



Hollywood and the  
American Historical Film

*Edited by*

J.E. SMYTH

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## Vico's Age of Heroes and the Age of Men in John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*<sup>1</sup>

Mark W. Roche and Vittorio Hösle

Vico, the father of historicism, discovered that the nature of man changes: the archaic man feels, think, acts in a way completely different from modern man. In Vico's scheme of the necessary evolution of every culture, three phases are distinguished: the age of gods, the age of heroes, and the age of men. The age of gods is characterized by a theocratic government: it is anterior to any differentiation of the various aspects of culture such as religion, politics, or art. The age of heroes, on the other hand, is dominated by the conflict between classes, the heroes and the plebeians. This age does not yet have a state: therefore, force and violence reign. The right of the stronger is the main ground of legitimacy. Two types of relations are characteristic of this age: the relation between enemies who fight each other, risking their own lives and those of their combatants, and the relation between master and servant. The duel, a fight between two heroes accompanied by their servants, is *the* symbolic action of the heroic age. In it the value of a person is proved, even constituted. Relations toward wives in the age of heroes are clearly asymmetric: women are not yet recognized as having the same human nature as men. "Love of ease, tenderness toward children, love of women, and desire of life" are alien to the heroes, so Vico once sums up his view of the heroic age.<sup>2</sup>

The central characteristic of the age of men is the rule of law based on reason, no longer on force. A monarchical or democratic state replaces the aristocracy of the heroes. The principal equality of all human beings is recognized in the age of men. Not only within the state, but also within the family, relations tend to become more symmetric. The power of the word contributes to this transition: pre-verbal expressions, and later poetry, are replaced by oratory.

Very important in this context is alphabetization. Whereas in the age of heroes only very few persons can write, the age of men is based on almost universal literacy, potentially on general education. The passionate impulses of the heroes weaken more and more and are replaced by calculating intellect. With the process of rationalization a depersonalization takes place: the great individual is no longer necessary; the due procedure of the institutions characteristic of the age of men now guarantees the order without which societies cannot survive.

In Vico's reconstruction of this transition, two aspects are especially noteworthy. First, the absolute necessity he ascribes to it: the speed with which cultures evolve is not everywhere the same, but the progress toward rationalization is unavoidable. It is not special individuals who bring the change about—it is the law of development, which brings individuals forth who then realize the changes. Vico does not believe (as Hegel or Carlyle does) in historic individuals; history is for him an apersonal power that moves in an irreversible way toward rationalization. While the persons who act for the change may view themselves as independent agents, they are in truth driven by the tendency of the development, which transcends their particular aims. The end result of history is something nobody wanted or expected. In this heterogenesis of the ends, Vico sees the expression of what he calls divine providence.

Second, Vico's attitude toward this process is deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, he sees in the process of rationalization something *morally* necessary. The age of heroes is characterized by violence and inequality, and the overcoming of both cannot be praised enough. As a philosopher, Vico is furthermore convinced that the reflexive attitude toward oneself and one's history, as it can be achieved only in the age of men, has a higher intrinsic value than the pre-reflexive mind of the age of heroes. On the other hand, in an era dominated by the belief in progress and enlightenment, Vico was one of the first to see how much is lost in this transition. The age of rationalization is also an age of dis-enchantment (to use Max Weber's term). The unity of the archaic mind breaks, the different subsystems of culture become autonomous, it is no longer possible to be a universal person. The necessity to risk and to sacrifice one's life—so characteristic of the age of heroes—disappearing, a great source of morality vanishes. By fighting for his life, the hero acquired a depth that is missed in representatives of the age of men. Rationalization also destroys the powers of fantasy and creativity. The age of men necessarily culminates in what Vico calls the "barbarism of reflection," (1106) and empty reasoning that has lost any contact to substantial contents, a strategic attitude toward

fellow human beings, a lack of roots and traditions and therefore of emotional richness. One aspect of the barbarism of reflection is the spreading of lying. Whereas the hero is constitutionally unable to say something different from what he thinks, the age of men is—at least, in its late phase—characterized by a schism between the internal and the external. According to Vico, the barbarism of reason destroys a culture, and thus the cycle of the three ages begins again.

Vico's theory of culture is one of the richest models for understanding human history, although Vico ignores several aspects. He neglects, for example, the differences between the cycles; in particular, he could not yet grasp the importance of the Industrial Revolution in changing the mind and soul of modern man. These changes in the United States have been more incisive than elsewhere for two reasons. First, the new continent allowed for a fresh beginning; modern capitalism and modern industry could develop more quickly than in Europe, where certain feudal bonds limited the changes. Second, America experienced something that in Europe had become impossible centuries ago: the state of nature which existed at the Great Frontier. The struggle against nature as well as against the archaic cultures of the Indians constitutes the "wilderness" that forms the background of almost all Westerns. Whereas the wars in Europe since the late Middle Ages had been between civilized powers, the Indians represented something radically different, and the necessity of defending oneself against them held alive in the soul of the Westerners moments that are themselves archaic. The frontier situation is characterized by an intrinsic tension: it represented a mentality more archaic than in Europe and at the same time worked toward a process of modernization much more radically than in Europe. The transition between the age of heroes and the age of men, which in Europe lasted several centuries, was concentrated in the United States in a few decades: one generation has been able to witness this transition.

