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ON THE FUNCTION OF THE ENDING IN THE ENGLISH NOVEL

All elements of the structure of a literary work are important in contributing to its general character and value, and the ending of the novel has its particular significance since it constitutes the point toward which the plot gradually evolves to be finally resolved. What Aristotle said about the well-constructed plot, which cannot either begin or end at any point one likes, can be applied to the novel as well. "An end", according to Aristotle, "is that which is naturally after something itself, either as it is necessary or usual consequent, and with nothing else after it."

However, quite a few critics maintain that modern fiction no longer obeys Aristotle's rule of the unity of the plot and that the conclusion of the modern novel has changed its function radically. The function of the ending has certainly enough significance to undergo a close critical examination.

The focus of interest in the present paper will be on three aspects of the subject: The discussion will begin with the presentation of opinions expressed by English novelists who have written on the role and the nature of the ending. This will be followed by a brief and, by necessity, selective survey of English literary conventions determining its character. The survey will be concluded by an evaluation of critical approaches to modern "open" endings.

Novelists themselves have always been well aware of the problems which must be faced in bringing the plot of a novel to an end. Already in the early stages of the development of

the English novel the problems were hinted at by Henry Fielding. While commenting on the use of the epistolary method, the novelist remarked that "by making use of letters, the writer is freed from the regular beginnings and conclusions of stories, with some other formalities in which the reader of taste finds no less ease and advantage, than the author himself"¹.

In 1816 Walter Scott expressed similar views when he wrote the ending of Old Mortality. The ending contains a conversation with Miss Bushbody, a lady of refined literary tastes. While discussing ways of concluding a novel, the writer says to the lady:

Really Madam, /.../, you must be aware that every volume of a narrative turns less and less interesting as the author draws to a conclusion; just like your tea, which, though excellent hyson, is necessarily weaker and more insipid in the last cup².

George Eliot blames some of the deficiency on the essentially inassimilable nature of the ending. In her opinion "conclusions are the weak point of most authors, but some of the fault lies in the very nature of a conclusion, which is at best a negation"³.

Anthony Trollope complained that it was not easy to write an exciting conclusion, because readers were difficult to please. He wrote in Barchester Towers /1857/:

What novelist, what Fielding, what Scott, what George Sand, or Sue, or Dumas, can impart an interest to the last chapter of his fictitious history? Promises of two children and superhuman happiness are of no avail, nor assurance of extreme respectability carried to an age far exceeding that usually allotted to the mortals. The sorrows of our heroes and heroines, they are your delight, oh public! their sorrows, or their sins, or their absurdities; not their virtues, good sense, and consequent rewards. When we begin to tint our final pages with couleur de rose, as in accordance with fixed rule we must do, we altogether extinguish our own powers of pleasing. When we become dull we offend your intellect; and we must become dull or we should offend your taste⁴.

Trollope saw no way out of the dilemma created by the perplexing choice between an interesting conclusion which would, however, be contrary to his readers' expectations, and a dull happy ending; he opted for the latter.

In the opinion of Henry James the novelist had more artistic freedom in choosing his own method of concluding a story, but he also had more responsibility; his problem consisted in selecting the right moment to stop the development of the plot. James asked questions which are not easy to answer:

Up to what point is such and such a development indispensable to the interest? What is the point beyond which it ceases to be rigorously so? Where, for the complete expression of one's subject, does a particular relationship stop - giving way to some other not concerned in that expression?

Really, universally relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so⁵.

The ending then, is bound to be an artificial and arbitrary closure of various relationships and developments in the novel, since it collides with realistic tendencies of fiction to represent life as it is. Limitations imposed on the novel by the arbitrary ending are pointed out also by E.M.Forster, a modern writer and critic. He, too, notes the weakness of the ending:

Nearly all novels are feeble at the end. This is because the plot requires to be wound up. Why is it necessary? Why is there not a convention which allows a novelist to stop as soon as he feels bored? Alas, he has to round things off, and usually the characters go dead while he is at work, and our final impression of them is through deadness⁶.

E.M.Forster regards the convention of writing a "proper" ending as a damper cast on the activities of characters after they have acquired lives of their own in the course of the development of the plot. It is, according to Forster, one of

the two possible explanations of the inherent defect of the novel, the other points to the "failure of pep, which threatens the novelist like all workers"⁷.

