

Modernist Open Endings

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Abstract: The following article intends to offer a brief overview of the concept of open-endings in the context of Modernism and Postmodernism in literature and the arts while detailing aspects of it with references to specific works of literature or art. We shall try to illustrate how the idea and use of open endings in art reflect modern life's new realities, with its complexities and contradictions, anxieties, and lack of meaning. The latest facts shaped by historical and social evolution and the traumatic experiences of two world wars doubled by the instalment of terrible tyrannies in the forms of communism and fascism transformed individuals and nations, obliterating prior beliefs and complements in favour of meaninglessness, absurdity, and anxieties. The literary and artistic word reflect, as always, the transformations mentioned above and concerns, but this time they seem to lack answers. The perplexing and innumerable questions posed by our modern and contemporary world and the diversity and multitude of attitudes, ideologies, and opinions of today make(render) it impossible to reach even a very loose and fragile consensus. The fragility of the modern world is the one that keeps us away from close endings. In such a volatile world, any firm conclusion would prove fleeting.

Keywords: *open ending, modernism, unfinished, literature, art.*

Modernism, in itself, is an open-ended story, concept, phenomenon, movement. There is no clear ending to it as it has subtly mutated into postmodernism, which many see as a continuation of modernism. The designation itself tells us so. Even post-postmodernism contains the same stem and principle embedded, proving even further the open-ending of both modernism and postmodernism, off all contemporary stories and questions.

We seem to be living a never-ending story, humanity, so why are we so fond of endings? Because of our approaching end as individuals? The Bible teaches us that there will be an apothetic, apocalyptic end to life on earth, a final battle. If the forces of good win the battle, there will be eternal life in heaven. If not, damnation is eternal.

However, life does not end with us. However, apocalyptic scenes are present everywhere, starting with the Bible and other ancient books of beliefs, up to present-day all-popular Hollywood apocalyptic scripts. All aware of their mortality and concerned with humanity's fate, modernists seem to have understood

that their end is not the end and that people had not yet deciphered the meaning of life. Turning away from religion, with its salvation scenario of the finality of mortal life on earth only to be continued forever in the afterlife, they realized there are no explanations. The two eternal questions: “where do we come from?” and “where do we go?” were more actual than ever. Darwin’s evolutionary theory might have liberated scientific minds from superstitions related to origin, but as to the more tantalizing question of the final destination, it could offer but restlessness. The beginning was clear. What about the ending?

Following such concerns and interpretations, life was to be regarded as an intermediary station between birth and death, but the ending was unclear. Was that the end, or not? The two above mentioned questions related to origin and destinations do not find answers any longer; they are open-ended questions in modern and postmodern literature and the world. Existential questions have turned from religion’s close-ended form to the open-ended one of modern and contemporary anxieties.

In the established form of modernist rebellion against conventional literature and the newly risen star on the literary stage – the novel as a simple means of entertainment, modernists turned it into reflection, meditation. Instead of offering clear answers that would close any arguments with a perfect ending, they rose even more of them – all open-ended. A logical conclusion to a novel or work of art cannot function in an absurd world, as modernists saw theirs; it does not reflect reality, and, paradoxically, it does not answer any question!

The artistic revolt started earlier, with Romanticism. The Romantic rebellion that followed the Enlightenment with its emphasis on reason and combating superstition and religious fervour released chained accumulations and frustrations to populate the modern people’s psyche. The challenged faith led to new interpretations, questioning the established order of Heaven and Hell, starting in English Literature with Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and continued from a different perspective by William Blake, with his *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. New tendencies were also following breakthroughs in philosophy, influenced by Kant and German Idealism. According to Kant, people were under-aged, under constant tutelage from the State, Church or Army, obediently following orders without questioning them. They could not use their reason for their benefit. On the philosophical and aesthetical side, taking over from Plato’s ideas on art, human imperfection made it impossible to perceive and comprehend true art and pure beauty. That was a matter of the divine. The modern, romantic soul was split in two, in constant search for a new heavenly order on earth, while still anchored in the old traditions of faith with two separate worlds and lives - one earthly and the other heavenly. These were conditioned by a rhythmical cyclicity of birth, death and rebirth, with clear beginnings, developments and endings. The new torments of modernity challenged the established orders, oscillating between old and new, having lost the ages’ unity and balance.

