

LITERATURE

A PLURALIST APPROACH TO POSTMODERNIST FICTIONAL ENDINGS*

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There is no such thing as novelistic 'ending' in the abstract; there are only different ways of ending, and different endings may support different theoretical assumptions about literature.

John Kucich: "Action in the Dickens Ending: *Bleak House* and *Great Expectations*" (1978)

1. Introduction

The study of narrative endings has become increasingly important for students of the novel during the last two decades or so¹. Endings are not only critical points for examination of plot and theme, but also provide focal points in the attack on the realist programme by postmodernist philosophies and practices. To study multiple fictional endings is to entertain questions which will remain partially unanswered and which will never lead to the last word on the subject. The very notion of 'ending' is already problematic (Davidson 1984:1). Where does any beginning end and its complementary ending begin? The end of the beginning and the beginning of the end are arbitrary notions and coterminous throughout the text. This is clearly emphasized by Hillis Miller (1978:4) when he states that "any point the spectator focuses on is a turning which both ties and unties", and this "is another way of saying that no narrative can show either its beginning or its ending ...[since]

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¹ The following can be regarded as standard works concerned with fictional endings: Kermode, F. 1966; Girard, R. 1965. Friedman, A. 1966; see also the special issue of *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 33:1, June 1978.

it always begins and ends still *in medias res*". This view is also echoed by Szegegy-Maszak (1987:48) when he states that it is "to a great extent the reader who decides whether the last words or pages of a novel mark the end or the beginning of a process".

Another factor which complicates the very notion of the identification of fictional endings relates to one's general views on the notions of mimesis and intertextuality. Davidson (1984:1) asks the vitally important question: "Even if we could map out a certain textual space and clearly mark it – 'Here is the ending' – another problem intrudes. Do we see within this boundary a living, breathing ending or only the appearance of one, a cunning simulacrum crafted by the author to imitate the real thing?"

The notion of endings is also made more intractable by the complication and multiplication of narrative endings which are regarded as typical postmodernist conventions (Lombard 1988:459). In postmodernist novels the general features of nonselection manifest themselves more concretely in the multiplication of narrative instances, combined with the multiplication and complication of narrative endings (Musarra 1987:215). Postmodernist novels further obfuscate the distinctions between narrative levels by subverting the traditional hierarchy of these levels. The same can be said of the open and variant endings of postmodernist novels, which are not only functional devices in obliterating the form:content dichotomy, but are also one of the most effective devices of undermining the teleology of narratives so typical of realist fiction (Szegegy-Maszak 1987:47). The multiplicity of narrative endings is a major supporting device of the novels in their attempts to transcend the boundaries of genre and time, thereby extending the relation of the specific text in question to other similar generic texts, and even texts of a different genre, and establishing it as "a network of intra- and intertextual cross-references" (Musarra 1987:230).

A fourth major problem which has further compounded the extent and difficulties posed by postmodernist fictional endings is the fact that no consensus has yet been reached with regard to an acceptable terminology with which to name, classify and categorize various kinds of endings. The aim of this paper is to highlight this lack of consensus by supplementing one's intuitive sense of endings with a collection of terms which will enable one to investigate and describe the various strategies of novelistic closure in general and the (predominantly) postmodernist phenomenon of multiple endings in particular. It will thus attempt to construct a kind of master reading strategy² based on various theoretical concepts and categories.

Its basic premisses are twofold: first, that the protean nature of postmodernist fictional endings calls for – and indeed necessitates – a pluralist approach to this phenomenon. Second, what can be regarded as the 'discipline' of literary theory consists of two main movements, namely one which **generates** new theoretical in-

² One of the implicit aims of this paper is to work from the assumption that reading is a cognitive process and to construct reading models which are pedagogically useful. Cf. the special issue of *Poetics*, 16:1 (1987) for further work in this regard.

sights, and one which seeks to **apply** these insights by using concepts and terminology generated by original theoreticians in the reading of literary texts and so develop **reading strategies** which will enable scholars to identify, describe and interpret literary phenomena and their workings in literary texts³. It is my contention that these two main movements should co-exist in a close symbiosis to ensure that the models and reading strategies which have been developed can constantly be updated and sophisticated. This paper will **apply** concepts generated by theoreticians by using the following method: a brief profile of the general features of postmodernist texts will be given and a number of textual manifestations of these features will then be enumerated as background to the study of the specific phenomenon of multiple endings. A number of principles which may be applicable as a matrix for the reading and analysis of multiple endings will then be discussed under the headings: Categories, Relationships and Interactions.

2. A Profile of Postmodernist Textual Characteristics

Indeed, the ending cannot be evaluated by itself, but must be weighed in the relationship to the whole work, which necessarily means evaluating the whole work. (Torgovnick 1984)

Many attempts have been made to categorize postmodernist characteristics⁴. One of the most useful attempts is that of Lodge (1988:220-45), who – in an essay entitled 'Postmodernist Fiction' – sets out to define the formal character of Postmodernist fiction by identifying eight major characteristics: contradiction; permutation; discontinuity; randomness; excess; 'short circuit'; the resistance it offers to reading and interpretation; the uncertainty of the reader; and, finally, the concept of multiple endings. Each of these categories will be discussed in turn, after which a number of practical devices displaying these characteristics will be dealt with by means of a summary of Fokkema's paper, "The Semantic and Syntactic Organization of Postmodernist Texts" (1986:81-98).

