reflected in every aspect of the narrative: in the syntax of the text, in the principles of casting the characters, in the manner of constructing the space of the story, and so on.³⁶ In this section, I will focus

³³ J. Cohen, “Poésie et reconance,” *Poétique* 28 (1976): 422–423.

³⁴ Prominent examples of this phenomenon may be found in the stories “Kneller's Happy Campers” from *Kneller's Happy Campers* and “Lieland” from *Suddenly, A Knock at the Door*. On parallel worlds in Etgar Keret's works, see C. Merril, “Parallel Universes: The Worlds of Etgar Keret”, *BGU Review - A Journal of Israeli Culture*, Issue 5, Winter 2018.

³⁵ The pattern, the joining of two hostile and integral poetical-philosophical moves and the confrontation between them, corresponds with the definition of repetition that Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan offers as a preparatory platform for the discussion of the poetics of repetition. Rimmon-Kenan presents the phenomenon of repetition by means of three paradoxes: 1) “Repetition is present everywhere and nowhere”; 2) “Constructive repetition emphasizes difference, destructive repetition emphasizes sameness (i.e., to repeat successfully is not to repeat)”; and 3) “The first time is already a repetition, and repetition is the very first time” (S. Rimmon-Kenan, “The Paradoxical Status of Repetition,” *Poetics Today* 1.4 (1980): 151–159. Also see in this context S. Rimmon-Kenan, “Doubles and Counterparts: Patterns of Interchangeability in Borges' ‘The Garden of Forking Paths.’” *Critical Inquiry* 6.4 (Summer 1980): 639–647.

³⁶ R. Jakobson, “The Dominant,” in *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views* (ed. M.

only on the level of plot, or, more precisely, on the phenomenon of narrative scenes replicating themselves in a sort of mechanical way and collapsing.

Many of Keret's stories are designed in this loop format, which corresponds at several levels with the narrative loop format of Scheherazade's *The Thousand and One Nights*. A prominent example is the narrative loop of the story "Suddenly, A Knock on the Door," which opens the collection of the same name. This story begins with a scene in which a man, called "the Swede," "invades" the home of the protagonist, a writer named Keret, and presents him, as he provides some strange explanations, with a choice between two options: "a story or a bullet between the eyes."³⁷ The writer realizes he has no choice and begins to tell a story whose opening sentence is "Suddenly, a knock on the door." At that moment, there is a knock on the door, and at the entrance stands another story robber, who demands that the author, Keret, reproduce the previous scene.

This pattern is repeated two additional times—if we do not take into account the story the narrator tells his child before this whole nightmare begins—and becomes a tyrannical matrix. In other words, what began as a one-time scene replicates and continues to replicate itself, in principle forever, in the sense of perpetual motion.

The repeated phrase, "suddenly a knock on the door," serves here as a narrative "starter," opening each plot loop and connecting it to the next. In other stories, the repeated expressions, the phrases that connect the loops, have other roles. Thus, for example, in the well-known story "Missing Kissinger" from the collection of the same name, the echoes serve as closures. At the end of each of the four main

Ladislav and K. Pomorska; Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), pp. 82–87.

³⁷ E. Keret, "Suddenly a Knock on the Door" (trans. M. Shlesinger), in *Suddenly a Knock on the Door* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2010), pp. 3–8.

scenes of the story, the narrator—who, “by the way,” murders the two women closest to his heart, his mother and his lover—offers a conclusion: four sentences, like folk proverbs, borrowed from the dustbin of “junk philosophy,” the “philosophy” that informs many of the film directors with whom Keret is in conversation: Mike Leigh, Ken Loach, and Quentin Tarantino, for example. These are “sentences of eternal truth”:

1. “He who goes to bed with skunks should not complain that his children stink.”³⁸
2. “He who plays practical jokes on dodgy crackheads shouldn’t cry about broken bones.”³⁹
3. “He who swallows prickly pears with the spikes shouldn’t gripe about hemorrhoids.”⁴⁰
4. “There are two kinds of people, those who like to sleep next to the wall, and those who like to sleep next to the ones who’ll push them out of bed.”⁴¹

These lines of “junk philosophy” are supposed to offer closures for the scenes at whose end they are placed, but they “betray their mission.” Indeed, they are designed in the format of proverbs, pretending that, like regular proverbs, they have the authority of closures and life lessons. However, these “proverbs” are very far from their “morals,” so they themselves become “morals” that require new “proverbs” and so forth. The result is that instead of making possible the closure of the story, and thus allowing a sense of ending, at least according to the logic of modernism, these

³⁸ E. Keret, “Missing Kissinger” (trans. M. Shlesinger), in *Missing Kissinger* (London: Vintage, 2005), p. 11.

