Windows and Applications: A Reading of Etgar Keret’s “Windows”

Introduction

The story “Windows,” found in Etgar Keret’s collection, **A Glitch at the Edge of the Galaxy (**2018), first appeared two years earlier in the anthology, **The Posthuman** **Age: Between the Fantasy of Eternal Life and Existential Panic** (edited by Yochai Ataryah and Amichai Shalev, 2016). The story appeared at the conclusion of this combined theoretical and belletristic collection. Later in this paper, I will relate to the significance of its publication in this platform. Ten pages long, it constitutes one of Keret’s longest short stories.

The story describes the next stage in human experience achieved through an application that offers its users a bot, a virtual machine that imitates human behavior but proves much more powerful. It is also available to users who order intimate virtual relationships. The story presents the bot as a well-synced product. Its developers put a great deal of thought into the human-machine interface’s construction and the programs that it employs are frequently updated.

My discussion of the story will have three parts.

Part One

The story’s protagonist awakens in a one-room apartment with bare walls and no windows, under the supervision and watchful eye of a caregiver in a brown suit. The protagonist, who does not know his name, is told that he has suffered memory loss and that, “when he was found on the side of the road, he did not have any identification on him,” (p. 361). The one-room apartment is referred to as “an excellent place to recover,” (p. 361) and it appears that it has been selected to avoid distractions that will delay the return of the protagonist, who agrees to be referred to as Micky, to health. Nonetheless, to provide Micky a sense of open space conducive to his recovery, two windows and an open door are projected onto the walls of his room to serve in lieu of actual windows.

The author employs internal focalization to convey this information, but Micky, who serves as the focalizer, does not know anything. He does not know his name, where he is, with whom he is speaking, or who this caregiver actually works for. Instead of a human touch and the “on-site examination of a physician,” the approach to the protagonist’s care involves a tracking center and twenty-four hour telephonic support service.

Up until this point in the story, we are in the familiar realm of the postmodern topos that emphasizes the type of disorientation that Fredric Jameson spoke about in his foundational article. Loss of direction, the search for meaning, and uncertainty serve as the foundation for the literary reduction of this situation to the absurd. The story’s protagonist embodies the type of individual who attempts to attribute meaning to his existential experience through response to existential questions that find tangible expression here–who he is and what he is.

At some point, a young woman appears in one of the wall projections. The individual from the tracking center that the protagonist speaks with explains that she is part of an application upgrade currently available free of charge that was developed to provide users with “a human presence” (p. 364) and personalized so that “each system is equipped with a different human character.” Initially, Natasha exists across the threshold of the projected door and is observable to Micky through the half-opened door. Yet, when she passes through the wall, enters into Micky’s room, and enters into an emotional and physical relationship with him it produces an ontological crisis in the story. The opening of a passage across the threshold of the projected door proves unidirectional. Only the woman can transverse it. When Micky tries to pass through it, he bumps into the wall. He questions whether Natasha actually visits him in his room; he looks for evidence that he is not being deluded. As he notes, “the painful burn on his hand [from scalding coffee that Natasha caused to spill on his hand] and the mug with the yellow sun and the caption ‘RISE & SHINE’ [brought into the room by Natasha] were still there, two burning proofs that everything that he thought occurred here a few minutes earlier actually took place,” (p. 366).

Here too we are found in the familiar territory of postmodern fiction. Micky’s room constitutes part of what scholar Brian McHale refers to as “the zone,” (McHale 1986, 49-53). The zone’s fluidity enables “a large number of *fragmentary possible worlds* [to] *coexist* in an impossible space,” and produces ongoing clashes between worlds characterized by different ontological conditions (McHale 1986, xxx; emphasis added). According to McHale, such clashes prove central to postmodern poetics, because, when authors no longer feel capable of supplying their readers with meaning about the world, their fiction assumes an ontological dominant and pushes readers to address questions related to the nature of their existence.

Natasha’s entrance into Micky’s room and his inability to cross the threshold into hers sparks consideration of the nature of emotion. Postmodern fiction traditionally reflects a reality in which emotions prove highly artificial and are produced for cynical reasons. This is understandable, because emotions prove questionable and unreliable in a world where huge corporations manipulate things to suit their interests. Even love and its ability to exist in a state where emotion has withered (again, I draw on Jameson’s formulation) are placed in doubt. Through means of emptied characters who move through the world like free radicals without identity or personal meaning and a fictional world that offers them disjointed and frequently passive experiences, Keret reflects this reality in his writing.

