

Interiority and Artifact

Death and Self-Inscription in Thomas Smith's *Self-Portrait*

Since its restoration in 1934, Thomas Smith's *Self-Portrait* (c. 1680) has become one of seventeenth-century New England's more familiar images (fig. 1).¹ It has been widely reproduced and meticulously described. Ultraviolet fluorescence, X-radiography, and X-ray emissiography have revealed surprising visual details; and the tentative identification in 1981 of two testamentary documents—Smith's will and an inventory of his estate—has lent substance to his otherwise scant biography.² Yet for all of this, Smith and his *Self-Portrait* continue to be served up corpse-cold, the painting's reception history shaped largely by connoisseurship and by the blander forms of Puritan foundationalism.³ Seldom has it been entrusted with the power to exceed its antiquarian interest as a memorial of someone who was, or of a past that is presumed to have been. It is easy to see that the man in this painting cherished the world he knew. But the painting also reveals Smith's appetite for what he knows he will not live to become or to possess—for what, in the end, remains to be seen. He presents himself as someone to whom it matters how the world will continue to disclose itself, and as someone, furthermore, who can wield techniques of self-presentation as means of extending the consequences of this already extravagant care.⁴

At the same time, Smith's *Self-Portrait* works to frustrate an insufficiently critical identification with its attractive figure of world-making by manifesting deep ambivalence about the ambition to be seen. As it cleaves to its viewer across the physical and conceptual spaces it opens up, Smith's *Self-Portrait* seems to shun as well as to invite the shared endeavor of looking. The skull, for example, featured so prominently in the left foreground of the painting is, as *memento mori*, a precautionary device; its iconographic function is apotropaic, to ward off attention to the visible world.



FIGURE 1 *Thomas Smith, Self-Portrait, c. 1680, Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Mass.*

And Smith's own direct gaze functions as another kind of evil eye to the extent that it arrests and mortifies, so to speak, the viewer's mobile look.⁵ To get caught in that stare is to feel implicated, however briefly or skeptically, in another's alienated identity, in the disclosure of another's dying. Smith does not want us to see him as a being that has already come to his end, but he does want us to appreciate the articulation he has given us of himself in word and image. Thus, we may regard his painting as an artifact of its subject's interiority, of its subject's ongoing attempt to recover himself through the phenomenology of disclosure.⁶

Smith's *Self-Portrait* seems intent upon enlisting the world in his work of self-restoration, his effort to recover an ideal of selfhood from the self-

threatening knowledge of death. He gives us an image of himself confronting the viewer as if he were yet a living man conscious of mortality and devoted to the possibility of posthumous self-assertion. Nevertheless, his painting is canny about how the world perennially resists such self-assertions—how the world, that is, seems so often both to betray its possible metaphysical foundations and, conversely, to throw up very material obstacles to its circumscription as personal self-relation or self-regard. Death is a perfect emblem of this multifaceted resistance. Thus, commemorative arts like portraiture and elegy—the arts reflexively combined in Smith’s *Self-Portrait*—constitute a complex and exigent record of the history of interiority. We can and should read that record with respect for the limits of historical self-understanding and for the plight of alterity that makes the historian’s task so difficult. But Smith’s painting will not brook the historicist paranoia that insists defensively on the estrangements of historical difference to the exclusion of its most challenging intimacies. It reminds us that the reception history of the mourning arts is, crucially, a history of delight in identity and anachronism, as well as a history of terror at time’s wounds.

WRITINGS ON THE WALL

In order better to recognize the stake we might have in Smith’s *Self-Portrait*, as well as better to appreciate its visual complexity and conceptual sophistication, I will work up to my interpretation of the painting with some observations on early modern portraiture and elegy, and on image-text relations in traditions from which Smith draws. For the *Self-Portrait* takes distinctive historical form as a compound document of self-bestowal: Smith’s painted image of himself at the threshold of death includes a depiction of the handwritten text of a self-memorializing poem.