³⁹ E. Keret, “Missing Kissinger,” p. 11.

⁴⁰ E. Keret, “Missing Kissinger,” p. 11.

⁴¹ E. Keret, “Missing Kissinger,” p. 14.

proverbs and morals stimulate and accelerate the process of mechanical reproduction.⁴²

Therefore, we are talking about a kind of “narrative epidemic” that is hostile to any one-time, individual performance. This narrative epidemic can be stopped—or, more precisely, delayed for a brief moment—in only one way, the occurrence of an exceptional and random event, a “narrative mutation,” which disrupts the continuity of the operation of the guillotine of narrative loops in Keret’s penal colony. This unusual event, which, for a moment, turns the deterministic system into a humanistic existential space, has a clear operating mechanism: the identification, marking, and magnification of the exceptional event. Sometimes this mechanism is operated by characters in the fictional world—those who have a secondary role in the plot.⁴³ But usually, this humanistic role is imposed on us, the readers, or rather, “the right readers,” who know how to identify the unusual event, which is frequently tiny, to mark

⁴² F. Kermode, *The Sense of Ending* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967).

⁴³ For example, in “Suddenly, A Knock on the Door,” it is the last story robber, the pizza delivery boy, who convinces the robber to give in to Keret the author, who will allow him to give up his opening mantra “suddenly, a knock on the door”: “‘Let him,’ the pizza guy says softly, ‘give him some slack. You want a knock on the door? Just so long as it brings us a story’” (p. 8). Sometimes the character that sets this mechanism in motion does not belong to the story’s narrative present, although it becomes clear in retrospect that it has an important role in the interpretation of the story. Thus, for example, in the story before us, from whose opening paragraph it is clear that all the acts of robbing the narrator of a story echo a parallel story between a father and son: “Tell me a story,” the bearded man sitting on my living-room sofa commands. “The situation, I must say, is anything but pleasant. I’m someone who *writes* stories, not someone who tells them. And even *that* isn’t something I do on demand. The last time anyone asked me to tell him a story, it was my son. That was a year ago. I told him something about a fairy and a ferret—I don’t even remember what exactly—and within two minutes, he was fast asleep. But the situation is fundamentally different. Because my son doesn’t have a beard, or a pistol. Because my son asked for the story nicely, and this man is simply trying to rob me of it” (p. 3). A similar situation opens the chain of events in *Streets of Rage*: “When I was twelve my big brother took me to a movie about boxers” (E. Keret and A. Hanuka, סמטאות הרעם [Streets of rage; Tel-Aviv: Zemorah-Bitan, 1997], p. 4), and that brother, like Keret’s son in “Suddenly, a Knock on the Door,” is never mentioned again in the story. On this phenomenon, from a different angle, see N. Buchweitz, “Vitalities and Fatalities in Relationships in Keret’s Graphic Texts (*Streets of Rage, Nobody Said it was Going to be Fun, Pizzeria Kamikaze*),” *BGU Review - A Journal of Israeli Culture*, Issue 5, Winter 2018.

it, and then to greatly enlarge it and thus stop the loop-like movement and create an ethical space—even for a brief moment.

I would like to validate what I am suggesting here with an example from one story, “Streets of Rage,” whose title is the same as that of the collection in which it appears. I must note here that I have carried out “two indecent assaults” on this wonderful text. First, I cut the written text off from the graphic text. Second, I arranged the written text like a sort of a prose poem. In my defense, I would like to say that this is a pedagogical “deviation” and I am convinced that the discussion of this text in its original version, with all its layers, will add depth and validity to the conclusions that arise from the present discussion. Here is the text:

“Streets of Rage”

by Etgar Keret and Asaf Hanuka

First stanza

When I was twelve
my big brother took me
to a movie about boxers.

The film was called *Streets of Rage* or
Alleys of Anger, something like that.

It was about a small, skinny boy
who grew up in a tough neighborhood
and became a boxer
so he could return the money his drunken father

had lost at cards to
people from the underworld.

How he fought,
that boy in the movie.
You had to see it to believe it.
He just charged anyone who
entered the ring with him with such rage
that there was simply
nothing anyone could do.

