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THE ANTECOMS OF HISTORY:
USES OF THE PAST IN "THE CUSTOM-HOUSE"
AND THE MAN WHO SHOT LIBERTY VALANCE.

by
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April 11, 1978
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Professor in Charge

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# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section I</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section II</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section III</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section IV</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section V</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section VI</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section VII</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section VIII</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section IX</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

In both "The Custom-House" by Nathaniel Hawthorne, and The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance by John Ford, a central character/narrator, guilt-ridden and obsessed with the past, moves from the mainspring (and direction) of his time to a confrontation with the past; and, by extension, the present as a consequence (and in both a falling away, a diminution) of that past. In both works the confrontation takes place in a room off-stage, an anteroom of sorts, passed over by history. In both rooms the narrator finds and uses an historical object, a prop, as the talisman or touchstone for his reveries. In "The Custom-House" Hawthorne's narrator discovers the letters of Surveyor Pue and the scarlet letter itself in a recess in a vacated room; in The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance Ransom Stoddard moves into the backroom of a funeral parlor to discover the stagecoach that brought him to Shinbone decades before. This use of off-stage areas as the settings in which the truth is revealed is one of the leitmotifs running through both works. Other similarities occur as well, not the least of which is a conception of the past as being more substantial, more real, than the present. For those who are unfamiliar with Ford's film, I apologize, but a considered viewing is really necessary in
following my arguments. As I concentrate on themes, and specifically on the theme of history (how it is seen, how it is to be viewed), I move to plot (at least initially) in a random manner. I am only interested in the various elements of these works as consequences or revelations of the main historical concerns, the fusion of history with memory, the continuous nature of the past.
Synesthesia is the process by which one type of stimulus evokes a secondary subjective sensation, like sound evoking place or the scents in an unused room evoking the very palpable presence of time. It is a crossing over, a transformation from one sense to another, playing on more than one sense at a time. It is both elusive and allusive. It is the process by which a man sitting in his chair reading Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Custom-House" can be flooded with images of the dark streets of Shinbone instead of Salem. It is the process by which the same man, watching The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, hears, during Stoddard's story, echoes of Hawthorne's narrator's own attempts at making sense of the past. "The concern with history in the shape of memory" is central to both works.

The process of comparing a "Sketch" with a film is itself a synesthesia of sorts: a transition (and translation) of information and meanings from one medium into another, from the ear to the eye. Film has dialogue and soundtrack and the printed page is alive with images:

The picture has other characteristics of the novel: it ranges where it pleases, it studies the reactions of single characters, it deals in description and mood, it follows, by means of the camera, the single, unique vision of the writer. You will find, in every novel, the counterparts of long shots and close-ups, trucking shots and dissolves; but you will find them in words addressed to the ear, instead of pictures meant for the eye. 2

But as Robert Nathan goes on to say, "One may, on the other hand, see visually through the eye or imaginatively through the mind. And between the percept of the visual image and the concept of the mental image lies the root difference between the two media." 3

It is not the purpose, then, of this thesis to force an exactness between differing media, but to suggest that both as works of art (narrative art) emerge from the human imagination and that similarities, especially in theme, are not suprisingly to be found. A medium is, after all, as much a form as a process; which is to say that the form is the result of the process, context and content umbilically linked, that the content, the what of it as opposed to the how, can be sought out regardless of the processes that convey that content. If we bear in mind that the lan-


3 Nathan, p. 133.
guage of film is visual and look for our correspondences accordingly (the silent locations of meaning), it is my belief that we may set these two works in tandem, illuminations proceeding from the one into the other.

The process is not so tricky as it seems. Both "The Custom-House" and The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance are, as I have stated, narrative works, both employ a narrator in the form of a central character (and consciousness), both deal with the recounting of an earlier incident (the film in obvious flashback, the sketch in a parallel mode), and both use a pivotal flashback inside of this first one to reveal even more crucial information. The proportion of the past to the present is roughly equivalent in both. Beyond this, both seem adamant that the real meaning of history is hidden behind the appearances and legends of history. Both insist on the private over the public. As they deal with appearance, both are essentially holistic works.

In The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance the camera's frame is the frame of consciousness of Ransom Stoddard (James Stewart), the narrator. Its subjectivities are his own, and for the greater part of the film what we will see is what Stoddard sees or comes to see. In this way the placement of the camera determines meaning since it reveals Stoddard's relationship to his story, the relationships he perceives within it. (In a larger sense it reveals Ford's
awarenesses as well.) The most striking example of this is Tom Doniphon's (John Wayne) flashback in which we learn who really shot Liberty Valance. The revelation is conveyed by Ford's camera moving back to the sidelines, to a vantage-point which includes the actual as well as the legendary actions. We learn the truth as Stoddard does, and we learn it by seeing. In similar fashion we become aware of the cactus rose which Hallie (Vera Miles) has placed on Tom's coffin only when Stoddard himself does, even though it has presumably been there for the entire flashback.

For Hawthorne's narrator it is the location of language (from tombstones to newspapers to packets) that is the revealer. He learns about Hester Prynne only when he wanders on a rainy day upstairs to an abandoned room and reads Pue's letters; and his thought and discoveries (even the inabilitys to discover) are fused to a series of locations. What happens in either work is largely dependent upon the narrator, where he is and what he learns there. Both have consciousnesses remarkably like a camera: they consistently frame and select. Like their functions in modern physics, time and distance are the results of movement, of motion pictures. And it is this physicalness of movement into the past which gives the past its solidity.

Consciousness, by being a selective process, becomes a subjective one as well, and both "The Custom-House" and
The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance are intensely subjective works--a subjectivity belonging not only to the narrators, but the authors (the auteurs) too. The narrators are extensions of the authors (parts of them) and the only information imparted in either work that does not come either from the narrators, or in the narrators' presence, comes from the authors, not from other characters. This of course raises problems of reliability since everything we learn we learn through essentially one consciousness, although having the narrators as content as well as context helps somewhat.

When Hawthorne remarks "I am surrounding myself with shadows which bewilder me by aping the realities of life," we feel not only that his statement is a poignant one, but that it is also a fair description of the cinema, especially a cinema like John Ford's, haunted by the past. Nowhere did Ford come so ruthlessly to grips with the past than in the black-and-white frames of The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance. It might be argued, in fact, that both works are black-and-white ones: not bold chiaroscuro (that would falsify the meaning of either) but a range of relative greys: the greys of history, truth, reality.

itself as it is a consequence of them. It is the legends which are black and white (for and read or), bold as newspaper headlines. This elision of color is intentional. For one thing it conveys a mood and tone that color would not; for another it functions as the presentation of the past. There are subtler allusions as well. In Ford it is the harkening back to an earlier cinema: the black-and-white movie itself seeming like a work from an earlier time. For Hawthorne it is the arraying of his world in the somber appearances of the Puritans themselves, and perhaps also a play on the Puritan world: an absolute world of good and evil (Ford deals with this myth too), elect and preterite, a world black and white as the garments we imagine them in. There is this too: "In exterior shots, color generally conveys a sense of space more easily than black and white... [increasing] the feeling of spaciousness." Black-and-white then generally serves to remove or condense this spaciousness. It also removes or condenses the spaciousness of time, the distance between past and present. It makes the past more immediate, more available. Heightening this effect in the film is Ford's insistence on close-ups and interiors (the parallels to which are evident in Haw-


8
thorne), giving the film the feeling of immersion in the past and its momentousness.

History, the relationship to the past (the very conception of it), is the trace element which gives all the other elements (character, setting, style) their shades of meaning.

The how of it, as I have mentioned, is the chief difference between the works.

Both film and literature, in narration, can deal very freely with time...But there is a permanent difference, in that writing has more exact...readier means...of describing time relationships. 'Before he came into room...Since I have been here...Then...'

In the cinema, transitions in time are visual, the change in location of the camera indicating an attendant change in time. (Movement, we may remember, being the agency of time and distance.) A basic example of this, involving a short passage of time, would be a camera moving from the inside of a room to an exterior from the street in order to convey a character's departure from his house. To convey longer lapses (or passages) of time, other techniques are used, among them the lapse-dissolve, wipe, and fade-out. "In the case of a fade the old image gradually fades out and there may be a brief period of darkness on the

6

screen." This is a fair description of the construction of the critical fade-cut in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* with the smoke from Tom's cigarette momentarily blurring out the screen. Put like that it seems simple enough, but how many directors have achieved anything like Ford's economy and control, his classicism?

The movement of interior to interior (to even the remembered interior of the Old Manse) marks the progress of Hawthorne's narrator as he tries to work his way clear of the entanglements of the present into the clear confrontation (and consideration, the apprehension) of the past. Here too change of setting equals change of time, or the establishing of setting as a consequence of time, of history. One can even imagine the long, enveloping pan of the Custom-House and its surroundings, the expansive, encircling shot, as a pan which welds time to place as fluidly as a pan in a film of John Ford. Both artists are extraordinarily inobtrusive, given instead to contemplation and the quiet unfoldings of inevitable processes. Let us not forget that Hawthorne's narrator is as much trapped in his present as the characters in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* are in the film's past; or Hawthorne's narrator in his own past, the present of his ancestors. It is precise-

7 Stephenson and Debrix, p. 66.

10
ly this inseparability of present and past, the intrusions of the past into the present, that make the worlds of the narrators so ambiguous. For Hawthorne "the ambiguity underlines the significance by dissolving irrelevant actuality in the mists of the past and leaving only an ideal history . . . a vision of the Past in the light of the Present, a picture in a frame of distance." It is in this picture in a frame that the loci of the media overlap.

II

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
—Burnt Norton

Talking about Ford and the Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges, Joseph McBride writes that "The meeting-ground between these two artists is their preoccupation . . . with the power of legend to overshadow reality, and the way a remembered past can crowd out the present." He might as easily have been talking about Hawthorne as about Borges. In terms of the American experience he might be compelled to, for, as Borges himself remarks, "New England invented the West." Hawthorne's Salem then is on a historical/cultural line that runs, like the railroad, to Shinbone. John Ford, another New Englander, was born and reared in Maine. Ransom Stoddard is a "Pilgrim" from the East.