The above quotations express opinions of writers of different times. Their voices are by no means isolated; other novelists have grappled with similar difficulties. Some were, like Anthony Trollope, fairly content with the prevailing literary conventions of their times, others accepted the formalized conclusions rather unwillingly, still other rejected it completely. As can be expected, it is in the twentieth century that most criticism of the traditional technique can be found.

In view of their frequently despairing attitude to the problem, it will be interesting to see what kind of conclusions writers did provide for their novels and how they approached the difficult task in different periods of the history of the English novel.

The endings of novels which belong to particular literary periods have their own prevailing characteristics and regularities; so much so that in many cases it becomes possible to tell the age of the novel by the mode in which its conclusion is written.

The dominant type of the novel in the early stages of the development of the genre, focused or reporting series of interesting events in the life of the main character. More often than not, novelists began their stories with the birth of the hero or the heroine, and then followed them throughout their lives until old age and /or/ death. Sometimes the initial point of the story fell on an event later than birth and the ending consisted in marriage, but also in these cases, writers usually considered it necessary to inform the reader of what happened before and after the two points.

The Nachgeschichte conclusions of such chronicles of lives did not structurally belong to the basic framework of the novel and were frequently distinguished as separate units. In Henry Fielding's Tom Jones /1749/, for example, the Nachgeschichte ending occupies "Chapter the Last In Which the History is Con-

cluded". The chapter provides information on what befell the major characters after Sophia and Tom had been united.

The conclusion of Pamela /1741/ by Samuel Richardson stands apart from the body of the novel even more distinctly since it assumes the form of the "editor's" note whereas the rest is written in the epistolary technique. The note contains the usual enumeration of the significant events which shape the fates of the main characters.

It is the conviction that a broader perspective of characters' lives was indispensable in the novel that did not allow Charlotte Brontë', a Victorian novelist, to conclude Jane Eyre /1847/ with a mere promise of her heroine's wedding. The writer provides an additional chapter as a conclusion in which Jane Eyre announces that she did marry Rochester and then says:

My tale draws to its close; one word respecting my experience of married life, and one brief glance at the fortunes of those whose names have most frequently recurred in this narrative; and I have done^s.

What follows is an assurance of her happiness in marriage and a list of characters with "a brief glance at the fortune" of each of them.

Charlotte's sister Emily Brontë' avoided an enumeration of this kind in Wuthering Heights /1847/. In the ending of the novel she depicts a scene in which two lovers are seen together by the narrator, who learns that they are about to get married. In the last paragraph the narrator reflects on the progress of time as he looks at the grave of Catherine and Heathcliff. The author does not supply a conventional formal conclusion for the novel, marriage and death, nevertheless, play a considerable role in its ending.

Death and marriage provided a most convenient means of concluding a story and they soon became part and parcel of the "prescribed" ending, which has lived well into our times. "If it was not for death and marriage I do not know how the average novelist would conclude", says E.M.Forster in The Aspects of



Novel. "Death and marriage are almost his only connexion between his characters and his plot; and the reader is more ready to meet him there, and take a bookish view of them, provided they occur later on in the book"⁹. This kind of conventional ending gave the traditional novel its aura of completeness and finality. A Nachgeschichte contributed to it by creating the impression that the author had exhausted his material thoroughly, leaving nothing more to say on the subject. In spite of the fact that it helped to "round things off", the Nachgeschichte conclusion was often felt to be structurally cumbersome. Walter Scott got so impatient with it in Old Mortality that he nearly left it out from the novel even though the "precedats are wanting for a practice, which might forward be convenient both to readers and compilers"¹⁰. The writer, however, yielded to the arguments of Miss Bushbody, who assured him: "... your plea of omitting a formal conclusion will never do"¹¹. And so he did present, in the conversation with the lady, the customary roll-call of characters and their fortunes.

Similar conclusions were used in other novels by Scott as well as by numerous other novelists such as Smollett, Jane Austen, W.M.Thackeray, and Charles Dickens. The Nachgeschichte listings were often introduced by lines exemplified by Oliver Twist /1837-8/:

The fortunes of those who have figured in this tale are nearly closed. The little that remains to their historian to relate, is told in a few and simple words...¹².

or by The Old Curiosity Shop /1840-1/:

It remains but to dismiss the leaders of the little crowd who have borne us company upon the road, and so to close the journey¹³.