From this torment, frustration and unbalance, the resulting split created tragic characters trying to inhabit both heaven and earth, an impossibility that the old Greeks denied starting with Icarus. The creations of Blake (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*) and E. T. A. Hoffman (*The Sandman*), Poe's *William Wilson*, Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* were expressions of this search for a new order, for an explanation for the new order. Freud would later psychoanalyze the authors and their characters, trying to find his own logical and reasonable explanations to ancient and modern manifestations of the irrational.¹ Based on old mythical and mystical interpretations and religious exegesis² combined with the theories of the newly risen star of psychoanalysis, modern writers started their battle for the definition of life and its meaning. This time, everything was different. The social and historical context was one of significant transformations, rapid changes in the structure and fabric of human lives and society that were not easy to cope with. The new generation of young writers was enthusiastic in creating new, original forms of expression, breaking with all previous traditions, but not as enthusiastic about life, to the celebration of life. With no clear ending in sight, life is now represented as a mere painful journey that leads to nowhere, as in Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. Contrary to the key in the title, this is not a love song at all, rather a wailing, a desperate cry of grief, the kind that is represented in Edward Munch's famous modernist painting.

Modernist fragmentation of space and time contributed to the breaking of unity; beginnings and endings being amalgamated within the story's evolution developments. Clarity as a tool of stability was lost. Eliot's *The Wasteland* starts somewhat chronologically, with the restart of the cycle of life, in spring, followed by memories of the winter. April, the month of rebirth, renewal, resurrection, is only built on death, on the previous generations' sacrifice, making it thus "cruel", a sad rather than joyful event. Celebration of life in modernist style.

Endings, closures are limits, limiting the work, exhausting the subject. The open ending is limitless, creative, freedom to speculate and continue. We might relate it to the limitlessness empowered by science and technology and explored by modernists through Sigmund Freud's interpretations and liberated from prior ages' superstitions.

In this paper, we shall focus on open-endings and epilogues in the novel and film, with brief references to other arts and support our thesis that the concept of open-ending was spread across all the arts, as art reflects most clearly society's anxieties. The challenged and troubled western society of the 20th century, demanding answers and enforcing partial answers that have yet to be validated by time, was mirrored by the time's artistic expressions. A succinct analysis of those expressions will offer us radiography of society as well.

¹ Explored by Sigmund Freud in his 1919 essay *The Uncanny*.

² James Frazer's *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. It had a significant impact on the literary world, influencing as well European thought.

We shall try to show that the open ending in literature and the arts in the contemporary world results from centuries of evolution of art and society that found its full expression in modernism and its continuation, postmodernism. We relate this modern obsession with open endings with the fascination of life and death interpreted first through the pious works of the Renaissance artists, later by Romantic artists and finally by the modernist and postmodernist expressions. These changes and transformations enhanced when humanity experienced a radical shift in the collective consciousness about the meaning of life and death, following the scientific revolutions and the theory of evolution. The result was a challenge to people's relation to religion as the universal source of truth and comfort³, leaving emptiness behind that the new unrooted artists tried to fill with their uneasy questions, more than answers. The eternal fear of death was uncomforted by faith now. When the final end is not definite and clear any longer, questions are left unanswered, and endings are wide open. Through the open doors of incertitude, primal fears escape from the infernos of the neurotic minds to populate the devastated earth – the Paris of Baudelaire or the Wastelands of Eliot. Expressions of these evolutions and transformations are found in all significant artistic expressions, from poetry to the novel, from theatre to sculpture, from painting to picture movies. All accompanied and surrounded by music, even if not the *Ode to Joy*, but rather the *Totentanz – Dance macabre*. In the following, we shall present but a few examples to try and prove our theory.

Furthermore, quite important: with modernism, madness was officially allowed into art.

Literature and film

Modernist novels and poetry, like modernist music, were not mainstream. Mainstream was the happy ending, the clear-cut end of the story, one that left the reader/viewer, the audience pleasantly comfortably and happy without effort. They were anti-commercial, knowingly and willingly approaching and presenting themes that are not easy, that is challenging and disputed, controversial. Those are the kind of questions and themes that lead to discussions, debates, exchange of ideas, and eventually progress, enhancing our knowledge or our understanding of the world, in our transformation into more conscient, aware human beings.

In picture movies as well, mainstream is happy-ending movies, the box office hits that please without any effort required from the audience. Nevertheless, contrary to possible appearances, modernist intentions are not elitist, are not anti-popular. The desire is not to retreat and isolate into the ivory tower and separate from the real world, but to try and bring awareness to the people, instead of numbing their minds with an easily affordable drug in the form of light literature and films. The critique of Theodor Adorno in his essay “Against popular culture” is not elitist. Adorno, a Marxist, could not have been elitist and dismissive towards

³ This comfort had been there, in various forms, since the beginnings of humankind.

the masses. His critique was based on the idea that popular culture was enslaving people instead of liberating them by transforming them into a conscienceless mass of consumers of ready-made products, served mechanically according to an easy recipe. In his opinion, this was stealing away their freedom of choice, transforming them into mechanical creatures that could not think for themselves. Instead, they were following blindly what they were served. The drug of light stories and happy endings. Nor challenging, not shaking any beliefs or preconceptions - stability, as in the *Brave New World*.