There are other connections. The novel that "The Custom-House" frames, The Scarlet Letter, begins after the first bloody battles with the Indians in 1639; the present

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10 Jorge Luis Borges, cited by McBride and Wilmington, p. 177.
in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* is not much later than the last, and most ignominious, "battle" of the Indian Wars— the massacre at Wounded Knee. Between the two, the past of "The Custom-House" and the present of *Liberty Valance*, a whole era of American history was played out. Somewhere nearer the middle the present of "The Custom-House" and the past of *Liberty Valance* coincide. Both are approximately mid-19th century. In fact Ransom Stoddard and Hawthorne's narrator are contemporaries. (In more, I mean to show, than one sense). Last, but not least, the present in *Liberty Valance* is our past. What is happening here is a system of linkages, of frontiers, by which pasts and presents overlap right on down to the train's departure at the end of *Liberty Valance* for the future, for us. The implications, I think, are clear. The blood-curse was on the land from the beginning. Shinbone is the consequence of Salem, S of S, and what's that? SS, which just happens to be, O my goodness, the double integral sign. The double integral is a method of charting time-frames, and here our movement is that of history itself! Anyhow it's not a particularly attractive declension. Hawthorne's narrator seems aware of this: "Neither the front nor the back entrance of the Custom-House opens on the road to Paradise." The community of *Liberty Valance* is bordered

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13
on the north by the Picketwire, a river which turns out to be a cowboy bastardization of the Purgatoire River.

In the meantime something strange is going on. Time is collapsing, telescoping in. With each successive stage in the linkage the past crowds out more and more of the present. What starts in "The Custom-House" as a discussion on the past from the present becomes in *Liberty Valance* a relinquishment, a longing back into the past itself, abandoning the present (and future), holding the present only long enough for Hallie to place the cactus rose on Tom's coffin—long enough, that is for Stoddard to realize another truth behind the appearances of things, that Hallie still loves Tom; long enough for Stoddard to be trapped irrevocably in his role as the man who shot Liberty Valance as the train moves off into the future, the thinnest present of all, merely hinted at, implied as a consequence itself . . . .

The connections pile up. Both Stoddard and Hawthorne's narrator are aliens, outsiders, to their communities (and times), both bear witness to their times, both are chroniclers of it. Hawthorne's narrator returns to Salem just as Stoddard returns to Shinbone. The setting is one of time as well as focus: both are returning to the past. As returners they are also in a sense intruders; they disrupt the world around them. Both make confessions. There is
something of expiation in both Stoddard's attempt to re-
deeem himself and Hawthorne's narrator to come to terms
with the responsibility he feels for the sins of his fath-
ers. Do they both, I wonder, try to control the past, re-
lating it (fashioning it) by their own tongues? By being
their own historians as well as their times', do they at-
test to step outside their selves? Historian as final
distancer and mask? What we remember of the past is what
we tell of it. "The Custom-House" is not only the histori-
cal bearing of witness upon The Scarlet Letter, but upon
Hawthorne himself by himself. Stoddard's Pirandelloisms
follow suit.

It is a holist framework which makes such ambiguities
profound, such anonymities behind the public record; the
idea of masks, of the unknowability of truth behind the
inescapable necessity of roles, the lock-step of a culture
in which the private is hidden and the public removed into
myth.

Both then "The Custom-House" and The Man Who Shot Lib-
erty Valance are historical bearings of witness (and rev-
elation). They are the agencies by which the past is
brought with all its immediacy and power upon the present,
forming a present with it as one long, simultaneous thread
( like Quohog, his mark: ∞ ). Hawthorne-as narrator (it
is not so much that Hawthorne is disguised as narrator as
the other way around) is clear about this: "But the past was not dead" (p. 30), a quote which might serve John Ford as well. This "sort of home-feeling with the past" (p. 11) haunts (obsesses) Hawthorne, who felt it literally in the immediacy of his blood, in a strikingly similar way that it occupies Ford: Ford the immigrant who adopted the history and legacy of America when he adopted America itself and then became responsible for what he had adopted, felt the same grief and guilt, the same complicity. How both must have tested and retested their own roles and responsibilities as tellers of fictions, of more legends and myths by which to celebrate their country.

The film and the sketch are both, in part, in-sizable part, documents which stress the hidden, the private life, which imply that it is there that truth is ultimately to be found: truth behind the legend or letter, in the living breast. Not in the public records, but in an accounting in a desolate room, an anteroom to history. Both stress lives lived "more real" within the mind; commerce and politics as a communal history while the real story (what really happened) lies buried in a past more bodied than the present, a past without which the present is without substance. For it is the present which is temporal and elusive, unknowable until it is past, a continuity in which the past is in a state of perpetual realization; in which
a man's life seems nothing more than bookends around a
legend that threatens to utterly destroy his real self; in
which a man in a Custom-House, outside his time and com-
munity, can discover the writings of an earlier Surveyor
from the same adjacent vantage-point of isolate and yet
inseparable witness to the life outside; where he can
write about what his predecessor had written about: a
flashback inside a flashback, like the peeling on an on-
icn. Both are perspectives, Janus-faced investigations
of the backrooms of the soul, the human capacities for
suffering, for cruelty, for nobility, century inside of
century "through the haze of memory" (p. 47) and "the
thick haze of illusion."

This rose-bush, by a strange chance, has been kept alive in history.
--The Scarlet Letter

a cactus rose on a coffin
--The John Ford Movie Mystery

This is the other interface (or locus), the symbol of time in the shape of a flower, a perennial which blooms in its cycles down across the years: a surface of sorts, the objective correlative for the temporal in the chains of history. For Hawthorne "It may serve, let us hope, to symbolize some sweet moral blossom, that may be found along the track, or relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow." Its function for Ford is even more ambiguous. Hallie's placement of the cactus rose on Tom's coffin and Stoddard's discovery of it frame the long flashback that makes up nearly the entirety of the movie. (So completely does the movie occupy this past that from time to time the viewer may well mistake it for the movie's present.) By occurring inside the flashback as well it bridges time, and because it is linked in both time frames to Tom it serves to confer an immortality of sorts upon him. Put what an ironic immortality. Tom is wholly

Hawthorne, p. 50.
unknown to everyone but Stoddard and Hallie and the few other survivors from the film's past: most notably Andy Devine's Linc Appleyard and Woody Strode's Pompey. The irony becomes all the more compelling when we reflect that Stoddard himself is the immortal here, grafted onto legend. The implication is one of complicity, of shared fate, and like the end of *The Scarlet Letter*, one tombstone may very well serve them both: the man of legend and the man of fact. The rose will continue to bloom, but truth will continue to be sub rosa.

There is one more time-frame we are omitting, and that is the continuous present of the works of art themselves. All works of art (as Porges has so often noted) exist simultaneously in the present. From one spot we may encounter a view of the Salem wharf or the signposts which serve as the credits for *Liberty Valance*. As soon as those signposts disappear, the train carrying Stoddard and Hallie (along with us) into a confrontation with legend will make its fateful and inevitable arc across the screen, an arc, as Joseph McBride has observed, that will be perfectly reversed at the end of the film. These are the real borders of the movie, (the way *The Scarlet Letter* is really bordered by "The Custom-House.")

*The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* opens then with a shot of a train passing through a recognizably Western land-
scape. It is a familiar sight, a lexicon from countless other Westerns (including Ford's own *The Iron Horse*). Like the stagecoach it replaced, it is an object that summons up its milieu as certainly as the Yankee Clipper anchored (ahem) its own. But Ford undercuts this familiarity (and our expectations in the face of it) by maintaining the shot for a few seconds longer, allowing the landscape and screen to be almost blotted out completely by the massive dark thunderhead of smoke issuing from the stack. The symbol has neatly become the reality. This not only prefigures the theme of the film, but technically it also anticipates the smoke of Tom's cigarette which will also momentarily darken the screen before dissolving into another layer of the past, and its realities. When the train arrives in Shinbone, it is the town's present, even though it is supposedly bustling into the future, which seems ghostly, enervated. And when Stoddard and Hallie are met by an incredibly aged Andy Devine, we have the feeling of ghosts themselves inhabiting their former dwellings. It is a haunted tableau.

Cross-cut to: a Custom-House on the wharf in Salem, the center of commerce and activity of the port, a camera quiet as Ford's establishing the physical coordinates of its world. But with the same lingering, ruthless inspection we see that the wharf is "dilapidated," "burdened
with decayed wooden warehouses" (pp. 6-7). The chief cargo seems to be firewood, as if the present were literally being consumed, sent up in smoke. The Custom-House itself is viewed in long-shot across "the track of many languid years" and "a border of unthrifty grass" (p. 7). It is the seat of records, of official documents, a monument to the conception of life measured, and comprehended, in terms of facts, arrangements of dates and figures. It has more than a passing resemblance to a mausoleum. The dissolutions of Salem are one to one: the physical decay is emblematic of a moral decay, and the emblem over its door, the eagle of the Republic, is shown clearly as a bird of prey.

The dissolution of Shinbone is more deceptive. It looks prosperous along its main streets (although we will move quickly through them, as I have mentioned, to more privileged interiors), but it is curiously lacking in any resonance. It is photographed in a range of middle tones, without any real shadows, or depth. The feeling is of a world washed out, depleted. Unlike the direct equivalences of Salem, one has the feeling that the surfaces of Shinbone are hollow, are facades that cover-up the present decline. By the end of the movie, Shinbone will knowingly maintain this cover-up by refusing to accept Stoddard's confession, preferring instead to perpetuate the legend. The beauty of Shinbone is that it does seem like a stage-
set. I suggest that the artificiality is intentional, that it is perfectly in keeping with Ford's meaning, with the subjective nature of the film, and, of course, with both Stoddard's present play-acting as a politician and his projection of himself and the characters of the film's present back into the past into their fateful roles. If the unreality of the set in the flashback serves to heighten its feeling of dream or memory, the unreality of the set in the present serves to heighten precisely that: the unreality of the present in the face of the past. This is but one example (and facet) of Ford's "double-vision . . . of an event in all its . . . immediacy, and yet also in its ultimate memory image on the horizon of history."

