CLOSURE IN *SILAS MARNER*

James C. T. Shu
English Department, National Central University

The appearance in 1966 of Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* has no doubt contributed to the revival of the interest in the problem of the endings in literary texts. As a brilliant discourse on the tension that exists between the opposing human needs to imitate the contingency of life and to impose an order on life, *The Sense of an Ending* demonstrates how the problem of the endings bears on the nature of literature. Inspiring as it is, the book is mainly noted for its theoretical, or philosophical, speculations; it is relatively short on practical application. By contrast, such later works as Barbara Herrnstein Smith's *Poetic Closure* and Marianna Torgovnick's *Closure in the Novel* aim at applying the concept of the endings to the study of concrete texts.

Closure, in the sense Smith employs it, intends to comprehend and re-organize such a variety of established critical terms as unity, integrity, completeness, coherence, and stability:

> Closure occurs when the concluding portion of a poem creates in the reader a sense of appropriate cessation. It announces and justifies the absence of further development; it reinforces the feeling of finality, completion, and composure which we value in all works of art; and it gives ultimate unity and coherence to the reader's experience of the poem by providing a point from which all the preceding elements may be viewed comprehensively and the relations grasped as part of a significant design.[1]

Here, integrity implies coherence, distinct identity, and completeness. The expectation of nothing is identical with stability, resolution, and composure. The point of closure does not refer to a point at which the reader's experience comes to a stop, "but to a point at which, without residual expectations, he can experience the structure of the work as, at once, both dynamic and whole."[2]

Smith obviously does not attempt to be rigidly systematic, but her discourse on closure is quite tenable and it has a way of clarifying older concepts like unity or organicism. Torgovnick generally follows the sense in which Smith uses the term even though her chief concern is to apply it to the study of narrative fictions. Besides, she pays more attention to the relationship between the endings and closure and makes an effort at a systematic description of the endings. To her, the test of closure is

"the honesty and the appropriateness of the ending's relationship to beginning and middle, not the degree of finality or resolutin achieved by the ending" and the ending "straightforwardly designates definable unit of work—section, scene, chapter, page, paragraph, sentence—whichever seems most appropriate for a given text."[3] The ending can be circular, that is, it refers back to the beginning in its language, situation, or character grouping; it can be parallel, when it refers to the beginning as well as a series of points in the text. The ending can be in the form of an epilogue when it contains a remarkable shift in time and provides an overview of the text. It can be a scene, without a shift in the time scale and without the narrator making comments. Finally, according to the author's attitude toward his reader, she divides the endings into three types: the complementary (when the author is confident that his point will be accepted), the incongruent (when the author thinks that he needs to coax his reader into accepting his point), and the confrontational (when the author deliberately wants to shock his reader).

Even though Torgovinck has constructed a systematic framework which is a convenient aid for the discourse on narrative fictions, the framework is largely flexible, that is, it is assumed that the ending and closure of a text need to be studied on an individual basis. Both Torgovnick and Smith are vague on two points. Is closure a descriptive or evaluative term? Is it possible to describe the form of the ending, as Torgovnick's definition of the ending does not help much in this respect? This paper intends to analyze *Silas Marner* in terms of its ending and closure, hoping thereby to gain a structured understanding of the work on the one hand and to clarify the very nature of the ending and closure on the other. The work is chosen first because being unusually form-conscious among the so-called classic nineteenth-century realist novels, it provides a convenient example to demonstrate how the ending and closure work and second because its seemingly unproblematic ending and closure contain a provoking complexity.

In reading *Silas Marner* we first exercise speculative thinking, raising questions about the meaning, function, and significance of the situations, characters, and even the mere use of language; we then reach a point at which we naturally shift into retrospective patterning; finally we attain what Smith calls ultimate stability when our retrospective patterning succeeds in answering the questions previously raised. All this trajectory of reading experience coincides neatly with the formal divisions of the text. We can locate the ending as occurring where our reading becomes predominantly retrospective, and closure where all our speculations are clarified one way or another.