John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) is the greatest film about this transition. In a sense, the film consummates the Western: in it a central aspect, perhaps *the* central aspect, of the genre has been fulfilled; after it, another Western is scarcely conceivable. Like Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus* or Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* is a work manifestly written by an old man. The film is rich with allusions to Ford's earlier work, which effectively renders the film a summary of the Western tradition.<sup>3</sup>

Ford was one of Hollywood's most eminent directors, having developed a reputation for his striking use of visual images, his masterful stories, and his explorations of the American spirit. A recipi-

ent of four Academy Awards for direction, Ford is most famous for his portrayals of moral conflict on the American frontier, including such works as *Stagecoach* (1939), *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), *My Darling Clementine* (1946), *Fort Apache* (1948), *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), *Wagonmaster* (1950), *Rio Grande* (1950), *The Searchers* (1956), and *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964). *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* was one of Ford's later films. Not insignificantly, the two main actors were also nearing the end of their careers. The film deals with the death of a man, which represents at the same time the death of a culture; and it contains implicit reflections on the role of art in a world that has been radically transformed.

The narrative structure of the film consists of a short frame story. Senator Ransom Stoddard and his wife, Hallie, arrive in Shinbone for the funeral of a virtually forgotten man, Tom Doniphon. The inner narrative and greater part of the film consists of the Senator's confession, a flashback that commences with young Ransie's stagecoach journey to Shinbone. Liberty Valance and his henchmen rob the stagecoach; teaching the idealistic Ransie a lesson in "Western law," Valance brutally flogs Ransie and rips apart his law books. Tom Doniphon finds Ransie and brings him into town, where he is cared for by Hallie, Tom's "girl." When Ransie announces his intention to bring justice to the territories, Tom, "the toughest man south of the picket wire," instructs him that the only way to challenge Valance is with force. Because Ransie has no money, he pays for his meals and lodging by washing dishes, but he also starts a school, teaching reading and writing as well as civics to the townsfolk, including Hallie and Tom's black servant, Pompey.

Hired by cattle interests, Liberty Valance uses violence in his efforts to keep the territory an open range. Dutton Peabody, founder and editor of the *Shinbone Star*, writes a story about Valance's murderous deeds and is later beaten for doing so. After Ransie is elected, along with Peabody, as one of the local delegates to the territorial convention for statehood, Valance orders him to leave town or face him in a shoot-out. Ransie meets Valance on the street, is shot in the arm, and with the gun in his left hand fires at Valance, who drops dead. After the duel, Tom sees Hallie embrace Ransie and grasps that Hallie, who had been torn between Tom and Ransie, has chosen Ransie. Tom gets drunk and burns down the house he had been building for her. When Ransie doubts his future as a politician because he has qualms over his having "killed a man," Tom informs him—in a flashback within a flashback—of the truth. Hiding in the shadows, Tom fired the shot that killed Valance (Illustration 7:1).



Illustration 7.1 The unacknowledged view of the legend: *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) © Paramount Pictures Corporation/John Ford Productions

A renewed Ranse helps win statehood and moves on to greatness as a politician. The newspaper editor, who elicited the story by relentlessly asking why the Senator had come to a forgotten man's funeral, decides not to print it: "This is the West, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend." The initial frame, which began with the train's arrival in Shinbone, is mirrored by the final frame, as Ranse and Hallie ride the train back to Washington. Ranse's deception is underscored in this final scene: the conductor accompanies his efforts to please the Senator with the words, "Nothing's too good for the man who shot Liberty Valance." The film closes with the melancholic faces of the two spouses and a final shot of the train.