Likewise the citizens of Salem seem content to live in the backwater of their own legends, the difference being that outside of Hawthorne and a few crass young clerks (very much like the reporters in Liberty Valance) Salem seems to be inhabited solely by antiquarians. It is an old world, on the literal edge of extinction. And, of course, a whole phase of Salem is passing away as Salem recedes more and more and "the mighty flood of commerce" (p. 8) moves on to Boston and New York. Conversely, the present in The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance is filled with new

14 Sarris, p. 173.
buildings (which on repeated viewings of the film we come to resent) since the Old West is dead (ha!) and Modern America in its ascendancy. It is history itself that is prime mover in both worlds, and all the characters involved are caught up in irresolute historical movements and forces (irresistible as the railroad). Dan McCall has something not unlike this in mind when he writes that "What gives Hawthorne's . . . essay its own great tension . . . is this sense that the validations of the community have given way and that the individual by himself cannot adequately make meaning out of experience." They are trapped in their time just as they are a part of it, and their time is an accumulation of forces that were in operation before them. This is akin to Stoddard's inability to transcend legend and Ford's notion that history is not made by men who are at peace with their world. It is the belief that history is made by people who are essentially outsiders, who like Tom Doniphon and Hester Prynne, or Hawthorne himself, step outside their communities. It is not so much, I think, a deterministic vision of history as a tragic one. Tom and Hester both transcend (however painfully) their situations by refusing to submit to them. They embrace (accept) their fates completely. The logic is

that of Camus' *Sisypheus*. Hester changes the meaning of the letter by embracing it, by appropriating it, in her own terms. Tom alters our conception (and perception) of hero-ism by stepping clear, as Yeats says "of the nets of wrong and right." Yet the situation they share most important-ly is one of being participants (actors) in the private life of their times, the realities not included in the of-ficial documents. If Stoddard is the zeitgeist of *Liberty Valance*, Tom is its dark and permanent past. There are other combinations as well, triangles and parabolas, tan-gents which are the only possible means between two points.

Perhaps the most odd and compelling characteristic of either world is the degree to which it is contained-- by history, custom (it is, after all, a Custom-House), eco-nomics. In fact, to some degree the entirety of the main flashback of *Liberty Valance* seems to be an interior, a contained space. The interior is a subjective space, and both works depend heavily upon it.

When we move inside the Custom-House, Hawthorne's nar-rator presents us with a row of "venerable figures" (p.9), human remnants (relics really) from an earlier time. These

ancients have found their final resting place (on this side of things) here beneath the Federal eagle. They pass their time mostly by sleeping, by reminiscing, or lost in their separate memories. One character, the Inspector, is wholly consumed by visions of past meals whose ghosts "were continually rising up before him" (p. 21) (like Stoddard rising "up out of the gravy and the mashed potatoes," to quote Dutton Peabody). It is a comic, and sometimes bitingly satirical portrait, and yet Hawthorne senses certain virtues among them, especially the Collector, a veteran of many years and campaigns who Hawthorne implies has earned his dotage: "weight, solidity, firmness; this was the expression of his repose, even in such decay as had crept untimely over him" (p. 23). Line Appleyard is sketched along similar lines—amazingly old in the film's present, he spent his life in its past (as the town marshal) by cowering in doorways at the mention of Liberty Va lance and running up a tab at the Ericsons' restaurant (the setting for a sizable part of the film). Sar ris calls Devine "Ford's Falstaff," and goes on to say that, despite his undeniably comic role (played as broad as the actor himself), "Devine's mere participation in the fierce nobility of the past magnifies his character in retrospect. For Ford, there is some glory in just growing old and remembering through the thick haze of illusion."

17 Sarris, p. 150.
It might even be mentioned that this applies not only to Link, but Pompey; and up until his death Tom must have been viewed by modern Shinbone in the same way: as ambulatory ghosts, wrecks from the town's past.

There is something of memory in the works themselves. "The Custom-House" is written in the past tense and Liberty Valance is clearly a summation of Ford's view of history, which makes it also a commentary on many of his earlier films, most obviously My Darling Clementine and Fort Apache. In fact the film is filled with such personal allusions, from the signpost credits which had been previously used in Clementine, to the playing of the Ann Rutledge Theme from Young Mister Lincoln when Hallie visits the ruins of Tom's cabin. And of course there is Ford's use of actors, the legendary "stock company," and the accumulations and memories they bring with them. This must have been a marvellous bonus to watching Ford's films as they appeared, to move through the years comparing the actors' aging against one's own, lamenting the loss of both McLaglen and Ward Bond, watching Ford move a vision of a country through a personal iconography from the timeless vistas of Monument Valley to the mortal and yet monumental vista of John Wayne himself (it does that to you). Hawthorne fills "The Custom-House" with his own set of allusions. Not only is his personal history conveyed, but its
conveyance is immediately reminiscent of his "The Author Makes the Reader Acquainted with his Abode," the autobiographical sketch which introduced *Mosses from an Old Manse*. There are also allusions to such earlier works as "Old Ticonderoga: A Picture of the Past," *Main Street*, and "A Rill from the Town Pump" as well as some personal genealogy and the inclusion of the names of his more famous friends and contemporaries. Lest we forget the most obvious allusion, the entirety of "The Custom-House" introduces *The Scarlet Letter*.

It is the genealogy, however, which is the prime mover. Hawthorne's movement to Salem, to the public sphere, has something of atonement about it, something perhaps even of penance--as if only by squarely confronting the ghosts of his ancestors, and their deeds, the world they have founded, can he release himself to his true self, "the literary man" (p. 46). The humor with which this is treated, Hawthorne's assertion that he is punishment enough for his ancestors, a "degenerate" "writer of story-books" (p. 12), is the sort of distancing device Ford achieves through the comedic elements in *Liberty Valance*. The comedy gives relief to what would otherwise surely be an almost unbearable darkness. It also serves to give the two artists the distance they require from their works, the distance of observation, contemplation, nostalgia. There is also about
the two works and the situations of their protagonists a feeling of inevitability, of inescapable reunion.

If Stoddard is his own progenitor, is himself living descendent of his own legend, his own earlier self, he is still scarcely more connected to the past than Hawthorne's narrator (and the narrator is also a surrogate self). The "sensuous sympathy of dust for dust" (p. 11) is a bond which is simultaneous as well as eternal, and when Hawthorne eulogizes his first Salem ancestor, William Hawthorne ("the earliest emigrant of my name, made his appearance in the wild and forest-bordered settlement" [p. 11]), his tone and phrasing are remarkably similar to Peabody's nomination of Stoddard at the Territorial Convention towards the end of Liberty Valance ("he came, not packing a gun, but carrying a set of law-books"), and the description of 17th-Century Salem could very easily pass for one of 19th-Century Shinbone. Both Stoddard and Hawthorne's narrator are stranded in the present. Hawthorne's narrator confesses "a sort of home-feeling with the past" (p. 11), and at the end of Liberty Valance Stoddard proposes that he and Hallie return for good, like one of Hawthorne's ancestors "returned from his world-wanderings, to grow old, and die, and mingle his dust with the natal earth" (p. 13). It is as if Shinbone were the inevitable center (or coming to terms) of Stoddard's universe, the
same way that Salem was for Hawthorne.

All of this leads Hawthorne as narrator to speculate on not only the affinities for the soil, but the nourishments thereof. "Human nature," he says "will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long . . . in the same worn out soil" (p. 114). Inside the train, on Stoddard's return at the beginning of the film, Hallie looks out across the valley and says, "Look at it. Once it was a wilderness. Now it's a garden. Aren't you proud?" Stoddard has just introduced an irrigation bill into Congress which will make the transformation complete.

The ideas of garden and wilderness find their meeting-place in Liberty Valance in the cactus rose. As a plant of the most desolate and forbidding landscapes, it is something of an anomaly when it bursts into blossom. Such extravagance seems out of place. We are used to thinking of roses as plants requiring cultivation, and of the sort of leisure and aesthetics that entails as requiring civilization, not wilderness, especially not the moral wilderness of the West.

There is a scene in the middle of Liberty Valance (in more ways than one) where Tom comes into town for dinner at the Ericson restaurant and brings Hallie a cactus rose. It is the scene in which Tom first realizes that Hallie
is being charmed by Stoddard (behind his back, but to be
fair, somewhat unconsciously on Stoddard's part), and the
gesture of the rose, its reception, the way a succession
of characters perceive and respond to it forms a matrix
from which the film seems to flow forwards and backwards
to the cactus rose that frames the flashback. For Tom it
is both a gesture of love for Hallie and a conception of
Hallie in terms of the rose. She is the extravagance of
beauty in a harsh landscape, and Tom cherishes her for it,
as a sort of natural miracle (like the rose) to be simply
appreciated for what she is. "Any more color," he tells
her "n' you'd be prettier than that cactus rose." Like
many of the pivotal gestures that fill Ford's film, this
has the feeling of ritual to it, as if Tom has been court-
ing Hallie over the years, bringing her cactus roses. This
is important for it supplies a context for her reaction to
this specific rose, and to Tom himself, all duded up and
come a' courtin'. In the presence of Stoddard she seems
self-conscious and embarrassed and receives the rose with
some hesitancy and awkwardness. What has been a natural
state of affairs, we feel, is beginning to flounder. (I
don't think it forces the image too much to suggest that
the West itself is becoming self-conscious at this time,
regarding itself as inadequate, in need of the respecta-
bility and culture of the East. Women have traditionally
fulfilled this role in the Western, the longing for civilized values and order, and it is revealing that in the Ericson's kitchen it is Jeanette Nolan's Nora who urges Stoddard and Hallie together to the outrage of John Quallen's Peter. Sensing her embarrassment, Pompey offers to plant the rose for her in the garden outside the kitchen door. Tom goes into eat, and in the quiet that ensues Hallie stands in the doorway gazing at the plant. "It is pretty" she says to Stoddard as if insisting upon it to herself. It is here that Stoddard asks her if she has ever seen "a real rose" (an unintentional bit of Eastern-dude chauvinism). The "real rose" then, the ideal, is the siren Stoddard offers her, and she sees him as the embodiment of that ideal. "Maybe someday," she says "if they ever dam the river, we'll have lots of water, and all kinds of flowers." As McBride points out, "This is the root of Stoddard's famous and symbolic irrigation bill. It was Tom who inspired it, with his romantic but destructive uprooting of the rose, and Hallie who set the idea in motion."