Postmodernist texts **contradict** and cancel themselves out as they go along, contradicting what has been stated and condemning the narrator "to oscillate between irreconcilable desires and assertions" (Lodge 1988:229). This self-contradiction is evident in the text and is often followed by despairing self-admonishment and, fi-

³ My use of theoretical concepts and models is an attempt to answer a basic question focused on by Lodge (1986:17-18), viz.:

The question I wish to raise...is whether progress in theory and methodology means progress in the critical reading of texts. Is it possible, or useful, to bring the whole battery of modern formalism and structuralism to bear upon a single text, and what is gained by so doing? Does it enrich our reading by uncovering depths and nuances of meaning we might not otherwise have brought to consciousness, help us to solve problems of interpretation and to correct misreadings?"

See also my paper, 1992.

⁴ Many attempts have been made to draw up a list of Postmodernist characteristics. Cf. Alexander, M. 1990:2-23; Tallis, R. 1988:96-119; Hassan, I. 1986.

nally, by renewed resolve. One of the most emotively powerful emblems of contradiction is the hermaphrodite, which affronts the most fundamental binary opposition of all. Lodge also observes that the characters of Postmodernist fiction are often sexually ambivalent, thereby adding to this notion of contradiction.

All writing, says Lodge (1988:230) involves selection, and selection involves leaving something out. Postmodernist writers often try to defy this fictional law by incorporating alternative narrative **permutations** in the same text, Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* being one of the most famous examples. This procedure is only a different kind of contradiction and is often resolved in practice by ranking the alternatives in order of authenticity. When the text is reduced to only two variables, permutation simply becomes an alternation which expresses the hopelessness of the human condition.

A second and more radical way of defying the obligation to select is to exhaust all the possible variables. One of the most famous examples discussed by Lodge (1988:230-1) is that found in Beckett's novels, *Molloy* and *Murphy*. In *Molloy*, the hero wrestles with the problem of distributing and circulating his sixteen sucking stones in his pocket in such a way as to guarantee that he will always suck them in the same order. In *Murphy*, the hero – making his lunch from a packet of mixed biscuits – is torn between his weakness for a particular kind of biscuit and the possibility of total permutability:

...were he to take the final step and overcome his infatuation with the ginger, then the assortment would spring to life before him. Dancing the radiant measure of its total permutability, edible in a hundred and twenty ways! (Lodge 1988:230)

Fokkema (1986:87-8) offers a number of lexemes belonging to the semantic field of multiplication and permutation often found in Postmodernist fiction which underscore Lodge's observations, such as 'mirror', 'labyrinth', 'journey without destination', 'encyclopaedia', 'advertising', 'inventory', and 'paranoia'. This permutation of semantic units, such as "the permutation of matter and mind, resulting in equally plausible subjectivism and objectivism, withdrawal from the outside world and identification with the outside world...or: the permutation of possible and impossible, relevant and irrelevant, true and false, reality and parody, metaphor and literal meaning" (Fokkema 1986:95) are all additional **weapons** in the postmodernist writer's arsenal.

Continuity is one quality that is generally expected of all writing. One expects a logical flow in the progress that writing should take from one topic to another. And it is precisely by its continuity that a discursive text persuades its reader, implying – says Lodge (1988:231) – that no other ordering of its data could be intellectually satisfying, thereby imposing its vision of the world on the reader. Postmodernist texts are highly suspicious of continuity and do everything to create a sense of **discontinuity** by means of unpredictable swerves of tone, metafictional asides to the reader, blank spaces in the text, contradictions and permutation. Some of the American exponents of postmodernism have actually gone beyond

merely 'breaking up' the continuity of their texts by means of these devices by actually basing the whole discourse of their novels on discontinuity, as 'confirmed' by authorial voice in Ronald Sukenick's 98.6: "Interruption. Discontinuity. Imperfection. It can't be helped" (Lodge 1988:232-52).

Various devices are used to create this sense of discontinuity. There is a growing tendency for composing in very short sections, often only a paragraph in length, often quite disparate in content. The breaks between sections are sometimes further emphasized by the use of capitalized headings and numbers. Some writers use typographical devices like arrows, while others use quite bizarre illustrations to 'break up' the text. A typical example of the variation of typographical layout to create a sense of discontinuity is found in Raymond Federman's novel, *Double of Nothing* (Lodge 1988:232):

a..direct form of narration without any distractions

without any obstructions just
plain
normal
regular
readable
realistic
leftoright
unequivocal
conventional
unimaginative
wellpunctuated
understandable
uninteresting
safetodigest
paragraphed
compulsive
anecdotal
salutory
textual

PROSE prose boring
PROSE PROSE prose PROSE plain
PROSE

The use and development of this feature has virtually led to the creation of a new genre: "the cluster (it is precisely not a sequence) of short passages – stories, anecdotes, reflections, quotations, prose-poems, jokes – each with an individual title in large type. Between these apparently discontinuous passages the bewildered but exhilarated reader bounces and rebounds like a ball in a pinball machine, illuminations flashing on and off, insight accumulating, till the author laconically

signals TILT" (Lodge 1988:232). It is only after several readings that a kind of thematic coherence begins to emerge from this textual collage, thereby recreating the very slightest sense of 'continuity'.