Open endings are the opposite. They invite readers to engage in reflection, implication, involvement, searching for solutions, challenging the obvious, and finding the new. British novelist and critic Ford Maddox Ford was one of the leading figures of literary modernism in English literature, and his book *The English Novel*, published in 1930, offers a critical overview of this literary genre in modernism, and about the happy endings: "It is all very well to say that such happy endings were the convention of the day, that you find them in the *School for Scandal*, *The Vicar of Wakefield* and in every eighteenth-century romance that you pick up out of the twopenny book-box, and it is all very well to say that the public demands a happy ending." [Ford, 1930: 93-94]

Further, he discusses the result of such poor writings, effecting a lousy reputation for novelists and their craft, due to the poor-quality literature they wrote:

[...] his was not a serious profession. In England, that State of things still pertains. In the demobilization forms after the late War, the novelist was actually placed in the eighteenth category—along with gipsies, vagrants, and other non-productive persons; and my last public act in Great Britain being to allow my name to be placed on a list of voters, when I gave my avocation to the political agent as being that of a novelist, he exclaimed: "Oh, don't say that, sir. Say 'Gentleman!'" He was anxious that his list should appear as serious as possible. [Ford, 1930: 95]

According to Ford, a serious writer did not have to follow the conventions of the day. Therefore he was free to organize the structure of their novels as they believed to be best. Not happy endings were allowed. These intended to wake up the people from their induced false dreams and, following Kant, to encourage them to use their own intelligence:

Ordinary humanity, deprived of the possibility of viewing either lives or life, makes naturally for a pessimism that demands relief either in the drugs of the happy endings of falsified fictions or in the anodynes of superstition—one habit being as fatal to the human intelligence as the other. [Ford, 1930: 125]

The way out of such a 'fatal', almost dystopian destiny for humanity was offered by the "upholders of the arts" by offering the public works that encouraged them to think for themselves, to get engaged with the story, to put some effort into

understanding: “[...] in perusing this sort of book the reader must be prepared to do a great deal of the work himself—within his own mind.” [Ford, 1930: 24]

All this was happening in a time of deep pessimism and lack of moral directions, following the trauma and social transformations brought along by the Great War. Again, the arts’ role is underlined, its importance emphasized, against the background offered by the remarkable transformation in culture. The same educational and moral role of the art is offered here, as later by Adorno. Art was to liberate the people’s minds, get them involved in the day’s matters, consider their place in society, acknowledge reality, and take an active role in it.

However, we, as upholders of the Arts, the Moralists having been pretty well blotted out as a national or international factor by the avalanche that in 1914 began to overwhelm classical culture and revealed religion alike, we then might just as well ascribe the Fall of Rome to the inartistic materialism of the true-Roman citizen as to any other cause. For the function of the Arts in the State—apart from the consideration of aesthetics—is so to aerate the mind of the taxpayer as to make him less dull a boy. Or if you like, it is by removing him from his own immediate affairs and immersing him in those of his fellows to give him a better view of the complicated predicaments that surround him. [Ford, 1930: 21]

In such a context, one of the foremost writers who took up the challenge and did not conform to the conventions, risking his financial success, was William Faulkner. His writings have all the features of modernism: no happy ending, thoughts that never end in the streams of consciousness because they are overtaken by other dreams, streams that never end, except in the nearby ocean of forgiveness and forgetting where he plunges to end at least that chapter of the family saga, with Quentin’s suicide. This intermediate close ending is only opening the next one. Quentin’s sufferings are passed along by the baptism to Caudy’s daughter, in a different form, not intellectual and idealistic, but plain and vain. Further degradation and decay. The grand ending of the family and an era is not heroic and clean cut. It is a gradual decomposition and fragmentation into nothingness, with multiple splitters breaking away to all corners of the world as the house of the Compsons falls. It is not grand at all; it does not go away with a roar, with a rumble of thunder, but with multiple distorted dimmer voices lost in the tumult of the new era of modernity. The voices of Quentin, Jason, and Caudy, and their mother get lost within the new world’s more significant concerto. The ending is not clear; it fades away, open for several interpretations, even after the post scriptum. According to each reader’s passions, Jason could still have married and fathered children, continuing thus the family line. Even so, his distrust of and dissociation with the Compsons made him a voluntary outsider, a chosen misfit that projected himself outside the family, cutting all ties and loose ends, deleting the family history with the selling of the house. Even if he had started a family of his own, it would not have been the Compsons. The ending might be open, but the story has already been told.