That's where the title of the movie came from. "Avenues of Rage" or "Paths of
Revenge," whatever it was called.

Second stanza

Part 1:

Anyway, a week after I saw the movie, I took the bus to Jaffa, to the boxing
club of some Polish guy from the yellow pages. It said there that he was
once world champion.

I didn't tell anyone about it.

But I already had a plan.
I would practice every day,
secretly, until I became a real champion, and then I would get back at
all the
punks in the neighborhood.

I would attack them in a rage, just like in the movie,
and blow them to bits, while

all the girls watched.

Second stanza

Part 2:

That was an excellent plan,
except that the teacher at the boxing club
didn't agree to register me.

You're not for boxing, he said.
You're a happy boy. Go play football.
I told him that he had to teach me,
that boxing was my life,
that I might look normal and happy,
but I had rage.
All I needed was an opportunity.

The teacher looked at me
for about a minute without
saying a word, and then
took two black boxing gloves
out of his metal cabinet.
He put them on my hands
and put me in the ring

There I hit all the bad guys from the movie
and tore them to pieces.

Third stanza

Part 1:

In the meantime, he left the club for a few

minutes, and when he returned, some kid was with him,
a skinny, dark kid who looked like an Arab.

“You and him,” the Polish world champion said to me.
“Free fight, no rules, three minutes.”

I was very glad that he believed in me, that already in the first lesson
he was letting me fight, even someone skinnier and smaller than me.

Third stanza

Part 2:

[The fight. No words.]

Third stanza

Part 3:

I fell down.
I felt something warm running down
the whole left side
of my face.
Before I understood what was happening,
he was already on me
biting my shoulder like some rat. More
than it hurt, and it hurt terribly, it was
frightening.

A few seconds later

the world champion came
to separate us.

“This is only the first lesson,” said the champion as he sterilized my wound,
“Come tomorrow, we’ll learn the basics.”
I could hear in his voice that he knew I wouldn’t come.

Fourth stanza

A year later the
sequel
Streets of Rage Two or
Avenue of Anger Two,
or whatever it was called, arrived. The hero
this time was already older, and he found some other kid,
an orphan whose parents
had been murdered by drug dealers, and taught him how to
box.

I still had
a scar on my shoulder from the Arab kid.

And when I saw the orphan smash some
red-head in a practice fight, I felt a little sad
for myself. That my parents hadn’t ever been murdered or lost a little
money to gangsters or even just gotten drunk and beaten me.

Something, so I, too, could
have a little rage.

This text, like most of Keret’s texts, is amusing and horrifying, usually in that

order.⁴⁴ It is amusing, as Henri Bergson taught us, because of the collision between the human and the mechanical.⁴⁵ We expect a human being to change his behavior when circumstances change, and when he responds automatically, it amuses us, as it does, for example, in the films of Charlie Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy, and Monty Python, with which Keret is also in conversation. Our protagonist goes through a traumatic experience. A year passes, during which he is supposed to process it, to mature, learn a lesson, and open his eyes. But his brain remains a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate; he neither internalizes nor learns anything. A slight smile remains on our lips because this is the “infantile” behavior of a child. Although the child is already thirteen years old, an adolescent, we are forgiving, and grant him an “extension.” However, the temporary exemption from moral responsibility that we allow the child is not valid for us. As adult readers, we must notice that the story at hand creates a mechanism of reproduction of injustice, which, if we fail to mark it and caution against it, will continue to operate, trample, and destroy.

This injustice is marked here with an unusual linguistic event, an event that marks the only way out of infinite mechanical reproduction. It is revealed when we compare the linguistic performances in the two narrative loops. In the first loop, our protagonist describes the child with whom he boxed in the ring as “a...kid who looked *like* an

⁴⁴ See for comparison Y. Orian, “יופי של גיהנום” (A lovely hell; *Yedioth Achronoth*, February 28, 1992). p. 24. Yaron Peleg offers a suggestive analysis in which he points to the gap between the “flat” surface of Keret’s stories and their serious subject matter, the difficult mental states that echo through them, and the author’s deep criticism. Particularly interesting is his discussion regarding the relationship between the jackets of the books *Pipelines* and *Missing Kissinger*, which are naïve/kitschy in character and the essential character of the stories in them. See Y. Peleg, *Israeli Culture*, pp. 68–90.