In opposing speculation to retrospection and using them to characterize the reading experience before and after the ending, we do not literally suggest that only a given way of thinking is operating during a specific period of time. Rather, our emphasis is on the predominance of such way of thinking during that period. Also, since

even the reading of a very short passage necessarily involves combined speculations and retrospections of varying degrees, we are here concerned with the broader speculation or retrospection that is roused by or seeks after the larger patterns of significance in a text.

In *Silas Marner*, what most strongly and consistently provokes our speculation is the way its plot is constructed. For much of the work, two plots—Silas's story and Godfrey's story—go side by side without being apparently related. As our reading convention makes us expect the work to be mainly about its title character, we are disturbed when we find that Godfrey's part is given equal, if not more, emphasis in terms of the amount of treatment, emotional texture, and structural completeness.

Silas Marner is composed of twenty-one chapters and one short "conclusion." It is divided into two parts, with the first fifteen chapters forming Part I, and the rest Part II. Chapter 1 introduces Silas, with flashbacks to his early life in Lantern Yard. It reveals how he was betrayed by his friend and wronged by his religious sect, which has resulted in his loss of trust in man and God. Chapter2 presents his experience of the first fifteen years in Raveloe, a life of self-imposed isolation. Chapters 3 and 4 shift to the Cass family and tell of Godfrey's secret marriage to the lowly Molly, a marriage which has made him a prey to blackmailing by his good-for-nothing brother Dunstan. Chapter 5 describes how Dunstan steals Silas's hoarded gold and vanishes. Chapter 6 presents the Rainbow Tavern scene, which allows us a glimpse into the life of the Raveloe community. Chapter 7 presents Silas as lamenting over his lost gold to the visitors of the tavern. Chapters 8 and 9 describe Godfrey's abortive attempt to confess to his father. Chapter 10 describes how Silas's relationhip to the villagers has improved on account of the burglary. Chapter 11 describes the clumsy relationship between Godfrey and his heart's intended, Nancy. Chapter 12 describes the death of Molly and the adoption by Silas of the orphaned baby Eppie. Chapter 13 describes Silas's resistance to the community's attempt to take the child away from him; as a contrast, it also describes Godfrey's failure to own the child. Chapter 14 describes how living with Eppie has positively affected Silas's emotional capacity. Chapter 15 describes Godfrey's apparently successful self-rationalization to ease his conscience. Thus in Part I, Chapters 1, 2, 7, 10, 14 deal exclusively with Silas and Chapters 3, 4, 8, 9, 11, 15, with Godfrey. Quantitatively both characters receive about equal attention.

We also notice that efforts have been made to invest both stories with great emotional intensity. Three events in two different stages of his life have caused Silas great despair and almost irrevocably destroyed his trust in man and God alike. In his youth he suffers the double blow of betrayals from man and God. His best friend frames him into a crime. His God, so he thinks, is unjust to him when his religious sect's practice of casting lots confirms him to be guilty of the theft. Meek by nature and deficient in intelligence, he is unable to challenge the validity of a man-made

religious practice, and his instinctive response to the injustices is to turn self-withdrawn and self-absorbed. For the entirety of the prime of this life he has led a reduced life. The following passage, for example, vividly conveys the horror of waste in his insect-like, or rather, automaton-like existence:

> Silas's hand satisfied itself with throwing the shuttle, and his eye with seeing the little squares in the cloth complete themselves under his effort. Then there were the calls of hunger; and Silas, in his solitude, had to provide his own breakfast, dinner, and supper, to fetch his own water from the well, and put his own kettle on the fire; and all these immediate promptings helped, along with the weaving, to reduce his life to the unquestioning activity of a spinning insect.[4]

Fifteen years after he has settled in Raveloe, Silas encounters another injustice. His hoarded gold, which has been his sole emotional prop, is stolen. The ejaculation of agony he shouts upon finding his gold gone strikes us as having a Job-like intensity. Silas is a simple soul with his suffering yet reaching an almost heroic dimension.