The presentation of the fortunes of the main characters were frequently accompanied by a pious thought, or a reflection on the brevity of life and mutability of time, or a promise of future happiness.

More often than not the idea of a happy ending was associated with marriage in the traditional novel. One could make a very long list of novels in which lovers get married to live happily "ever after". Such fairy-tale type of ending, overflowing with happiness, can be found even in The Adventures of Roderic Random /1748/ by Smollett, a novel which is not so happy otherwise:

If there be such a thing as true happiness on earth, I enjoy it. The impetuous transports of my passion are now settled and mellowed into endearing fondness and tranquility of love /.../

... my dear angel has been qualmish of late, and begins to grow remarkably round in the waist; so that I cannot leave her in such an interesting situation which I hope will produce something to crown my felicity¹⁴.

As can be seen from the quotation, Smollett obeyed the rule of "allowing a glimpse of sunshine in the last chapter" in his grim story. The importance of the rule was strongly emphasized by Scott's "critic" in Old Mortality, Miss Bushbody. She tells the writer to avoid sad tones in the ending of his story:

You may be as harrowing to our nerves as you will in the course of the story, but /.../ never let the end be altogether clouded¹⁵.

This conventional rule acquired force in the course of time, and in 1857 Anthony Trollope wrote about it as a "fixed rule" to which he conformed notwithstanding the weakness of the happy ending. According to the fixed rule "The end of the novel, like the end of a children's dinner party, must be made up of sweetmeats and sugarplums"¹⁶.

Henry James refused to consider adding couleur de rose to conclusions as an obligation of the novelist and he mocked at the expectations of the readers who believe that the value of a novel "depends on a "happy ending", on a distribution at the last moments of prizes, pensions, husbands, wives, babies, millions, appended paragraphs, and cheerful remarks /.../ The "ending" of a novel is, for many persons, like that of a good dinner, a course of dessert and ices, and the artist in fiction

is regarded as a sort of meddlesome doctor who forbids agreeable aftertastes"¹⁷. James who regarded fiction as art, saw clearly that "the "artistic" idea would spoil some of their fun /.../ Its hostility to a happy ending would be evident, and it might even, in some cases render any ending at all impossible"¹⁸.

Victoria Sackville West also sees in the happy ending a compromise between the requirements of the structure of the novel and the psychological needs of both the writer and the reader:

Life, moreover, as we continue to consider it from the novelist's point of view, life, although varied, is seen to be continuous /.../ there is only one beginning and only one ending, no intermediate beginnings and endings such as the poor novelist must arbitrarily impose ; which perhaps explains why so many novels, shirking the disagreeable reminder of Death end with Marriage, as the only admissable and effective crack in continuity¹⁹.

The fact that the general reading audience preferred the happy ending does not imply complete absence of tragic or sad conclusions from the "traditional novel". The tragic ending depicting a premature, often violent death was especially in keeping with the pre-romantic tendencies in English fiction. Quite a few sentimental and Gothic novels end on a tragic note. Clarissa Harlowe /1747-8/ by Richardson provides an expressive example of the sentimental tragic ending: its young heroine dies leaving disconsolate friends and readers. In Gothic novels it is often the villain who dies at the end of the story. Endings dealing with such deaths frequently contain a strong didactic element; didacticism pervades the tone of the ending of The Monk /1796/ by M.G.Lewis, a moral teaching can be found also in W.Beckford's Vathek /1786/ whose curiosity and lust led him to eternal damnation and suffering in hell as his punishment:

Such was, and such should be, the punishment of unrestrained passions and atrocious deeds! Such should be the chastisement of that blind curiosity, which should transgress the bounds of wisdom the

Creator has prescribed to human knowledge /.../
Thus Caliph Vathek, who, for the sake of empty
pomp and forbidden power had sullied himself with
a thousand crimes, became a prey to grief without
end, and remorse without mitigation; whilst the
humble, the despised Gluckenrose passed whole ages
in undisturbed tranquility, and in pure happiness
of childhood²⁰.

Thus evil has been punished and good triumphs /and the gloomy
ending has a brighter side to it/.