Put the pursuit of Paradise is a peculiar thing, and the uprooting and subsequent disruptions are certainly not what Hallie had in mind. We might remind ourselves that the river to be dammed is the Purgatoire, and that the

18 McBride and Willington, p. 164.
characters themselves (especially Loniphon and Stoddard) seem damned to a life of spiritual exile and limbo.
At the same time that the movie itself was first released, there appeared on the Top 40 AM stations across America a song entitled "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance" by Gene Pitney, a rocker with an upper lip like a Florentine scroll. It boasted lyrics along the lines of "The shape of a gun was the only law that Liberty understood," and "When two men go out to face each other only one returns." Its throbbing refrain, "The man who shot Liberty Valance / He shot Liberty Valance [very urgent echo chamber effect through here] / He was the bravest of the all." Turns out the song has nothing to do with the movie. What millions of teen listeners are allowed to believe is a theme song is just Gene's own response to the film. It is another-public confusion, a gap in reality.
As soon as he steps from the train, Senator Stoddard is recognized by a cub reporter, who calls the editor of the town newspaper—The Shinbone Star, whose founder, Dutton Peabody (Edmond O'Brien), plays a large part in the story the Senator is soon to tell. Stoddard readily agrees to grant a routine interview (most likely about the ramifications of the irrigation bill) and entrusts Hallie to the care of Linc Appleyard. As Stoddard and the newspapermen move off to the interview, the camera follows Hallie and Linc as they drive in a buckboard to the ruins of a house out in the desert. There, with an almost imperceptible gesture from Hallie, Linc dismounts to dig up a cactus rose. The next shot is of the newspaper office where Stoddard is concluding the sort of interview, filled with the sort of information, that is generally considered newsworthy. Seeing Hallie and Linc through the window, the Senator excuses himself and goes to join them. We pick the three of them up approaching the back door of a carpentry shop/funeral parlor, where the undertaker is in the motions of dumping out a bucket of wood shavings, presumably from a coffin. Seeing Stoddard, he stops and effusively excuses
his actions (and the quality of the funeral) by saying that he didn't know the Senator was going to be there. Even thus prepared, the first shot of the plain unvarnished coffin (nothing more than a box really) in the stark room is quite a shock. So much so that it is not until a moment later that the entourage realize Pompey's presence, old and weary, in the corner of the room. Stoddard lifts the lid of the coffin towards us (we never see the body, and this serves to make the man inside even more of a legend, a force, something huge and incorporeal), and shoots an angry glance at the undertaker: "Put his boots on, Flute. And his gun belt. And his spurs." We learn from Pompey that the man has not carried a gun for years, and there is an unaccountable sadness in that information and the gesture it summons forth: a relinquishment, a decline of a man that is somehow more terrible than if we were shown his corpse, for in that gesture we feel a man's acknowledgement of impotence, of a living death.

It is into this atmosphere of almost relentless sorrow and private grief that the editor of the Star struts, demanding an explanation, shrill about the news and the public's rights to it and his responsibilities to see that they get it. The editor is played by Carleton Young, and here the subtleties of Ford's casting, of using an actor to comment on a role, comes into play. It is a device
which enables Ford to get a maximum of meaning out of a minimum of role, and it populates his films with an array of character actors and parts that fill them out to a degree which otherwise would not have been possible. Two years earlier Carlton Young had played the vindictive Prosecuting Attorney in the military trial in Sergeant Rutledge, a film in which the title character (played by Woody Strode) was falsely accused of the rape and murder of a white girl. Presiding over the trial is another racist, played by Judson Pratt, who plays the conductor on the train that carries Stoddard and Hallie away at the end of Liberty Valance, who tells Stoddard that "Nothing's too good for the man who shot Liberty Valance." That these two actors, having already played roles in which they were blind to the reality behind the "evidence," should play the roles they do in Liberty Valance is to emphasize the futility of such a position. Like Hawthorne, Ford "is mocking the easy belief that a historian can penetrate truth by a simple disposition of . . . facts."

The editor, Maxwell Scott, tells Stoddard that he has searched the back issues and records of the newspaper and cannot find any references to Tom Doniphon (which is odd

when you think about it, but then look in the stacks of The Historical Society of Essex County, Massachusetts, and you will find no records of Surveyor Pue either). If "the scarlet letter itself is a vivid emblem of the Puritan belief that no individual action occurs outside the purview of the theocratic society," Scott's badgerings are evidence that Puritan beliefs are still very much in effect in 19th-Century America. Stoddard looks to Hallie for direction, who gives the barest, discreet nod of her head, and then follows the three newspapermen (was ever the phrase news-hound ever so right?), in Andrew Sarris' words, "into the next room away from the mourners, away from the present into the past." The camera cuts from Hallie opening her hat-box on Tom's coffin to Stoddard standing in front of an old dust-enshrouded stagecoach, proclaiming it to be the very one ("I think it is") that brought him to Shinbone in what seems to be an eternity ago. And with that we are in the flashback.

It is an obvious device, and Ford makes no attempts to disguise it. On the one hand it fits in with the Senator's rather hammy persona, and on the other it is a pretense

21  Sarris, p. 177.
(and tcol) in triggering the flashback (and here, as elsewhere in the film, effects are reached in the simplest, most economical and pure way). It gives Ford an object to literally carry the cut, appearing in the present and then in the past, and it is one of the many allusions, previously alluded to, in the film. (Who can see a stagecoach take center-stage in a Ford film without thinking of his first great Western Stagecoach?) So Ford has used an old device, the use of a prop, in much the same way that Hawthorne's narrator uses the prop of the letters, and like Van Deusen, we feel that "it seems perfectly clear that with Hawthorne the discovery of the papers is a pretense . . . which introduces . . . the problems of knowledge, historical and creative, real and absolute." 

Even this early in the work we have moved through a series of interiors, but it is in this anteroom that we will learn, through Stoddard, what really happened. This motif is used throughout the rest of the film as we are constantly being taken backstage, and being shown our privileged information there. Other such areas are the Tricson's kitchen in the rear of their restaurant where Stoddard is first brought, where he courts Hallie, where Tom realizes that Hallie is no longer his girl, and where

22 Van Deusen, p. 62.
Hallie cries after the gunfight; the schoolroom behind Peabody's office, itself a sort of back-stage area, where Stoddard starts his school; Tom's ranch and the addition he is building for Hallie; the alleyway behind the restaurant where we first see Tom, Pompey and Hallie (when Stoddard is brought into town, abject and beaten in the buckboard), where Hallie has her garden of cactus roses, and where Pompey waits with a buckboard to slip Stoddard out of town before the gunfight; the saloon where Liberty Valance (Lee Marvin) awaits the gunfight drinking, strutting, knocking off a "tinhorn" gambler's hat and drawing aces and eights, the dead man's hand Luke Plummer drew before going out to face the Ringo Kid on the dark streets of Lordsburg; the backroom at the convention hall where Tom tells Stoddard what really happened; and the visualization of Tom's story, the alley where he and Pompey waited, from which he shot Liberty Valance. The legendary actions, the actions that will be recorded by history and will therefore be considered real, occur in the public spaces: the streets, the restaurant itself, the convention hall, the bar as the delegating hall where Stoddard is literally trapped in his position under the stairs, where Tom significantly passes the gavel to Stoddard and then moves to the sidelines, the margins he will live his life in, passed over by history, abandoned by the woman he
loves.

I don't think it's excessive to insist again at this point that Stoddard is aware of all this, that every scene in his retelling is charged by Tom's flashback. On repeated viewings of the film, that flashback begins to weigh on us too, investing every scene that precedes it with a sense of unalterable fatality and doom. We then watch Stoddard as much as watch with him as he replays the past. Knowing the truth gives Stoddard's story an extraordinary resonance and makes its ironies tragic ones. The first shot of Tom's coffin becomes a statement of a life ruined and left to waste. Wittingly or not Stoddard is the agent of this tragedy, so there is something in Stoddard's telling, we feel, of a pitiless self-examination, of a man worrying the scent like a hound, looking again and again for the grand design that will make sense of it all, or at least to see, on yet another viewing, how he and the other characters were consumed by the parts they played, how they participated in a lock-step of historical process. But the fact remains that Stoddard is the most culpable of the characters. He has allowed the myth to become the fact, and he must now answer his own anguished question: "Isn't it enough to kill a man without building a career on it?"
The reader may object that it was Tom, not Stoddard, who killed Liberty Va Lane, but the division, I think, is not
nearly so neat or simple.

Stoddard has after all allowed the myth to serve him, has in effect built (or at least started, and by some implication, maintained) his career on the death of another man, the killing of whom he takes credit for. Even this is overly simplified since Stoddard is perhaps the most trapped of all the characters as well, and he accepts the charade as the agency of not only inevitable but necessary forces. Having taught Hallie to read he is obliged, as Tom tells him, to give her something to read about. Still, Stoddard is a man for whom guilt and responsibility seem hopelessly entwined, "and Stoddard's story has the feeling of a guilty confession before the court of history." Presided over by Carleton Young.