The verse inscription in Smith’s painting is, strictly speaking, neither epigraphic nor emblematic, though its more “internal” relation to the scene depicted exists within a continuum of experimentation with inscriptions in northern European Renaissance and Baroque portraiture. For example, Jonathan L. Fairbanks has compared Smith’s *Self-Portrait* to an unidentified artist’s 1626 portrait of *Captain Adams* (fig. 2), against the background of which the subject’s apparently self-authored memorial poem appears (Fairbanks and Trent 3: 420). This inscription shares



FIGURE 2 *Artist unknown, Captain Adams, 1626, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond. © 2001. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.*

in common with many other contemporary portrait inscriptions an abstracted relation to the image of its subject. It cannot easily be said, that is, to occupy the same physical space as Adams's person. The poem hovers near his head—palpably important from the perspective of the viewer, yet immaterial to its subject. In keeping with more realistic treatments of inscription, however, Thomas Smith presents his text as part of the painting's *mise en scène* of authorship, registering its kinship with works like Renold

Elstrack's 1615 engraving of Sir Thomas Overbury, in which Overbury is just signing his name to "His Epitaph written by himselfe" (fig. 3).

For Reformation England, and even more importantly for Thomas Smith's protestant Anglo-America, literary epitaph and the closely related elegy were important reworkings of the material inscription of the dead and cultural transmission—what Armando Petrucci calls "the patrimony of commemorative memory" (45). These mourning genres were a crucial commemorative resource in the tightly controlled mourning culture of early New England, and they also tended to distinguish themselves among literary forms by thematizing as content what they so frequently underwent as material texts. They were artifacts of loss in this double sense. Early protestant mourners, for example, wrote reflexive mourning poems about hearses that were trimmed or heaped with verses, and these written or printed verses were themselves often attached to coffins before they were buried. In his elegy for Thomas Leonard, Samuel Danforth II writes:

Tho' I pretend to no skill in Poetry,
 Yet will adventure once to Mourn in Verse
 Rather than such a Worthy, dead should ly
 Without a due Encomium on his Herse. (489)

Cotton Mather also alludes to the Puritan practice of trimming hearses with verses, and refers to one of his own elegies as "a *Paper* winding sheet" (*Verses* 51, 64). Elegies were commonly buried or "funerated" along with the subjects whose interment they commemorated—while copies of these same poems were also frequently preserved in the diaries, broadsides, pamphlets, and books of New England memorial culture.⁷

Thus, New Englanders both ritualistically destroyed elegies and carefully preserved them, and then they passed them on as a kind of heritage—that is, both as cultural tradition and as property. In 1722, a writer for a Boston newspaper alluded to just this sort of dual heritage as an aspect of the genre's omnipresence: there is not "one Country House in fifty," he wrote,

which has not its Walls garnished with half a Score of these Sort of Poems . . . which *praise the Dead to the Life*. . . I have trac'd this Spirit of Elegy among us for an hundred Years back, and find that it came in with the first Planters. *New-England's Memorial* furnishes us with several Elegies



FIGURE 3 Renold Elstrack, The Portraiture of Sir Thomas Overbury, 1615, British Museum, London.

made long since by our Fore-Fathers, which our modern *Elegiac* Writers imitate. (Hypercriticus 1)

In his researches, this writer has discovered that elegies form the substance of a New England literary tradition. He pokes fun at the provincial appeal of such poems. But in his references to cultural transplantation, historiography, and the much-imitated elegiac activity of what he calls “our Fore-Fathers,” he also acknowledges the genre’s role as a literary genealogy that engages wider social and discursive contexts. He finds, furthermore, that elegies are treated as important household belongings—not just part of the furniture, but a kind of heraldic memory. They “garnish” the walls of rustic homes like a verse counterpart of portraiture, in which the dead are praised, as he says, “to the Life.” They bring mortuary inscription inside, so to speak, from the slab to the page, while also preserving a sense of textuality’s material nature, its connection with history’s remains: the relics, corpses, monuments, and effigies that history leaves behind.

We see this quite clearly in composite elegies (elegies that conclude with formal epitaphs).⁸ In some cases, the migration of text is literal: from tombstone inscription to published elegy, or vice versa. In other cases, the epitaph with which an elegy concludes takes the place of a lost or non-existent tombstone. Most commonly, one finds multiple literary and composite elegies for the same person, each of which asserts a figural relation to an extant tomb on which none of them appears as an actual inscription. For example, the epitaph with which Anne Bradstreet concludes her composite elegy for her father, Thomas Dudley, does not appear on his Roxbury tomb. Yet Bradstreet’s elegy became the best known and best remembered memorial for her father. At the beginning of the elegy proper, Bradstreet, like so many of her peers, reflexively conjures the graveside scene of ritual elegism through her use of the familiar “verse”/“hearse” rhyme. And the concluding epitaph begins with yet another assertion of the poem’s proximity to the deceased: “Within this tomb a patriot lies” (203). Yet it is the fiction, rather than the fact, of the poem’s link with his physical remains that sustains Dudley’s proximity to the living. The poem not only makes the tomb proximate but renders it transparent to the reader, who beholds within it not the physical remains of the deceased but the traces of his beneficent character (“a patriot”). Elegy, not the tomb, is where the transparency of inner and outer, masked by death, may be restored.

