

Open-Ended Narratives in a Diachronic Perspective

This article traces the evolution of open-ended narratives in Russian literature from Karamzin to Bitov. It proposes a typology of narrative figures that generate incompleteness. Building on Genette's theory, the article distinguishes two main figures: *analepsis* (retrospective omission) and *prolepsis* (anticipatory omission), which have subtypes: referential versus modal, linear versus variable, and focalised versus non-focalised. Two advanced forms are highlighted: the eliminated ending (Chekhov's "Fear"), where omission is irreparable and undermines narrativity, and metanarrative *prolepsis* (Nabokov, Bitov), where openness points to the infinite regress of storytelling. Together, these figures mark a historical transition from plot-based uncertainty ("What happens next?") to narrative self-reflection ("What does it mean to end?"). The article also outlines hypothetical types, such as metanarrative *analepsis*, and notes contemporary uses, such as in Vodolazkin's *The Aviator*. Ultimately, the open ending proves to be a persistent literary device that highlights the fundamental incompleteness of narrative discourse.

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of an open ending is not as straightforward as it may appear at first glance. An open ending can be interpreted as a specific mechanism for disrupting the compositional logic of narrative, as described by Aristotle (1995, 55): "A whole is that which has a beginning, middle, and end. [...] Well-constructed plots, therefore, should neither begin nor end at an arbitrary point [...]." The arbitrariness of the conclusion of a chain of events, or even the absence of an ending in the traditional sense of the term, is the most obvious sign of the phenomenon under investigation. However, it would be imprudent to consider Aristotle's model exhaustive. Twentieth-century researchers have concluded that any work driven by plot is fundamentally incomplete. This is precisely the idea expressed by J. Hillis Miller (1978, 7) in his article "The Problematic of Ending in Narrative": "Attempts to characterise the fiction of a given period by its commitment to closure or to open-endedness are blocked from the beginning by the impossibility of ever demonstrating whether a given narrative is closed or open."

It can be argued that, in the strictest sense, a narrative is never unconditionally complete. Under certain circumstances, every story may be continued. However, this fact does not eliminate the question of an open ending. Due to its structural features, a narrative strives for completion, as if predetermined by it. As Paul Ricœur (1984 [1983], 201) rightly points out, the narrator establishes a causal chain by linking the events and implements "conditional necessity: *given* the complete set of causal conditions that took place (and not others) it was *necessary* that the effect that was actually produced occur." The intrigue of the narrative is predicated on the anticipation of a denouement. Frank Kermode (2000 [1966], 23) emphasises the following: "We cannot, of course, be denied an end; it is one of the great charms of books that they have to end."

A further avenue for exploration lies in the complementary relationship between openness and closedness, centrifugal and centripetal forces that govern narrative. It is noteworthy that Stephen A. Nimis (1999, 234) characterises the specificity of novelistic plot construction in the following

manner: “Efforts to move the story to its conclusion keep opening up new narrative possibilities, resulting in a surplus of narrative energy.” It can be said that an open ending is the result of this “surplus of narrative energy,” which is played out in different ways in the practice of storytelling.

An open ending introduces ambiguity into the narrative and thus serves as a mechanism of receptive frustration. As Eyal Segal (2019) rightly observes (referring in his arguments to Meir Sternberg’s model), “the cessation, or termination, of narrative interest (in other words, the filling in of all the significant informational gaps about the represented world that have arisen along the textual sequence) is what stops narrative from going. Conversely, narrative ‘openness’ would be the result of significant gaps relating to the represented world that remain open – or at least not definitely closed – even at the end; in other words, it would result from permanent gaps”. It can thus be concluded that openness is determined not so much by the possibility of supplementing the story (as mentioned above, it is always present) as by the receptive attitude of the text (the ‘insufficiency’ of narrative information, postulated in one way or another).

The phenomenon under investigation has not yet been the subject of study in the historical dynamics of its formation. The present paper sets out to delineate the evolution of the open ending in Russian literature from the late eighteenth to the late twentieth centuries. The eighteenth century marked a significant turning point in the development of Russian literature, which began to grow rapidly. This was primarily due to the active reception of European cultural and literary traditions. This suggests that large-scale patterns, which typically evolve gradually and impact the characteristics of narrative completion, will manifest in a compact and comprehensible form. It can be concluded that this article was written within a methodological framework that includes “a wide spectrum of exploratory studies bearing on specific and clearly defined narrative techniques and devices as they have developed in various national traditions across different periods” (Hühn 2023, 3).