With some modifications this is the situation of Hawthorne's narrator in "The Custom-House" as well. He has come back to Salem, his center, in part because of the guilt he feels both for and to his ancestors. Instead of going to sea and living his life in the active channels of public endeavor, he is a writer whose real self stays adamantly hidden behind not only his normal reticence, but also the sometime maddening nuances and ambiguities of his art. He has come to the Custom-House but has maintained a

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23 McRide and Silmington, p. 178.
rigorously critical eye and distance between it and himself, and has chosen to keep this private life hidden from the people around him. Paskett claims that

Like Dimmesdale, Hawthorne has lived a hypocritical life among his associates; and, like Dimmesdale, after having scourged himself for years with his sensitivity, Hawthorne finally brings himself to a two-fold expiation, in the darkness of a romance purportedly dealing with the dim past, and in the ambiguous daylight of the Custom-House. 24

In other words we have a sense of coming to terms, of confession, remarkably similar to Ransom Stoddard's. Like Stoddard, the final catalyst for this is presented to us in the form of a prop, in this case the letters of Surveyor Pue, and, like Stoddard, the setting of the revelation is in an anteroom off the main paths of history. In both works these critical moments occur in symbolic rooms in symbolic buildings on the threshold of the past. Here the focus of meaning and setting Huffman refers to not only anchors the works, but their fundamental relationship to each other as well.

Both narrators, then, estranged from their contemporaries, turn towards the past for personal meaning and, hopefully, salvation— at least exoneration, forgiveness. The darkest part of either world is the implication that such forgiveness is not forthcoming. Stoddard, trapped in

24
Paskett, p. 327.
his role by the train conductor, and Hawthorne, judged by his imagined successors as the writer of local histories become local history himself—both are wedded forever to their settings and times. By embodying a time they come to be responsible for it, and as I have earlier mentioned, both seem to already feel such responsibility. If the causes for Stoddard’s guilt are much more understandable, those of Hawthorne vague, we need only reflect on Hawthorne’s idea of Original Sin—the flawed estate we are each of us born into, and our moral responsibilities to take on the consequences of our life even in such an estate. Nobody gets off easily.

In such a world “Man’s chief temptation is to forget his limits and complexities, to think himself all good, or to think himself all bad.” This is the temptation Hawthorne’s narrator deals with in "The Custom-House" and The Scarlet Letter (it is the Manichean world-view of the Puritans themselves), and it is Stoddard’s temptation too. Even in his retelling, Liberty Valance remains a figure (almost an embodiment) of evil, as if in Stoddard’s mind Valance has indeed become a mythic or archetypal figure, and not a human being. This clash of opposites (Stoddard/Valance) occurs immediately in the flashback when the

25 Fogle, p. 6.
stage carrying Stoddard is held up on the outskirts of town by Liberty Valance and his henchmen (Strother Martin and Lee Van Cleef). When Stoddard attempts to save a woman's brooch (Anna Lee, Ford's suffering female from *How Green Was My Valley* and *Fort Apache*), he is brutally beaten and left lying on the road. This confrontation has about it the feeling of Stoddard's own fears being projected forward, as if (like Crane's protagonist in "The Blue Hotel"), this is what he has expected the West to be like. This accounts also for the Crusade-like aspect of Stoddard's journey west, the absolute religion he makes of the law, and seems to account for Tom's teasing nickname for him: "Pilgrim." For Liberty Valance (who also refrains from using Stoddard's real name), he is the prototypical Eastern greenhorn, the "Dude." In light of all this, it might not be going too far to suggest that this initial clash between Stoddard and Valance is a clash of opposites, of the chaos of the Old West colliding with the order of the East. At least Stoddard's subjective accounting gives it such shape. And structurally Ford (and Stoddard) have given us this clash at the start of things, before the introduction of Tom, who occupies a ground between the two, incorporating within himself elements belonging to both— for Tom is a compromised loner, an outsider longing for a home (and building one for Hallie).
At the end of the film he will occupy the crucial middle-ground, which will also be the foreground of the frame, and when Pompey throws him a rifle its arc will perfectly transcribe Stoddard on the left and Valance on the right: both it and Tom part of a gesture which will transcend the Manichean good or evil. And Tom, stoic and enduring, will be able to "live with it."

His is the gesture then beyond the neat opposites Stoddard sees the West in terms of. For Stoddard, his clash with Liberty Valance is one of good and evil, the gun and the book, wilderness and civilization. In his book, *Horizons West*, Jim Kitses gives us a detailed list of such antimonies:

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The West

America

Europe
the frontier         America
equality           class
agrarianism        industrialism
tradition          change
the past           the future

Jim Kitses goes on to say that

What we are dealing with here, of course, is no less than a national world-view: underlying the whole complex is the grave problem of identity that has special meaning for Americans . . . the slow growth of social forces, the impact of an unremitting New England Puritanism obsessed with the cosmic struggle of good and evil, of the elect and the damned . . . these factors are the crucible in which American consciousness was formed. 26

And, of course, Ford is playing around with them. His most central irony is the name of Liberty Valance himself, for here (in Shinbone, south of the Picketwire) liberty means license, and Liberty Valance's idea of "Western law," the law of the gun, strikes Stoddard as a perversion on an almost sacred level. Put to get back to Kitses' list, I think we can see (going with the oversimplifications involved) that the list seems to give us the attributes of Valance and Stoddard; whereas Doniphon embodies characteristics from both lists. Yet, perhaps, finally for Tom (tragically to be sure), he is not so much a synthesis of these elements as much as host to warring and contradictory impulses. His allegiance is too much, ultimately, to

the past and he never makes it into the future, but wanders like a ghost in the haunted environs of history. After the gunfight he tells Stoodard and Hallie, "I'll be around," and he is (like Tom Joad), haunting them in the form and truth of a legend (another set of incompatibles). Not seeing Tom's body in the coffin increases this feeling.

What I have tried to suggest here is that even on retelling (and how many times over how many years has Stoodard already relived this past?), the world of Stoodard remains an almost exclusively subjective one; but his hope remains that sense can still be made of it. Hawthorne's narrator gives himself to this problem directly: "There would have been something sad, unutterably dreary, in all this, had I not been conscious that it lay at my own option to recall whatever was valuable in the past" (p. 20). The implications of the word "recall" are important: they not only link Hawthorne with the past directly (as well as umbilically), but they establish the past as a subjective state, one that lives in the narrator's mind. So there is this to it too, Salem and Shinbone recurring endlessly in the minds of their historians.

"Put the past was not dead" (p. 30). As Faulkner observed, it is never even past. Such is the revelatory message of "The Custom-House." The revelations of "The
Custom-House" concern time and history. It is the revelations of *The Scarlet Letter* that concern legend. More properly, perhaps, it is the action of "The Custom-House" upon *The Scarlet Letter* that reveals the myth, as it were, of legend; and in this way parallels the entirety of *Liberty Valance* (with a man in a building in the present, and his story in the past). In this sense, Hawthorne's narrator is very close to Ford's, and the discovery (the telling) of what really happened functions for both artists in another close sense. *The Scarlet Letter*, ostensibly Pur'rs "real story," undercuts the traditional conception of the Puritans in general, and Hester Prynne's fate in particular, in much the same way that Stoddard's revelation undercuts both *Liberty Valance* and the West. Trouble is, when you think about it, these revelations, and the works they occur in, make the whole business even more complex. If the past is not past it is not fixed, and can never be certain since it is open to endless examinations and interpretations, endless possibilities of meaning. What Hawthorne and Ford have done is to make the problems of history the problems of perception, of epistemology. What was safe and tidy, already committed to the catalogues, is suddenly, well, not even past. And the revelations become the awareness of the lack of such simple notions. Further complicating this is the fact that Stoddard and Hawthorne's
narrator continue to look for exonerations, for blessings, from the outside, from history, while the only place they can truly find forgiveness is in their own hearts.
VI

The consequences of an event take place in the mind
--The Imagination of an Insurrection

Musing over the heap of discarded papers in the second story of the Custom-House (the second story, see!), Hawthorne's narrator is filled with a sense of loss and nostalgia, a sadness for the futility of human endeavor; that the work they required was so ill conceived and directed that the papers were purposeless in their day, that they are, in effect, anonymous efforts rendering anonymity upon their writers (and anonymity is central here). Still, Hawthorne reasons, they might not be "altogether worthless . . . as materials of local history [containing] many references to forgotten or remembered men, and . . . customs" (p. 31). Hawthorne is playing upon our expectations (like Ford) that out of this heap may come an embellishment to history or, perchance, a legend to lend to it. I do not think that anyone at this point expects the debunking of history and the implications of the work Hawthorne purportedly discovers anymore than we expect James Stewart to be revealed as an impostor in Liberty Valance. Nor do we expect the dark assertions beneath the casual surface of "The Custom-House" itself. In fact, we so little expect it that it has taken us decades to see what is really there.
and the critical relationships it has to the romance it frames.

The presence of these assorted documents makes the narrator uneasy. He senses something of value in them, is clearly affected by simply being in contact with them as objects. It is as if just embodying the past were enough, just surviving. These resonances are the only things Hawthorne finds attractive in the other remnants too: the old men on the floor below him (whereas he has nothing good to say about the younger employees). These papers, by literally embodying the past, lead Hawthorne to speculate that he might indeed, by exerting his fancy, "raise up from these dry bones an image of the old town's brighter aspect . . . when clerks engrossed their stiff and formal chiro- 
geraphy on more substantial materials than at present" (p. 32). It is a curious contention, when you consider it, since the Salem of the papers is hardly a bright one, but it does reveal a relationship to (and conception of) the past much like Ford's own: "a luminous memory more real than the present, and presumably more than the . . . future."