The Senator's narrative evokes an age the character of which has passed away forever, only to be sealed with the death of Tom Doniphon. A differentiated attitude toward this period dominates the film. While the young Ransom is inspired by the vision of a better future, the dominant mood of the old Senator is a mourning of the past. *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* can be contrasted with that of a work which deals with a similar problem, the *Oresteia*. Aeschylus's trilogy also treats the transformation of violence to law and order, from passion to reason, from vengeance to statehood. A process of rationalization that radically transformed a culture is the subject of both artworks, but the evaluation is different. Whereas Aeschylus sees only

the positive in the process, Ford's attitude is as ambivalent as that of Vico. The differences in the evaluation result obviously from differences in the two transitions; in the early fifth century BC none of the dangers of hyper-rationalization was visible; the negative side-effects of the Industrial Revolution, on the other hand, have escaped very few of this century's great artists. *The Eumenides* does not simply end with the triumph of the forces of law and rationality over those of vengeance and blood; the drama culminates in the integration of the Eumenides into the political and religious system of Athens. The ancient rationality acknowledges being rooted in the pre-logical; it takes strength from the emotional powers, which are not excluded, but recognized as a necessary moment of every culture. This process of recognition occurred in Greek culture (in a certain sense, it was its essence); therefore, the poet could mirror the reality of his culture and celebrate it in a temporal attitude that was clearly related to the present.

The essence of modernity, on the other hand, is the rash elimination of the pre-rational, the quick triumph of restricted technical and functional rationality over the deeper emotional needs of the human soul. Since the result is not an equilibrate synthesis of passions and reason, past and present are divided by a deep gap, and the poet can no longer identify with the present, but has to recall the past *against* the tendencies of his own time. This leads to the elegiac character of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*: recollection is the main mood of the film. But it is the recollection of a time which, at least for Ransom Stoddard, was deeply characterized by the hope for a better future.<sup>4</sup> Ransom never relates in an unproblematic way toward his present; immediacy in relating to the present can be ascribed only to Tom Doniphon.

The lack of a synthesis in modern culture deprives art of the possibility of identifying with its own time. This means that it divests the artist of one of the most important sources of happiness accessible to humans: the art of modernity is no longer in harmony with its culture. This disharmony, however, gives art a special function, which was alien to a work like the *Oresteia*. It has to hold alive something which, in the real world, has disappeared. It has, therefore, a particular responsibility toward the past. Against public opinion, Ford reminds us who *really* shot Liberty Valance; he gives us both legend and reality. He preserves thereby a heroic virtue: faithfulness, understood here as faithfulness toward the truth and the past. Ford's film has a vindicating function—a function which has become necessary because the age of men has forgotten the heroes without whom it could not have succeeded.

Ford's ambivalence toward the age of heroes is shown by his introduction of two representatives: a good hero and an evil one, Tom Doniphon and Liberty Valance. The moral difference between them is the reason for their conflict; that they are two aspects of the same culture, on the other hand, links their fates together. Tom has an important social function as long as Liberty Valance lives; with Liberty's death he becomes, in a sense, superfluous. The killing of Liberty Valance would have had bad consequences for Tom, even if his action had not meant the loss of Hallie, and the fact that it triggers his personal catastrophe is only an intensification of the intrinsic problem of the good hero: in order to be himself, the hero needs something evil he can negate. The fact that, in the night after the duel, both the corpse of Liberty Valance and the body of Tom Doniphon are thrown on a buckboard expresses in a symbolic way the link between the two.

As toward the heroes, so toward Ranse the attitude of Ford is deeply ambivalent. Surely, there are few doubts about his being a positive figure. In Ranse's classroom we see young and old, male and female, whites and blacks, learning that "all men are created equal" and that, in the United States, power is determined not by the individual's gun but by the voting electorate. Together with the town's other intellectual, Dutton Peabody, Ranse works to bring statehood to the territories; justice, education, and progress to the people; and protection from violence. Beyond his good intentions, the young lawyer risks his life several times and can therefore claim a certain heroic attitude. But the hero is not only willing to fight evil—he is, at least in the majority of cases, also successful. Ranse would never have been able to get rid of Liberty Valance by himself (the fact that after the duel Ranse actually believes he shot Valance evidences an unrealistic and somewhat vain self-perception), and although Ranse's act of risking his life gives him a high moral value, it doesn't yet make him a hero. His weakness is apparent not only in his inability to conquer Liberty Valance, but also, symbolically, in his unmanly wearing of an apron (even to the gunfight) and his waiting on tables.

The young teacher's patronizing attitude toward his class is especially disturbing, as he insists on equality. When Tom's black servant Pompey forgets the words "all men are created equal," Ranse comments that many people forget that line. Ranse is cleverly ironic toward racists, but the text is also ironic toward Ranse, who is patronizing toward Pompey.<sup>5</sup> Implicitly, Ranse shows that in the new culture differences will remain—based, however, on education, not force. The question will no longer be who is quicker at shooting, but who is better at speaking. The intellectual superiority his knowledge of writing and

reading give him with regard to most inhabitants of Shinbone (Hallie is not yet literate when he arrives, and Tom reads with obvious difficulties) will become the ground of a new inequality, the overcoming of which had been the promise of the age of men. Ranse corrects the English not only of Pompey, but also of Hallie; and the condescension that characterizes the young lawyer becomes even more pronounced in the old Senator (think of the scene when he gives Pompey money). Only by way of Hallie's poetic gesture of putting the cactus rose on Tom's coffin does the Senator grasp how much has been lost in the passage to the age of men; he recognizes how deeply the world of men, which he helped to bring about, differs from the ideals of his youth and how little right he had to feel superior to the survivors of the earlier age.