Central terms such as accident, memory loss, recovery, rehabilitation, patients, medical tracking and “our support center open twenty-four hours” are initially understood as means for psychological support, and the windows that are projected onto the wall with a special application are viewed as a form of physical support for the patient during his recovery. Yet the polysemic character of specific terms, such as contact center and windows, gradually increases, and it becomes clear that the story is full of terms connected to digital communication and the online world: laptop computer, call center, windows (as an operating system), applications, system, updates, users, upgrade, free service, tracking (collection of user data and feedback), feature, expansion of existing service, user experience, access code, running, feedback, additional options, service interruption, and disconnection.

Confirmation of the reader’s suspicions about the existence of a computer-related subtext to the story comes in the fifth of the story’s six sections. The plot develops over the course of six episodes with the start of each new episode marked by asterisks in the original publication of the story. Micky serves as the focalizer in every section except the fifth. The story plays a trick on the reader here. The point of view shifts to Natasha together with the man in the brown suit who can move between the two worlds of the text. This change inverts the initial classification of user and virtual neighbor, and the reader’s initial perception of what constitutes extratextual reality and what constitutes virtual reality. Natasha becomes the user and Micky becomes the virtual neighbor.

~~Instead of being found in some kind of tangible extratextual reality, we are found in cyberspace, a cybernetic reality.~~

Micky is not a user who has a “neighbor” projected onto the wall of his room thanks to an application. He is the virtual neighbor. He is not a patient injured in an accident. Micky only exists in cyberspace. Natasha is the user and he is her virtual neighbor. The window that is opened is a window on a computer screen. At a certain stage it becomes clear that the nameless protagonist is in effect under the purview and the watchful eye of the application’s developers. Micky’s bewilderment and incomprehension about how a woman suddenly appears, passes through a wall to enter his room, and eventually disappears, explained to him as part of an update to a computer application, are suddenly understood in a completely different way. Micky is available for Natasha’s selection. Every time something changes, it is a sign that she either added a feature or Natasha changed her settings. The climax of the story comes when Natasha chooses to discontinue the service. This time, at the story’s conclusion, when Natasha disappears and Micky tries to clarify what happened, nobody answers his call.

Micky is a bot, a machine, that is capable of understanding man and portraying him perfectly in accordance with the user’s particular needs.

~~Keret lingers upon the way in which the computer has fundamentally change human life.~~

Indeed, the story is narrated primarily from the point of view of a view of a bot, but the bot is not the subject. The bot is what the science fiction scholar Darko Suvin refers to as a novum, a hypothetical new thing that can be imagined to exist by scientific means rather than by magic, creates cognitive estrangement, and pushes individuals to think in new ways about human society. The individual who uses the application is the actual subject. Natasha represents a specific type of person of a specific age in a specific environment that lives in the multiverse. Existing simultaneously in everyday reality and imagined reality, in the real world and the worlds on the screens in the palms of our hands, across from us on our knees, or on the table in front of us. The individual who desires to imagine a life like a computer simulation for himself; the individual for whom virtual experience is preferable in every way to experience in tangible reality. The individual who lives in cyberspace on computers and smartphones, in applications, and through smart systems that navigate our lives—in fact, all of us. For the user in the story, imagined reality and artificial intelligence in the form of a bot are more human that the machine that is man.

Part Two

As has been previously noted, the meeting between the virtual neighbor and the user occurs in the zone, which scholar Elana Gomel characterizes as “an ‘impossible typology,’ (Gomel, p. 12).” Yet, in practice, the zone offers a typology for the multimedia world made possible by contemporary communications technology. This digital space constitutes a real zone. It is exactly this type of space, because it creates an interface between the real world and the virtual world in both of which the user lives. Cyberspace is reality, not fiction. It is a reality in which “daily experiences are defined by simultaneity, semantic proximity and immediate access to cyberspace rather than by the body’s field of action for a growing number of people,” (Gomel, p. 5).

It seems that the story “Windows” expresses the depth of cyberspace’s presence in people/ surfers’ lives, the new “Terminal Identity” (a new term coined from the term computer terminal), and the understanding that cyberspace’s existence underpins humanity’s contemporary condition and even becomes life itself. As Scott Bukatman writes:

Whether “cyberspace” is real or not, our experience of electronic space is a “real” experience. By distinguishing the constitution of being as an activity of interface, phenomenology suggest that the status of being is not an absolute condition, but one that changes relative to changes in the experience of the real [enabling] a reconceptualization of the human and the ability to interface with the new terminal experience […] and thus a uniquely terminal space becomes a fundamental part of human (or posthuman) redefinition, (Bukatman, p. 118).