2. Open Ending as a System of Figures: from Nikolay Karamzin to Andrei Bitov

2.1 Analipsis

One of the earliest instances of an open ending in Russian literature is evident in Nikolay Karamzin’s gothic tale *The Island of Bornholm*, which is constructed upon a succession of escalating enigmas that remain unresolved by the conclusion. The narrator, traversing the sea from England to Russia, encounters a “young man, thin, pale, languid – more specter than a man” (Karamzin 1969 [1794], 119). The melancholic countenance of the young man captivates the traveler’s interest. The stranger performs a song about unhappy love, but its meaning is unclear. The narrator, having arrived on the island, encounters an ancient castle inhabited by a “venerable, grey-haired old man”. The “marks of spiritual sorrow” (125) that have been etched on his face remain unexplained. As night fell, the traveler discovered a cave in the vicinity of the castle, where he noticed a young woman “behind an iron grating” (128). She does not give clear answers to the character’s questions. The narrative concludes with a dialogue between the traveler and the old man. However, the insights provided by the latter, which are indispensable for the reader to comprehend the events that transpired, are not disclosed within the confines of the narrative. The traveler recounts, “We sat beneath the tree, and the old man told me a most horrible story [...]. This time I shall tell you one

thing only, that I have found the secret of the Gravezend stranger – a terrible secret!” (131). Readers acquainted with Gothic prose will undoubtedly be able to unravel this mystery. Vadim Vatsuro posits that the motif of incest is implicitly present in the story. However, within the context of a Gothic novel, the “owner of a gloomy castle” is often depicted as guilty of “the sin of lust and incest; he pursues his victim, locking her in a dungeon.” Karamzin transforms the traditional plot scheme: “the burden of individual guilt does not lie on him [the old man; A.A.]. It lies precisely on the young lovers who committed the sin of incest” (Vatsuro 2002, 93; my translation).

The open ending in Karamzin’s work refers to events of the past which are not explicated. In this regard, we can recall such a narrative figure as an *analepsis* – that is, “any evocation after the fact of an event that took place earlier than the point in the story where we are at any given moment” (Genette 1980 [1972], 40). In *The Island of Bornholm*, however, the event is not mentioned, but is concealed in retrospect. Importantly, we are not dealing with a here-and-now omission, which may be filled in later (precisely through analepsis), but rather with a retrospective omission, a failure to fill in a previously made omission. The proposed designation for this figure is *analipsis*. The legitimacy of this term is supported by the etymological reflections of Genette himself. In one of the notes appended to *The Narrative Discourse*, the author discusses

the opposition between the root *-lepse* – which in Greek refers to the fact of taking, whence, in narrative, assuming responsibility for and taking on (prolepsis: to take on something in advance; analepsis: to take on something after the event) – and the root *-lipse* (as in *ellipsis* or *paralipsis*) which refers, on the contrary, to the fact of leaving out, passing by without any mention. (Genette 1980 [1972], 40; emphasis in the original)

An open ending of this type does not necessarily indicate the plot gaps, but may hint at an alternative (unexpressed) perspective on the story presented in the text. In the context of Russian literature, this particular instance of analipsis emerged at a considerably later point in time. An exemplary illustration of this phenomenon can be found in Mikhail Lermontov’s *A Hero of Our Time* (2009 [1840]). The novel consists of several novellas about the life of Grigory Pechorin. The order in which the events are presented in the book does not correspond to the chronological sequence of the events described. The conclusion of the narrative is revealed in the midst of Lermontov’s text. “The Fatalist,” the chapter which concludes the novel, takes the reader back to the middle of Pechorin’s biography. The protagonist is engaged in a game of cards with other officers. A dispute regarding the concept of predestination emerges among the participants. Pechorin’s colleague Vulich proposes conducting an experiment to ascertain whether an individual possesses the capacity to voluntarily relinquish their life, or whether a predetermined moment of fatality is destined for each person. Vulich shoots himself in the temple, but the pistol misfires. The following morning, it turns out that Vulich was murdered during the night by an inebriated Cossack. The criminal is concealed within a hut, and it is at this point that Pechorin resolves to test the will of destiny. The protagonist enters the Cossack’s refuge through a window, and the Cossack discharges a firearm at him. However, the bullet merely grazes his epaulette, causing him no harm. In a state of reflection on the events, Pechorin poses the following question to himself: “After all this, how could one not become a fatalist? But who knows for sure if he is convinced of something or not?” (168). In Maxim Maximych’s commentary, rational explanations are proffered for mystical and fateful events: “Yes, sir. Of course. Quite a wise old joke! ... But those Asian cocking-pieces frequently misfire if they are badly greased or if you haven’t pressed hard enough with your finger”. And then Pechorin’s simple-minded interlocutor adds: “Yes, I have pity for the wretch... The devil possessed

him to talk to a drunk that night! But, clearly, it had been written for him in the sky at his birth...!” (168f.) The ambiguous perception of human life (fatalistic/rational) postulated in the final novella is extrapolated to the whole story of the protagonist. Was Pechorin’s life predetermined? Or was it the result of a combination of circumstances? This is the essence of the contradiction that Lermontov’s readers encounter in the finale.