The explicit and implicit moral teaching contained in sad
or tragic conclusions was often accompanied by an address to
the reader, in which the writer frankly and directly commented
on his characters. Not many modern novelists permit themselves
to speak to the reader in their own voices; most of them would
consider it a flaw in their narratives. However, a certain type
of sad endings of a certain type of the traditional novel often
do share some qualities with modern fiction: in describing
a scene of untimely, sudden death, they do not necessarily
provide a Nachgeschichte listing of characters' fortunes and
thus acquire a more dramatic tone. The popular Gothic novel by
Mary Shelley ends with Frankenstein's monster taking leave of
his dead creator. He, too, is going to die as can be inferred
from the closing lines:

He sprang from the cabin as he said this, upon the
ice raft which lay close to the vessel. He was soon
borne away by the waves and lost in the darkness and
distance²¹.

Although the Nachgeschichte ending continued to be used as
late as the Victorian period, a number of writers preferred to
conclude their novels /also those with happy endings/ by an
abrupt, dramatic cut in narrative.

George Eliot, whom critics often consider the first truly
modern novelist, fairly frequently chose a scene or a dialogue
as a closure of her story. The conclusion of Silas Marner
/1861/, for example, would have been unusual in an earlier
novel:

Eppie had a larger garden than she had ever
expected there now; and in other ways there had
been alterations at the expense of Mr. Cass, the

landlord, to suit Silas's larger family, for he and Eppie had declared that they would rather stay at the Stone-pits than go to any new home. The garden was fenced with stones on two sides, but in front there was an open fence, through which the flowers shone with answering gladness, as the four united people came within sight of them.

"O father," said Eppie, "what a pretty home ours is! I think nobody can be happier than we are"²².

This kind of ending became a wide-spread practice towards the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the twentieth. Writers felt it no longer necessary to tell the reader what was obvious or of little relevance to the events of a plot. It was enough to suggest that marriage was to be expected after the union of two lovers, mentioned in the conclusion. And so the last paragraphs of Clayhanger /1919/ by Arnold Bennett read as follows:

Drowning amid the waves of her terrible devotion, he was recompensated in the hundredth part of a second for all that through her he had suffered or might hereafter suffer. The many problems and difficulties which marriage with her would raise seemed trivial in the light of her heart's magnificent and furious loyalty. He thought of the younger Edwin, whom she had kissed into rapture, as of a boy too inexperienced in sorrow to appreciate this Hilda.

He braced himself to the exquisite burden of life²³.

The conclusion suggests the end of a phase in the life of the hero, but it also looks forward to the future and makes it possible for the reader to imagine a further development of the plot of the novel.

Paradoxically, death scenes, too, have lost their aura of absolute finality of previously written novels; they end a life, but, at the same time, they make the reader aware that life goes on. In many cases the final death scene is deliberately contrasted with some less important events which have little or no significance in themselves. Indian Summer of a Foreyte /1918/ by John Galsworthy provides an interesting example of this method. In the last lines of the book the focus of attention seems to be not on the dying Jolyon, but on the

behaviour of his dog:

The dog Balthasar stretched and looked up at his master. The thistledown no longer moved. The dog placed his chin over the sunlit foot. It did not stir. The dog withdrew his chin quickly, rose, and leaped on old Jolyon's lap, looked in his face, whined, then, leaping down, sat on his haunches, gazing up. And suddenly he uttered a long, long howl.

But the thistledown was still as death, and the face of his old master.

Summer - summer - summer!
The soundless footsteps on the grass!²⁴

Such a sudden arrest of the story and understating the significance of the old man's death by presenting it against the background that continues to be full of life, remind the reader that the world has not ceased to exist because a life in it has stopped and that the hero is not the centre of the world. A character seen as a "case" or as an example representing general phenomena has a rather diminished stature and this often happens in those endings, both sad and happy ones, which contain a generalizing comment, a reflection on the fate of a character viewed in a detached and objective way. Thus the narrator of Romance /1903/ written by Conrad and Ford, reflects on his experience as well as on life in general:

Looking back, it seems a wonderful enough thing that I who am this, and she who is that, commencing so far away a life that, after such sufferings borne together and apart, ended so tranquilly there in a world so stable - that she and I should have passed through so much, good chance and evil chance, sad hours and joyful, all lived down and swept away into the little heap of dust that is life. That, too, is Romance!²⁵

The ironic tone which sometimes marked the tone of the ending /as was the case with Henry James/ added considerably to the process of weakening the position of the hero. The novel ceased to represent a whole self-contained world demarcated by the fates of its main characters.