"You talk too much, think too much," Tom says to Ranse in the crucial scene when he informs him about the true identity of the person who shot Liberty Valance. Ranse, indeed, lacks the sense for preverbal communication which both Hallie and Tom share. When Tom brings Ranse to his ranch and tells him to take a look, he expects Ranse to grasp his meaning, but, for Ranse, Tom must spell it out in words. Symptomatically, Ranse pays his tribute to Tom by making a long speech to the press, while Hallie puts the cactus rose on the coffin. When Ranse wonders whether he should talk with the journalists, Hallie doesn't speak, she only nods her head. In the last scene in the train, very few words are spoken between the spouses, and the Senator, rather than answering Hallie's question, as to whether he is proud about the transformation of the wilderness into a garden, instead asks her whether she put the cactus rose on the coffin. By asking his question, Ranse implies that Hallie's comment lacks sincerity. She has shown by her deed that the cactus rose means—if not more—at least as much to her as the real roses which in the meantime she must have gotten to know.

The adequate gesture for depicting the passage from the age of heroes to the age of men is not literature, but film, for the passage has also to do with the transition from non-verbal to verbal communication, and only film can mirror both. The filmmaker Ford, not being a novelist, keeps alive the idea, forgotten in the age of men, that some dimensions between human beings transcend words. The feeling that words cannot convey the essential meaning becomes even stronger when the railway conductor speaks with the Senator. His words lack the depth of Hallie's glances; and, even worse, they end with a false statement. Not only is the Senator disturbed by the fact that the merit of another person is ascribed to him (he cannot, for example, light



his pipe), he finally grasps that not only his existence, but also the age of men as a whole is based on a lie.<sup>6</sup> The men of this age have forgotten to whom the age owes its existence; the civilizing hero in the modern world is not acknowledged in the way the Eumenides are in the *Oresteia*; and therefore the last image and the first are of the train, that impersonal power of modernization which moves history forward and deprives humankind more and more of the moral and emotional richness of the age of heroes.

Ford's ambivalence toward the characters, his sense of their greatness and limits, is enriched by structures of recognition between the characters, which contain not only tragic but also reconciliatory moments. The film suggests a "unity" of Tom and Ranse. In fact, the title contains the conflict (or opposition) as unified. *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* is at once realistic or literal (Tom did, in fact, shoot Liberty Valance) and figurative or representational (to the populace, it was the Senator who shot Liberty Valance).<sup>7</sup> In this non-literal meaning, we see the moment of abstraction or representation which belongs to the spirit. If in the primary content of the film the two characters are opposed, the title unites them, as does a close reading.

Tom and Ranse do not merely compete with one another; each figure indirectly recognizes the value of the other. Tom shoots Liberty Valance, thus giving up the West and making possible the paradigm shift toward the new era of justice. The fact that Tom does not consciously give up the West (he later states: "I wish I hadn't" [saved Ranse]) does not undermine his role in this process; on the contrary, it only reinforces for us the applicability of Vico's thought to the film. As in Vico's theory of divine providence, the end of history transcends the willing of its agents. Tom calls the political meeting to order, arranges that Ranse run it, and seconds the nomination of Ranse for representative ("not only because he knows the law but because he throws a good punch"). Tom recognizes the validity of Ranse as a representative partly because he uses force, a mode privileged and acknowledged by heroes. Further, Tom keeps the meeting democratic (with a display of power). In the period of transition, force and representation are not so easily separated. Knowing that "votes won't stand up against guns," Tom makes sure that votes stand up *with* guns.

Ranse succeeds only as a hero, as the man who shot Liberty Valance; that is, as Tom Doniphon. Yet, Ranse himself shows glimmers of heroism to the extent that he asserts that nobody fights his battles for him, slugs Tom, and, most importantly, is willing to put his life on the line with Liberty Valance. Ranse must accommodate himself to the age of heroes. Tom and Ranse each move into the other's realm—even

when they are not fully at home there: as when Tom reads aloud Ranse's sign, or Ranse attempts to learn how to shoot. Each mirrors the tension of the two poles within himself. Ranse succeeds as a politician partly because he is a thinker and a good representative, but he is a representative also because he has the charisma associated with power and the law of nature. This appearance of heroism is necessary for the transition to statehood. The populace admires Ranse because he appears to be a synthesis of the two worlds. Ranse, however, does not kill Liberty Valance; Tom does. Ranse is too ineffective, but this very ineffectiveness is a further presupposition for the development of civilization. If Ranse had killed Liberty, he might not have succeeded as a man of justice, a herald of the new order. Shooting Liberty Valance would have upheld the law of power. Moreover, Ranse would have been incapacitated by pains of conscience, as we see at the territorial convention.