A retrospective shift in the reader’s perspective can also be observed in Ivan Goncharov’s *Oblomov*, which concludes with the following phrase: “In time Schtoltz related to his friend what herein is to be found recorded” (Goncharov 1915 [1859], 317). The final words reveal a far from impartial account of Oblomov’s life. It has become evident that the information provided to us by Schtoltz was significantly one-sided. However, Schtoltz could not have been privy to certain moments in Ilya Ilyich’s life that have come to light. Consequently, these moments belong to the sympathetic interpretation of the “friend” who recorded the story. It is only at the novel’s conclusion that the dual and ambivalent nature of the narrative becomes apparent, presenting the reader with a choice: to distance themselves from Oblomov in terms of values or to identify with him (Tiupa 2010, 117). The uncertainty of the narrative provokes the reader not to fill in the plot gaps, but to understand (reconsider) the meaning of what has already been told. It is therefore possible to conditionally designate the analepsis presented in Karamzin’s story as *referential*, whilst it can be designated as *modal* in Lermontov’s and Goncharov’s novels.

2.2 Prolipsis

It is perhaps the most common type of open ending to make references to events which are not covered by the narrative. At the end of Pushkin’s *Lady into Lassie*, the narrator remains silent about the events that took place after the episode of recognition, when Alexei realises that Akulina (the peasant girl held dear to his heart) is in fact Lisa (a lady, the daughter of Muromsky). So his desire to marry Akulina curiously coincides with his father’s wish for him to marry Lisa. “The reader will relieve me of the superfluous task of describing the end of the story” (Pushkin 1954 [1830], 110), the narrator humorously states. It is obvious that the denouement is happy, and its possible reconstructions will not differ significantly.

Something similar can be observed, for example, in Chekhov’s early prose. Thus, the main character of the story “Nerves,” agitated after the spiritist séance, cannot sleep and comes to the room of the governess Rosalia Karlovna, and then safely succumbs to the charms of Morpheus on “a wicker chest standing by the door” (Chekhov 1976 [1885], 15; my translation). In the morning, his wife, who has returned from church, sees him: “What his wife said and how stupid her husband looked when he woke up, I leave to others to imagine. As for me, in my helplessness, I lay down my arms” (Chekhov 1976 [1885], 15; my translation). The reader can easily imagine the ensuing family scandal.

We will refer to the open ending of the described variety as a *prolepsis*, without deviating from the chosen terminology. Prolipsis can be *linear* and limited to a single chain of potential events, but also *variable*. This suggests a broader range of possible plot versions, necessitating more complex reception procedures.

In Alexander Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, the narrator abruptly interrupts the narrative at the crucial moment when Tatyana's husband catches her in a dramatic dialogue with the main character. This deliberate 'pause' powerfully suggests that the story will continue beyond the immediate narrative:

At this unlucky moment, we
Must leave my hero, ruefully,
For a long time... indeed, forever. (Pushkin 1943 [1833], 154)

We do not know what will happen next: Pushkin's narrator decisively lowers the curtain at the climax, placing the burden of the denouement squarely on the addressee. The text makes it clear that none of the addressee's assumptions can be considered reliable, as it does not offer him any effective 'navigation' tools to choose a single path. The same principle is implemented in a less acute form in Russian novels of the second half of the nineteenth century. *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoevsky (1950 [1866], 532) ends with a reference to Raskolnikov's moral transformation: "But that is the beginning of a new story – the story of the gradual renewal of a man, the story of his gradual regeneration [...]." The precise details of the 'story', including the cast of characters and the success or failure of the hero's 'renewal', remain to be ascertained. The historical 'halo' of the plot of Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1950 [1865–1869]) exerts a significant influence on the subsequent fates of Pierre, Denisov, and Nikolai Rostov, though this influence is characterised by a certain degree of ambiguity and indistinctness. The narrator does not withhold the denouement from the reader, but rather offers a glimpse into the subsequent course of events, delineated by a series of potential outcomes.