Another device which Lodge (1988:235) identifies is the use of interrelated or contiguous characters, consciousnesses or conversations, and the mixing of these together to produce an apparently random montage of contrasting verbal fragments. Fokkema (1986:91) also identifies a number of syntactic strategies which are often employed to create a sense of discontinuity, viz. syntactical ungrammaticality with incomplete sentences and stock phrases having to be supplemented by the reader; semantic incompatibility and, as mentioned previously, unusual typographical arrangement.

Lodge (1988:235) defines the **random** nature of postmodernist fiction as writing composed according to the logic of the absurd. It tries to subvert the normal functioning of the human mind which always tries to order sensations and other stimuli by introducing this absurd logic. The writer cuts up pieces of different texts (including his own), sticks them together in random order and then transcribes the result. A practical manifestation of this procedure – and perhaps the ultimate example of Barthes' writerly text – is found in B.S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates*, which was issued in loose-leaf form, the reader being invited to shuffle the sheets to produce his own text. It must be pointed out that this device can create the impression of being very mechanical, with the implicit danger of losing the reader's interest once the novelty has worn off.

Another important postmodernist technique is the **excessive** exploitation of metaphoric and metonymic devices, in order to render them impotent and to escape from their 'tyranny' (Lodge 1988:235). This is achieved through the modes of parody and burlesque. The underlying principle is to take commonplace analogies and to pursue its ramifications endlessly throughout the novel, often straining the principle of similarity to breaking point. One such an example is found in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, in which the analogy between rocket and phallus is pursued endlessly throughout a very long novel. This device has the same effect as that of permutation discussed previously: by presenting the reader with more detail than he can synthesize into a whole, the discourse affirms the resistance of the world to interpretation, leaving "...the reader...crushed by the multiplicity of detail unloaded on him in a limited verbal space, and...physically unable to grasp the whole, so that the portrait is lost" (Jakobson quoted in Lodge 1988:237).

Lodge (1988:239 ff.) argues that literature is always metaphoric and nonliterature is metonymic. The literary text is metaphoric in the sense that when the reader interprets it, he applies it to the world as a whole. This process of interpretation assumes a gap between the text and the world, between art and life. Postmodernist writing tries to short-circuit this process in order to administer a shock to the reader, thereby resisting assimilation into the conventional categories of the literary. There are various devices at the postmodernist writer's disposal with which to achieve this effect: he⁵ can combine violently contrasting modes like

⁵ Read her when appropriate.

the obviously fictional and the apparently factual: he can include letters, recipes, bibliographies, photos, etc.; he can introduce the author and the question of authorship in the text; or he can expose the conventions in the act of using them. These devices have an interesting double effect: On the one hand, they can remind the reader that the story has an autobiographical, documentary origin, that the author was 'there', and that the narrative is thereby 'true'. On the other hand they simultaneously remind the reader that the character and author belong to different planes of reality, and that he is reading a book, a story which is necessarily a highly conventionalized, highly artificial construction, and thereby at a considerable distance from 'the way it was'.

While these devices were not invented by Postmodernist writers (as a reading of *Don Quixote* and *Tristram Shandy* would prove), they appear so frequently in postmodernist writing and are pursued to such lengths as to constitute, in combination with some of the other devices discussed so far, a distinctively new development (Lodge 1988:240).

Postmodernist fiction also **resist interpretation** by refusing to settle into a simply identifiable mode or rhythm, thus imitating – on the level of reading conventions – the resistance of the world to interpretation, thus obliterating the form:content dichotomy. But utilizing only this characteristic of postmodernist fiction without a demonstration of the human obligation to attempt interpretation nonetheless would be an extremely sterile basis for writing, says Lodge (1988:225). He discusses Beckett's *Watt* as an exemplar of the general idea of the world resisting the compulsive attempts of the human consciousness to interpret the apparently absurd world. This is also the reason why postmodernist fictions try to find formal alternatives to modernism. *Finnegan's Wake*⁶ 'resists' reading and interpretation through the difficulty of its style and narrative method. But Lodge maintains (1988:226) that we persist in trying to read it "...in the faith that it is ultimately susceptible of being understood – that we shall, eventually, be able to unpack all the meanings that Joyce put into it, and that these meanings will cohere into a unity".

Postmodernist fiction further resists interpretation through the subversion of the regulating principles of teleology and causality (Szegegy-Maszak 1987:43). Teleology and causality are abstracted from the text, which is then read through the matrix of causality and teleology. Postmodernist fiction undermines the traditional belief in teleology and linear succession, thereby suspending meaning and "frustrating our reading habits and assumptions about intelligibility, thus blocking our regular interpretative moves" (Szegegy-Maszak 1987:46).

This aspect also encompasses the notion of the **uncertainty of the reader**. Postmodernist fiction subverts that very faith that the multifarious meanings will ulti-

⁶ Joyce apparently designed it for "the ideal reader suffering from ideal insomnia" (!) (quoted by Lodge, 1988:226). McHale (1990:1-21) makes out an interesting argument for the postmodernist qualities of *Ulysses* in a paper entitled "Constructing (Post)Modernism: The Case of *Ulysses*". Much if his argument is also applicable to *Finnegan's Wake*.

mately cohere into a whole. The difficulty does not lie in the apparent obscurity (which might be cleared up), but in the endemic uncertainty which manifests itself on the level of narrative.