The 20th century novels, in which the stream of consciousness technique was used, made it very clear that their narrat-

ives represented fragments of life in general as well as fragments of individual experience. Their endings often give the impression that their plots have been broken off almost at haphazard. And although artistically the narratives of Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse /1927/ and Ulysses /1922/ by James Joyce are by all means complete and finished, their endings do not exclude the possibility of continuing their stories.

The ending of Ulysses is difficult to separate since the final portion of the book consists of the long interior monologue of Molly Bloom, who is falling asleep. The monologue has no punctuation marks and it unwinds its thoughts slowly and seemingly in a disorderly way. There is no full stop after the last word:

... and then he asked me would I yes to say my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breast all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will yes²⁶.

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man /1914/ by Joyce ends with Stephen Dedalus's diary and its last two entries are as follows:

April 26. Mother is putting my new second-hand clothes in order. She prays now, she says, that I may learn in my own life and away from home and friends what the heart is and what it feels. Amen. So be it. Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality and experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.

April 27. Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead²⁷.

This ending could be a beginning of another novel as it promises new events and experiences in the life of the hero.

The ending in the 20th century fiction often expresses symbolically the direction of the new phase of life toward which the hero is moving after a turning point is reached /marriage and death included/. Sons and Lovers /1913/ by D.H. Lawrence, for example, depicts the position of the hero at the end of a period in his life and about to enter another - by

means of placing him in a symbolical scene. After the death of his mother, Paul Morel experiences a powerful desire to die, too, but his will to live wins eventually. This inner conflict is presented through contrasting symbols provided by the darkness of night and the lights of a busy city:

He could not bear it. On every side the immense dark silence seemed pressing him, so fine a spark, into extinction, and yet, almost nothing, he could not be extinct. Night, in which everything was lost, went reaching out, beyond stars and sun ...

... But no, he would not give in. Turning sharply, he walked towards the city's golden phosphorence. His fists were shut, his mouth set fast. He would not take that direction, to the darkness, to follow her. He walked towards the faintly humming, glowing town quickly²⁸.

There are many other examples of 20th century novels which end in significant symbolical scenes promising further developments, but the characteristic tone of past modern fiction manifests itself in the conclusion which chooses a rather insignificant moment. This insignificant moment often follows an important event, a crisis. In such a conclusion, the hero or the heroine, after suffering a great loss, undergoing an intense experience, is seen doing something ordinary, trivial. For example the heroine of The Country Girls /1960/ by Edna O'Brien, after receiving a telegram which confirms her suspicion that her lover has left her, cries for some time and then goes downstairs to make herself a cup of tea. Just before the novel ends, she is in the kitchen. A foreigner comes to see her landlady. She talks to him politely and offers tea to him. These are the very last sentences of the novel:

I poured him a cup and brought it in.
"No English speak", he said, and he shrugged his shoulders.
I came out to the kitchen and took two aspirins with my tea. I was almost certain that I wouldn't sleep that night²⁹.

The novel by Edna O'Brien does not contrast the importance of its character's experience with the banality of the back-

ground detail as was the case with some earlier novels, but it makes the heroine herself busy with insignificant activities. Humdrum life engulfs stormy tragedies, ordinariness prevails, and the main characters shed their last appearances of distinguished personalities. They go on living their not particularly exciting lives, in many instances, rather insecure lives. New storms, complications, and problems may easily crop up again and they, too, are likely to be humdrum and trivial.

Numerous endings leave the reader uncertain not only about what could happen "afterwards", but also about the correct /or the most acceptable/ interpretation of what has happened in the book. This is certainly true about William Golding's "gimmick" conclusions which illustrate the relativity of the meaning of a novel most emphatically. His conclusions depend on a sudden change of perspective, which makes the reader take a completely different view of the story. Lord of the Flies /1951/, in which boys turned savage are confronted by a uniformed officer, arrests the story at the point when one of the main characters is about to be killed. He is saved by the arrival of the officer. There is, however, a suggestion in the ending that he, too, may be considered a savage since he kills in the war.