In his confession, Ranse would reveal the truth about himself and Tom; he would erase the tragic structure of his life, the fact that, though he has not built his life on killing a man, he has built it on a lie. In the West, however, "legend" triumphs over "fact," and the film closes with the Senator being heralded not for his government service but for his supposedly having shot Liberty Valance; that is, for the old morality, which lives on in the people and which the Senator has worked to replace. The structure is ironic, for Ranse has been successful in his overarching goal of bringing democracy and good government to his people. But he is recognized not for his democratic service but for the old morality to which he owes his success and which he has knowingly worked to replace. We recognize in Ranse's facial expressions a certain sadness at his having used this lie, but Ranse never expressly regrets his duplicity. This suggests, first, that he may not be fully aware of his Machiavellian actions and, second, that his awareness—expressed only in glances—is a throwback to an earlier age of greatness. Only as a nonverbal person, a hero, does Ranse come to full recognition of the crisis of his identity and the transgression of justice contained in his lie. In allowing Tom's actions to be ascribed to him, the Senator is no longer free to be fully himself. Ranse must not only renounce the truth, he must relinquish his self and his identity in order to become a representative. This is at the core of Ranse's embarrassment at the end; he recognizes that there is something wrong with his identity.

By not lighting his pipe in the final scene, Ranse makes a nonverbal gesture to the earlier period, for light may be taken as the symbol of the new world, the world of spirit, and Ranse acknowledges that light

presupposes the darkness associated with the age of heroes. Whereas the earlier age is visible only in darkness, the age of men is consistently filmed during daylight—not only in the frame, but also in the schoolroom and the electioneering scenes. When the Senator and his wife arrive in Shinbone, the journalists tell him to come “out of the sun”; later, in the darkness of the undertaker’s shop, he recalls the past. The light of reason has destroyed the passions of the past, bringing the rational bleakness of modernity: there is so much light that one can no longer “see” the true basis of the age.

Politics in this new age is no longer a simple and immediate exertion of physical power. Power, now representational, is mediated by figures who have gained the respect of others. Within this paradigm, appearance and reality do not always coincide. Because of its capacity for deception and the range of its impact, political power can be even worse than the immediate assertion of physical power. The break between seeming and being is already present at the convention in its circus atmosphere; it is the reverse side of progressive spirit. The cattle ranchers appear to be simple-minded with their stage rituals, including their band and their parading a horse on stage, but they are, in fact, very oratorical (especially in their rhetorical anti-rhetoric) and they know precisely how to hurt the opposition (that is, by rendering Ranse vulnerable). We see the dangers of a political theatre that focuses not on any essence but on representation and form alone, and with this hides its blind lust for power.<sup>8</sup> Spirit contains within it the possibility of abuse.

Ranse is weakest at the convention. Not only does he not come clean, he doesn’t react with gratefulness toward Tom. Though Ranse may not approve of Tom’s cold-blooded murder, he nonetheless takes advantage of it. Ranse uses the lie and his position as hero without fully recognizing the greatness of Tom, who made his success possible. Ranse fails to see that it was he who put Tom in an impossible situation.<sup>9</sup> Although one could argue that Ranse is even more guilty for having morally obliged another person to commit a cold-blooded murder, after Tom’s confession Ranse loses his sense of guilt. We see in Ranse a structure typical in politics: the externalization of responsibility (which in this case also means a lack of faithfulness toward the past), a structure analyzed so well by Shakespeare, for example, in *Henry V*. One causes others to act immorally and then reproaches them for having acted so or at least doesn’t thank them for it, although one owes one’s life or one’s power to them. In taking advantage of an act he condemns, Ranse is not only opportunistic, he is hypocritical. And yet not only in Tom’s action, but also in this hypocrisy lies a force,

namely, the articulated ideal, alien to the age of heroes, that will eventually lead toward the greater realization of justice.

If Ranse’s weakest moment is at the convention, his strongest is on the train. The Senator could become Vice-President, but he will return to Shinbone—clearly owing to his love for Hallie. He will finally offer her what Tom had wanted to give her much earlier, when he refused the nomination. The Senator returns to Tom’s example, but only after his work is mostly done. In an act of renouncement, Ranse tries to give Hallie back as much as possible of what she relinquished. An important symbol here is the cactus rose, which dissolves on the screen only after we move to the scene in the train. The hat box, which appears to tell us that Hallie is no longer a woman of the wilderness, actually exhibits her bond to the world of heroes, for it is empty, and she uses it to collect the cactus rose. Hallie has kept an emotional link to the world of heroes, which Ranse seems to lack.<sup>10</sup> The cactus rose, which for Hallie is a clear gesture toward the past, triggers in the Senator a process of recognition. It reminds him, first, of Hallie’s love for Tom and thus of her great self-renouncement, and second, of how much he owes to Tom.