It is in the midst of these papers and the associations

they have for Hawthorne that he finds the folded parchment
of an earlier Surveyor, Jonathan Pue, and opening it dis-
covers not only the tale of the scarlet letter, but "more
traces of Mr. Pue's mental part, and the internal opera-
tions of his head, than the frizzled wig [in his coffin]
had contained of the venerable skull itself" (p. 33). It
is a marvellously deceptive sentence, and contains a whole
series of allusions and puns that are central to the mean-
ing of the whole rigamarole of discovering the papers in
the first place. It is a beautiful bit of fun to have had
Pue's remains dug up during the "renewal" of St. Peter's
Church, since Hawthorne's subsequent discovery of his pa-
pers is itself a bit of unearthing. This rather ghoulish
implication makes Hawthorne as much a grave-robber as an
historian. Too much? What is an archeologist but a robber
(to good end no doubt) of graves? the difference being
that an archeologist insists on the past being past, while
Hawthorne is concerned with the living truth, the truth
that resides within the object. Here the idea of the skull
as a container comes into play: like the folded parchment
it is merely a wrapper, the outer visible image of the in-
er invisible truth, a truth which passes from the inside
of one skull to another, one Surveyor to the next, whose
own papers we discover by reading "The Custom-House." Haw-
thorne's supposition that "[Pue] lived a more real life
within his thoughts, then amid the unappropiate environment of the Collector’s office” (p. 25) further enhances this. Also at work is the notion of a skull as housing an interior where the truth is revealed, and the extended pun of the inner history of the times being revealed, a history which metaphorically leaps from mind to mind. When we consider that Hawthorne considers Poe to be his real or "official ancestor" (p. 36), the linkage tightens even further, and the whole revelation takes on the trappings of racial memory. (Hawthorne "recalls" the past.)

The parallels between Poe and Hawthorne, then, are significant, significant to the extent that in a very real sense Poe is Hawthorne, is Hawthorne imagining himself back to his ancestors’ time, literally displacing them, becoming his own progenitor (which is a way of overcoming the guilt and responsibility he feels towards them). Seen in this way, what seemed at first to be a light and obvious literary device becomes instead a very serious attempt at recreating the past through the imagination (the inside of the skull), and Hawthorne’s own relationship to that past, lineage.

Let’s back up for a moment and consider similarities. Most striking, outside of the link of their title, Surveyor, is the fact that both in effect while occupying a position in the Custom-House, write a private reflection
from an emotional, historical perspective that places them outside of it, reflections which are essentially private despite the fact that Hawthorne publishes his. I don’t know if too much can be made of this, this insistence (doubled now) upon the private in the very presence of the public: "They were documents, in short, not official, but of a private nature, or at least, written in [a] private capacity" (p. 33). And, after all, the documents are The Scarlet Letter (as well as the sources for "A Rill from the Town Pump"), and The Scarlet Letter, ask any schoolboy, was written by Nathaniel Hawthorne. No more proof is required in establishing their mutual identity. By immersing himself into the past (unearthed into the present really when he is forced out of the Custom-House by the election of Zachary Taylor), Hawthorne not only distances himself, but in addition forces an even greater connection (and interdependence) between the past and the present. Hawthorne's narrator, like Pue, is a "local antiquarian," and he suspects that in drawing upon Pue’s material he might even write "a regular history of Salem" (p. 33). But what he has done instead, like Ransom Stoddard, is to give voice to an irregular history, the history behind the surfaces. This makes Hawthorne's notion "that his fictional writings rather than his official acts may perhaps become
'materials of local history' hardly the casually ironic aside we may mistake it for. It is rather the insistence that the two are ultimately indistinguishable, and that, when revealed, the truth is just as likely to be rejected in favor of the fiction, the legend. It makes a mockery out of history, and makes human knowledge an even more problematical and ambiguous affair.

Nor do the structural implications help relieve this web. The three-fold time, the flashback inside the flashback, further removes from us any myths of objectivity, perhaps even the myth of objectivity. And by condensing the whole process into one lifetime, Ford insists that the problem is not one of linear time or distance, it is a problem of the subjective conception of time, of place. In fact, Pue himself becomes a rather ambiguous figure, embodying not only drives ascribable to Hawthorne, but those of Carleton Young in Liberty Valance: he is a witness, but he chooses to keep what he has witnessed private. It is Hawthorne and Ford that perform the neat trick of both revealing and concealing simultaneously.

One thing, as I have mentioned, is clear in both works, and that is the insistence on the private. Hawthorne even begins "The Custom-House" by apologizing for his "autobi-
graphical impulse" (p. 5), "earnestly promising at the same time to "keep the inmost Me behind its veil" (p. 6). This sentiment runs throughout the sketch as Hawthorne frets about being a "real human being" and not a "forlorn survivor" (p. 45) of better, more human endeavors, about regaining his true self, "the literary man" (p. 40), about becoming "a citizen of somewhere else" (p. 47) than "The Custom-House" where he does not "share in the united efforts of mankind" (p. 41). Clearly Hawthorne feels that there is something wrong about life in a Custom-House. Not only is it shallow in its conceptions (and values) of life and history, it is dangerously enervating, rendering its employees wholly dependent upon externals. Once having relinquished himself "to lean upon the mighty arm of the Republic, his own proper strength departs from him" (p. 41), and Hawthorne is quick to point out that "Uncle Sam's gold . . . has, in this respect, a quality of enchantment like that of the Devil's wares" (p. 42). In fact, the only way out of all this is out of the Custom-House itself and the life and world it contains. Departing, Hawthorne leaves "few but aged men . . . with little to disturb them, except the periodical terrors of a "residential election" (p. 15). A telling phrase, it summons up that official conception of history that resides in the chronological portraits of Presidents, with its assuredness (a Great Man
Theory, really) that history is shaped, and therefore consciously shapable, which means among other things that what is most important about it is perceivable, knowable. It is this fairy tale Hawthorne and Ford have so consummately debunked.

This distrust is clear in *Liberty Valance* too, where "we find a regret for the past, a bitterness at the larger role of Washington [Stoddard is, after all, a politician], and a desolation over the neglect of older values." Put what we are seeing in both works is the awareness that the real issues of life have little to do with the public ones and are more likely than not at odds with them. Politics occupy both artists: it is political squabblings that oust Hawthorne from the Custom-House (just as his appointment was a political one in the first place), and the flashback in *Liberty Valance* ends with a circus-like political convention, replete with Wild West Show, while John Wayne's enormously austere Tom Doniphon walks bitterly and wearily away in front of an anti-Statehood poster, both now species near extinction. 'Tis into this circus of politics, the area of false and contrived appearances, that Stoddard is heading. Ford's assessment seems the darker of the two. Hawthorne, out of office, returns to his real self— the

29 Fitses, p. 13.
writer; but Stedward, even if he were to retire, has no
other self to return to--he has lived the legend too long
and fully. This is the meaning of our last shot of him on
the train, stricken and trapped, "the man who shot Liberty
Valance".

When Hawthorne's narrator comments that it is "as if
the facts had been entirely of [his] own invention" (p.36),
he is making us pivotally aware of the subjective nature
of his world and past. And if they are his own, he has a
connection and responsibility to them and their workings
that is radically different than if he were indeed the
mere transcriber he claimed to be earlier. This stripping
away to the essentials is paralleled (as it was in Liberty
Valance) by the movement through a series of interiors and
their attendant revelations. We have moved, with Hawthorne,
from the present Salem to the past one, from the main
floor of a Custom-House to the vacant second story, to an
inner room, to a recess in that room, to an interior of a
barrel, a packet, a dead man's skull, and now perhaps
strangest of all, we watch Hawthorne try to make sense of
it all in the haunted night-time of his study and parlour:
his attempts at perceiving the grand design.

The attempts affirm the subjective. Like Rimbaud's sys-
tematic derangement of the senses, Hawthorne attempts to
literally enter the objects of his meditations. It is not

58
only that he attempts to infuse the past, he allows the past to infuse him. It is an interpenetration, a mutual movement, and it is given a characteristically Hawthornian setting: the dissolve of a familiar room in moonlight where objects "seem to lose their actual substance, and become things of the intellect" (p. 36). The facts of daylight, then, undergo transmutation when the mind is cleared to have free reign with them, the opportunity to see them for what they are, freed from the illusions and surfaces of corporate reality. "Thus, therefore, the floor of our familiar room has become a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other" (p. 38). It is a world of momentary (and achieved) harmony, a world in balance, the outer image and the inner meaning combined. In the terms we have been using, it is an accord of history with legend, and the neutral ground on which it occurs is a privileged one. Privileged, in fact, as the alley in Tom Toniphon's flashback, for if Hawthorne's glimpse through the veils of truth and fancy occurs in a moonlit space, so does the gunfight in Liberty Valance (which itself is a strange thing), and Tom's revelation in the form of a flashback is also a meeting of the Actual and the Imaginary where "ghosts might enter" (p. 38). How much Liberty
Valance, "a film of darkness and interiors," seems to be "a repetition of all the gleam and shadow of the picture, with one remove further from the actual and nearer to the imaginative" (p. 39). A film on Hawthorne's floor.
The light and the dark then, not Stoddard's simple insistence (and belief) in opposites, willy-nilly, either/or. And, as we have seen, "Valance was not shot by the man of law, but by another primitive [and] the outlaw and his killer are not motivated by pure evil and pure good: Valance is the hired gun of the big ranch interests who are fighting statehood... and Doniphon saves Stoddard's life for Hallie's sake." Stoddard himself, by facing Liberty Valance in a gunfight (by, in fact, endorsing what Valance calls "Western law"), is hardly the agent of civilized values he claimed to be. Ford's own attitudes, the implications of his camera, layer this dilemma with even greater ambiguities. For Ford, Stoddard is as much a comical figure as a pitiable one, as much a man caught up in changes as the agent of that change. Through him Ford is both celebrating the triumph of communal impulses over savage ones, and lamenting the end of a way of life that produced the West and its attractions. The realization of

31 McRice and Wilmington, p. 101.
inevitability, that Tom's way of life (his world) must, by
necessity, have given way to Stoddard's, is tinged with
great sadness, and it is this double-perspective that is
the mark of Ford's genius—just as it was Hawthorne's.