Faulkner stated himself in the post scriptum that Jason was the only sane Compson. He even hated the Compsons and considered all other people as

Compsons – not to be trusted. He seems to be the only sane one in an insane world, the modernist world where everything suddenly turns upside down. In this world, values and concepts, codes of honour and living are abandoned, only to be replaced by their distorted reflections of triviality, immorality, decadence, and decay. Candace is doomed, and she knows it, but with her, the entire family was doomed, she being just the result of the decaying house of the Compsons. The House and the people belonging to it seemed to have reached the end of their history and weakened by external and internal factors like the Civil War and marriage with lesser peers and the changing times that left no place for the maladapted.

In a resemblance of Poe's *House of Usher*, the last representatives of the House of Compson fade away and disappear in the grand quake of modern times, with its rapidly changing values and constantly shifting epicentre and gravitational point. Jason survives because he is by choice, not a Compson and despises their world. He adapts to the new times and, stripped of his fortune, becomes a self-made man. The fact that the family line ends with him remaining a childless bachelor could be interpreted differently. He had already rejected his belonging to the Compsons, so the family is already dead for him. Relieved from the burdens of taking care of the family after his mother's death, he sells the last symbol of the "old world" - the family house. All ties have been cut and ended. He is now not a Compson any longer, but just a regular guy trying to make his fortune. And he succeeds. However, he is just one among other millions; the family dissolved and disappeared. Traumatized by his family's experiences, Jason chooses not to have one of his own and to end the line by fading away in the anonymity of the crowds. He becomes a man of the crowd, the one described brilliantly by Poe, without any distinction, a John Doe, with no different identity than all the others. Following a similar pattern, Candy and her daughter, Quentin, disappear and dissolve and dissipate into the crowd.

The trace of the Compson's glorious history returns to their first poor drifter ancestor's anonymity from Scotland. It appeared from nowhere, and it returned to nothing. The Appendix after the last chapter is telling us just that. Still, the reader is left with the liberty and maybe even invitation to get his imagination sparkled and, according to their own feelings and emotions and desires to try and continue the story, to convince themselves of other possible endings for it, from Quentin possibly getting on the right track, maybe with the help of her mother, or for Jason possibly marrying and having children, and continuing this way the story. Faulkner makes it quite clear that this would not be the case, but still, the conclusions as to the fate of the last three remaining Compsons are not definite but hinted at. This way, there is still some room left for the passionate, imaginative reader to free their creativity and continue the story in their universe. Maybe even write a continuation of it, sometimes.

The Appendix seems to be necessary to illuminate the baffled, dazed and confused reader that managed to complete the last chapter of this modernist masterpiece. The extreme complex tasks of presenting the story from the

perspective of an idiot and then from the perspective of a troubled self-destructive mind, using interminable charges of the stream of consciousness and fragmentation, may exhaust the readers, leaving them frustrated at the end of the novel. After reading the Appendix, the muddy waters start to clear. It seems now that this would be the proper and definitive explanation and ending of the story. Still, although bringing many needed clarifications, we believe that Faulkner intentionally loses ends for the imagination of avid and creative readers. Like any good writer would do, according to Salman Rushdie. In an article written in 2019 on Kurt Vonnegut and his novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Rushdie praised Vonnegut for leaving an open end to his novel:

It is perfectly possible, perhaps even sensible, to read Billy Pilgrim's entire Tralfamadorian experience as a fantastic, traumatic disorder brought about by his wartime experiences—as “not real.” Vonnegut leaves that question open, as a good writer should. That openness is the space in which the reader is allowed to make up his or her own mind. [Rushdie, 2019]

Faulkner wrote at the height of literary modernism, Henry James at dawn. With James, there is a transition from Victorian Literature to Modernism. His long writing career allowed him to witness and use different writing styles and techniques while knowing fame and fall. In one of his transitory phases, struggling to find a way out after a disastrous reception of his play *Guy Domville*, James returned to some more popular literary genres—the ghost story. He imprinted on it new artistic expressions, turning the plain ghost story into a psychological one and leaving the end as wide open as possible for interpretation, creating a masterpiece of literature that is still and continuously debated on, a century and a quarter after its first publication. *The Turn of the Screw*, as this is the story we would like to focus on now, is a novella on which critics and readers alike still argue today, therefore one of the perfect open endings.

