

**POSTMODERN (UN)ENDINGS. THE SUBJECT AND INFINITY  
IN MODERN AND POSTMODERN LITERATURE<sup>1</sup>**

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**Key words:** classical novel, modernist novel, postmodernist novel, narrative, ending.

**Abstract:** The paper explores the possible endings of narratives in the classical European novel from Cervantes through Goethe to Flaubert and the twentieth-century modernist novel of Proust, Kafka, Joyce, Beckett, and García Márquez. Against this background, the twenty-first-century novel *The Pianist's Touch* [*Pianistov dotik*] by Mirt Komel is interpreted. The thesis is that the European novel has grown progressively incapable of bringing the story to a close: in Kafka, the castle is never to be reached, in Proust, the infinite Time itself incarnates, in Beckett, the flow of words never comes to an end, and in García Márquez, the ending is only a fulfillment of a prophecy in which we are eternally caught. It is the modernist collapse of the symbolic structure of the world that condemns the hero to this kind of "narrative infinity." By contrast, in Komel's novel the symbolic frame of reality has never existed, which is why the world no longer addresses, interpellates or obliges the protagonist, but rather lets him be apotheosized into a transcendent element in the midst of the immanence of the world.

**POSTMODERNI (NE)KONCI: SUBJEKT IN NESKONČNOST V  
MODERNI IN POSTMODERNI LITERATURI**

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**Ključne besede:** klasični roman, modernistični roman, postmodernistični roman, naracija, konec.

**Povzetek:** Članek raziskuje možne konce naracij v klasičnem evropskem romanu od Cervantesa mimo Goetheja do Flauberta in v modernističnem romanu dvajsetega stoletja pri Proustu, Kafki, Joyceu, Beckettu in Garcíi Márquezu. Skozi to perspektivo je podana interpretacija romana enaindvajsetega stoletja *Pianistov dotik* Mirta Komela. Teza se glasi, da je evropski roman postajal vse bolj nesposoben, da bi zgodbo pripeljal do zaključka: pri Kafki ni mogoče doseči gradu, pri Proustu se utelesi neskončni Čas sam, pri Beckettu tok besed nikoli ne pride do konca, pri Garcíi Márquezu je konec le izpolnitev prerokbe, v katero smo vselej že ujeti. Razlog, ki junaka obsoja na takšno »narativno neskončnost«, leži v modernističnem sesutju simbolne strukture sveta. V nasprotju s tem pa v Komelovem romanu simbolni okvir realnosti nikoli ni obstajal, zato svet junaka ne interpelira in zavezuje več, temveč ga raje povzdigne v transcendentni element sredi imanence sveta.

## 1 Introduction

The “end of history” is arguably the most notorious, exploited, criticized, and sometimes misunderstood of the Hegelian notions<sup>2</sup>. And Hegel’s philosophy might well be the last historical stance that could still proclaim the existence of “objective Spirit,” which is, among other things, an institution of a guaranteed ending to any possible story. After his death, it is this “warranted closure” that seems to have become impossible. Somewhere in the second half of the nineteenth century, a certain tendency in philosophy, as well as science, begins to manifest itself and prevail, a tendency to invent terms of a kind of unending, fatalistic repetitiveness of being. In the wake of post-Hegelian spirit, Marx developed a series of concepts of self-referential automatism, such as the circulation and self-expansion of capital. Nietzsche was famously subject to the great revelation of the eternal recurrence of the same, an experience which he cherished as the most momentous insight of his life. In the twentieth century, Freud, in his “last dualism,” juxtaposed life drives with cyclical and inherently infinite death drives; this doctrine is widely held to be the climax of his scientific career. Heidegger’s late thought introduced the fateful truth-events which no longer adhere to the “subjective” logic of narrative closures. Lacan defined drive as essentially non-reducible

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<sup>2</sup> Even though a benevolent reading could still “save” it by re-interpreting it into an intrinsically modern idea, for it was invented as an opposition to the “bad infinities” of Kant and Fichte.

to desire and derived the concept of *jouissance* precisely from this iterative, unremitting, anti-humanist force in the core of human sexuality. Deleuze based his entire ontology on the notion of repetition, drawing heavily on Marx's circulation and Freud's death drive. And Luhmann's sociology, his "systems theory," is centered around the reproduction of the system, whose only immanent desire is never to come to an end. In short, by all appearances the closed horizons of metaphysics were slowly resigning and making place for an altogether new "discomfort" of possible endings eternally eluding the human condition.

And it was perhaps literature that developed the most delicate and sophisticated sensitivity for this modernist "terror of non-finitability." A certain not to be generalized although clear enough trend can be observed. While the nineteenth-century novel could still guarantee the form of the "end of the story," the following period would begin to deny us even this hindmost solace, the solace of great tragic, but nonetheless determinate and finalized fates. In this paper, we would therefore like to embark on an exploration of the modern emergence of what we term "narrative infinity." For we will argue that the most representative literary works of the previous century, novels written by Kafka, Proust, Beckett, and García Márquez, are either incapable of constructing an ending or can only bring the narrative to a close where the impossibility of a true ending becomes self-referential and eventually incarnates in an image of infinity circling back into itself. Our ruminations on the different ways of ending a novel arose upon reading a twenty-first century novel, *The Pianist's Touch* by Mirt Komel, in which, as we shall see, a sort of total novelistic non-finitability permeates every layer of its narrative world.