At times the artists seem interchangeable. J. Donald
Crowley might just as easily have been talking about Ford
when he wrote that

Hawthorne tried to understand the past rather
than judge it. Instead of accepting either the
myth of progress or the myth of decline, he
tested the implications of both, ultimately
rejecting the optimistic notion of progress . . .
[the problem is one] of the direction of his-
tory. 32

This may well be the meaning of the train's arc reversing
itself at the end of Liberty Valance, a visual assessment
of the movement of history as being a cyclical one, one
that is constantly looping back across itself, as well as
representing Stoddard's (the official figure of history)
continual return to his past, his longing, subjectivity,
his looking back. This looking back is the artists' as
well. No director has roamed so long or wide across the
American past as John Ford, and no American writer (with
the possible exception of Faulkner) has given himself over
so completely to Clio as Hawthorne. So the false polarity

32
J. Donald Crowley, "Hawthorne Criticism and the Re-
turn to History," Studies in the Novel (Spring 1974), 221.
of light and dark comes to represent (among other things) the false polarity of past and present. And if, as Fogle claims, "The dark is better than the light," it is because "All action is imperfection, and all plots are about something gone wrong, set over against a norm of rightness by which we judge them." It is also better since it more appropriately houses a conception of life and history which is, simply, a dark vision, a tragic one. It welos tone and mood to meaning, raises setting (mise en scene) to a participant level, and invests the characters with a stately and tragic stature. Fogle is again on the mark when he says that "one grasps [Hawthorne, but Ford just as well] wholly only by observing his characters, his settings, the patterns of his diction, the trencs of his imagery, the concrete mechanics of telling a story." It might be a good time now to take a closer look at the characters.

The characters do not seem to me to be extensions of their settings so much as expressions of them, and the fundamental differences between Valence and Doniphon preclude the idea of simple determinism (as do the differ-

33 Fogle, p. 221.

34 Ibid., p. 5.
ences between the Inspector and the Collector). Like everything else in the works, the characters have their ambiguities. Just as they are connected to their settings, the characters seem to obey certain structural imperatives, and the sort of historical triangulation that informs the settings informs them as well. In the one work we have Shinbone, Historical Shinbone, and Doniphon's Shinbone; in the other we have Salem, Historical Salem, and Poe's Salem. Hawthorne's narrator's relationship to his contemporaries and his past parallels Stoddard's, and further triangles can be found throughout for it is the triangle, the third option, the introduction of the observer, that transcends the binary configuration: the either/or. The triangle has other virtues as well. For one it is not linear, and is therefore not a figure of cause and effect. (Squares are called squares for good reason.) In fact, its lines of force can travel in different directions simultaneously, arriving at a variety of combinations, possibilities—and all this in a form which is dynamic and yet can be exquisitely symmetrical at the same time. Look here:
The enormity of time this can involve becomes clear when we consider that there is yet a final triangle—the one comprised of artist, work, and audience.

Triangulation, we may recall, is a means of plotting an object in time and space. Andrew Sarris may have this in mind when he says that

The heroic postures of Wayne, Stewart and Marvin form a triangle in time. The conflicting angles, the contrasting plays of light and shadow, the unified rituals of gestures and movements and, above all, Ford's gift of sustained contemplation produce intellectual repercussions backwards and forwards across the work. 35

The moment is central and, because of that, seems eternal. (An illusion in keeping with film, which is itself an illusion: a series of stills [frozen moments] which take on the illusion of movement, of life.) In the projector of any mind, when we appropriate the work, view it at our own speed, the pace of our own comprehension of it, such moments become enormous, and it is upon them that we fasten meaning. In much the same way we may stop to linger over what we consider to be a central passage, and looking up from the page see some suspended animates of Hawthorne's Salem before us. Just as the characters and the works they are part of took up space before their artists, they now take up space before their audiences. At some point the

35 Sarris, p. 102.
work becomes not only pivotal, but mutual as well. They
(the works) become as important for us as they were for
their creators. When that happens, some of this responsi-
bility I have been talking about becomes the audience's.
Simply put, each of us has his own Liberty Valance, as
subjective as Ford's own.

What I am trying to convey here is the idea of response
transcending itself into the idea of judgment (replete
with its moral connotations). For a person who is himself
haunted by these phantoms, their meaning becomes one
against which his own meanings may be understood. Certain-
ly there is more to Tom Doniphon than to the strangers who
surround us in the dark of the movie house, no matter how
much more corporeal they are. Hawthorne recognizes this re-
lationship between artist and audience when he says that
"the author addresses . . . the few who will understand
him, better than most of his schoolmates and lifemates."
(p. 5), and that "thoughts are frozen and utterance be-
numbed, unless the speaker stand in some true relation
with his audience" (p. 6). This is something more than
imitative form. In "The Custom-House" it is the means by
which the man whose "official ancestor" is Hawthorne par-
ticipates directly in the lineage of Hawthorne's narrator
from Surveyor Pue; for the viewer of Liberty Valance it is
the incorporation of the spirit of Tom Doniphon into the
very quick of his life. In either work it is to bring the past into whatever present we encounter it in, for regardless of its tense a work of art is always encountered in our present. Whenever we open "The Custom-House" Hawthorne's narrator will be there apologizing for his intrusion; whenever we watch the second sunfight scene in Liberty Valance Tom's rifle will always be transcribing its arc (each point on its parabola belonging, like Zeno's arrow, to a separate frame) across the legendary action before it. That arc becomes indelible (and suspended) in the mind as on the screen. Just as we hold it (and its figures) there in our endless enchantment, we are reminded that Hawthorne, like Ford, "holds his characters to the highest standards, for he literally brings them to judgment at the bar of eternity." History becomes eternal, then, because it is endlessly occurring, and our subsequently endless attempts to perceive its design are the pattern of our judgments upon it.

The question of reliability concerning the narrators is a legitimate one. As characters themselves, and characters in works which are this subjective, we must be attentive to their relationships to their stories, the light and tone in which they render them--meanings they may be

Fogle, p. 4.
imposing upon their texts. The question here is what information, if any, is ascribable to the artists themselves, do they appear? If we can discern their presence we can then more accurately judge the voice of the narrators.

Throughout my discussion of "The Custom-House" I have been freely interchanging the terms Hawthorne, Hawthorne's narrator, and Hawthorne as narrator since it seems self-evident that their identity is that entwined. The narrator is more a persona than a character, more a stance or posture Hawthorne assumes in order to achieve the distance he requires to tell his story. Problems of reliability seem to be more properly belonging to The Scarlet Letter than "The Custom-House," although I think that understanding the voice of "The Custom-House" is imperative to any real investigation of narrative voice in the romance. Simply put, "The Custom-House" being a sketch does not present us with the problems and complexities that a novel does. Hawthorne's prejudices are more accessible, the characters more like furniture. Liberty Valance is another matter. Although in both works we have the narrators as content as well as context, the complexity and extent of authorial use of narrator are more apparent in the film. I have already suggested that Ford pokes fun at Stoddard and sees him as historical effect as opposed to historical cause.
Ford also sees Valance in a context that Stoddard does not, and Ford sees Doniphon with a compassion and complexity that Stoddard does not seem capable of. There is a major sequence in the film's heart where Stoddard is not present, and the understanding and structure there seem most certainly to be Ford's. If this is true, we discover a construction (and conception) surrounding Stoddard's own, one that places Stoddard in a very rigorous frame of context. Part of this frame is an awareness that Stoddard "was not the prime mover, but merely a catalyst for inevitable historical forces; the Old West destroyed itself to make way for him and the way of life he represents—law, book learning, progress." 37

I am referring to the construction of the film in the scenes immediately preceding and following the first version of the gunfight. It seems to me that the layering and juxtaposition of viewpoints and their meanings are particularly rich here. First of all, on the structural level the scenes in question do, literally, surround the gunfight, and are the only such scenes in the film. This is Stoddard's gunfight, the fight that history records. To have it surrounded by two rather substantial episodes in which Stoddard is absent is to (even at this point in the

37 McRide and Wilmington, p. 176.
film before the truth is known. The subjective account within the more objective perimeters of Ford's vision. Stoddard could easily have learned what happened in either sequence, but we aren't told so (or how) and the effect is to ascribe these scenes to a more omniscient, all-encompassing narrator--Ford. This is especially true for the second sequence.

The first sequence concerns Lutton Peabody, publisher and founder, among other things ("I also sweep out the place"), of The Shinbone Star. Having exercised his credit at the Mexican cantina, Peabody returns to his office to beam about his headline proclaiming the defeat (in the paper, DEFETED; "The unsteady hand betrays") of Liberty Valance in the local selection of delegates to the territorial convention concerning statehood. After a marvellous Hamlet-like soliloquy concerning courage as a complication to mortality (with empty jug as skull), he becomes aware of other presences in the room. It is Liberty Valance and his goons, who proceed to smash the office and, in a chilling scene, apparently beat Peabody to death: the camera on a sadistic and demented Valance whipping a prone Peabody to the accompaniment of Strother Martin's maniacal giggling. Stoddard is among the first to find Peabody, and is so enraged that he finally accepts what has been ordained all along, the head-to-head confrontation with Lib-
enery Valance. If this scene is indeed an objective one (attributable to Ford), then what the structure is telling us is that Stoddard is reacting to real, and not supposed, historical and social forces. Like the rest of Ford's mature work, it is a statement made with great simplicity, never interfering with the story itself. This is not Stoddard as "Pilgrim" on an imagined crusade; this is a man in a place reacting to the immediate realities which surround him. The inevitability of the gunfight becomes an inevitability of history, not of myth.