According to various developments and trends in society, there have been many interpretations of his story's open ending, from mysticism to neuroticism and repressed sexuality to Marxist and feminist interpretations.

The Turn of the Screw, 1898

Henry James was at a turn of his life, at least at the turn of his literary career when he wrote *The Turn of the Screw*. Already an established novelist, James had tried his hand as a playwright and produced a play entitled *Guy Domville*, published in 1894 and staged in January 1895. The opening night would prove disastrous for the author, being booed by the “rougher” part of the audience after the performance. Not a happy ending for his dreams of playwrighting. He decided to give up theatre and return to novel writing, to publish three years later his stories *The Turn of the Screw* and *Covering End*, in a volume entitled *The Two Magics*.

Since its publication, the story has created an unprecedented number of debates, discussions, critical analysis, and reader reactions, becoming James's most

known work, despite the other great novels he authored.⁴ It seems all a little too much for a ghost story. The response lies with the originality of the way James constructed it, leaving so much ambiguity in the end that anybody can imagine what they want when they read it and approach it as a different type of story each. The author's brilliance lies precisely within this performance; one cannot 'grasp' it, if we are to use one of the famous double meaning word sat the end of the story.

The Turn of the Screw has been to critics a chameleon text, taking on a colouring that lets it blend in with almost any way of reading it. Depending on who is reading it, the story can be a gothic tale in the tradition of Poe, a romantic tale in Hawthorne's tradition, or a realistic tale in the tradition of Howells. It can be a Freudian tale of sexual repression, an allegory of good and evil, a detective story about murder and deception, a call for better treatment of children, or a reflection of hidden truths about its author. It can demonstrate its author's knowledge of scientific research on ghosts, his rejection of that knowledge, his accord with the social structures of his time or his rejection of those structures. [Beidler, 1995: viii]

In this story, we have it all: Double meanings, double turn of the screw, multiple turnings of the stairs, signaling the multiple twists the story might take. A confrontation with ghosts symbolizes a confrontation with the dark and dangerous unknown; the outcome is incertitude. After the confrontation scene at the end of chapter 9, introduced by "I found myself, at the turn of a page", the governess is confidently victorious, but that is not the end of the story, just another turn. In the end, the turn takes another twist, leaving readers in horror and wonder, frustratingly unable to "grasp" the meaning of the open-ending. Noticing the meanings of the word "grasp", both as to seize and hold firmly and to understand, comprehend, the end is intriguingly open:

[...] the **grasp** with which I recovered him **might have been** that of catching him in his fall. I caught him, yes, I held him—it **may be imagined with what a passion**; but at the end of a minute I began to feel what it truly was that I held. We were alone with the quiet day, and his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped. [Beidler, 1898: 126]

It is this unclosed end of the story that has created and led to so many interpretations, and that invites readers and critics alike to take sides in their interpretations, as no objectivity seems to be possible in this masterfully engineered structure of a story: "It is almost impossible to read the story without taking sides and almost impossible to approach the story critically without knowing where one stands on it." [Beidler, 1995: 137]

It gives a final touch to the horror of the story, a horror that had been haunting the characters and the readers alike and now releases its full blow and shattering impact by the overwhelming and apothecic end that leaves the questions unanswered. The contemporary master of the macabre and horror stories

⁴ A critical review in *The Independent*, in 1899, said this about the book: "[...] the most hopelessly evil story that we have ever read in literature, ancient or modern". [James, 1992: VII]

explains the function of the open end as a basic recipe for triumphant mystery tales: “[...] the very basis of the horror story: *secrets best left untold and things best left unsaid*. [King, 2010: 88]

Instead of concluding the story, the shocking and unexplainable death of Miles opens entire new worlds of possible explanations and elucidations. Beidler presents no less than 26 different explanations on Miles’ death, collected from various authors and critics, expanding over 60 years, 1934-1994, before offering five more possibilities of reading it in the volume that he coordinates. These opinions range from the governess being mad, to the eternal battle of good and evil, with Miles being evil or trying to fight off evil and the governess supporting and protecting him, including one about Miles not dying at all but telling us the story from behind the character of Douglas.

All the many reactions to James’ story prove that he did the right thing: he wrote a good book. Readers and critics alike were ‘enslaved’ by his story, reading and rereading it repeatedly, trying to make sense of it, understanding the turns, investigating the facts, and speculating about the emotions. We are forced to analyze and interpret, use our intellect and imagination, knowledge and experience, and write the story in finding an explanation for its open ending. It is a quest for finding the truth, and as many investigators, as many truths, as truth is primarily personal. This quest is, in our opinion, a perfect example of the modern people’s quest for getting the meaning of our modern lives.