## **2 From the classical endings to the modernist non-finitability**

The beginnings and the ends of novels are never an innocent affair; the first sentence plunges us into a hitherto unknown universe, the last expels us from it, leaving an aftertaste of a world accomplished. And one perhaps particularly compelling and economical way to enquire into the most pervasive changes of the entire literary space is to focus precisely on these opening and closing moves.

Let us re-read the initial paragraph of *The Pianist's Touch*, Komel's 2015 debut novel, and ask ourselves how does it differ from the beginnings that we, as readers, are accustomed to:

Darkness. A timeless, colorless, weightless, sick emptiness without me, you, him, or anyone or anything else. No matter. Soon after, a not quite inevitable unconscious movement of the body, then the waking

of consciousness: pain, brightness, pain, emptiness, pain—voices. One's own griping and groaning. The heart is beating, breathe, the blood is flowing, breathe, the wound is healing, breathe. Light (Kommel, 2015: 11; hereafter translation T. D.).

The usual scheme of classic novels – especially the nineteenth-century realist novel – is the one which opens with an image of a ready-made world and then locates the protagonist in its midst. Here, on the other hand, it seems as though we are witnessing cosmic creation *tout court*. Although we later find out that this scene is about the protagonist waking up in hospital from a coma he fell into in the middle of the street, it is also evident that the first sentence of the paragraph – “Darkness” – as well as the last one – “Light” – allude to ancient creation myths, in particular the biblical Genesis. With this move, the author pulls the rug of safe traditional narrative forms from under our feet and makes us follow the tracks of a somewhat more inscrutable logic of creation. And the coordinates of this opening are set so firmly that they will not let us out of their clutches until the very last page. Already at the end of the first chapter, the author hints with a refined, Nabokovian irony that the novel will not follow the traditional narrative structure and honor its pledge by imparting an ending to the story:

At this point, as an intermediate conclusion, merely an interjection intended for the rather more sensitive reader, and in the face of all those who judge a book by its ending and rush towards the final page: rest assured that the book will not end with the death of the protagonist (the right to change the ending is reserved in the name of capricious artistic freedom) (16).

As we see, the author has set out to withhold even the most “natural” of narrative conclusions, the death of the hero; in fact, this promise itself, should the reader put too much faith in it, hangs loose, with the author being able to retract it if he so wishes. So what does this announcement tell us and what does it condemn us to?

To answer this question, let us first ask what kind of endings were permitted in the classic novel from Cervantes onward<sup>3</sup>. After all, an important

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<sup>3</sup> For, apart from a couple of exceptions – such as Wilhelm Meister's accomplished self-cultivation in the *Apprenticeship*, Raskolnikov's atonement in *Crime and Punishment*, or Pierre Bezukhov's familial happiness in *War and Peace* – the European novel hardly seems to be a realm of happy endings. Admittedly, this does not apply for the English novel of the “imperial century,” in which happy endings were a matter of course; perhaps this is why continental Europeans could never truly come to terms with the “narrative pragmatism” of Charles Dickens or Jane Austen. However, even in the most tragic finales of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century

reason for *Don Quixote* being considered a paradigmatic novelistic narrative featuring a prototypical modern hero lies precisely in the fact that it explicates a new *form of ending the story*. As Lukács claimed in *The Theory of the Novel*, it is “the problematic individual’s journeying towards himself,” i.e., the process of gaining self-knowledge by way of one’s life story, that reveals “the great difference between the discrete, unlimited nature of the material of the novel and the continuum-like infinity of the material of the epic. [...] The novel overcomes its ‘bad’ infinity by recourse to the biographical form” (Lukács, 1971: 81). Of course, Cervantes’s narrative technique is still partly mired in the world gone by, that is, in the tradition of the medieval chivalric romance; Don Quixote enacts his willful incompatibility with the world, his imagined chivalric honor, through a lengthy, at times tiresome series of episodes, which give the impression that they could go on forever. According to Lukács, Cervantes avoided this predicament only by adopting the parodic form. It is because of it that *Don Quixote* disposes with another lever, the unravelling of which can at last produce an actual *modern* ending of the story: this lever is, of course, the hero’s comical stature, unfolding in the gap between the “idea of chivalry” and the prosaic mundanity of the world. Cervantes’s world is already “disenchanted” enough that, coming in collision with it, even the ideality of the hero’s soul may go up in smoke at some point, thereby allowing the narrative arc to close. Competing at a tournament, the hero is vanquished by the Knight of the White Moon, who orders the loser to do penance by returning home. Once at home, the protagonist falls ill and enters a deep slumber; when he wakes up, he is no longer the sublime Don Quixote but only the common man, Alonso Quijano. “[A]nd one of the signs by which they conjectured he was dying,” Cervantes writes in a wonderful phrase, “was, his passing, by so easy and sudden a transition, from mad to sober” (Cervantes, 1992: 940). This is the crucial shift that finally makes it possible for this thousand-page-long colossus to come to an end: from behind the self-aggrandizing and therefore comical Quixote steps the small, profane, somewhat tragic Quijano. As observed by many theorists of the novel, the novelistic narrative arrives at its conclusion at the point in which a negative space opens up inside the hero that can be occupied by the reality of the ordinary world. The ending takes place when the ideals of the heart retreat,

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literature, the great deaths in Stendhal and Balzac, or the famous suicides in Goethe, Flaubert, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy, the world still posed as a substantial background to the hero’s ruination. Life might not have had enough meaning to promise happiness, but there was still enough of it there to finish our stories at least in an unhappy way. And the world could still coalesce into a contrastive setting for the aberrant path of the hero, a path that, albeit at the cost of the hero’s death, nevertheless straightened out in the end.

enabling high-flown interiority to succumb to and become level with the pressures of prosaic exteriority.