Most post modern novels have rather depressing endings; they are concluded with a loss, a disappointment, a breakdown, a failure. But even modern happy endings do not often reach the level of ecstatic raptures to be found in novels of the past. The last paragraph of the happy ending of Life at the Top /1962/ by John Braine reads as follows:

I took out a lemon from the vegetable rack. I cut a slice from it, then stopped and put down the knife. With no warning, through no conscious effort I was happy, happier than I had been since childhood. It could not last, it was already evaporating as I began to be grateful for it: but I knew it would come again³⁰.

Novelistic conclusions of stories at seemingly random point, seemingly incomplete, interrupted plots suggesting possibi-

lities of further developments, with ambiguous meanings- these conclusions have led some critics to argue that modern novels use the "open ending" which defies Aristotle's rule of plot unity. The term "open" conclusion was conceived in contrast to the "closed" ending of the "traditional" novel. This distinction is the basis of Alan Friedman's view of the change in modern fiction. He believes that "... the expanding flux of conscience in modern fiction is left finally open. It is "open" in one of the three senses: finally uncontained, finally unreduced, or finally still expanding."³¹ Friedman argues that the purpose of a modern novel usually reveals itself in tracing the process of acquiring knowledge of reality. The knowledge, however, cannot ever be complete and the point at which modern novels arrive finally does not demark a limit of experience.

In the mythic journey it traces from innocence to experience, the modern novel offers to take the self of the reader along, and to structure and inform that self by its truer ending, either an ever-widening disorder or a finally open "order" which embraces all the opposed directions on whatever ethical compass it has brought along for the trip. Like the modern cosmos, the modern novel is ever expanding, and it is racing away fastest at its evermost reaches ³².

In "Narrative Time and the Open-ended Novel"³³, Beverly Gross pointed out that the Aristotelian plot unity has ceased to be a ruling principle; time can be transformed into space. Modern novels, therefore, /Beverly Gross concentrates on Marcel Proust's The Past Recaptured, Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, and To the Lighthouse by Virginia Woolf/ tend to present apparently random moments and their endings are unresolved; they have ceased, in the words of Frank Kermode, to "pander to temporal expectations"³⁴.

David Richter strongly objects to the term "open ended" as he believes that all modern novels are complete and closed. To strengthen this view he quotes Aristotle who stated that a work of art must be whole, complete and of sufficient magnitude. On the other hand, Richter stresses the fact that some of the old novels /Pamela by Richardson is his example/

did not stop their stories at the convenient point of marriage, but carried them on until much later³⁵.

Richter's objections are groundless because they stem from misunderstanding. To be sure, no one would deny that as a work of art a novel should be a whole, and all the "unfinished" modern stories are complete and ended when they have proved their point, have made a statement, posed a question, or presented a psychological situation: even if the sequence of events appears to be broken off, they are completed on the level of thought, logic and emotional experience. But this kind of completeness is of a nature different from that of a "traditional" novel such as Pamela. In spite of the fact that Pamela's plot develops beyond the heroine's wedding, the novel has a closed ending. The reason lies in its presenting a self-contained vision of the world. The novel seems to assume that after its final point little can happen that has relevance or significance. The material of the novel has been exhausted - its ending is static after an equilibrium has been attained. In contrast, modern conclusions tend to be more dynamic, directed towards the future, although, as artistic utterances they are whole and, in that sense, closed. Even if one rejects the term "open ending" in reference to modern fiction techniques, one has to admit that there is a great difference between old and new ways of concluding novels.

Whether the term "open" versus "closed", or "dynamic" versus "static", or some other labels are used, the fact of the difference remains, and one has to give the Aristotelian principle of plot unity a much broader interpretation not limited to the surface story only, if one is to apply the principle to the novel of to-day.

It is imprecise to speak of the difference between the "new" conclusion and the "old" ending as if there had been only one kind of the ending in the past. The opposition suggested by critics of "modern" versus "traditional" fiction is far from satisfactory since, as we have seen in the present paper, the "traditional" ending does not stand for one single type of conclusion: the conventions of writing novelistic conclusions

have undergone various changes throughout different literary periods. Modern endings, therefore, can be contrasted with a number of different types of endings representing consecutive stages of the development of the English novel.