By contrast we find Godfrey's story mundane and the misery depicted there pitiable exactly because of its relative commonplaceness. Godfrey's secret marriage to Molly, over which he has long since regretted, is the cross he has to shoulder. He is aware, quite correctly, that were it not for the sorry state brought about by his youthful folly, his life could be expected to be a most promising one. The immediate effect of the existence of such an undesired and undisclosed marriage is seen in the ambiguity of attitude he is forced to adopt toward Nancy, his lady of the heart. He lives in perpetual fear of detection and is torn by the pull between the desire to confess and not to confess. Every time he finds his deceptive existence no longer tolerable and out of desperate abandon proceeds to confess, the coward in him reasons him out of it. Godfrey is given to self-rationalization, which bespeaks his uneasy conscience. Witness for example how he rationalizes upon being assured of Molly's death:

> Where after all, would be the use of his confessing the past to Nancy Lammeter, and throwing away his happiness?—Nay, hers? for he felt some confidence that she loved him. As for the child, he would see that it was cared for: he would never forsake it; he would do everything but own it (*Silas*, ch. 13, p. 107).

Here, Godfrey's cowardly response, though morally undesirable, is convincingly human. In fact Godfrey's story is rounded out with numerous depictions of his agonized hesitation and self-deception, which, being entirely convincing, are in their own way moving.

Besides emotional texture, it is noteworthy that by the end of Part I both Silas's

story and Godfrey's story have attained structural sufficiency of sorts. Silas has been wronged both in Lantern Yard and in Raveloe, yet with quite different consequences. On account of the injustice done to him by his friend and fellow church members in Latern Yard, he rejects both man and God and chooses to live in utter solitude. The alienation has lasted for fifteen years. When he is burglarized in Raveloe, even though for a while it plunges him deeper down in the abyss of despair, it unexpectedly results in prompting the community people to extend sympathy to him and hence to draw him out of his total solitude. Soon after, he adopts Eppie and begins to develop a fatherly love for the child. At the end of Chapter 14, we notice a gradual regeneration in Silas, as evidenced by the narrator's comment:

> In old days there were angels who came and took men by the hand and led them away from the city of destruction. We see no white-winged angels now. But yet men are led away from threatening destruction: a hand is put into theirs, which leads them farther gently towards a calm and bright land, so that they look no more backward; and the hand may be a little child's (*Silas*, ch. 14, p. 118).

As for Godfrey, for much of Part I he is presented as haunted by his secret marriage. However by the time Part I ends, Dunstan has disappeared, Molly has been dead, and Eppie has been adopted by Silas. with all the obstacles to his prospective life of easy comfort gone, Godfrey, consistent with his predilection for rationalizing, has arrived at a kind of resolution:

> He felt a reformed man, delivered from temptation; and the vision of his future life seemed to him as a promised land for which he had no cause to fight. He saw himself with all his happiness centred on his hearth, while Nancy would smile on him as he played with the children (*Silas*, ch.15, p. 119).

In a sense, both Silas's story and Godfrey's story have achieved a kind of closure at the end of Part I.

Thus, up to the end of Part I, there are clearly two plots simultaneously going on, competing with each other in emotional power and structural adequacy. We find it hard to read Godfrey's story as merely functioning as a subplot to Silas's story, even though the title of the work seems to favor such a reading. Furthermore, the two stories seem to be independent of each other. Thematically, the most one can do to relate these two stories is to declare that both present miserable souls caught face to face with their predicaments. It is an obviously lame imposition of relationship. True that the two stories have two points of contact: The burglarizing of Silas's gold by Godfrey's brother Dunstan and Silas's adoption of Godfrey's unowned child.