The one who probably articulated this negative space at the heart of the modern hero in the most formally perfected, to a degree even cold, but at the same time logically and esthetically convincing manner was Goethe in his famous *Bildungsroman Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*; he called it "inaptitude." Despite the occasionally episodic structure, he devised the final version of the *Apprenticeship* so that the entire narrative would be drawn towards Meister's final sacrifice, his famous *Entsagung*. The innermost core of Wilhelm's personality is his love of theater; the first, unfinished version of the novel was actually titled *Wilhelm Meisters theatralische Sendung*, and the protagonist is, after all, also Shakespeare's namesake. However, towards the end of the book, there is a conversation in which a friend has a few sobering words to share with Wilhelm:

"I think," said Jarno, "that you should abandon your association with the theater, for you have no talent for it."

Wilhelm was thunderstruck. He had to compose himself, for Jarno's harsh words had deeply offended his self-esteem. "If you can convince me of that," he said with a forced smile, "you will be doing me a great service, though it is always sad to be shaken out of a pleasant dream" (Goethe, 1989: 287).

This short dialogue, which Goethe, in his unassuming elegance, expands into a broader scene focusing on other things, might well be one of the great passages of world literature. The element that creates enough negativity to harbor the ending of the story is the hero's *insight into his own ordinariness*. His self-realization is further elevated and well-nigh consecrated in the famous scene of revelation, where the mysterious *Turmgesellschaft*, a sort of masonic lodge, lets him know, in some kind of ritual, that it had kept an eye on him all throughout his maturation, but did not want to intervene in his journey because he had to take each step on his own. Meister's *Bildung*, his "self-cultivation," is complete when he sacrifices the very thing that he treasures most, that is, when he terminates his acting career, dissolves the theater company, marries, and devotes himself to his newfound son. And this is the aspect that Lukács's typology of the "novel of synthesis," which is in part critical of Goethe, may have failed to point out. Although the *Apprenticeship* does in fact stand out in the tradition of the European novel due to its unusually happy ending, the price to be paid for this happiness is the highest possible; the hero's sacrifice is nevertheless total.

Given their inner monotony and dullness, Flaubert's *Emma Bovary*, Frédéric Moreau, and Bouvard and Pécuchet are definitely Meister's

successors. The *Sentimental Education*, in particular, could be interpreted as the final realization of Wilhelm Meister expanded onto five hundred pages. As such, Flaubert's masterpiece, probably the most perfect literary work ever created, provides nothing short of an unhurried and exceptionally refined insight into the banal heart of the heart. The main protagonist Frédéric is too lazy to finish his studies, not decisive enough to not love other women besides his one great love, too tired to act on his suicidal thoughts, and too distracted to mourn his own child. Only when his sentimental passion is finally extinguished does he look back on his life, reminiscing together with his friend Deslauriers. Submerged in bourgeois everyday tedium, they remember their failed attempt to visit a brothel, which, in its unremarkable mundanity, proves to be the most beautiful event of their lives. The only thing that can cut through the ubiquitous narrative entropy and put a full stop at the end of the book is a random anecdote, an occurrence that previously had no narrative significance whatsoever.

Where, on the contrary, the protagonist cannot bear to look into the emptiness inside, and is unable to exchange its poetry for the prose of the world, the only remaining ending is death. The heroes of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels thus preferred to finish by dying and, following the example set by Werther, frequently killed themselves: such was the fate of Bovary, Karenina, and Stavrogin.

But the days of Lukács's narrative finitability of the story were slowly coming to an end. We can observe a specific move in this direction already in Flaubert's *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, which some would deem to be "the first modernist novel." In the book, two middle-class, philistine Parisians, scriveners by profession, that is, bureaucrats and copyists of material written by others, retreat to a remote provincial abode in order to provide world history with another parodic repetition. In a sense, Flaubert's novel seems to be nothing but an extensive testimony to the fact that nothing else will ever happen in this world. But it is precisely this completed and consummated world that will not allow the story to have an ending. When the heroes finally lose their will to live, the customary ending of the realist novel suddenly begins to recede. Self-realization, conciliation, self-cultivation, grand revelation, acceptance, disillusion, death, suicide – all of these events would be all too easy ways out of a world that has lost its purpose. Ironically enough, Flaubert passed away before he could finish the book, which is why the ending itself is only hinted at in a couple of meagre fragments. We find out that Bouvard and Pécuchet, independently of one another, each had the idea to once again take up their original profession of copying, as if everything had already been done and all that remained was to replicate past ideas. They order the carpenter to make them a double-counter desk, they purchase

notebooks, pens and erasers, and, as per the final paragraph: *Ils s'y mettent*, "They get to work" (Flaubert, 1910: 395; translation T. D.). Since there is nothing to hold the world together anymore, apparently there is also nothing left to do but "continue for the sake of continuation itself."