Each character enacts a sacrifice, but Tom’s sacrifice contains moments that clearly exhibit Ford’s elevation of Tom over Ranse, and his nostalgia for the world of heroes. Tom is not just a stubborn hero of the past, a man of formal virtues, he is also a self-sacrificing hero. In silently rendering Ranse a hero, Tom makes possible the new age. This sublimity renders him superior to Ranse, who was unable to acknowledge the greatness of Tom’s gesture during the convention. It belongs, however, to the idea of heroism that the hero sacrifice himself and receive no credit for it. The film is clear in telling us that Tom could have beaten Liberty Valance in a draw of guns. That he kills him in a cold-blooded way is, in a paradoxical sense, even more admirable, for it robs him of a chance for public heroism and thus exhibits a certain renouncement. It is symbolic that when Tom comes through the door to find Ranse and Hallie embracing, he is visually in dark colors and in the far background. His importance now recedes. Time passes Tom by, and only a handful of people remember his name. The passing of the age of heroes is also symbolized in the marshal’s statement that Tom had worn no handgun for years; even he no longer practiced Western law. Tom is a hero only when the community needs him to protect it. With the introduction of legality and the elimination of Liberty (and the forces he symbolizes), the hero becomes superfluous. Tom’s killing Liberty consummates the Western in the very specific sense that it renders the hero unnecessary. Another

consequence of the death of Liberty—related to our earlier reflections on the ambiguities of the world of spirit—is that evil is no longer easy to recognize. It is sublated in the more shaded world of men, diffused among the crowd of cattlemen and seen to lurk even in the world of light.

Tom, a transitional figure, may very well sense that by killing Liberty Valance he is giving up the West, but what he doesn't know is that his action also means the loss of Hallie. Tom's sacrifice has immediate consequences. In saving Ranse's life, Tom relinquishes the woman he loves. The shooting does not simply perpetuate the competition for Hallie insofar as it means preserving the life of Ranse. The moment is more tragic still. It means his giving Hallie to Ranse. He does Hallie a favor and thereby loses her.

Though a hero, Tom is in no way brutal, and he would have made Hallie at least partially happy. He is tender toward her, and he is—as we have seen—self-sacrificing. But, for several reasons, Tom doesn't fully express his love for Hallie. First, it's not Western-like; the strong hero does not easily exhibit sensitive emotions. This is symbolically conveyed in Tom's not being at home in the kitchen: Tom burns his finger on the coffee, and Hallie takes the bottle out of his hands. More importantly, Tom doesn't see Hallie when she looks after him from the kitchen door. Not a man of words, Tom does not speak his love, and not a reflexive person, he doesn't turn around to see if his love is encountered, reciprocated. Whereas other persons would be motivated to look back—conscious of their position in the love relationship, Tom simply loves her. Tom's lack of concern, which is a weakness, also contains a moment of greatness: he is indifferent to the games of love and love's moments of self-glorification and sentimentality.

Hallie did not want Ranse to leave Shinbone, and her sin of omission, not encouraging his departure strongly enough, contributes to his endangerment. She thus expresses her love all the more after the duel, for Ranse has become vulnerable partly because of her actions. Heroes, on the other hand, are never weak, and thus never in a position where love is so easily expressed. Unjustly, the hero who saves the other is the loser, and ironically, being the loser, he deserves (or needs) the love much more than the other. Throughout, Tom is hard on Hallie and stoic within himself. He does not *show* his need for Hallie. Hallie is attracted to Ranse precisely because he seems so vulnerable (first, when he arrives; second, after the altercation in the restaurant; and, finally, after the gunfight); only in the end does she grasp that, in truth, Tom was far more vulnerable. Tom, part of a disappearing age, needed her much more than Ranse, who would have

had a successful life also without her: Tom without Hallie can only stay with Pompey.<sup>11</sup> The feminine aspect of Ranse is here significant. While heroes are worshipped and longed for, we can relate to men. Thus, although Ranse, unlike Tom, can exist without Hallie, it is Ranse who can benefit from Hallie's pointing out his weaknesses and who, unlike Tom, can adapt.