Yet elegy is also often the place where any sense of shared conviction in the transparency of inner and outer breaks down. Commemorative inscription, like physical dissolution, can come to seem like yet another manner of *de*-composition in its variously motivated assaults on the complexities of character. “It is with the utmost concern,” wrote one Bostonian in 1723,

[that] I would now represent to you the hard Fate which our Countrymen are ever like to suffer, who happen to dye with a *good Name*. The Dead have been long abus’d and the Living disturb’d . . . insomuch that some of the most considerable Persons among us have been constrain’d to do but little Good, and appear useless all their Life Time, to avoid the *Persecution* of an Elegy at their Death. (Tibullus 1)

“Persecution,” of course, is one way of naming the more realistic forms of testimony that “patrimonies of commemorative memory” often seek to suppress.⁹ Consider William Wordsworth, rambling around a country churchyard, reading the tombstones of “faithful Wives, tender Husbands, dutiful Children, and good Men of all classes.” “Where,” he wonders, “are all the *bad* People buried?” (63) Yet whereas Wordsworth lets his critique of commemorative language slide into a romantic, anticapitalist celebration of the cemetery as the “one Enclosure where the voice of detraction is not heard” (64), the Boston satirist maintains that the pressure to render every dead person exemplary is itself a negative social force.

Puritans like Thomas Dudley knew they were bad people. Indeed, that knowledge was the theological foundation of their social lives. Persecution was for them a technique of self-knowledge that also helped them manage relations among the living, and elegy was a preferred management tool. The genre provided constant reminders, for example, of the contingency of Puritan institutions on generational transmission, and of the likelihood of spiritual declension through the attenuation of filio piety. For the New England Puritans, especially, elegy was *the* literary form of generational conflict and, as such, was used to persecute as well as to praise. In May 1645, for example, shortly after Thomas Dudley’s election to the governorship of Massachusetts, a neighbor shoved a poem under Dudley’s door. It was a memento mori that reads like a death wish or curse. Employing the popular characterological device of the anagram — rearranging the letters in Dudley’s name to form the motto “Ah! old must dye” — the verses alert

Dudley to the fact that “You in your name may spell mortalitye” (Alden 3: 49–50). The meaning to Dudley of this aggressive wordplay may have been largely personal, an undermining of his enthusiasm at the outcome of the election. But the general import of the poem—addressed, during the third year of England’s Civil War, to one of Anne Hutchinson’s ex-communicators—could not be clearer. Through what Ivy Schweitzer calls its “agonized redundancy,” the poem expresses the “double fear of the second generation that haunts Puritan elegies: their dread of straying from the pious standard set by their obdurate elders, and the equally horrifying impossibility of escaping such a fate” (49). The poem’s oedipal work is violent: not only does it envision Dudley’s dissolution through the dismantling of his name, it literalizes antipatriarchal aggression as decapitation. Handing him his head, so to speak, the anonymous poet assures Dudley that the memory of his death will be as a curse upon the living.

What to do? How to repair the damage his ego has suffered while restoring for himself and for others a satisfactory vision of a nevertheless imperiled future? To be sure, after death, his talented daughter and his ministerial peers would strew his hearse with verses. Dudley could count on that. But he also opts for a kind of interim management of futurity by writing an elegy for himself.