Thus, in 1880, Flaubert perhaps already opened the door to the twentieth century, which slowly began to develop the logic of infinity by way of depriving us of the traditional warranty that there will be an ending at the end. This new endlessness of modernity is no longer the positive infinity of the rich continuum of the epic world, but the *negative infinitude of the inhibition of narrative denouement*. At least in Kafka and Proust, downright programmatically in Beckett, but also in García Márquez, novels cannot end until they succeed in painting a convincing enough image of a certain *ontological non-finitability*. Kafka could not finish two (out of three) of his novels, Proust concluded his grand heptalogy only at the point in which time itself becomes timeless, Beckett's novels are nothing but a vast effort to cultivate the grand immortality of small drives, and García Márquez usually puts an end to his narrative only at the point in which the prophecy produces its fulfilment, thereby trapping the protagonists in a sort of perpetual and viscous circularity of this world rather than the next. We have to ask, though: What is the real reason behind this invention of infinity? Is it possible to define what it is in the twentieth-century novel that might represent the structural analogue to the shift by which Don Quixote transformed back into Alonso Quijano and Wilhelm Meister discovered the lack of talent in his own innermost essence? And could it be explained why this shift no longer promises an ending but condemns the narrative to infinity?

Kafka could be the one who developed and thought through this "logic of unending" most rigorously, consummately, and perhaps even schematically. *The Trial* is his only "relatively finished" novel, and its ending – as "two gentlemen" come looking for Josef K., abduct him from his home, take him out of town, and execute him – could momentarily indeed appear to offer a somewhat premature exit from an oppressive, essentially non-finitable Kafkian universe of indeterminable guilt and eternal trial. But being the genius that he is, Kafka closes the book with the suggestion that, in this world, not even death will bestow upon the hero the dignity of an ending:

But the hands of one of the men were placed on K.'s throat, whilst the other plunged the knife into his heart and turned it round twice. As his sight faded, K. saw the two men leaning cheek to cheek close to his face as they observed the final verdict. "Like a dog!" he said. It seemed as if his shame would live on after him (Kafka, 2009a: 165).



Thus, one might ask, what has the world lost that we seem to shamefully and grievously outlive even our own deaths? The answer to this question might well be found in one of the emblematic scenes of twentieth-century literature. When K. in Kafka's *The Castle* gets close enough to the castle, he sees that it is

neither an old knightly castle from the days of chivalry, nor a showy new structure, but an extensive complex of buildings, a few of them with two storeys, but many of them lower and crowded close together. If you hadn't known it was a castle you might have taken it for a small town. [...]

But as he came closer he thought the castle disappointing; after all, it was only a poor kind of collection of cottages assembled into a little town, and distinguished only by the fact that, while it might all be built of stone, the paint had flaked off long ago, and the stone itself seemed to be crumbling away (Kafka, 2009b: 11).

From behind the great Quixote there ultimately emerged the small Quijano, and perhaps there are some similarities here with the bleak reality of low and narrow cottages coming to light from behind the symbolic screen of the "Castle." Even so, while Cervantes places the utmost denudation of the hero only at the very end of the book, Kafka's "desublimation of the objective structure of the world," so to speak, happens practically at the beginning. And it is precisely this *negative initiation* that marks the point in which K.'s seemingly simple task truly becomes infinite. Although it is now the world that has lost something, this fact no longer liberates the protagonist, but rather obliges and forever binds him. The Castle is not unreachable because it is too sacred but because it is too secular. Just as ever new doors reveal themselves behind the door of the Law, stretching into infinity, K.'s step begins to endlessly falter on his way to the castle since the purpose of his task can no longer be consolidated into a final objective. The world turns out to be utterly ontologically inconsistent, thereby condemning the hero to an eternity in the purgatory of an essentially "negative" infinity.

It is this structure, in which the framework of being dissolves and consequently commits the protagonist to a state of a true ending infinitely eluding him, that could represent the link that binds together literary worlds as disparate as those created by Kafka and Proust. In Proust, the gloomy and oppressive exterior structures, which interpellate Kafka's characters, are substituted with an emasculated and spoiled neurasthenic I, one who spends his days mostly in bed. Nonetheless, his hypochondria is no less precipitous than Kafka's trials and tribunals. In this egotistical universe, the function of the "ultimate screen of being" is thus assumed by the famous Proustian *le*

*grand moi*, the big I. The sole purpose of its preoccupation with itself, however, is a gradual revelation of the utter absence of a substantial psychological “personality” behind the phenomena of involuntary memories. Reading the famous definition of the ego from *Albertine disparue*, for example, this I could well be recognized as a subjectivist version of Kafka’s Law, that is, as a door that opens to ever new doors:

Our ego is composed of the superimposition of our successive states. But this superimposition is not unalterable like the stratification of a mountain. Incessant upheavals raise to the surface ancient deposits (Proust, 2006: 893).

Because memories no longer revolve around a “psychic” core with a solid, unified, and unidirectional biography, but rather continuously shift according to the involuntary impulses triggered by random exterior causes, “narrative time” is unlikely to be sutured by “biographical” events, such as insights and disappointments, meetings and breakups, births and deaths. Nonetheless, Proust seems to bridle this constant disintegration of traditional narration at one point and balances it out with an exceptional move: time, being precisely the measure which ceaselessly prevents the world from conforming to any possible metaphysical frame of meaning, ultimately reaches its apotheosis and becomes Time with a capital T. When in a somewhat overlooked but probably critical scene from the last of the seven books of *Remembrance, Time Regained*, the elderly characters meet in the little Empire salon of the Guermantes family, time becomes Time incarnate in the arms of Mme. de Sainte-Euverte, a thing among real-world things:

She little knew that she had given birth to a new development of that name of Sainte-Euverte which, at so many intervals, marked the distance and continuity of Time. It was Time she was rocking in that cradle where the name of Sainte-Euverte flowered in a fuchsia-red silk in the Empire style. [...] to me it represented the function of cradling time in that room full of temporal associations. (1266–67)