In the end, the turn that the story takes is unexpected, frightening and does not seem to make sense. Such sudden turns of life were experienced in the rapidly changing world in the first half of the twentieth century. Technological progress and social and political developments followed so fast, and life seems to develop at an increasingly accelerated pace. Many people found themselves baffled, dazed and confused by the surrounding realities, unable to understand and make sense of what was going on. Such alternating experiences would be reflected by artists and writers in their works, as they were trying to catch the moment of the day.

Cinematography

The seventh art has its specific reflection of modernism. Following modernist and open-ended novels, modernist films use the same recipe to baffle and invite the audience to actively participate in the story, use their intelligence and imagination, and construct multiple versions of the ending, which is at the same time the future of the characters. Motion pictures have encompassed from the beginning the divergent directions and struggles of the literary world, as films follow a predefined plot, tell a story, present characters and situations, just like a novel. Movies being mostly picturization of novels. In this way, movies have followed and continued their historical evolution, taking over the novel’s role as the primary form of popular entertainment in the late 19th and early 20th century. There is a need for a good and clear structure for good entertainment, which does not confuse and strain the reader and viewer. An exciting beginning to catch the

attention of the audience, a smooth transition to a logical narrative in the middle section, and a pleasant and satisfying ending, that leaves the audience complete and comforted, with the satisfaction of bringing the sailing ship back home securely into the harbour, of completing the task, closing it, leaving no rests behind and being thus able to move forward, to the next “challenge” posed by yet another entertaining novel or movie.

With modernist movies, the narrative is not adding up. The plot is not constructing, the characters are not composed but decomposed, the untold story and setting are falling apart instead of building up, the plot is de-structured, sounds are shattered. A possible reality is reflected in a mirror that has broken into many small pieces. In the lack of a premise, there can be no conclusions. There is no beginning, no middle, no end. Ambiguity is everything. No opening, no closing. Everything is a giant open puzzle, filled in by the viewer who becomes participant and creator, conductor, and interpreter. The reverie presented on the screen fascinates and enslaves the viewers into reveries of themselves, freeing their imagination and leaving them searching for more clues and indications, creating their own ones if they do not find others. They are continuing the author’s work, taking it further, assuming it, making it their own.

In *Casablanca*, 1942, the plot revolves around a love story, a romantic drama, and we still have a classic movie, following all the ingredients of a successful and captivating story. However, some elements of modernism appear as well. The beginning of the story is *in media res*, followed by the classic, captivating and intriguing, suspenseful development of the story, the ambiguity of characters that keeps the viewer constantly tense, wondering what turn the plot will take an ending that is both glorious and sad. The story of the two lovers ends here; there is a new life for Ilsa and Victor. One passionate love story ends, and another one, more profound, based on humanist ideals and respect, on hope for the entire human race, is continued. It seems that everything is neatly wrapped up for the expected ending. But no, the end of the love story represents the dawn of a new era for Rick and Renault. The movie’s closing scene is the opening to new stories with the famous ending line: “Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship”. Each end is a beginning in the constant and continuous cycle of life, which seems to be one of the movie’s vital messages. That is a welcomed reinvigorating effect on the audience, as they are saddened by the broken love story, even if impressed by the sacrifice that the two lovers make for the greater good. The movie served as well political and propagandistic purposes and was a great box-office hit. Therefore it is not conclusive to represent modernist ambiguity and open endings, but still foreshadowing to an extent the cinematographical experiments of the avant-garde.

Twenty years later, the world was changed. *L’Année dernière à Marienbad* (1961) breathes different air, infused by the experimental attempts made in theatre and cinematography. This is a different kind of love story. Times had changed dramatically over the previous two decades. War had ended, and the new society had forgotten mostly its terrors, confident in a new prosperous life and a new kind

of hedonism in the late 50' and early 60'. But not all society. Thinkers and writers, artists of all kind, employed their sensibilities to receive and comprehend other sensations than the apparent mainstream happiness, driven by materialism and consumerism, to a new type of collective self-indulgence.