⁴⁵ H. Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (trans. C. Brereton and F. Rothwell; New York: Macmillan, 1911).

Arab.”⁴⁶ In contrast, in the second loop, when he recalls the scene a year later, he reports that he “still had a scar on my shoulder from the *Arab* kid.”⁴⁷ In other words, the only sign that something was moved in the consciousness of the protagonist in relation to that traumatic event, over the course of an entire year, is that the *adjective* “Arab” takes over the noun “kid.” Such a violent take-over of a noun by an adjective is, as Ariel Hirshfeld has shown, one of the hallmarks of the grotesque.⁴⁸ No wonder, then, that this event turns our indulgent smile into a hollow, grotesque one.⁴⁹

The flood of memories of the exceptional event and the strong response to it cause a flood of memories of the circumstances that led to it, as well as—and this is a decisive interpretative move—the element of danger that it suppresses for the future, since, in retrospect, it turns out that the child’s brain is not just a *tabula rasa*. In fact, from the start, even at the stage of consolidating his plan, he has been in a problematic state of mind. His linguistic faux pas was not born out of thin air. More precisely, it is not a faux pas at all, it turns out, but rather the “natural,” logical product of the racist environment in which he grew up.

This is a loaded semiotic environment full of stereotypical racist identifying signs that create clear rules of action and behavior. For example, in order to learn boxing, one travels to Jaffa, to the boxing club of some Polish guy that the yellow pages say was once a world champion, and not to a class at one of the clubs in a prestigious neighborhood in Northern

⁴⁶ Emphasis added.

⁴⁷ Emphasis added.

⁴⁸ See A. Hirshfeld, “עיוות המרחב בגרוטסקה ב'תמול שלשום' לש' עגנון” (Warped space in the grotesque in *Only Yesterday*), *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature* 15 (1981): 49–59.

⁴⁹ On the grotesque in Keret’s work, see A. Mendelson-Maoz, “בלום וקרת סיטואציות קיצוניות זוועתיות” (Extreme, horrific, and grotesque situations in the works of Castel-Bloom and Keret), *Dapim le Mechkar be-Sifrut* 11 (1997–1998): 269–295.

Tel Aviv. In the world where our child grew up, football is an activity for happy children, mainly wealthy, Ashkenazi children. Boxing, on the other hand, is an activity for tough kids (Arabs, for example) who grow up in tough neighborhoods (Jaffa, for example), tough, downtrodden children who fight to pay back the money their drunken father lost at cards to gangsters, and not “nerds” who are fantasizing about getting back at “all the punks in the neighborhood...while all the girls watch.”⁵⁰

The protagonist of our story has everything but the real rage of a victim. He attempts to fill this “lack” by means of the practice of repeating the stories of others, through which he appropriates life stories not his own. But that is not enough for him. He labels the child who fights him and wins “like an Arab,” and then turns that label into “Arab kid,” in other words, according to the socio-cultural lexicon encoded in him, a dangerous enemy. With this domineering action, he is attempting to achieve two goals simultaneously: to deprive a “skinny, dark” child from Jaffa of his life story and also to deprive him of the legitimacy of his rage, in a sense, “to murder and also inherit.”

⁵⁰ E. Keret and A. Hanuka, *Streets of Rage*. In a number of stories, Keret reveals the tactic that justifies his use of stereotypical racist labels. Thus, for example, in “מונטאז” (Montage), in the graphic short story collection *לא באנו להנות* (Nobody said it was going to be fun; Jerusalem: Keter, 1996) by Keret and Rutu Modan, the story begins with four fragments in which Keret creates a labeling drama, each one of which on its own, and all of which together reflect a society that marks and attacks anyone who is perceived as other (p. 29).

A similar mechanism of exposing the stereotypical racist approach to Arabs in Jewish Israeli society is used in *פיצריה קמיקאז* (Pizzeria kamikaze; Or Yehuda: Kinneret, 2004), the graphic novel adapted from *Kneller's Happy Campers*, by Keret and Asaf Hanuka. At a certain stage of the story, two of the Jewish Israeli protagonists are driving to an unknown area. The following conversation takes place between them: Character A: “Look at this place. The sorts of people walking around here. Seriously. I don’t know why I came with you.” Character B: “Just because you don’t know them, that’s no reason to be paranoid.” Character A: “It’s not paranoia... everyone here is an Arab. I told you we should have driven **north. Everyone knows all the sexy girls are in the north. In the east there is nothing except Mizrachim.**” Character B: So what if they’re Arabs? Character A: **Suicidal Arabs**— that doesn’t make you a little nervous? What if they find out we’re Israeli?” (E. Keret and A. Hanuka, *Pizzeria Kamikaze*, p. 35; emphases added).