Second, it belongs to the idea of the hero that he sacrifice all love relations; this is the ideal of the knight, who is thus free to do heroic things. The knight, however, does not forgo all intersubjective relations. Pompey has a prominent role throughout as the caring servant and loyal friend. The relationship between Tom and his black servant is stable, if not fully symmetrical. One is reminded of Tom's ordering Pompey out of the schoolroom. Tom's relationship toward Hallie is clearly asymmetric; he treats her as if she were his property. Hallie's mother, unlike her father, favors Ranse over Tom; the woman has an interest in symmetry. Ranse treats Hallie as an equal, helping out in the kitchen, for example. After Tom has lost Hallie, Pompey gains in importance—he repeats Hallie's gesture of taking the bottle away from Tom; he even saves his life. Pompey becomes the person who cares for Tom, as Hallie might have. The relationship becomes more symmetrical. When we see him beside the coffin, he seems almost a widow, and Hallie—not the Senator—recognizes this.

Third, the hero and quester Tom must seek the perfect ideal before he is ready to ask Hallie to marry him, and so he works on the house he will never finish. Significantly, Pompey stops working on the addition because he is in school with Ranse. Pompey is loyal to Tom, but his people's destiny is with the idealism Ranse represents, even if this affiliation means disrupting a stable relationship for something less secure and momentarily patronizing. Pompey, not unlike Hallie, sees his future not with the hero whom he continues to admire, but with the man who will bring him equality.

Tom's self-sacrifice causes him great pain. He eventually burns the house, even endangering his horses, knowing that his earlier actions have eliminated any chance for bliss with Hallie. The fire represents both the passage of time and the all-consuming light of spirit. Self-destruction and a return to the pure power of nature, symbolized in the horses he orders freed, are Tom's reactions against the inexorable passage toward rationality.<sup>12</sup> In a certain sense, the railroad, which opens the outer frame, represents civilization and the age of men; the stagecoach, which opens the inner frame, represents the frontier, the transition period; and the horse is, of course, nature. Whereas Ranse takes the stagecoach and later sits on a buckboard, Tom rides a

horse. Tom's contact with nature is immediate; Ranse's relationship is mediated. The futility of Tom's affirmation of the horse (as nature) is unveiled to the viewer when, at the statehood convention, the horse becomes a mere prop. Nature gives way to (a corrupt) spirit.

Another way to recognize the superiority of the heroic age is to contrast Peabody and the modern newspaperman. Peabody risks his life in pursuing and printing the truth; the modern reporters neither risk their lives nor print the truth. A dominant aspect of the modern newspaperman is their intruding on others. Peabody is a heroic and sympathetic character. He is also very cultivated: his literary allusions range from Homer to Shakespeare. Particularly fitting is his description of Liberty Valance's thugs as "myrmidons," which implies that the setting is still that of the age of heroes. The myrmidons are the obsequious soldiers of Achilles, and Achilles is *the* hero—also, for Vico, both in the positive and negative sense. Also of interest are Peabody's various comic exchanges with Tom, the Marshall, and Hallie. The modern newspapermen are not as substantial or human. On the contrary, they are banal and indiscreet. Especially tactless is their address to the Senator, when they show no respect for the deeper emotional needs of human beings. Like much of modernity, the journalists rely too much on speech. While Ranse is at home with them in their office, Hallie and the Marshall say very little, but in those few words there is a wealth of meaning. Similarly, while Ranse tells the reporters his tale, Hallie, Pompey, and the Marshall sit in silence.

The newspapermen associate the West with legend, but the lawless past was in truth very real, also in its often fatal consequences. Peabody tells the truth and does not speak of legends, for he is still part of the West. The legend exists only for the modern consciousness, which looks back on the West. The older West, the earlier stage, is in fact less legendary, more realistic than the deceptive modern spirit. For the archaic mind, there is no difference between reality and legend. The legend exists not in the West itself, but in the modern world, which looks back on the West, speaks of it, reflects on it—and then denies it.

The universal opposition between the law of nature and the law of spirit is beautifully intertwined with the private love story. Hallie briefly wavers between Tom and Ranse, but eventually chooses Ranse and, with this, the future. She longs for equality and intellect, but also for security and home. It is obvious that love has, in part, to do with identity search and the decision as to which type of life one wants to lead; by marrying a certain person, one cannot live the same life as by marrying another. Marriage always signifies a certain renouncement. In choosing, Hallie limits her possibilities. Already in the schoolroom

we see a more subdued, less vocal Hallie; as J.A. Place notes, "she is dressed in darker shades than previously, her hair up under a hat instead of free in pigtailed."<sup>13</sup> These details are symbolic of Hallie's movement—like that of the West—in the direction of civilization. Hallie's choice is not without a moment of tragedy. She clearly loves Tom: she would like to be with the hero, and she would like to stay in Shinbone. Yet, Hallie also loves Ranse, who has brought her the world of spirit, the world of reading and writing. To go with Ranse, as she does, Hallie must renounce Tom, and she must leave Shinbone for Washington. A tragic moment of self-sacrifice surfaces here as well, for Hallie still loves Tom: she puts the cactus rose on his coffin and longs to be back in the village. Indeed, she may love Tom in ways she never could have loved Ranse. Spirit demands sacrifices. Like Tom and Ranse, Hallie, too, is a transition figure; in fact, she bridges the two eras in a way that neither Tom nor Ranse can. She is at home both in the old Shinbone—where Ranse cannot feel at home, and in the new era—where Tom could never have been at home. Nonetheless, Hallie cannot have both simultaneously; she, too, must choose.

