

I know my claim for the usefulness of literature must seem like a claim raised too late for an art form too outmoded. But to say that we can learn more from the accumulated wisdom of the past than from the pooled ignorance of the present should not seem an unreasonable claim. I'll take my stand with Stephen Spender who wrote in "Statistics":

Lady, you think too much of speeds,  
Pulleys and cranes swing in your mind;  
The Woolworth Tower has made you blind  
To Egypt and the pyramids.

Too much impressed by motor-cars  
You have a false historic sense.  
But I, perplexed at God's expense  
Of electricity on stars,

From Brighton pier shall weigh the seas,  
And count the sands along the shore:  
Despise all moderns, thinking more  
Of Shakespeare and Praxiteles.

I'd want The Word that Eliot refers to also, to put the stars and Shakespeare in proper perspective. But I do want knowledge of literature. The future is less of a shock to the man who knows where his race has been and where his race is leading him.

## Writer In Residence

muttering  
master of parentheses,  
he wears his desk  
like an overcoat  
two sizes too small  
  
tornadoes rummage  
his eyebrows,  
his hair a snow cloud  
lost since  
sometime in the last century  
  
twice a day  
pockets crammed with searchlights  
he stalks the ferocious silence  
the shadows of unbelievers  
just beyond the door

MARK VINZ

## On The Function Of "The Custom House" in Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter

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The function of "The Custom House" in Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter is a matter of considerable uncertainty. Editors sometimes omit it, and critics usually dismiss it as either a lame attempt on Hawthorne's part to establish the historicity of his tale or to relieve its gloom. In omitting it from The Portable Hawthorne, Malcolm Cowley explains:

He [Hawthorne] was afraid that the public would be repelled by this intense monotone, so he prefaced the book with a long humorous account of his adventures in the custom house.<sup>1</sup>

In summarizing critical treatments of "The Custom House," Sam S. Baskett points out that even critics who have given it "a closer look" tend to

relegate it to a precariously tangential position in relation to the principal part of the book. The implication is that the reader of The Scarlet Letter, if he likes, may legitimately ignore "The Custom House."<sup>2</sup>

Baskett and others<sup>3</sup> go on to give "The Custom House" a fuller treatment, seeing it as extension and clarification of the main tale or some of its themes, or as ironic counterpoint.

It is not my intention here to quarrel with any of these theories concerning "The Custom House." They all, as a matter of fact, have a certain validity. One need go no farther than the sketch itself, or perhaps some of Hawthorne's letters, to find support for any of the views so far expressed. The reader with sufficient determination