Keret created a brilliant labeling drama, based on the custom of calling people by animal names and on the literalization of some of those names, in “The Sad Story of the Anteater Family,” in the collection *Missing Kissinger*.

Recalling this unusual labeling event reveals the background of the dehumanizing move that takes place before our eyes in the narrative present, also turning our attention to what might happen in the narrative future if we sit idly by. After all, the fact that the story ends after two narrative loops is coincidental. Keret is suggesting, in an ingenious way, that if we do not find a way to sabotage the mechanical reproduction, the same child will see next year, when he is fourteen years old, a film called *Streets of Rage Three* or *Avenue of Anger Three*. Then he will revise the story yet again. And in this third version, the skinny dark kid from Jaffa from the first version, who became an Arab kid at the end of the second version, will change from an Arab child who “bite[s]...like some rat” into a rat— an animal pest that must be eliminated.⁵¹

We can compare the world that Keret creates to a magic performance gone wrong (as in his stories “A No-Magician Birthday” and “Hat Trick” in the collection *Missing Kissinger*), to a circus-like performance in the style of a horror tale (as in “The Hollow Men” in *Missing Kissinger* and “Katzenstein” in *Pipelines* and the book *Dad Runs Away with the Circus*, in which the horror tale ends well, apparently because it is a children’s story), or to the style of a summer camp for zombies (“Kneller’s Happy Campers” in *Kneller’s Happy Campers*). The stories always present, despite the redundancy created in

⁵¹ In his analysis, Roman Katsman makes a connection between Etgar Keret’s “The Hollow Men” (from the collection *Missing Kissinger*), and the practice of linguistic repetition in an attempt to appropriate something that belongs to another. He notes, following Erik Gans, that “the very repetition of the words of the father by the hollow men amounts to the stealing of the voice, that is, it is appropriation” (R. Katsman, “אתגר קרת געגועים למיתוס: אישיות, אתיקה ואידיאולוגיה במיתופואסיס הפוסטמודרני של” [Missing the myth: Personality, ethics and ideology in the postmodern mythopoesis of Etgar Keret], *Mikan*, January 4, 2005, p. 36). By the way, Udi Taub, in his monumental work *יודאיקה* (Judaica; Or Yehudah: Kinneret Zmora-Bitan, 2011), makes brilliant use of the praxis of reproduction, here the reproduction of durable products, as an attempt at both religious and commercial appropriation. See also E. Gans, “Originary Narrative,” *Anthropoetics: The Electronic Journal of Generative Anthropology* 3.2 (1997–1998). Online: <http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap0302/narrative.htm>.

them due to mechanical reproduction, “a well-made story” that arouses curiosity and suspense (that leads to a sharp ending that sometimes ends in the clear structure of a point, and sometimes does not) that conceals and reveals sites of social and cultural contamination. This contamination is always evident in the language, for example, in “Streets of Rage,” as we have seen, in the takeover by racist adjectives of neutral nouns and by the takeover of personal names by collective national, professional, and other labels (in “Streets of Rage” the teacher is “some Polish guy” and the child who fights him in the ring is “a skinny, dark kid who looks like an Arab.” The child in the first film is “a skinny boy who grew up in a tough neighborhood” and the child in the second film is “an orphan whose parents had been murdered by drug dealers” and who “smash[es] some red-head in a practice fight”). The protagonist’s disdain for the exact titles of the films he has seen ([t]he film was called *Streets of Rage* or *Alleys of Anger*, something like that) also exposes his arrogant attitude toward the culture of the southern neighborhoods, the boxing films he mentions, and so on.

But in order to fight violence, Keret tells us—and this is a basic paradox in his work—we, both the readers and the author, must apply counter-violence, which is also destructive. The only way to halt the mechanical reproduction in Keret’s work involves severing the narrative flow, which is, by nature, infinite. The act of severing the chain of narrative links is in itself extremely violent. The fact that Keret writes short and very short stories strengthens this violence and leads to a situation of a narrative that is constantly on the verge of exploding. It creates almost unbearable tension between the aesthetic and the ethical, which is one of the secrets of the corpus before us and one of the secrets of its charm and power.