Moreover, from the perspective of terminal identity, a shift in foreground and background occurs in relationship to placement of characters in the story. The secondary characters are central to the story. They represent forces and processes much larger and more meaningful than what happens to Micky and Natasha. The representatives of society, both those that are encountered directly like the man in the brown suit and those who are on the phone line, are a sign and testimony to the entrepreneurial digital world that advances, enhances, updates, and develops up until the point where the application is optimized, that is to say when man and machine interface.

The interaction with the user is one of information gathering in order to enhance the content she consumes, its timing and its duration, and to match it to her behavioral patterns. Society searches for information necessary for development of an engine that is supposed to monitor and improve the efficiency of the bot’s performances in accordance with the user’s taste and needs. The story lingers on the information that is constantly collected, the customer’s needs, and the user’s experience, everything in service of the goal of intensifying the actual reality inside of the virtual one.

One can read the relations between Micky and the support center and its telephone receptionist and between the man in the brown suit and Natasha as the embodiment of the relations between man and the computerized systems that rule over subjects through deployment of oversight and control from one central tower to a chain of transparent and available cells occupied by prisoners ready to surrender themselves, just like a metaphoric panopticon disguised as “support and assistance” which “intuitively” and comfortably connects to the user. Keret shows that this technology did not emerge ex nihilo. Keret shows it possessing a countenance that manifests itself in the secondary characters. Yet this countenance proves anonymous, impulsive, and egotistical and is motivated only by commercial considerations. The technology “has no memory” and reserves the right for itself to change the rules at any moment, just as Micky is programmed.

The result and the implication of this for users are, as Bruce Sterling, one of the first prophets of digital technology, noted, that “technology is instinctual […] it penetrates into every location, in a totally intimate form. It is found besides us rather than outside us. It is underneath our skin; frequently, it is inside our brains,” (Bukatman 2005, p. 69).

The bot, technology’s fruit, is a digital being that created value for itself and that is granted autonomy. The bot is performativity of human behavior. It is the product of mathematical and statistical analysis of patterns of behavior through use of algorithms and studies based on mathematical and engineering methodologies for social and human development. The bot represents the achievement of the simulacra—the copy replaces the original and even surpasses it. Interaction with the bot surpasses experiences in extratextual reality. The bot truly has no memory, a story in both senses of the term. First, Micky’s lack of memory leads his programmers to create a story about how he lost his memory when he got into an accident. Second, memory is the basis for a coherent identity, a basis for stability and for uniform meaning, something that Micky will never have even if he performs perfectly as a human. He is programmed in such a way that the user, that is to say the user of technology, enters into a space where identity, time, and space prove meaningless. This enables an experience of “real interaction” with social contact when the user enters into the human-machine interface.

In the story there is a representation of cybersex that I will not be able to discuss here due to time limitations. I will merely note that, according to Wheaton, cybersex belongs in proximity to the posthuman idea, because it takes place in a realm where the biological and the technological meet and it demands that we become more than our human shapes in order to take part, because it is impossible to enter into cyberspace as flesh and blood, (Wheaton 2015, p. 163).

The bot is also a reflection of Man in the new technological environment. Natasha does not need to take the bot and its needs into consideration, because he is built for her needs and suited to her attributes. The digital world influences the quality of interpersonal connections. The bot satisfies a need for belonging and connection, but it testifies to the difficulties individuals have maintaining connections to the physical world. Natasha’s relationship to the bot is like the relationship one has to mere merchandise that one can cut oneself off from—in every sense of the term. She cuts herself off from the service both physically and emotionally. She orders intimate relationship services “without energy for true intimacy” like one would order take-out food. The thought that comes to mind is that if a machine can mimic a man, perhaps Man is also a machine. He externally sources fundamental aspects of what is defined as human: interpersonal connections, feelings, emotion, and sex. ~~Cybersex and technology raise the question of what it is possible to define as true intimacy, and what the true realm of “the real” is. Natasha experiences an emotion that seems authentic, but she proves unable to express it in a meaningful way. She can merely communicate that “ he was exactly like a real man.”~~

It is clear why the story was published in an anthology about Posthumanism. The characters in the story are Posthuman. In terms of a new type of subjectivity, they are imbued with technology like Natasha; in terms of essences, they represent disembodied man-machines whose whole existence is found in cyberspace.