The sequence following the gunfight centers on Tom Doniphon, and is virtually our last look at him in this time frame. He first appears in the doorway of the Ericsons' kitchen to sorrowfully confirm another certainty, Hallie's cradling of Stoddard. "I'll be around," he says, and moves back out through the frame of the door much as Ethan Edwards had walked back out into the desert to wander between the winds at the end of The Searchers. We pick him up next at the bar, truculently trying to buy a drink for Pompey. Behind him Strother Martin and Lee Van Cleef are trying to organize a mob to hang Stoddard. Tom knocks them both senseless, snatches a bottle and leaves, roaring drunk, for home. The sadness here is that what tenuous connections Tom had to home were through Hallie and he has just lost her. (When Stoddard leaves the territorial
convention he says to Tom, "I'm going home" and we wonder where home is. Both are dispossessed in a sense, Tom losing his home and Stoddard living in a kind of orbiting limbo--Shinbone has been lost by them both. He vents his anger and despair by setting fire to the back-room he has been building for Hallie and is momentarily caught in the conflagration as the whole house goes up in flames. Pompey carries him down to the buckboard and our last sight of him is lying there (helpless as Stoddard was at the beginning of the film, and in a sense as dead as Liberty Valance, who was carried out of town in one), watching as Pompey saves the horses. It is a sequence of great power, not the least of which is Tom's fall from grace. Clearly, Ford feels the nobility of this character and his sympathies are with him. The objectivity here, what I am calling objectivity, serves various functions. For one, it gives us distance from Tom which somehow seems to be his distance, and the fact that he has taken his pain into privacy before revealing it further ennobles him; for another, it gives Ford the opportunity to fully respond to Tom and his dilemma. It is Ford who sees Tom as a heroic figure, as a tragic hero, Ford's camera which has enlarged him throughout the entire film, Ford who is with him in defeat, Ford who pays homage to the man who shot Liberty Valance. The next time we see Tom is when he shows up at the territori-
al convention, and we have the feeling that he has just been drifting aimlessly, lost, that he has indeed been around.

Surrounding the gunfight with the third person instead of the first places it in a vortex of forces, complexities, complicities. It enlarges. All of this will be essentialized by Ford in Tom's flashback, will come down to one station of the camera in the second version of the gunfight when the truth is revealed and "fact and fancy, halfway meeting, interpenetrate, and form one seamless whole."

Wayne embodies the brutal, implacable order of the West less with personal flair than with archetypal endurance.

—Confessions of a Cultist

Truth of it is he looks like a hero, even here beyond his prime. He moves like an athlete, like someone comfortable in his body (it's roomy enough), and he moves with an economy of effort like someone who has been through all of this before and knows just how much energy it will take, and how best to use it. There is a wry, amused stoicism to the face which perfectly balances the sensualism of the body. And there is space. Always there is space around him as if he were still bigger than he looks.
The conflict in *Liberty Valance* is as much between reality and symbol, truth and legend, memory and conscience, form and substance, as among the archetypal characters who enact it.

---John Ford

The disturbed eyes rise,
furtive, foiled, dissatisfied
from meditation on the true
and insignificant.
---Hawthorne

The film on Hawthorne's floor is continuous. Anytime we roll back the carpet, like the curtains before a movie screen, it is there and we have the vertiginous sense of actually walking upon the past, of being in a sense suspended in the suddenly insubstantial present. For Hawthorne, "the past was not dead and, still more important, Surveyor Pue was not dead, for the secret of his continued existence, as Hawthorne learned, resided in his devotion to a living past." Tom Louniopon is not dead either. Hawthorne, in resurrecting his Surveyor, and Ford, in never looking in Tom's coffin, are saying the same thing.

It is telling that the Custom-House only begins to make sense for Hawthorne when he looks back upon it, as if only

the past were truly perceivable, that the agencies of time sorted through the varieties of the present, that a sediment gradually collected itself into discernible layers. The irony is that the whole meaning of "The Custom-House" refutes such a view: the past, by being alive, by being, in effect, eternally present, is open to the freshness of discovery the same way that the present is (and one of the discoveries of the present is the past). Hawthorne's assertion that the figures of the Custom-House, "those venerable personages [were] but shadows in my mind; white-headed and wrinkled images, which my fancy used" (p. 47), is an assertion suspiciously close to his initial one concerning Poe's letters: "as if the facts had been ... my own invention" (p. 36). The intermingling is absolute, with the actual anchoring the imaginary, while the imaginary fuses the actual with meaning; with the past giving birth to the present, and the present modifying and refining the meaning of the past. Perhaps most strangely of all it is the fusion and inseparability of history and legend. Like Ford, Hawthorne appears to be saying that they are ultimately the same thing. What is most perplexing about this is that Hawthorne and his narrator (like Ransom Stoddard, like Ford himself doing penance for celebrating the myth: "I've killed more Indians then Custer, Peacher and Chivington put together") may well feel guilt for a legend
and not an actuality, a responsibility for a past which is largely an invented one. The artists bridge this problem by bridging the differences, by giving us all of it, fact and fancy and their incredibly prolific variations.

In Liberty Valance, Andrew Sarris sees "the spiritual submission of the living to memory, tradition and even habit," but goes on to observe that "repentance for past sins is hardly the same thing as repudiation of history." If history is, in effect, invented, it is invented by everyone—-the invention by no means absolves. If anything, invention is an imaginative act, not a passive acceptance, and it links us more vitally, by being such, with the past. After all, in the Christian canon a transgression of thought is just as sinful as a transgression of action. On the other side of the coin, fancy, the imagination, being finally human expressions, are capable in a sense of redeeming history: "a heart and sensibilities of human tenderness to the forms which fancy summons up" (p. 39).

So, then, "The Custom-House" is about the imaginary documentation of an actual time written in the uncertain actualities of the present. Hawthorne purports to discover the existence of an actual person, Hester Prynne, and then

40 Sarris, p. 58.
undermines the official or actual conception of her life through the discovery of her hidden life, the imaginary equivalent, the flip-side. It is a construction of mirrors, each one claiming to hold the primary reflection, the absolute point of demarcation. Hawthorne himself might ask if a sight viewed in a mirror has any less reality than a sight viewed in a window. "The purpose of playing," Hamlet has already told us, "is to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature," and the mirrors go back, like human consciousness itself, to "the head of the past."

Ford is no less complex. Many critics have floundered on a film of such seemingly divided loyalties, "the profound contradiction of a film with, in V. P. Perkins' words, 'a story which celebrates the submission of the Old West to the rule of law and order, and a style which evokes nostalgia for the primitive nobility of its untamed frontiers'," a film which mourns the loss of a way of life which makes way for the community Ford has always championed. Setting to the contrary, the farewells of Tom

41 Hamlet III. ii.


43 McPride and Wilmington, p. 182.
Lciphon and Tom Joad seem to imply that Shinbone follows the dust-bowl, that the community of Ford's vision had already been scattered across hostile ground. This makes Shinbone a last out-post, one of the last out-posts, of the Fordian world. And it is lost. Liberty Valance, then, is also about the dissolution of values in the modern world, a world where the replacement of morality by expediency is announced by a leeringly officious Judson Pratt.

Joseph McBride and Michael Wilmington provide us with another connection between the two artists by their fortuitous use of the word essay:

"Ford is not merely toying with the past; like Stoddard, he is attempting to perceive in it a grand design. What Ford is doing in his 'essay' . . . is using a set of historical and formal assumptions as a departure point for a revaluation of the Western Myth."

In like fashion, Hawthorne had a century earlier used his "essay", "The Custom-House," as a departure point for a revaluation of an earlier frontier, 17th-century Salem's. They both used the myths of the past as well as the official versions of it, playing upon their audience's expectations, its own conception of a past shaped by myth. Puritan New England had by the 19th century calcified into a set of symbols and responses, and the Western, of all the

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McBride and Wilmington, p. 160.
forms of the cinema, comes to us most replete with its iconography. It may be the final irony of these two works that they have so seminally ordered their myths as to have redefined them. And, because of that centrality, they have become not only among the last, but among the most endurable statements in the myths. By trying to remove a myth, they have wound up replacing it, and any subsequent artist who would work in either terrain must work in acknowledgement of them. As Edward H. Davidson put it, "The Scarlet Letter, even as it distorts history, is still the accomplishment of history." This may be nothing more than another way of saying that the works themselves have become legendary.

I don't think either Hawthorne or Ford set out to distort history, but rather to redefine it, synthesize its antimonies. In fact, I would imagine that both of them saw official history to be a distortion in need of correction. This unifying impulse seems self-evident in the works themselves since both contain within them both the actual and the imaginary, the works a Gestalt that are more sizable because of it. Carleton Young may claim that in the West when the legend become fact one prints the legend, but

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Ford prints them both: the lie, and the lie become fact, become history. Like Hawthorne, he confirms both the emotional and the historical reality, nourishing both the head and the heart.

By grounding their visions in such mythic settings, such quintessentially American locales, both "The Custom-House" and The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance address themselves not only to isolated examples or particulars of the past, but rather embody the whole movement of a culture and its ideal, from its inception in the Manichean wilderness of Puritan New England to its dissolution with the train at the end of Liberty Valance moving into the future, but, like Hawthorne's Celestial Railroad, really heading for hell, for the 20th century. This is the final present, ourselves and the gestures that still reverberate towards us into the "antiquity of days to come" (p. 47) where the future itself is nostalgia.
PIBLOGRAPHY


Robert Gibb was born on September 5, 1946, in the general confines and urban sprawl of Pittsburgh, PA, to Robert James and Helen Catherine Gibb. He graduated from Munhall Senior High School in 1964, Kutztown State College in 1971, and the University of Massachusetts in 1974, with a high-school diploma, a B.F.A. in Painting, and a M.F.A. in Painting, respectively. He taught (with a T.A.) for two years in Massachusetts; and for one year at the Baum School in Allentown, PA. Since September 1976, he has been a teaching assistant in the English Department at Lehigh University. His paintings are in Far Gallery, NY, poems have appeared widely over the past several years, and a chapbook, WHALESONGS, was published in 1976 by Turkey Press, Providence, RI.