And it is the time of the cosmic decline of things, which becomes Time incarnate in a self-referential turn, that finally represents the force strong enough to charge the protagonist, who is twice referred to as Marcel, with recording everything that has happened. As written in the final paragraph of the megalomaniacal opus, it appears that through the passing of time with a lowercase T, we become obligated by Time with a capital T. Consequently, we are caught in a paradoxical position between the passing of real time and

the simultaneous infinitization of ideal Time, so that the approach toward death, it would seem, only stretches out the landscape of immortality:

If at least, time enough were allotted to me to accomplish my work, I would not fail to mark it with the seal of Time, the idea of which imposed itself upon me with so much force today, and I would therein describe men, if need be, as monsters occupying a place in Time infinitely more important than the restricted one reserved for them in space, a place, on the contrary, prolonged immeasurably since, simultaneously touching widely separated years and the distant periods they have lived through – between which so many days have ranged themselves – they stand like giants immersed in Time. (395–396)

Within this structure, death can no longer perform its erstwhile function in the scope of which universal Time allowed for the personal, private ending of time; instead, it merely marks the real boundary of time where boundless Time is on the verge of revealing itself<sup>4</sup>.

Our next example is James Joyce, the third great modernist besides Kafka and Proust. However, due to lack of space and our limited knowledge of the case his contribution to the same logic must remain conjecture. Of course, *Ulysses* is a variation on the very tale of the West which has always been considered paradigmatic of the possibility of an epic ending (among others by Lukács), i.e., Odysseus's return to Penelope. At the end of the day, Bloom returns home and lies down by the feet of his wife, Molly. She wakes up, however, and drowsily recounts the impressions and experiences of the day in her famous inner monologue, which brings the book to a conclusion. Everything that "ended" throughout the day is repeated in a free flow of associations, as a formless, boundless, endless series of words without punctuation. It seems, thus, that the end of the day nevertheless produces its nocturnal infinity, ultimately emphasized by the reiteration of the word Yes, which stands both at the beginning and the end of the monologue, as if enclosing it into a different, emergent, self-contained world: "Yes because he never did a thing like that before ..." (Joyce, 1992: 871) "... and yes I said yes I will Yes" (933)<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Even autobiographically, Proust, who was terminally ill and made great haste to finish the last of the seven books in time, seems to have sensed that he was being persecuted by an end-time, in which he must complete the task of infinite Time.

<sup>5</sup> An even better example and a true glorification of "narrative infinity," though, is probably *Finnegan's Wake*.

It is worth noting that Slovene literature also contributed to this infinitization at the edge of the “end of the story.” Already in 1904, that is, before the great European modernists, Ivan Cankar published *The Ward of Our Lady of Mercy* [*Hiša Marije Pomočnice*], in our opinion the greatest novel on the non-existence of death ever written. It is set in a hospice for young girls with incurable diseases, so that the entirety of narrative time extends only in waiting for death. But Cankar – and in this respect, he is no lesser writer than Kafka or Proust – is capable of demonstrating that it is precisely within the horizon of impending death that some kind of absolute inertia of time unfolds. In this almshouse, there might be no more life, but there is also no death, no seasons, no days and years to be counted, and no solid boundary between this world and the next, only a fuzzy and porous one, which can seemingly be crossed either way so that some girls have already been to the other side and back. Finally, in some similarity to Proust’s *Time*, Death itself incarnates and, without causing a stir, lives among the girls as an indifferent but kind old woman<sup>6</sup>.

To continue with our examples of this structure combining the inconsistency of the world and the concurrent infinity of the hero’s inner disposition, the most obvious, downright programmatic case is certainly Samuel Beckett. In his work, the “non-existence of the world,” the fact that everything has come to an end, that the spirit is no more, and that nature does not exist, is an elementary fact, an entry condition of a sort. The trilogy *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable* shows characters who are already completely isolated, dislocated, even immobilized. They are slowly losing touch with the outside world, they are witnessing the creeping deterioration of their own bodies, and all they are trying to do is to die. But it is because there is nothing left of the world except waiting for death that death cannot arrive; instead, it pushes the protagonists into its indefinite deferral by endlessly producing words. Beckett’s literary universe is ultimately nothing but an expansive testimony of the fact that everything has come to an end so utterly that not even an ending can materialize anymore. This is Mladen Dolar’s take on this author; he interpreted Beckett’s reduction of the language and the body of the protagonist as a kind of deduction of the irreducibility of his unsilenceable voice:

Beckett’s protagonists are always and ever more so on the verge of death [...]. They have exhausted all the possibilities but cannot die. The end is constantly receding. It seems as though death would redeem them, it is everything they desire, but in this space of the end

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<sup>6</sup> See (Cankar, 1976).

eluding them there is a loop [...]; in this loop of being at the edge of nothingness they step into a kind of space of ‘immortality’ [...]. (Dolar, 2007: 36; translation T. D.)

Thus, in the frequently cited, and long, final sentence of *The Unnamable*, a sort of hindmost physical residuum of the “hero” finally says: “[Y]ou must go on, I can’t go on, you must go on, I’ll go on, you must say words, as long as there are any—until they find me, until they say me”; and then, a couple of lines later, “you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on” (Beckett, 1994: 418).