Although literary modernism was already a thing of the past, the cinematography was just discovering it. The new avant-garde movement in French cinema known as the Left Bank set out to implement the modernist manifesto into the seventh art expression. *Last Year in Marienbad* is the best example in many ways. The loose structure, almost impossible to grasp, the dreamlike appearance of a given reality, unreliable characters with no names, no history, no future, possible but also improbable prior meeting, affairs or desires, unclear relations between main characters make this movie into a modernist manifesto. We do not know, for instance, if the woman and the second man are married or not, a couple or not, or if this is only a repetition of the same dream of the woman, with another man, in the following year. There is no clear beginning, no intelligible structures in the middle, only fragmentation and illusion, and no closed ending. The entire creation seems to be an open structure, with no ties, no anchors, fleeting ephemerally as a well-constructed illusion, a dream of possible events yet to come. The music, strikingly modernist in its dissonance and rupture, the visual effects of surrealist paintings, the lack of plot and narrative all take us back to a story that might have never begun and shall probably never end because perhaps it never existed.

Hitchcock's cameo appearance in the movie does not help at all. The viewer is left to search for possible meaning, watch it repeatedly, and look for invisible clues that would help put all the pieces of the puzzle together, but not really able to find a closure to it. The unsaid is more important than the things that are said. As life does not make much meaning and the world seems to be an absurd place to live in⁵, art reflects once again life and leaves its story, just like the story of life, unfinished. Its main stylistic feature is that of ambiguity.

Sculpture

We relate here briefly to sculpture as another art under the spell of open ending to support our theory of the open-ending as a typical modernist feature, yet with roots in previous centuries in the case of sculpture. When speaking of modernist sculpture, Romanians automatically think of Brâncuși. He is the most representative, by far, of all Romanian sculptors. Some of his works fit perfectly into the topic of an open ending. Brâncuși's *Endless Column* is one of the striking symbols of endlessness. The sculpture is a perfect example of open endings in the art of sculpture. Its incomplete top unit symbolizes the open ending, the infinity, while the incomplete bottom possibly suggests the unknown depth of origins.

Brâncuși was one of the most brilliant students of French sculptor Auguste Rodin, considered by many to be the founder of modern sculpture. Rodin also

⁵ The film was shot after the publication of *Waiting for Godot* and two years after *Rhinoceros*.

employed the technique of open endings, or, to be more accurate, unfinished works in several of his sculptures. The most famous apparently unfinished sculpture is *The Thinker*. It marks a break from the traditional sculpture. However, Rodin was not the first to experiment with seemingly unfinished sculptures. Dating back to the Age of the Renaissance works by famous artists as Donatello and Michelangelo appear to the contemporary eye as possible first representations of modernist art. Still disputed if the works were left unfinished by purpose or by chance, they mark a different vision on closure. In the artistic tradition, they are called non-finito, the unfinished. One illustrative example of such a sculpture is Michelangelo Buonarroti's *Rondanini Pietà*, on which he worked for the last 12 years of his life. The sculpture style is utterly different from that used in the *Pietà* from 1498-1499, when he was only 24, or from David's *Statue*. In these sculptures, the details are impressive, taking us back to the perfection of Parian marble statues of Greek antiquity. The *Rondanini Pietà* does not place any emphasis on the perfection of details. The suggestion is what creates the emotion. Art historian Frederick Hartt gives a poetical description of the effects and emotions triggered by this sculpture:

Lofty, soaring, erect, the recurved group suggests less a *Pietà* than a Resurrection, the ultimate Christian victory. [...] The group floats. The marble is no longer sufficient for any of its elements. Corporeal beauty, even physical substance, dissolves. The unfinished is at one with the immaterial. Light breaks from its marble prison. [Hartt, 1968: 300].

Examples from the other arts could continue with Hauer's and Schoenberg's radical break with classical music in using no key to a composition leaving all sounds to be on the same level, indistinctively. The result is a more chaotic musical arrangement, disharmonic, unbalanced, that seems to have no clear beginning, development or ending, with the same effect on understanding and emotion. Stravinsky's *Rites of Spring*, drawing heavily on primaevial themes, present a kind of musical exorcism, primitive ritual dances to death, a *Dance Macabre* in a shocking form that revolted the audiences. Forms and spaces were left open, interpretations as well.

Conclusion

According to writer and literary critic Lee Rourke, open endings as endless novels are the best recipe for "endless fascination" [Rourke, 2012]. The endless questioning brings eternal readers. We might compare open endings to unfinished creative works, to incompleteness; they are inviting, exciting, provocative, daring us to get involved, to participate, to want to help finish it.