The notions of resisting interpretation and the endemic uncertainty of postmodernist fiction ultimately lead us to the main focus of this paper, viz. the **complicated endings** of postmodernist novels. Lodge's description will be given here for the sake of completeness, but will be elaborated on later in the paper. He states that the reader will never be able to unravel the plots of Fowles's *The Magus*, Robbe-Grillet's *Le Voyeur* or Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, as these are labyrinths without exits:

Endings, the 'exits' of fictions, are particularly significant in this connection. Instead of the closed ending of the traditional novel, in which mystery is explained and fortunes are settled, and instead of the open endings of the modernist novel, 'satisfying but not final' as Conrad said of Henry James, we get the multiple ending, the false ending, the mock ending or parody ending. (1988:226)

Lodge's profile of postmodernist catena can be supplemented by a summary of textual structures found in Postmodernist texts which have not been discussed so far. Fokkema (1986:92-5) identifies the following structures in addition to those enumerated by Lodge: redundancy (in a way similar to Lodge's category of excess); the duplication and repetition of texts by means of references to earlier texts, or the device of the 'palimpsest'; the inference of two stories within one text; the duplication of action, characters, clichés, and the act of writing (self-reflexivity); the multiplication of semiotic systems and the mixture of linguistic and other signs; the multiplication of action without solution (the labyrinthine plot); and – very importantly – also the multiplication of endings.

While explicitly no attempt has been made to 'define' postmodernism⁷ as such, this summary of postmodernist textual features provides a broad enough background of fictional principles and techniques against which the full relief of postmodernist fictional endings can be considered. But – as stated initially – fictional endings form **categories, relationships, and interact** with the other elements of the text. In order to draw up a critical matrix for the analysis of multiple endings, it is now necessary to examine these in more detail.

3. Fictional Endings: Categories, Relationships and Interactions

In a novel the beginning implies the end if you seem to begin at the beginning... you are in fact beginning at the end; all that seems fortuitous and contingent in what follows is in fact

⁷ The very nature of postmodernism makes it extremely difficult – if not altogether impossible – to 'define' the phenomenon. This paper does not wish to enter into this debate, but accepts the basic parameters outline in Bertens (1987), Jencks (1986) and McHale (1987).

reserved for a later benefaction of significance in some concordant structure. (Kermode 1967)

Indeed, the ending cannot be evaluated by itself, but must be weighed in relationship to the whole work, which necessarily means evaluating the whole work. (Davidson 1984)

Because of the length of novels, it is extremely difficult to recall all of a work after a completed reading, and it is ultimately the climactic moments, the dramatic scenes, and the beginnings and endings which shape the reader's sense of a novel as a whole. The reader expects endings, much more than beginnings, to show what the story was about, what special effect was to be achieved (Bonheim 1982:118). Despite the deconstructionist claim that endings both "ravel" and "unravel" the text, with interpretation a constant and constantly self-canceling act" (Torgovnick 1981:4), the endings of novels set in motion the process of retrospective rather than speculative thinking so necessary to discern the geometry and form of the novel. The importance of studying the endings in fiction as a clue to the multifaceted nature of endings is emphasized by Torgovnick (1981:6-7):

To study closure and the shape of fictions, we begin with the ending, but evaluate its success as part of an artistic whole, as the final element in a particular structure of words and meanings. The discussion of closure includes the discussion of aesthetic shape-verbal, metaphorical, gestural, and other formal patterns. It also includes the study of the themes and ideas embodied in the text and of relevant extratextual contexts that help form those themes and ideas, contexts including the author's life, his times, and his or his culture's beliefs about human experience. To approach fiction by way of closure is not, then, at all narrow. Endings, closures reveal the essences of novels with particular clarity; to study closure is to re-create and re-experience fiction with an unusual vividness.

A close scrutiny of this passage reveals three of the most important aspects which come into play when discussing fictional endings, namely shapes and patterns of **categories** of endings, the **relationship** between reader, text and author, and the effects that endings have on the **readers**. This section will describe the various modes of novelistic closure at the novelist's disposal, define the various relationships which are brought into play by fictional endings, and provide a brief description of the phenomenology of reading.

Bonheim's study of the short story, entitled *The Narrative Modes: Techniques in the Short Story* (1982) provides a number of important **categories** of fictional endings which are equally applicable to the novel. As fictional endings are subject to the context of the narrative in which they appear, Bonheim (1982:118-64) delineates and describes a number of options open to writers under two headings, 'Static Modes and 'Dynamic Modes'. As postmodernist endings specifically aim to

undermine what Szegedy-Maszak (1987:41-58) calls the teleology of realistic fiction through permutation, parody, etc., it will be necessary to recap briefly on the static modes before discussing the dynamic modes of fictional closure in more detail.

The following types of endings can be regarded as static: open and closed endings; endings with comment; ironic endings; comments from inside views; descriptive endings, under which one could classify descriptions of persons, descriptions of persons mixed with other modes, and descriptions of things.