However, the two points of contact are not apparently significant in the sense that whether or not the burglar and the adopted child are Godfrey's blood relations does not manifestly affect the closural adequacy of the two plots at the end of Part I. The paramount cause of instability, the dissatisfaction that most powerfully motivates the reader's sepculation can then be formulated in the form of two questions: 1) What justifies the co-presence of these two plots? and 2) what justifies the implication in the title that Silas's story takes ascendency over Godfrey's story? To answer these questions is to disclose the closure of the work, and that portion of the work which has as its function the answering of these questions constitutes the ending of the work. In this sense Part II is the ending.

Part II, especially in its beginning portion, gives the impression of what Torgovnick would call an after-history. A significant time shift occurs. The characters are presented as they are sixteen years after they were last seen at the end of Part I. For a while the stability achieved in Part I is kept up: Silas's reintegration process goes on consistently, the affections between him and Eppie developing into the natural affections of father and daughter, Godfrey is now the respected master of the Cass manor and the admired husband of Nancy, the easing of his conscience about the abandonment of Eppie still holding good. The stability, nonetheless, is soon to be disrupted by the introduction of a new narrative element, the nascence of Godfrey's craving to claim Eppie back. The development that ensues has a way of involving the major characters in the two stories in active interaction and thus forcing the two hereto separate story lines to coalesce. The outcome of such interacting and intermingling brings out the "meaning" of the work and puts the seal of an ultimate stability, a final closure, on the work.

The character traits of Godfrey we find in Part I are maintained in Part II. Notably, his motive to reclaim Eppie is not presented chiefly as that of a repentant father to redress his errors. Even though faintly prompted by an emerging troubled conscience, his motive is attributed largely to the desperate urge of a jaded middle-aged man seeking means to give meaning to his life:

> I suppose it is the way with all men and women who reach middle age without the clear perception that life never *can* be thoroughly joyous: under the vague dulness of the grey hours, dissatisfaction seeks a definite object, and finds it in the privation of an untried good (*Silas*, ch. 17, p. 143).

Still, considering his natural tendency to waver and his understandable apprehensions about the uncertain consequences of disclosing his secret to Nancy, who is emphatically presented as possessing a daunting sense of rectitude, the fact that he does bring himself to confess to Nancy has to be taken as manifesting a strain of moral courage.

However, whatever sympathy one may have for such manifestation of courage is soon to be undercut by the insensitive estimation he makes concerning the relationship between Silas and Eppie:

> Surely the weaver would wish the best to the child he had taken trouble with, and would be glad much good should happen to her: she would always be very grateful to him, and he would be well provided for as the excellent part he had done by the child deserved (*Silas*, ch. 17, pp. 142–43).

In a sense, Godfrey is a static character: regardless of the many outward changes in his fortune, he remains essentially unchanged as a person.

By contrast, Silas is a developmental character. The reciprocal affection that develops between him and his adopted daughter has brought about significant changes in him. Such changes, besides, are consistent with his character as established in Part I. In his Lantern Yard days, Silas impressed us as meek to the point of being vacuous. In his years of bitterness in Raveloe he was passive and self-effacing. Now, the same character is shown in his reliance on Dolly for advice on such matters as religion and marriage. However, it is exactly this character in him that enables him to be genuinely unselfish in his concern for Eppie. Witness, for example, the remark he makes to Eppie upon being sought for his opinion on her marriage, a remark that has a true ring of unselfish love:

> But there's this to be thought on, Eppie: things will change, whether we like it or no: things won't go on for a long while just as they are and no difference. I shall get older and helplesser, and be a burden on you, belike if I don't go away from you altogether. Not as I mean you'd think me a burden—I know you wouldn't—but it'ud be hard upon you; and when I look for'ard to that, I like to think as you'd have somebody else besides me—somebody young and strong, as'll outlast your own life, and take care on you to the end (*Silas*, ch.16,p.135).

Thus the disillusioned weaver who rejetcted the world has, without his knowing it, been reintegrated into the world of warm humanity through the acquired role of a loving father.