A most specific answer to the modernist inhibition of the story coming to an end was given by Gabriel García Márquez, perhaps the last author to have constructed his own “literary ontology,” comparable with Proust’s remembrances and Kafka’s tribunals. One of the fundamental features of García Márquez’s world is a certain compulsion, according to which the story may only end when it creates a loop by which it has always already ended. It is for this reason that his novels are so often structured as self-fulfilling prophecies. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the last descendant of the Buendía family, Aureliano Babilonia, deciphers the mysterious parchments of Melquíades, which turn out to contain both the chronicle and the foretelling of the history of the village of Macondo. Just as Aureliano begins to read about the moment in which he is reading about this very moment, that is, when he himself becomes a part of the prophecy he is reading about, and then skips a couple of pages to find out the time and place of his death, he gets caught in a city of mirrors destroyed by wind—in a way, the hero skips over his own death by becoming trapped in the instance in which death will never quite arrive.

The form of the time loop, in which the symbolic frame precedes the real fulfillment and is yet to produce its actualization, provided the title to one of García Márquez’s most accomplished and refined works, his *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, a novel about the torturous realization of something that had been predicted in words. Two brothers are bound to avenge the honor of their sister and kill the man she falsely claims took her virginity; although the brothers do everything in their power to let the wrongly accused escape his fate, the fatalism of the Caribbean renders it so that they finally do murder him nonetheless. An ending is thus possible, but only if it has been told before it ever had a chance to happen. However, since the ending is merely an “earthly” incarnation of the fact that everything has always already been told somewhere, its function is precisely not to disentangle the plot and provide an exit out of the situation; instead, it heralds perpetual entrapment within it.

It is here that the essential this-worldliness, “layness,” and secularity of Latin American “magic realism” shows its face. Perhaps its magic is not to

be interpreted as some kind of re-enchantment of a progressively disillusioned world; instead, its function might rather resemble Kafka's recognition of a row of cottages behind the screen of the Castle. The Márquezian marvel is the place where, behind the hope for transcendence, the ultimate attachment to the immanence of earthly existence is finally brought to light. When José Arcadio Buendía dies in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, García Márquez paints a wonderful scene, worthy of the greatest authors of world literature:

A short time later, when the carpenter was taking measurements for the coffin, through the window they saw a light rain of tiny yellow flowers falling. They fell on the town all through the night in a silent storm, and they covered the roofs and blocked the doors and smothered the animals who slept outdoors. So many flowers fell from the sky that in the morning the streets were carpeted with a compact cushion and they had to clear them away with shovels and rakes so that the funeral procession could pass by (García Márquez, 1971: 139).

Miracles are events that smother the animals, render the roads impassable, and press men down towards the ground; as such, they are nothing but instances of terrestrial immanence transpiring within celestial transcendence. This is why García Márquez's magical cosmos is so sweaty, moist, muddy, and sticky, and this is why people in it suffer from boils and elephantiasis. Even death seems merely to mark the instance in which the journey to the other side proves to be utterly impossible. Let us quote the following passage:

Pilar Ternera died in her wicker rocking chair during one night of festivities as she watched over the entrance to her paradise. In accordance with her last wishes she was not buried in a coffin but sitting in her rocker, which eight men lowered by ropes into a huge hole dug in the center of the dance floor. [...] It was the end. In Pilar Ternera's tomb, among the psalm and cheap whore jewelry, the ruins of the past would rot ... (382)

After all, the famous "one hundred years of solitude" is but a name for being caught in *this* world and a measure of time of being trapped in one's own prophecy: "Before reaching the final line, however, he [Aureliano Babilonia] had already understood that he would never leave that room [...], because races condemned to one hundred years of solitude did not have a second opportunity on earth." (399)

It seems that each of these examples exhibits the same logic. From behind the screen of the “symbolic hypostasis of the world” emerges its inconsistency, and this very “metaphysical under-compensation,” so to speak, condemns the protagonist to narrative infinity. If in the traditional novel the “objective structure of the world” could somehow still fill the protagonist’s heart, or at least push him into death, the modernist novel discloses a world that lacks precisely the truth that could still conclude our stories. Not even death can bring any solace to the new hero; what now awaits him is no longer the blissful immortality of the other world, but instead a cyclical, arduous, and uneasy deathlessness of this one. The infinity of the twentieth century is neither cosmic infinitude nor divine eternity, but merely the negative absence of an ending, unfolding on the grounds of the thorough lack of any transcendental guarantees.

Within these coordinates we can now embark on a reading of *The Pianist’s Touch*, a novel which we will interpret as an attempt to provide a new response to the twentieth-century prohibition that denied the story a proper ending.

### **3 Does *The Pianist’s Touch* tell us something about the twenty-first century?**

Mirt Komel’s book recounts the story of Gabrijel Goldman, a brilliant pianist modelled after Glenn Gould. This choice alone is telling. One might ask: Why is the protagonist a pianist and why a genius? Where does this need for the absolute “subjective surplus” over the world, for genius, come from?

The answer probably lies in the new landscape of the world gaining dominance in the twenty-first century. It seems as if the times of grand modernist extravagance, such as dark Kafkaesque oppression, Proustian hypochondriac megalomania, Beckettian apocalyptic scenarios, or Márquezian this-worldly viscous magic, are now over; instead, reality is somehow programmatically normalized and profaned until it becomes fundamentally trivial. With that in mind, Komel’s explicit stake is to try to paint a picture of a thoroughly disenchanting world, as in of the key passages of the novel depicting Gabriel’s first piano lesson:

In accordance with his unrelenting dialectical materialism, the teacher was of the opinion that he must first explain the mechanics of the instrument to the student in order to avoid musical mysticism. [...] “See, there’s nothing magical to this tool, which man invented just as he invented the sword or the wheel. You have to master the technique in order to command the mechanics of the device, which will follow

your orders unconditionally” (Kemel, 2015: 52).