The survey of novelistic conclusions written in different literary periods entitles a critic to associating prevailing literary conventions with dominant approaches to the role of the individual in society and in the world. In the course of time this role seems to have diminished considerably. Early English novels were written when the enlightened individual was regarded as fully capable of controlling his life and shaping reality in the stable, wellordered and predictable world. Accordingly, their endings presented the hero as the centre of the fictional universe. A typical 18th century ending closes a story by making it a balanced whole in which all questions have been answered, evil - punished, and good - rewarded, and the material, form which the novelist had drawn - completely exhausted.

In the Victorian age the emphasis was somewhat shifted onto society, and the individual came to be seen as a part of it. As a result, most novels of the late Victorian period present characters in the strongly felt context of their social environment. A certain loss of individual significance had an influence on the novelistic conclusion: it often depicted the hero against an indifferent background. Very frequently, works of prose fiction of the late 19th century and the early 20th century conclude on a pessimistic note: the endings show a failure of the hero, his helplessness and his unimportance. The tendency has deepened in contemporary narratives: their worlds often end "not with a bang but a whimper". In many of these endings, both pessimistic and less frequent optimistic conclusions, it is taken for granted that the story presented is only a fragment of the stream of life and that the hero is a part of the process of constant change in which there is no completeness or finality. The sense of instability in this prose is strengthened by uncertainty in interpreting the events-

so that their meaning becomes relative. The individual seems to be overwhelmed by the world, the best he can do in the cosmic chaos of modern reality is to resort to his inner sense of order, justice and goodness, and try to obey it even if he is not sure that he is right when doing so. All these features characterize novelistic endings of our time and they can, for want of a better term, be labelled as "open" conclusions.

Conclusions, then, are important not only as a technical means of ending a narrative, but also because they reflect attitudes of their writers to man and reality. We have seen in this paper that one can learn a great deal about a novel from its ending. This is the truth well known to those impatient readers, who begin reading a book by going through its ending in order to find out if they are likely to enjoy the rest of the novel. There is a lot to be said for this seemingly unreasonable method of reading!

NOTES

- ¹ Henry Fielding, Preface to Sarah Fielding's Familiar Letters /1747/, quoted after Miriam Allott, Novelists on the Novel, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1973, p.250
- ² Walter Scott, Old Mortality, Collins Clear-Type Press, London?, p.488
- ³ George Eliot, Letter to John Blackwood /May 1, 1857/ in Miriam Allott, op.cit. p.250
- ⁴ Anthony Trollope, Barchester Towers, Penguin Books Ltd. Harmondsworth 1957, p.460
- ⁵ Henry James, Preface to Roderick Hudson, Harper and Brothers, New York 1960, p.8
- ⁶ E.M.Forster, The Aspects of the Novel, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1968, p.102
- ⁷ Ibid., p.103
- ⁸ Charlotte Bronte, Jane Eyre, Washington Square Press Inc.

New York 1961, p.513

- 9 E.M.Forster, op.cit., p.102
- 10 Walter Scott, op.cit., p.487
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Charles Dickens, Oliver Twist, Bernhard Tauchnitz, Leipzig 1846, p.474
- 13 Charles Dickens, Old Curiosity Shop in Edwin Drood and Old Curiosity Shop, Books Inc., New York, Boston ?, p.514
- 14 Tobias Smollett, The Adventures of Roderick Random, Oxford University Press, London 1959, p.541
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O FUNKCJACH ZAKOŃCZENIA W POWIEŚCI ANGIELSKIEJ

Streszczenie

Artykuł charakteryzuje konwencje stosowane w budowie zakończeń w różnych okresach literackich. Zwraca uwagę na zachodzące w nich zmiany, które wiąże ze zmieniającą się rolą bohatera powieści ukazywanego w coraz to inaczej interpretowanej rzeczywistości.

Artykuł zajmuje stanowisko wobec zakończenia "otwartego", który to termin stosowany jest w analizie powieści współczesnej dla zaznaczenia odrębnego charakteru jej zakończenia. Podkreśla organiczne powiązania zakończenia z całością powieści i jego wagę w kompozycji utworu, bowiem zakończenie odzwierciedla istotę charakteru powieści.