I AM DEAD — OR ALMOST

Self-elegy, or the composition of pre-posthumous verses of memorial self-inscription, was a common Puritan and post-Puritan practice. William Bradford was a self-elegist, as were Edward Taylor and Anne Bradstreet. Jeffrey Hammond observes that such memorialists entextualized themselves as “human *ars moriendi* . . . meditative object[s] for generating an expectation of the transformation for which all believers yearned” (104–5). Their poems are exempla of what Schweitzer calls “redeemed subjectivity” (7). Put another way, they are objectifications of the construction of selfhood. Not only do self-elegists make ciphers of themselves for the edification of the like-minded, but they also make tokens, or totems, of themselves, which have afterlives of their own. Thomas Dudley secreted his self-elegy on his person, where it was discovered after his death. Harvard-trained Inniscean minister Edmund Weld made sure his was legated by his widow to his relatives in New England, where it became one of the most

frequently reprinted colonial broadsides. And if we may credit Samuel Mather's report, Boston entrepreneur Sarah Kemble Knight carved her self-elegy on a window in her home, thereby highlighting not only the dearness and transience of life (the expensiveness of glass in Knight's world was of course a function of its instability) but also her own metaphorical approach, as one about to die, to some metaphysical boundary between inside and outside (Titus). For many New Englanders, the practice of self-elegy encouraged and sustained attention to the boundaries of one's own being. One aspect of its cultural work was the promotion of ontological vigilance.

The self-elegy found in Thomas Dudley's pocket after his death in 1653 is an exhortation to other kinds of vigilance as well. While it is also substantially a poem of relinquishment, full of clichés about death and of banal moral instruction and consolation for his family, it is nevertheless a vivid reminder of the fierce ideological conflicts in which he spent his life embroiled—conflicts over orthodoxy and generations that left Dudley, as his life drew to its close, ambivalent about what he had accomplished and what he would leave behind. Within the previous five years, John Winthrop and John Cotton had both died, Charles I had been beheaded, his daughter Sarah had been excommunicated by the First Church, and his daughter Anne's book of poems had been published in London. Looking forward from a world of political, ecclesiastical, and familial disarray, Dudley begins his poem by conjuring a visceral image of his dying body in the process of dissolution:

Dim Eyes, deaf Ears, cold stomach shew
My dissolution is in view.

And its valedictory lines suggest, among other things, both a vehement grief over anticipated loss and a carefully modulated disturbance of ego:

Let men of God in Courts and Churches watch
O'er such as do a Toleration hatch;
Lest that ill Egg bring forth a Cockatrice,
To poison all with Heresie and Vice.
If men be left and otherwise combine,
My Epitaph's, I dy'd no Libertine. (140)

Simultaneously experiencing the throes of individual mortality and communal declension, Dudley here ends his poem with a self-epitaph that rhe-

torically embodies his ambivalence. “I dy’d no Libertine” is both self-praise and self-reproach. On one hand, it sounds like a proper paraphrase would be: “Here I am at the threshold of ‘dissolution.’ Yet if, as I predict, Protestant generations to come continue to reject Calvinist doctrine in favor of a licentiousness that seeks to pass as piety, then let the world know that I, at least, stuck fast to the end.” On the other hand, a world-bemoaning Puritan divine who at the end asserts nothing more than a sense of his inviolate piety seems to be drawing up his own indictment as little more than an ineffectual witness to decadence. He asks to be remembered as someone who is only willing to say what he is not. “My dissolution is in view,” he assures us in the second line of the poem, yet his self-composed epitaph insists, finally, upon the integrity and intactness of nondisclosure. What is “in view” exactly? How? And to whom?

Much like Thomas Dudley’s self-elegy, Thomas Smith’s sustains the impression of the subject-in-life through an image of voice. Like Dudley, Smith articulates a saving distance between the prospect of his utter dissolution and the present utterance of his prospective dissolution:

Why why should I the World be minding
 therein a world of Evils Finding.
 Then Farwell World: Farwell thy Jarres
 thy Joies thy Toies thy Wiles thy Warrs,
 Truth Sounds Retreat: I am not sorye.
 The Eternall Drawes to him my heart
 By Faith (which can thy Force Subvert)
 To Crowne me (after Grace) with Glory.

If Dudley’s self-elegy, metonymically related to the person it does its best to sustain, is itself, in a sense, brought to the brink of its own ruin by being secreted on Dudley’s person (did he intend it to be “funerated” along with his corpse?), then Thomas Smith figures this precariousness even more vividly and, as it were, lastingly, through his placement of an image of the text of his self-elegy in his *Self-Portrait*.