The confrontation scene in Chapter 19 where Silas resists Godfrey's effort to assert his parental rights most dramatically highlights the complexity in the changes of his character. During the confrontation Godfrey at first keeps unrevealed his true relationship to Eppie and instead proposes to adopt Eppie by reasoning on how it will bring her social advantages. Since the ground of his reasoning seems hard to refute, Silas, characteristically unselfish and self-denying, leaves the decision for Eppie to

make. He is nevertheless visibly elated when Eppie without a moment's hesitation chooses to stay with him. Then, when Godfrey in his habitually overbearing manner discloses the hidden relationship and insists on his parental claim, Silas surprises him (and the readers) by uncharacteristically rising to the occasion:

> [Silas] felt the spirit of resistance in him set free, not without a touch of parental fierceness. "Then, sir," he answered, with an accent of bitterness that had been silent in him since the memorable day when his youthful hope had perished—"then, why didn't you say so sixteen years ago, and claimed her before I'd come to love her, i'stead o' coming to take her from me now, when you might as well take the heart o' my body?" (*Silas*, ch.19,p.152)

Silas's speech is in its special way eloquent, spontaneous, and even assertive. It exudes a kind of confidence and moral superiority. He feels sure that he is the "natural" father, as sixteen years of love-giving and love-taking justify the claim; he makes his feeling known clearly and unequivocally. The speech, in a sense, points to his complete reintegration.

The confrontation scene is where the Silas story and the Godfrey story converge. What happens to both characters thereafter speaks well of Eliot's moral position. Silas fully gets over the bitterness that has enmeshed him the better part of his life. Eppie is happily married and, quite unknown to her, is financially generously assisted by Godfrey. Silas stays with the young couple and enjoys the fairy-tale-like bliss and fulfillment, as summarized in the last passage of the novel: "O father," said Eppie, "what a pretty home ours is! I think nobody could be happier than we are" (*Silas*, "Conclusion," p. 163). Godfrey, though disappointed of getting Eppie back, has arrived at some kind of understanding, as indicated in his remark to his wife: "And I *got* you, Nancy, in spite of all; and yet I've been grumbling and uneasy because I hadn't something else—as if I deserved it" (*Silas*, ch.20,p.158). The poetic justice thus meted out once again calls our attention to Eliot's celebrated emphasis on the saving power of humanity. The capacity for passion is a sign of spontaneous humanity, and even in his days of bitterness Silas exhibits a passion which is found lacking in most people around him: "For Silas, ignorant and confused as he is, moves, even in his passion for gold, on a more intense and heroic plane than the villagers; but Godfrey Cass... embodies in himself the very failings of the community as well as its potential virtues."[5] Silas's passion for gold is later replaced by his love of Eppie, which earns for him his regeneration and then reintegration into the community. It is then clear by this time that Silas is made to be the novel's protagonist, not so much because he is amply and dramatically presented as because in him Eliot's concept of humanity finds the best expression.

Our study of *Silas Marner* shows that the ending and closure are different, but one necessarily implicates the other. Torgovnick defines the ending of a novel as its last unit, leaving the meaning of the "unit" flexibly various. We can at least pinpoint the entire Part II as the ending of *Silas Marner*, where the Silas story and the Godfrey story, unrelated heretofore, merge into one inseparable story and from which emerges the theme of the exaltation of humanity. Closure, as Smith perceives it, designates not a spatial point, but both a quality and an act of comprehending. Closure in *Silas Marner*, then, refers to our grasp of the interconnections between narrative elements and thematic motifs through the interaction of the two parts of the novel.