The most common division made is that between **open** and **closed** endings. There is a common misconception that in closed endings the action simply stops. This is not true, says Bonheim (1982:119): there are a number of signals which are used to announce to the reader that the action is drawing to a close, such as giving a summary of the story, or a panorama after a series of scenic events. There is also the use of a final, symbolic event, such as a departure, the closing of a door or window, or the death of a character. It is important to note that the so-called 'closed endings' are brought about by a combination of various kinds of content and techniques and it is therefore not always easy to make a clear-cut division (Bonheim 1982:120).

In open endings, the dialogue and action continue to the end; conflicts are left unresolved, or appear insoluble. The action is suspended, left hanging in mid-air, as't were. Whereas closed endings tend to make use of description and comment to convey a sense of stasis, open endings often make use of speech and report, leaving possibilities suggested during the course of the plot unexplored or unresolved. Often the end is presented in the present tense, in contrast to the past tense used for most of the narrative. Bonheim (1982:119) describes an even stronger sense of conclusion which is created by means of the author's camera withdrawing from the dialogue and action, focusing instead of the characters themselves, on the setting, on the narrator and on the process of narration itself. This type of ending is usually accompanied by a gentle transition from report to metanarrative closure. This type of metafictional ending has become very popular in twentieth century fiction and is characterized by various signals to the reader: the narrator refers to himself, or to the reader, or to his story, or to any of these in combination. These endings function in a way similar to postscripts, says Bonheim (1982:122), because like postscripts, these statements are in the present tense, and they display the chief marks of extreme expositiveness: authorial comment in the present tense, unmitigated by an admixture from the other modes. This tendency toward modal consonance suggests the complementary hypothesis: that stories with wholly unexpositional beginnings will tend to have open endings, and that a large range of stories will display a mixture of techniques which seem to follow less obvious laws of narrative.

Endings with comment was largely a nineteenth century device and create a disturbing sense of intrusion. Twentieth century writers have tried to circumvent this problem in their attempts to **make** comment more palatable by – for example – integrating it with other modes such as dialogue and internal monologue, thereby making it appear less patronizing and monolithic. This type of ending is prob-

lematic, says (Bonheim 1982:124), because the author cannot really hide behind his narrator to appear less obvious. The only way in which this can really be employed successfully is to give it an ironic twist, making it very brief, and allowing a character to have the last word, or by a combination of these.

Because readers expect stories to 'speak for themselves' comments – if they should be included at all – should at least stem from a character rather than from a narrator. Very often even this kind of ending is unsuccessful, as the rhetoric of the narrator is obvious in such endings and may easily make the comment to appear intrusive. There are a number of alternatives open to the author: he can allow the comment to have a more universal nature (like the judgments of human nature found in Goldsmith, Melville, and Hawthorne), or they can judge a particular person; or the ending can be imputed to a character endowed with a choric function; and finally, endings with inside comment can be based not upon the comments transported by an author or narrator's voice, but by a consciousness within the fictional world (Bonheim 1982:125-6).

Descriptive endings is a static mode extremely suitable to a closed ending. Yet it is not always easy to categorize these type of endings. Bonheim (1982:127-9) describes two classes of descriptive endings, viz. those which facilitate a closed ending (i.e., block descriptions, descriptions of place, pure descriptions, and 'unfunctional' [sic] descriptions) and those that facilitate not so closed endings (i.e., short descriptions, descriptions of persons, descriptions mixed with dynamic modes, and functional descriptions).

Longer block descriptions of place, unmixed with report or speech and of minimal relevance to the action always result in closed endings. These are often reinforced by rhetorical flourishes, alliteration and an emphasis on panorama (Bonheim 1982:128). Descriptions of landscape which are only loosely related to the story, also furnish clear frames for closed endings.

More 'open' closed endings are brought about by short descriptions of character mixed with other modes such as report. In these cases both the final action and the description tend to be ironic to point to a larger significance beyond themselves and tend to summarize something of central importance to the story.

Having considered the various static modes as a means of contrast, one also needs to consider the nature of the dynamic modes of novelistic closure.

The two most important dynamic modes are **report** and **speech** which tend to produce open endings when they appear in pure forms or mixed with one another. In the simplest form, stories which end with these modes are open-ended insofar as the final sentences fail to round off some of the earlier elements of the narrative; instead, "the action or the final bit of dialogue seems to exist for its own sake or to point to some future event. So the ending can be seen in parallel to the *in medias res* beginning: we can leave the action *in medias res* as we have entered it" (Bonheim 1982:135).

But Bonheim (1982:136) makes a crucial statement with regard to viewing open endings in isolation when he states that these cannot be viewed in isolation: "On a second look we find that even these apparently open endings ...[have] their roots

reaching to the very heart of the story". This is confirmed by Torgovnick (1981:7): "Endings, closures reveal the essences of novels with particular clarity; to study closure is to re-create and re-experience fiction with an unusual vividness".

Bonheim (1982:138-45) proceeds to build his argument by focusing his attention on a number of dynamic endings or combinations of endings which produce open endings: endings with the death of a character which is rendered as an event posterior to the limits of the story; minor closing actions such as a departure, shutting a door or window, ending a telephone conversations, etc.

Endings which repeat beginnings, or the title of the story are used to create a sense of an ending: "The janus-headed ending combines the final look back which is essential to the closed ending and which both meta-narrative and comment inevitably convey, with the suggestion that life goes forward which is essential to the open one" (Bonheim 1982:143).