This most magical object of every pianist is thus reduced to a mere mechanism comprised of keys, hammers, and strings, a cluster of matter concealing no secrets underneath its shiny exterior. Moreover, the final truth of exhaustively mechanizing the world is that it finally forfeits the need for man, its creator. When Gabriel visits Steinway Hall, he is shown a self-playing automaton:

a greased up machine and its mechanically moving hammers, which pressed against the padded keys and moved other hammers hidden beneath the lid; [...].

This entire process of blindly hitting the keys, all this piano playing without a pianist inevitably reminded Gabriel of the provocative question posed by his late teacher: “Music without a musician – the future of music?” (157–158)

A certain shift seems to occur here compared to modernism. In Kafka, the doorkeeper standing before the “door of the Law” tells the dying man from the country that the door was built for him alone and that it will close when he dies; the disintegration of things in time calls upon Proust’s I to record their persistent recurrence in a memoir; in Beckett, the end of the world requires the incessant speaking of words; even in Márquez, prophecies prompt the protagonists to facilitate their fulfilment. Here, on the other hand, *the world essentially no longer addresses the hero*. Reality begins to show itself as commonplace, unremarkable, even routine-bound and vulgar, but its subsistence is already so thoroughly robbed of all metaphysical pretension that it can only pose as an immense enactment of the redundancy of man.

It now appears that Kemel conceived a counterweight to this ultimate disenchantment of the world in the shape of an *element of re-enchantment*. This element is the hero himself, Gabriel Goldman, who, as the title of the book would suggest, is primarily characterized by two traits: a demonic relationship with music and an agonizing attitude towards touch. Against the background of an already self-evident dehumanization of the world emerges a hero who is sensitized to the point of madness and who marks his place in the world solely through a variety of obsessions: on the one hand, he listens to the voice of his inner *daemon*, which drives him to play the piano, while on the other, he meticulously avoids being touched by anything belonging to the outside world.

Let us then take a quick look at the genesis and narrative function of this literary character. For it is his role of the lever of narrative infinity that defines the coordinates within which the esthetic layers of Kemel’s novel coincide:



the ironic style full of small diversions and reflexive passages evocative of Nabokov, as well as the non-linear, anecdotal narrative, the expansive temporal loops, the ephemeral, almost surreal love story, and finally the two principal motifs, music and touch. So, where does the central theme of the novel originate from? Why music and touch, specifically? In today's predominantly visual world, which is deemed to be "post-metaphysical" and "economically determined," why should one still write novels about pianists and their tactile phobias?

Music and touch are in fact chosen as the very media capable of performing their own immaterialist turn, the move into silence and intangibility. The ultimate purpose of Goldman's playing, especially his concerts, is, paradoxically, to *produce silence* as the sole authentic effect of music, the only element in which the protagonist can exist. If, for example, Gabrijel wears black to perform a piano concert, this is because one must "always pay one's respects to the immortal passing of music, which, unlike a painting or a statue, always dies off into untouchable silence after the last bar is played." (115) So it is music, and music alone, that enables Gabrijel to concentrate that experience which living in the real world never fully allows: namely, to be absolutely untouched. *The Pianist's Touch* is thus less a book about touch than the fear of it. On this account, it treats us to a veritable clinical history of haptic pathologies. Walking in the streets, for example, the protagonist is terrified of coming into contact with his fellow pedestrians, and when he is hospitalized, the sensation of a transfusion needle piercing his skin is unbearable. Music is probably the least mimetic and intentional art form, and it is precisely in its artistic absolutism that it receives its precise "narrative" function: it provides the hero with an ideal shield, which protects his transcendent interiority from any kind of outside breach.

The literary world of the twentieth century still charged the hero with, or at least forced him into, the discomfort of a never-ending task; it still turned to him and appealed to him. The lever that gave the world this power was the difference between symbolic projection and its failure to materialize, that is, the difference between the Castle and the castle, the big I and the little I, Words and the unnamable, transcendence and immanence. Within this gap, narration became infinite, yet in this infinity the world still needed and, in a way, appointed the hero. In Komel, on the other hand, even the fundamental framework of reality, from behind which its disintegration may come to the fore, is gone. The material profanity of reality has become axiomatic. As we have seen, the piano is exposed as a mere array of keys, hammers, and strings in the very first music lesson – as opposed to Kafka, where the castle was at first still the Castle, the piano was never the Piano in Komel. And because even this minimal gap between the symbolic investiture and the shortfall of

reality is missing, the world, which Mirt Komel steadily describes as a shallow screen, a flattened aggregate of fleeting phenomena, can basically do nothing else but impotently wait for the hero's brilliant accomplishments, his irrational bursts of piano performance motivated by no outside force whatsoever.