Smith emphasizes that closure is not a point of stasis but instead a point where one's activity of comprehending is most vigorous. We can readily agree to such a view. However, Smith throughout her *Poetic Closure* tends to use the term closure specifically to refer to an active comprehending of the parts inside the text. It is thus an act of looking inward. We would like to suggest that closure ought to be perceived as a point where one, besides looking inward, also looks outward, that is, one tries to be alert to the possible ideological or logical inadequacy of the text in spite of its achieved closural adequacy. This is a point especially significant in relation to Eliot. The relation between Eliot and her reader tends to be, to use Torgovnick's term, "complimentary," that is, she belongs with the novelists who "educate readers to share authorial views by the end of the novel, but are entirely confident that this process of education will take place as a natural result of the reading process, without much resistance by the reader."[6] This is certainly true of *Silas Marner*, for during closure we are convinced and satisfied that humanity, a virtue as natural as it is universal, inevitably wins. However, in the real world, or better, in the world outside of *Silas Marner*, not everyone holds humanity to be natural and universal. Terry Eagleton, for one, chooses to see it as "constructed at a certain historical point by a class society urgently in need of naturalizing and universalizing its dominion."[7]

So much of the closural adequacy of *Silas Marner* relies on the responsive humanity of Eppie, but Eppie is a remarkably vacuous character compared with the other major female character Nancy. When Nancy first appears in Part I she is about Eppie's age when the latter appears in Part II and receives relatively dramatic presentation. Except for a few negligible whimsicalities, she is almost perfect. In Part II, she appears as a mature woman who has weathered the necessary trials of life well. Even though she remains largely a kind and lovely lady, her youthful whimsicalities have developed into eccentricities. Besides, her character has developed into a combination of moral certitude, narrowness of judgment, warm-heartedness, and capacity for sympathy. In short, she impresses one as reasonably imperfect, complex, and hence convincing and interesting. Such substantiality of her characterization can at times be thematically significant. For example, given her complexity of character, we find it

hard to predict how she will respond to Godfrey's inevitable confession and therefore of necessity attach a weighty moral significance to her actual response when the long anticipated moment arrives. In fact all major characters save Eppie—Silas, Godfrey, Nancy—are imperfect and suffer more or less for their imperfections, and additionally, they have to cope with the problem peculiar to the community in which they live, be it the fanatical puritanism of Lantern Yard or the moral laxity of Raveloe. By contrast, Eppie is said to have been reared in an impossibly rarefied world of innocence and pure love, totally quarantined from "the lowering influences of the village talk and habits" and ever surrounded by "a breath of poetry [that is perfect love] which can exalt the relations of the least instructed human beings" (*Silas*, ch. 16, p.131). In fact, Eppie is a symbol of pure love and innocence; she is humanity in the abstract, unattached to the concrete socio-economic reality or even life process. When she chooses Silas over Godfrey, we simply takes it for granted for she is so flatly characterized that it would be out of character for her to be troubled by dilemmas. Her decision may well convey Eliot's moral judgment, but it lacks the intensity and convincingness of a real-world decision.

An inevitable question arises to provoke our speculation: when a heavily realist novel like *Silas Marner* has to rely on such a relatively unrealist character as Eppie for it to effect its closure, is it not in itself a reflection of the shaky ground of the ideology (namely, the liberal, sentimental exaltation of humanity as the panacea for human ills) that is "closed in"? Apart from the above speculation, our study of the closure in *Silas Marner* convinces us that closure can lead to disclosure mainly because of the following two points: 1) closural adequacy is not identical with ideological or logical adequacy, and 2) closure is the point where the activity of speculation concerning the interconnections inside the text comes to a satisfied end, but it is also where the activity of speculation concerning the text's relations to the real world begins.

Notes

1. Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 36.
2. Smith, p. 36.
3. Marianna Torgovnick, *Closure in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1981), p. 6.
4. George Eliot, *Silas Marner* (1861; London: Macmillan Education, 1984), ch.2, p.14. Hereafter *Silas Marner* will be referred to throughout the paper as *Silas*.
5. Henry Auster, "A Qualified Redemption of Ordinary and Fallible Humanity," *George Eliot: The Mill on the Floss and Silas Marner*, ed. R. P. Draper (London:

Macmillan Education, 1977), pp. 226–27.

6. Torgovnick, p. 17.
7. "Foreword" to Daniel Cotton, *Social Figures* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1987), xi.