Certain **stylistic considerations** have a very definite influence on the open-ended nature of endings and can be grouped under **diction, syntax** and **rhetoric**. The endings of novels are often signaled by a change in **stylistic register**, which often changes from what immediately preceded it, moving upward toward pathos or sublimity, or even downward into the mundane and vulgar. Bonheim (1982:148) distinguishes five types of register, viz. (1) frozen; (2) formal; (3) consultative; (4) casual; and (5) intimate. Literature very seldom makes use of registers 1 and 5. Nineteenth century fiction tended to use registers 2 and 3, while twentieth century fiction favour 3 and 4, starting with 4 and moving up from there. The register used at the end of narratives tends to move gradually from the more casual to the more formal and often goes hand in hand with the search for an abstract statement or truth (Bonheim 1982:149). This is not to say however, that a downward shift is impossible.

Syntax can also be used to affect the closing of a narrative. The four kinds of syntax available, i.e., normal, inverted, elaborated, and fragmentary are used in accordance with the principle guiding stylistic register, viz. that those which are most interesting and most effective are those that deviate from the norm. For example, inverted syntax can be used at the end of a story to heighten the effect, or the syntax can be elaborated.

The range of **rhetorical figures** used to close narratives are almost as wide as that found in poetry. In general favour are all forms of repetition such as anaphora, epistrophe, symplote, epizeuxis, etc. (Bonheim 1982:154-6). A very important aspect regarding the use of rhetorical figures is the piling up of stylistic deviations towards the end of a story, which in actual fact emphasizes the closed nature of the ending.

Bonheim (1982:156) concludes his survey by commenting on the use of irony at the end of a story and comes to the conclusion that irony usually occurs at the end of the narrative rather than at the beginning because it depends on the discrepancy between a statement and contextual information. The latter is established during the course of the narrative, and provides opportunities for the irony not offered at the beginning of the story. A second conclusion is that irony is a special

form of rhetorical heightening, and thus is one of the techniques which, when used with otherwise open endings, reduces that openness. Thirdly, the conclusion with irony is largely a modern development.

As has been noted, **speech** can include a **number** of other modes. Speech that conveys comment is of two kinds, straight and ironic. Where irony results from the narrator's treatment of his materials, the usual mode is comment, and less obvious ironic report and descriptions. On the other hand, where irony results from a discrepancy between the narrator's views and those of a character, the usual mode is speech: the character says what the narrator indicates to be mistaken, exaggerated or ridiculous, or the character is simply unreliable. Sometimes the closing speech presents the climax of the narrative; it can also formulate the 'message' or call into question everything that preceded it (Bonheim 1982:158-63).

Acknowledging the flawed and arbitrary nature of our perception of the notions of 'beginning' and 'ending' discussed earlier, the description of the various categories of endings available to writers has hopefully given us a firmer grasp on the notion of 'ending'. It is however, still imperative to define a set of descriptive and analytical concepts which will enable us to describe four crucial factors which constitute **relationships** which are elicited by the endings of fictions.

At any rate, we must be very cautious to speak of anti-closures, because to a great extent it is the reader who decides whether the last words or pages of a novel mark the end or the beginning of a process. (Szegedy-Maszak 1987)

Torgovnick (1981:13-18) identifies four **relationships**, namely the relationship of ending to beginning and middle, and therefore of the relationship of these concepts to the shape of fiction; the author's⁸ and reader's viewpoint on the novel's characters, and the major action specifically at its end; the author's relationship to his own ideas during closure which will indicate the degree of his self-awareness and of his control over the closural process; and, finally, the relationship between author and reader during closure.

The relationship of ending to beginning and middle is described by means of four geometric concepts: **circularity, parallelism, incompleteness, and tangential endings** (Torgovnick 1981:13-14).

When an ending clearly recalls the beginning of the novel in language, situation, and grouping or regrouping of characters on retrospective analysis, **circularity** may be said to be the dominant and controlling force in the closural⁹ process. When language, situation, or the grouping of characters do not just refer to the beginning of the work but to a series of points in the text, we may speak of **parallelism** as the novel's closural pattern. **Incomplete** closure includes many or the aspects that

⁸ The word 'author' is used in this paper to mean 'implied author' and is used in the same way as Chatman (1978:148-51) uses it.

⁹ Torgovnick's definition of the concept closure (1981:6) is considered problematic by Davidson (1984:2). This paper accepts Torgovnick's definition ("As I use the term, 'closure' designates the process by which a novel reaches an adequate and appropriate conclusion or, at least, what the author hopes

suggest circular or parallel closure, but omits the more crucial elements for full circularity or parallelism, either through deliberate authorial choice, or through inadvertent formal failure, or both. **Tangential endings** are endings which begin with the introduction of a new topic, and the reader is usually left with the impression that the author wishes to end his novel with the sense that it could be continued. As such these endings are therefore 'anti-closural' in a sense.