Part Three

I have the sense that this story represents a paradigm shift in Keret’s writing. It expresses a movement from postmodernism to post-postmodernism in the sense that it examines the new cultural situation in which technology’s tremendous powers penetrate Man’s consciousness and body. In “Windows,” questions about a subject immersed in a directionless, confusing, and inescapable state morph into questions about the implications of technology’s penetration into all aspects of life, human-machine relations, and the boundaries of the human.

In his monumental introductory text on postmodernism, **Postmodernist Fiction*,*** Brian McHale explains that postmodern poetics blur ontological boundaries and cross over into “the world[s] next door,” (McHale 1986). Yet today, reality has caught up with fiction. Virtual reality, alternative worlds, avatars and simulations are all worlds next door that are available to everybody. The crossing of ontological boundaries is not just an imagined, literary or theoretical trope. It is already here. It is well known that Keret studied with McHale. It is my assertion that the structure of the fictional world in “Windows,” where “the user” finds “the neighbor” next door is a clear allusion to McHale’s metaphor and its realization. This is a sign that we are no longer engaging with postmodernism fiction. The world next door has come to life before our eyes.

Edited Out Materials

“A world next door”

“A dual ontology, on one side our world of the normal and every day, on the other side the next-door world of the paranormal or supernatural, and running between them the contested boundary separating the world next door,” (1987, p. 73).

Thirty years after he published the aforementioned book, McHale published **The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism** (2015).

McHale dedicates the concluding chapter to what comes after postmodernism which he refers to as post-postmodernism [~~Note: Summarize the discussion on page 175 about how the fall of the World Trade Center towers on September 11~~~~th~~ ~~symbolizes postmodernism’s end, because Minoru Yamasaki, the architect who designed them, is the one whose work marked the beginning of postmodernism].~~ McHale adopts Nealon’s ideas and asserts that post-postmodernism is not a turning point or a turn in a new direction. Instead, it is an “intensification and mutation of postmodernism, (McHale 2015, p. 177). That is to say, an intensification and mutation of characteristics and tendencies already present in postmodernism. Intensification implies a change in degree rather than character, but at some point a change in degree transforms into a change of character.

Therefore, the post in post-postmodernism designates that postmodernism achieved its mature form, mutated, and transformed into something that can be identified as something distinct according to its contours and actions without being completely foreign to what came before it.

McHale points to four elements of postmodernism that were intensified and now constitute four important characteristics of post-postmodernism. I will now briefly discuss one of them that is most relevant to our present discussion. McHale refers to this feature as “the end of the world,” (McHale 2015, p. 182-184).

Even if we do not cross a new virtual threshold in the new millennium’s first decades, virtual reality will continue to mutate, change, and develop, (McHale 2015, p. 180). Virtual reality/ realities is/are more present than ever, consuming more and more time and attention, and completing and replacing paramount reality. “The erasure of ontological stability and the breakdown of paramount reality, markers of postmodernist style, […] have become identifying marks of substantive reality,” (McHale 2015, pp. 180-181).

According to McHale, reality has caught up with literature. We are marching towards a cyborgic condition of human-machine integration previously imagined by science fiction writers and theorists like Donna Haraway. Components of the world that previously seemed futuristic are the characteristics and featured properties of everyday realia, (McHale 2015, 182). Reality possesses the quality of science fiction, (McHale 2015, 183). “In short, what science fiction literature wrote about in the past and that was interpreted as a projection of what would be in the future reflects the present today.”

“In short, technological development has caught up with cyberpunk, which no longer projects a future reality but only mirrors a *present* one,” (McHale 2015, p. 182, emphasis in the original).

If postmodernism dealt with the attack on the very core of essentialist subjectivity, post-postmodernism already deals with Posthumanism and the individual who represents himself in two simultaneous realities, one physical and the other virtual.

From this we see that the zone in the story, the very sphere where Micky and Natasha meet, is a **visualization** of the interface between the real world of the human user and the virtual world. This is the location in the substantive world where access is given to the individual to enter through the adjoining door to a different ontology. Furthermore, the story is also an **allegory** of existence in the computer terminal, or terminal identity, in which the crossing of ontological boundaries is a regular occurrence and the existence of a new decentralized spatiality parallel to the topography of physical reality is recognized. The adoption of new technologies has always had a powerful physical and mental influence on humankind, as well as on literature.