In the literary works of Pushkin, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy, a narrative is framed through the medium of comments from an omniscient narrator. The combination of zero focalization with an open ending creates an effect of 'incomplete incompleteness', as if something has been left untold, but has happened. It appears that the ending is accessible to the narrator but concealed from the audience and the characters. It is proposed that this type of variable prolepsis be designated as *unfocalised*.

Its opposite, *focalised* variable prolepsis, is a technique widely used by Anton Chekhov in his late prose. *The Steppe*, which details a brief segment from the life of the boy Egorushka, concludes with a rhetorical question that generates a prospective illusion of an almost novelistic narrative and likens the story to its initial chapter: "He sank exhaustedly on a bench, greeting the advent of his new and unknown life with bitter tears. What kind of life would it be?" (Chekhov 1991 [1888], 81) The question conveys the character's point of view and does not anticipate an answer. The boy's impressions and experiences are a "superposition" of potential forks in his life path, in which the reader also finds himself. A similar situation is evident in the finale of *The Lady with the Dog*. At first glance, the story appears relatively straightforward: a resort romance that suddenly becomes serious. However, it is shaped by the characters' existential anxiety. The reader, along with the characters, is uncertain about how their lives will unfold moving forward: "and it was clear to both of them that they had still a long, long way to go, and that the most complicated and difficult part of it was only just beginning" (Chekhov 1919 [1899], 28).

We concur with Wolf Schmid's (2023, 48) assertion that Chekhov's narratives exhibit "consistent figuralization that leads to open endings". The reader, constrained by the character's perspective, perceives the future with a sense of complete ignorance (being in the moment of the ongoing present), and the narrator appears unaware of this future – "appears" because, strictly speaking, the non-diegetic narrator is aware of all that is happening and could happen in the storyworld. The

effect of a ‘completely incomplete’ story is achieved: it is not unfinished, though it could have been told in its entirety, but unfolds before our eyes.

Finally, Chekhov develops a special type of open ending that can be defined as *eliminated* in this context. An omission implies that what is left untold can, at least in theory, be reconstructed with some clarity. The term *elimination* (‘exclusion, removal of something’) characterises the absence of any narrative link, an irreparable gap in the text. In the story “Fear”, the common plot of infidelity is rendered invalid, since the narrator is unable to interpret the events, or more precisely, whether to consider them as such in principle. He was previously involved in an extramarital affair with his friend’s wife, but he is unsure of the reasons behind it: “Why did it turn out this way and not another?” The inherently conflictual situation proved to be unproductive: “On the same day, I departed for St. Petersburg, and I never saw Dmitry Petrovich and his wife again. They say they continue to live together” (Chekhov 1977 [1892], 138; my translation). The ending does not refer to anything untold; it is literally missing. The open ending no longer serves as an impulse for a logical continuation (or retrospective resolution) of the story. Instead, it ‘exposes’ its optionality, its ‘pseudo-narrativity.’ The reader enters the metanarrative level of reception, immersing themselves in ‘unraveling’ Chekhov’s narrative as such. Did anything happen at all in Chekhov’s story? Does the writer violate the basic principles of narration?

*Metanarrative*¹ prolepsis is the subsequent phase in the evolution of the open ending. The initial intrigue of the plot, characterised by the question “How will it end?” is superseded by the intrigue of the text itself. As Paul Ricœur noticed (1985 [1984], 22), in classical literature, “the end of the work tended to be confused with the end of the represented action”. Conversely, in modernism, “the ending of the work is [...] the ending of the fictive operation itself”. This shift in perspective leads to the emergence of genuine interest in works with open endings, stemming from the incompleteness of the narrative discourse as a whole. In this regard, the final lines of Vladimir Nabokov’s novel *The Gift* are quite indicative:

Good-bye, my book! [...] And yet the ear cannot right now part with the music and allow the tale to fade; the chords of fate itself continue to vibrate; and no obstruction for the sage exists where I have put The End: the shadows of my world extend beyond the skyline of the page, blue as tomorrow’s morning haze – nor does this terminate the phrase. (Nabokov 1963 [1938], 378)

In Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* the story seems to continue even though the narrative process has come to an end, Nabokov postulates the eternal nature of storytelling itself.