The second important set of terms concerns the **author's** and **reader's** viewpoint of the novel's characters and its major action at the end. Torgovnick (1981:15) distinguishes between two kinds of views, i.e., **overview** and **close-up**. In **overview** endings the authors gloss the ending's relationship to the body of the novel for the reader. If no explicit gloss is offered, these endings still create the impression of 'making sense', of giving a clear and unobfuscated view of the novel's action. The narrator – and hence the reader – may know more facts than the characters do, and therefore have an overview based on superior knowledge. Or the ending may be conveyed from a vantage point much later in time, or more cosmic in knowledge than that available to the characters. In these instances, says Torgovnick (1981:15), "author, narrator, and reader will have an overview unavailable to characters caught 'in the midst'".

Close-up endings on the other hand do **not** have any temporal distance separating the ending from the body of the **novel**. Initially, readers – like the characters – will lack the overview made possible by temporal distance or by authorial glossing of the action. It may even be that first-time readers may not even understand why the ending is the ending, or may be at a loss for what the ending implies about meaning. It is only through distancing themselves from the action and through reflection that readers can arrive at both the appropriateness of the ending and its implications for meaning.

The third set of terms describes the **author's relationship** to his own ideas during closure, to indicate the degree of his self-awareness and control over the closural

or believes is an adequate, appropriate conclusion") and employs the concept for want of a more precise term. However, I fully agree with Davidson's questioning of the notion, given here in full:

Assuming, now, that we have delineated an ending and determined that it is real, effective, honest and appropriate, how then do we describe it? Is it, to use current terminology, an open or a closed ending? Yet the conclusion of a novel is never self-evidently open or closed in the same sense that a door or window is. Furthermore, the figurative analogy of ending as aperture, when applied to any narrative, necessarily works in two contradictory ways that equally undermine the question ostensibly addressed. Every ending is open, for the reader who has just concluded a work has necessarily emerged through that ending to a time and space beyond the text. For that same reader, however, the same ending is now necessarily closed. Looking back, we see the whole text standing inviolate and not some special entrance into the heart of its matter. Furthermore, to review the whole text is usually to reread it, which entails entering again through the front door, not the back. But of course texts can be entered at any point. We can go through the ending again or we can mentally review and reweigh it to decide if it closes off or expands upon the material of the narration. And with the conclusion reread and reconsidered, we have still another question: is a revolving door open or closed?

process¹⁰. **Self-aware** authors are those authors who have mastered their ideas, who know what they want to say by means of closure, and who say it successfully. It is important to point out, as indeed Torgovnick (1981:18) does, that this does not mean the exclusion of ambivalence or controlled ambiguity. When authors have not fully thought through their ideas or may have inadequately communicated those ideas during closure, or when they display a lack of psychological quirkiness during closure, they are labeled **self-deceiving**.

The fourth important set of terms concerns the relationship between **author** and **reader** (Torgovnick 1981:16-18). Recent reader-response criticism, notably that of Iser (1978), has indicated a number of readers not always clearly distinguished or distinguishable. Descriptions of the relationship between author and reader differ for 'ideal readers', 'implied readers', and 'contemporary readers'. Moreover, 'contemporary readers' and 'ideal readers' may reach diverse judgments about the success or failure of endings.

To prevent this kind of confusion, Torgovnick (1981:170) insists that it is necessary to define the relationship and designates three types of relationships between author and reader, i.e., **complementary**, **incongruent** and **confrontational** relationships. Some authors, like Jane Austen and George Eliot, believe that they share a variety of ideals and views with their readers, especially the authorial views at the end of the novel, and therefore the relationship between author and reader **may** be described as **complementary**, because the reader more or less uncritically accepts both the ending and whatever meaning the author wishes it to convey.

When the author must actively coax and persuade his reader into accepting an ending, the relationship may be described as **incongruent**. Successful persuasion during closure will result in the reader's acceptance of the ending, thereby changing the relationship into a congruent one. If the author is unsuccessful in persuading the reader, the reader may feel that the ending is in some sense flawed.

Some authors also exploit incongruent relationships between author and readers. They anticipate reader resistance towards their attitude at the ending of the novel, and – instead of actively trying to create and promote a congruent relationship – they confront readers with endings which deliberately thwart reader

¹⁰ Torgovnick's (1981:18-19) approach here is slightly suspect. Consider the following statement:

Since an ending is the single place where an author most pressingly desires to make his points – whether those points are aesthetic, moral, social, political, epistemological, or even the determination not to make any point at all – extratextual information and statements of intention are often extremely helpful (1981:19).

Even though she takes note of what both the formulators and detractors of the theory of the intentional fallacy have to say, she still opts for the viewpoint that, despite the notion of the intentional fallacy, there are many instances in which extratextual information genuinely advance our reading of some texts. Seen within the ambit of her book, this is completely acceptable as she sets out to establish parameters for her analysis of more or less 'conventional' or 'traditional' novels like *Middlemarch*, *Bleak House*, *War and Peace*, *The Portrait of A Lady*, etc. Within the context of this paper, and especially seen in the light of Postmodernist notions of deliberately obfuscating, even denying meaning, of taking the reader for 'a ride', etc., I think one should be extremely cautious not to read too much serious authorial intention into the endings of Postmodernist texts.

expectations. Such relationships are confrontational and are usually aimed at contemporary readers, especially those who flout popular conventions: "They may deem a given ending as unsuccessful, while ideal readers find it successful and experience it as a kind of 'in' joke" (Torgovnick 1981:18).