*Liberty Valance* is a film about transition—the movement of history from heroes to men. The characters move history forward, yet the most interesting aspect of this development is the transition itself. Tragic is that the characters seek a better future, but when they reach it, they recognize that not what they achieved, but the process toward this future, was the greatest aspect, not the change from the primitiveness of the age of heroes to the superficiality of the age of men, but the richness of the time when both worlds were present, as they are present in the artwork itself, which is a synthesis, an ideal, and in this sense does not mirror contemporary society but breaks from it. The film seeks a synthesis of both modes, but it is a tragic synthesis: on the narrative level, it is too late for Ranse to undo his lie; on the thematic level, the film returns to the past knowing that history has already transcended it. The film tells us that force has given way to representation, the stagecoach has been surpassed by the railroad, the wilderness has become a garden, and yet, in this advance, an era of greatness, the age of heroes, has passed away.

## Notes

1. This article originally appeared in *Clio* 23(2) (1993): 131–47, and is reprinted with permission of the authors.
2. *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergen and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), section 951. Cited by section, hereafter, in parentheses in text.

3. See the comparisons between *Liberty Valance* and Ford's earlier Westerns which are developed by Joseph McBride and Michael Wilmington in *John Ford* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1974): 178–81.
4. Significant in this context is "the Ann Rutledge theme," first used in *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939) whenever Lincoln reflected on the death of his young love. David F. Coursen notes the contrast with *Liberty Valance*: "In *Lincoln*, the theme evokes a consistent set of feelings, first for Ann and later for her memory and her dreams for Abe, which remain vital and will come to fruition when the mature Lincoln assumes his mythic role as the embodiment of America's highest ideals. In *Valance*, however, the theme is associated exclusively with feelings that are remote and idealized, whether for Tom's memory after his death, or for Ranse's hopes for the future, which are only imperfectly realized. The music is invariably linked to an ideal, promised or remembered, its melancholy sound and its context alike suggesting that ideals are, by their very nature, unattainable" ("John Ford's Wilderness: *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*," in *Sight and Sound* 47 (1978): 240).
5. William S. Pechter also has commented that "Stoddard's relation to Pompey smacks unmistakably of paternalism" (*Twenty-Four Times a Second: Films and Filmmakers* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971): 234.)
6. Ranse's being shamed into not lighting his pipe ironically echoes an earlier scene in the classroom when Ranse shames one of the adults into not smoking. Here, Ranse is on the receiving end of a far more subtle lesson.
7. The third person to whom the titular verb refers is John Ford: in shooting the film, he unites the virtues of each.
8. The critique of mere oratory is one of Ford's dominant themes, beginning already with *Judge Priest* (1934).
9. We see in Ranse a certain carelessness toward others. Consider, for example, his decision to set up his law practice inside the office of the *Shinbone Star* just after it is made clear that doing so might antagonize Valance, and thus endanger Peabody and the security of his office.
10. This is also evident in Ranse's easy departure with the journalist, which contrasts with Hallie's depth of emotion during her ride to Tom's home, and in the funeral parlor, where Hallie rushes to greet Pompey and does so with great emotion, while Ranse stands aside in the bright light.
11. Pompey's name alludes to the Roman statesman Pompey, who was defeated by Caesar and represented the last attempt to defend the old Roman aristocracy (in an age of heroes); Pompey is, in this sense, the symbol of an era doomed to disappear. Pompey plays a major role in the dissolution of Tom's relationship with Hallie also insofar as it is he who—at Hallie's behest—helps Tom save Ranse and eventually tosses him the gun. On the symbolism of the names "Liberty" and "Ranse," see Tag Gallagher, who notes that Tom's name doesn't mean anything: "in contrast to whatever one may read into Stoddard's name, Tom Doniphon is just plain Tom Doniphon" (*John Ford: The Man and His*

- Films* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986): 407). Tom is the only person who is not a mere representative; he is the heroic man.
12. This progression might be said to have three stages: first, Tom gets Liberty Valance to leave the restaurant in response to an attack on his personal property (Liberty has led Ranse to drop Tom's steak); second, Tom shoots Liberty Valance not for himself, but for another—namely, Hallie; third, Ranse works for an abstract, less passionate and personal, but more comprehensive concept of justice.
  13. J.A. Place, *The Western Films of John Ford* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1974): 220.