In *Pushkin House* by Andrei Bitov (1987 [1978], 341), the inability to finish the story is theoretically justified. The narrator has to “delay the novel time after time (epilogues – a first, a second, a third...), in order to bring on ending after ending, each again unsatisfactory”; the narrator’s goal is “to *coincide completely* with the hero’s present”, but “Achilles will never catch up with the tortoise... [...] We wander in time present, where each next step is the disappearance of the preceding one [...]. Therefore, the present of the novel is a chain of finales, the line along which the past rips

¹ The term *metanarrative* is directly related to *metanarration*, which refers to “those forms of self-reflexive narration in which aspects of narration are addressed within the narratorial discourse, i.e. narrative utterances about narrative” (Neumann / Nünning, 2014). This article does not draw strict distinctions between metafiction and metanarration, as the focus is on narrative self-reflexivity in a broad sense, regardless of its function (whether it specifically points to the act of storytelling or ‘exposes’ its fictional nature). Metanarration is likely to be present implicitly in any narrative text insofar as the reader recognises it as such. However, my focus is solely on explicit forms of metanarration. Furthermore, in the chosen context of use, the term *metanarrative* in no way refers to the *grand récit* (in Lyotard’s sense).

away from the nonexistent future.“ An open ending is conceptualised as a fatal property of narration (Bitov appears to echo J. Hillis Miller, as cited in the opening paragraphs of this paper). Any conclusion will appear contrived, as in the absolute sense, it is deemed unfeasible, “the event being narrated and the event of narration itself” (Bakhtin / Medvedev 1985 [1928], 127) are never synchronised.

3. Conclusion

Taking a diachronic approach to the study of open endings has enabled us to examine them as a system of figures gradually adopted by writers from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. Once established in literary narrative practice, none of these figures disappeared irrevocably to make way for more innovative techniques, rather, they were reactivated after a period of time. For example, the modal analipsis discovered by Lermontov was used by Goncharov in *Oblomov*, and the linear prolepsis observed in Pushkin’s short stories is also found in Chekhov’s early prose.

In essence, a general assertion can be made regarding the evolution of the open ending in literary history. This evolution can be characterised by a gradual transition from a reader’s initial efforts to reconstruct the plot (i.e., formulate a solution/hypothesis) to more complex interpretive tasks, such as rethinking the story or engaging in narrative self-reflection.

The evolution of the open ending outlined in the article is not limited to the scheme presented. Initially, it can be augmented with hypothetical figures that have not been previously identified in Russian literature. For instance, analipsis, similar to prolepsis, can be classified into linear and variable types. In *The Island of Bornholm*, the lacunae are retrospectively filled in by the knowledgeable reader. However, it is conceivable to hypothesise a narrative text in which such reconstruction is problematic and implies several potential solutions. Distinctions can be drawn between focalised and non-focalised analipsis: ‘gaps’ that are limited by the character’s point of view and not filled in at the end are perceived as a more significant source of frustration for the reader than the delicate silence of Karamzin’s narrator. The paired characteristics previously mentioned are not applicable to metanarrative proleptic forms of narrative, as they exceed the perceptual experience of the characters and encompass solely the “event of narration” (Bakhtin / Medvedev 1985 [1928], 127). At the same time, the concept of metanarrative analipsis should be considered. For instance, the narrator may omit parts of the text or disrupt its graphic portrayal. However, in contrast to the addressee’s anticipations, the narrator does not correct the ‘mistakes’ at the conclusion. It is noteworthy that the omissions of lines in *Eugene Onegin* (stanzas IX, XIII, XIV of the first chapter, the second half of stanza III of the second chapter, etc.) could be interpreted in this manner. The modal variety of this type of analipsis should be represented by a reinterpretation of the manner, quality, or method of storytelling. In principle, if the first chapter of Pushkin’s novel is regarded as a relatively autonomous narrative, an example of modal metanarrative analipsis will also be found in the final stanza:

[...] My novel finds me in good fettle
And I’ve completed Chapter One.
I’ve scanned the pages most severely.
The errors are a trifle merely.
And those I do not greatly rue [...]. (Pushkin 1943 [1833], 23)

Additionally, we might note that contemporary prose seeks new ways to apply the system of narrative figures in question. According to Olga Grimova's observation (2017, 55), in *The Aviator* (2016 [2018]) by Eugene Vodolazkin, two plots interact – detective and enigmatic – and from the point of view of the former, “we are faced with an open ending”, but “from the point of view of the event line developing in the sphere of the hero's consciousness, the ending looks much more definite. In the mental sphere, Platonov was able to overcome the fragmentation of time” (my translation). It is evident that the open ending remains a highly sought-after narrative device, with a vast array of possibilities yet to be explored.

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