It is this setting that harbors the reason for Goldman's precarious, intangible, almost vampiric existence, which reduces his life to oscillation between two extremes: momentary inspiration and inner brilliance on the one hand, and protecting his untouchedness from outside things on the other. A considerable distinctive feature of the novel is precisely the consistent staging of scenes in which the ball is always in the court of the protagonist, never the world. The hero is thus no longer the modernist, Joycean, "phenomenological" subject, who absorbs outside impressions like a sponge, neither is he Musil's "man without qualities" as the emptiest possible medium of social and historical dynamics, but rather a subject in the face of which the world loses its colors, shapes, and stories; confronting Gabrijel Goldman, it is the world that now becomes *ohne Eigenschaften*, without qualities, bland and featureless. Against the background of this total deflation of the outside world, one that never addresses the hero and in fact never even touches him anymore, the protagonist is becoming his own self only through impulses that are absolutely internal.

The function of music thus becomes evident enough; it acts as *the medium of untouchability* which the hero needs in order to preserve his "non-narrativity" among the minor stories of his world. The novel draws up an entire series of narrative sets, only for them to remain passing, unfinished sketches. Such are, for example, the family milieu featuring a rich, ambitious father and sensitive mother, a professional ascent which puts the hero in an environment fraught with up-and-comers and rivals, a diagnosis of time that mercilessly mechanizes everything, including music, and, last but not least, the love story with the phantom-like Esther, in which two otherwise untouchable beings fuse into one. But as we accompany Gabrijel Goldman on his walks through the hustle and bustle of the city, i.e., as he visits the city café, or during the barely tangible love scene, we get the feeling that all of these motifs serve neither the purpose of reconstructing a life story, recapitulating a coming-of-age, or providing some in-depth psychological analysis, nor the purpose of displaying a panoramic view of an entire age; instead, they merely constitute a contrastive background for the staging of the self-apotheosis of the hero, his perpetual irreducibility to the exterior conditions of the world.

If, then, Don Quixote finally casts off his mask of knighthood and Wilhelm Meister sacrifices his innermost passion, the love of theater,

Goldman is merely becoming what he has always already been: *a monument in a world without mystery*. Even in early childhood he gives the impression of representing transcendence amidst immanence; when, for example, lightning strikes his family's apartment and breaks a window, the flying pieces of glass miraculously leave the talented child unscathed: "Gabrijel sat there, among the countless pieces and hues of sharpness – untouched." (38) In his unearthly inspiration he ensures a constant distancing from the possibility that the narrative stimuli might lead to the formation of a traditional story. Hence, the center of gravity between the hero and the world has changed places. Once, it was the world that did not allow the hero's story to end, and now it is the hero who seems to prohibit the world from sliding into the comfort of finitability.

#### 4 Conclusion

The question is, thus, how could a story in this thoroughly anti-narrative and non-mythical universe come to an end. Do the occurrences around the hero amount to a story at all? Can his statuesque untouchability have any hope for a definite ending? Gabrijel Goldman is a living monument, who knows neither the beginning nor the end of time and is unable to reach with the world even the most extreme of compromises, the one to be allowed to die. This is why the choice of where to put the final stop is all the more precarious. And it is here that Mirt Komel makes the possibly most confident and commanding move of the entire book: in the final act, the pianist becomes a composer, who burns his premiere work. Of course, it appears as though the writer uses the figure of the genius solely because it represents a semi-permeable membrane of a sort; whereas he never permits the world to reach inside him, the genius always has the right to release his brilliance upon the world. On the last pages of the book, the previously as yet uncontrolled bursts of piano playing retreat and make room for the creation of a new, never before heard composition. Above, we claimed that the twentieth-century novel is all about making a story unendable; here, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the levers of this endlessness are transposed into the protagonist's interiority, the infinite self-referentiality of his ingenuity. This is why the concluding point of *The Pianist's Touch* might be read as the last, ultimate endeavor to preserve the instance of the infinity of creation. When Goldman composes his first work, *Un quasi qualcosa*, he winces at the thought that "his life could be written down as musical notation, in the form of those little lines and heads and bars." (176) Being altogether untouchable, he is at great pains to come to terms with the fact that something as unworldly as creation ends up in the materiality of a written record; perhaps he shudders at the

thought that at the margin of the ink put down on paper inspiration finally does meet its “end.” Kafka’s phantasmatic castle is only a crowd of huddled little cottages, and the artwork is ultimately nothing but a sequence of dead signs on paper. This is why, in the final sentence of the book, Goldman “set fire to the papers, lifted them like a torch, walked to the window and opened it, and then extended his arm and opened his hand so that the paper transformed into an ashy butterfly flapping its wings into nothingness.” (176) What elevates Goldman to the status of literary hero is not so much the fact that he is a genius, but that he is an inventor who destroys his own invention. He might be “condemned to creation,” but his creation is finally nothing other than nothingness itself. Just as K. halts in front of the image of a disenchanting castle, so the final act of a genius who deprives the world of an ending to the story is merely a return to the spot one step prior to the materialization of the artwork, that is, to the place where the moment of creation is still infinite.

Interestingly enough, there is a scene at the beginning of the novel which, in its refined mundanity, already foreshadows this kind of ending, albeit in far more modest terms. One might even say that this rapport with his mother represents the very initiation of Komel’s hero:

he always saw his mother happy and smiling, and he ascribed her good mood to the fact that she always kept singing to herself. [...] He also couldn’t see that she often retreated away from him in sadness, hiding her tears with a smile as she was gripped by panicked desperation because she didn’t know what to do with the child who, as he was growing older, showed ever more uncontrollable and scary fits of something nobody could understand. (22)

And it almost seems as if the only thing that remains for us to do in this stale, insipid, hollowed out world of the twenty-first century is to perpetually hum to oneself.

Translated by Tanja Dominko

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