Loose ends, ambiguity, uncertainty, questioning, frustration at not knowing, seem all more human, more real-life than neatly closed stories, offering all the answers on a plate, leaving readers happily contented. Instead of escape from reality into a perfectly constructed (narratively) and shaped world, with clear leads and ends converging into a perfectly closed final, one is left with the alternative of the journey into parallel worlds, full of mystery, with real-life dead-ends and lack of

answers. This alternative seems to be more faithful to life. It seems more genuine, more believable, but also more frustrating, anxious, deflated. It may divide readers into two: ones who read for immediate pleasure and entertainment, for the immediate yet ephemeral satisfaction of reaching the end, closing the task, completing the circle, eliminating doubt and dilemmas. These readers can now move on immediately to other “tasks” and domestic activities, like watching a TV Reality show. The other group are the ones who read for themselves and, after reading the story, remain voluntarily for hours, days, weeks in the wisely constructed narrative trap. They dissect and analyze, think and rethink, repeatedly go over specific paragraphs and passages, ultimately unable to escape the compulsive urge to reread. They are yet feeling liberated.

If the intention is to give immediate and ephemeral satisfaction to readers and audiences, close endings work just fine. The other option is for authors and creators to invite their audience to use their intelligence. Such authors want their readers to think and wonder. They want to push them in the search for answers of their own. Readers should want to continue the story, to take an active part in it, to become part of the plot or the picture or the rhythm, to play the role. In that case, open endings are the opening questions that invite us to further adventures on our own or with friends, actually to start the next story. Here, satisfaction becomes intellectual.

In modernity, there is no end, just hiding and hoping without hope. After Darwin’s evolution theory, Nietzsche followed with his famous “God is dead”. New political ideologies claimed that religion was nothing but “opium for the people”. The millennia of faith that kept society together and people’s hope for a better afterlife were first shaken then shattered. The new utopias of ideology promised to create a “new man”, freed from all past burdens, faith included. The new people were supposed to put their entire energy into the State’s well-being, of the significant community, be it national or universal. The new socially engineered citizens, freed from egoistic concerns about personal salvation, serving a higher purpose, would be liberated from all worries and embrace and welcome their ephemeral existence followed by nothing, drugged this time by another opioid – political ideology.

Rather than finding and bringing peace, these movements seemed to have liberated not the people but their most terrible fears. Expressions of this new reality of the lost sense permeated first the arts and literature. Stravinsky’s Rites of Spring, with its violently disharmonic atonalities and dissonance and the ballet’s frenetic dance, dancing the characters to death, gives another interpretation of the eternal cycle birth-death-rebirth. Inspired by Russian folktales, the composition is a modernist dissonance of life, inspired by modernist thought and concerns and disillusion with life, based on primaeval rites and rituals, just like T. S. Eliot’s *The Wastelands*. Here as well, spring does mean new life, rebirth, the emphasis being instead on death. In Stravinsky’s composition, the heroine dances herself to death, bringing the ultimate sacrifice for her people to survive. In Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, the very beginning of the poem – *The Burial of the Dead* – starts with the

introduction of spring yet not emphasizing the beauty and vitality of spring, of newborn life, but the degeneration and decay and putrefaction of a previous life. The message reads as a warning and foreseeing of the future. It also emphasizes the inutility and uselessness of any joy related to rebirth. This way, April, the month of blossomed trees and wonderful spring flowers, with their marvelous colours and perfumes, turns into “the cruelest month”. In this hypostasis, it means nothing but the coming death after an illusional and very ephemeral life—a butterfly’s wing flutter. Eliot expresses here the worries and fears of an entire generation, of a whole age, left dazed and confused by all the revolutions of science and thought of the previous century. Like the decadents that preceded him, he remained with the choice stated by Barbey d’Aurevilly in his review of Joris-Karl Huysmans’ *À rebours*: “After *Le fleur de mal* I told Baudelaire ‘it only remains to you to choose between the muzzle of a pistol and the foot of the Cross’. Baudelaire chose the foot of the Cross. But will the author of *À rebours* make the same choice?” [Baldick, 2006: 136]. Fortunately, Eliot made the same choice as Baudelaire and Huysmans and turned to more religious themes in his later writings.

An ending without closing is a question without an answer. We are hereby invited to fill in the gaps. If we want to reach the truth, it is only through our efforts. Nobody will find it for us. The ready-made versions are standardized, serially mass-produced consumer goods that we are marketed into buying. ‘General’ truths that fit nobody.

Nevertheless, this is not the end. At least not a closed one. Everything is wide open. There is still hope. Art will adapt and survive, reflecting the adaptation and survival of humanity. There is eternity, and art is eternal, eternally our salvation.

That this is not the final stage of the Novel is obvious; there will be developments that we cannot foresee, strain our visions how we may. There are probably—humanity being stable, change the world how it may—there are probably eternal principles for all the arts, but the applications of those principles are eternally changing, or eternally revolving. [Ford, 1930: 141]

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