Having considered the categories and relationships of fictional endings, it is now necessary to briefly investigate the **reading process** – and especially the role played by readers to affect the endings.

True endings are found not in stolid or determinate formal conclusions to novels but in the infinite process of reading. (Dipple 1988)

Iser's aesthetic reception theory propounded in *The Act of Reading* (1978) and *The Implied Reader* (1983) provides us with the final set of concepts necessary in an analysis of postmodernist fictional endings.

Iser's work has strongly been influenced by the phenomenology of Poulet and Ingarden (Freund 1987:139) and a familiarity with the basic tenets is assumed. Iser builds his theory of reading on the notion of interaction between the structure of the literary work and its recipient. This involves three aspects: there is the **text** with its schemata of determination and the concomitant places of interdeterminacy, which constitute the potential for the production of meaning; there is the **reader's processing** of the text, i.e., his construction or concretization of a cohesive aesthetic object; and, finally, there are the conditions which give rise to the inter-action between text and reader. Iser gives the following compact description of his model:

...the literary work has two poles, which we might call the artistic and the aesthetic: the artistic pole is the author's text and the aesthetic is the realization accomplished by the reader. In view of this polarity, it is clear that the work itself cannot be identical with the text or with the concretization, but must be situated somewhere between the two. It must inevitably be virtual in character, as it cannot be reduced to the reality of the text or to the subjectivity of the reader, and it is from this vitality that it derives its dynamism. As the reader passes through the various perspectives offered by the text and relates the different views and patterns to one another he sets the work in motion, and so sets himself in motion too. (Iser 1978:21)

The text does not point to a referential reality, but represents a pattern, or a 'structured indicator to guide the imagination of the reader' (Iser 1978:9). This set of indicators or pattern is incomplete and full of 'gaps', 'blanks' or 'indeterminacies' which the reader must fill in according to his own disposition and to the perspectives offered by the text. The reader has to construct the *Gestalt* of the text by linking up the different viewpoints of the text. Each of these perspectives is limited in itself, and requires further perspectives to arrange the previous perspec-

tive into a consistent view of textual segments. Iser likens the reader's construction of *Gestalten* to that of a journey:

... the reader...[can be] likened to a traveler in a stagecoach who has to make the often difficult journey through the novel, gazing out from his moving perspective. Naturally, he combines all that he sees within his memory and establishes a pattern of consistency, the nature and reliability of which will depend partly on the degree of attention he has paid during each phase of the journey. At no time, however, can he have a total view of that journey (1978:16).

The journey through the perspectives and shifting themes and horizons is accomplished by virtue of the "reader's incessant acts of ideation, as she/he organizes segments and construes the connection between them, always preoccupied by gap-filling activities that ultimately produce... what we think of as comprehension and meaning" (Freund 1987:145). This means that every text is potentially capable of many realizations. This also means that no reading can exhaust a text's full potential.

This grouping together of perspectives is only one technique open to the reader; he also has the modes of anticipation and retrospection at his disposal:

...during the process of reading, there is an active interweaving of anticipation and retrospection, which on a second reading may turn into a kind of advance retrospection. The impressions that arise as a result of this process will vary from individual to individual, but only within the limits imposed by the written...text. In the same way, two people gazing at the night sky may both be looking at the same collection of stars, but one will see the image of a plough, and the other will make out a dipper. The 'stars' in a literary text are fixed; the lines that join them are variable. (Iser 1983:282)

One very important aspect of this process of anticipation is that which Levitt (1971:55-7) calls an 'obligatory scene'. Although discussed in terms of drama, it has an equally important function in fiction. An obligatory scene is one which the reader foresees and desires. An example of such an obligatory scene is the final showdown between hero and villain in the American Western. Obligatory scenes are made necessary by the progress of the preceding action, and even the reader's familiarity with other books, short stories, etc. with similar conventions, themes, plots, etc.

A final aspect pertaining to this paper which Iser mentions is that of the creation of illusions. This concept goes hand-in-hand with that of anticipation and retrospection, and is especially important in the reading of modern texts, as Iser emphasizes:

...[in] modern texts...it is the very precision of the written details which increases the proportion of indeterminacy; one detail appears to contradict one another, and so simultaneously stimulates and frustrates our desire to 'picture', thus continually causing our imposed 'gestalt' of the text to disintegrate. Without the formation of illusions, the unfamiliar world of the text would remain unfamiliar; through the illusions, the experience offered by the text becomes accessible to us, for it is only the illusion, on its different levels of consistency, that makes the experience 'readable'. (1983:284-5)

Conclusion

[My book]...is to be regarded rather as an interconnected group of suggestions which it is hoped will be of some practical use to critics and students of literature. Whatever is of no practical use to anybody is expendable. (Frye 1957)

The aim of this paper was to focus on the lack of consensus with regard to adequate terminology which could assist one in interpreting postmodernist fictional endings. It has not attempted to generate any new concepts, but to gather together concepts which have previously not been seen within one framework. The concepts discussed above must be seen as a composite number of 'tools' which could all be used in describing and interpreting postmodernist fictional endings. What remains is to test the usefulness of these concepts by using them in a reading of postmodernist fictional endings and this will be done in a subsequent paper entitled "*Hawksmoor* as Fictional Architecture, Or: (Re)Constructing Postmodernist Fictional Endings"¹¹.

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