BEING IN VIEW

Smith inscribes himself both as and against the prospect of dissolution, first (according to the picture’s implied narrative) by writing a self-elegy in which he figures his disappearance and then by preserving a represen-

tation of the handwritten poem as part of yet another memorial to himself. Tilted up unrealistically away from the surface upon which it rests, the poem awkwardly announces its intention to be read *here*, beckoning the viewer and competing for attention with the captivating gaze of the portrait's outward-looking subject. The poem also competes with the hollow-gazed skull that at first seems simply to hold it in place but that may be regarded more fancifully as either disgorging or devouring the manuscript. Looking closely, one can see that it is the "world" (literalized in the sixth word of the first line) being either spoken or eaten by the skull, which thus appears to be a grotesque mimicry not only of Smith's own head but also of Smith's world-enunciating, world-canceling powers as an artist.

The painting's material configurations of impermanence are striking. As a manuscript text, the poem is a symbol of its author's uniqueness or singularity. Yet, as the *representation* of a manuscript text, it portrays singularity as a fiction. The painting preserves an image of a manuscript that may or may not have existed as such. The painting itself supplants the manuscript as the unique or singular artifact and as the physical trace of Smith's own hand. It both commemorates the poem's creation and anticipates the manuscript's imminent disappearance as an ephemeral object by making the text seem at once to emerge from the skull's mouth and to disappear into it. Is it being "spoken" into material existence by the skull? Or is it in the process of being consumed, as the skull's row of tiny upper teeth sinks into its surface and begins to obscure its words? The placement of Smith's hand atop the skull not only echoes a conventional pose of *memento mori* portraiture but also suggests that Smith is manipulating the skull as a kind of instrument that links author and text. His long index finger points directly at the cipher of authorship: the interwoven letters *T* and *S* that appear in the bottom right corner of the sheet. Under ultraviolet light, the inscription "Tho S AET," followed by an illegible mark, presumably Smith's age, appears to the left of the cipher (Fairbanks and Trent 3: 474). Overpainted (by Smith, it would seem) and thus invisible to the unaided eye, this inscription suggests that he was experimenting with different ways of identifying himself not only as the painter of the portrait, but also as both the author and the subject of the poem. The placement and style of the overpainted signature recall the signature Thomas Overbury is in the act of penning in Elstrack's engraving (fig. 3), where it is precisely the disclosive gesture of self-inscription that is made to last.



FIGURE 4 Pieter Claesz, *Vanitas Still Life*, 1630, *Royal Cabinet of Paintings, Mauritshuis, The Hague*.

The adjacency in Smith's *Self-Portrait* of two distinct marks of authorship — one left visible, the other effaced — resonates with the simultaneous appearance/disappearance of the “world” beneath the superordinate figure of the skull: the instrument, as it would appear, of Smith's subjectivity. The skull, in other words, represents the ossature not of Smith-as-person but rather of Smith-as-subject. It does so in part through allusion to popular seventeenth-century *vanitas* paintings featuring skull-text configurations. In Pieter Claesz's *Vanitas Still-Life* (1630), for example, a realistically rendered skull seems to be making a meal out of some books and loose papers (fig. 4). Like other *vanitas* still lifes, Claesz's is as much an appreciation of ephemeral, sensuous pleasures as it is a warning against a too-exclusive devotion to such pleasures. In his *Self-Portrait*, Smith presents himself as a man familiar with sensuous pleasures: from the tasseled drapery in the upper right corner, to the upholstered chair in which he sits, to his meticulously rendered lace neck cloth, with its intricate vine-and-flower motif, to his similarly soft and undulant gray hair. That is, he hardly seems like a man intent on abridging himself of superfluities. Yet his self-elegy performs a valediction to such worldly “Joies” and “Toies,” and, as in Claesz's *Vanitas*,

the iconography of death in his *Self-Portrait* works to defuse presumptive Protestant opposition to the sensuousness of the other images. The skull sinks its teeth into the text and, as it were, the texture of sensation.

In doing so, it enrolls Smith's painting in the post-Reformation iconology of the "bite."¹⁰ Both Smith's and Claesz's texts share more, that is, than their vulnerability to maxillary seizure with the toothsome nude in Hans Baldung's appalling *Death and the Woman* (fig. 5). They link textuality to the history of the Fall. Baldung, of course, renders the sensuous explicitly sexual, depicting Death's skull-like head bearing down on the woman's cheek with a bite that is also a kiss. One recalls the Marquis de Sade's saying that there is "no better way to know death than to link it with some licentious image" (qtd. in Bataille 24)—a provocative perception given point by Baldung's painting, where the salacious death-bite suggests the symbolism of the bite into the apple that brings death and the concomitant eroticization of the body into the world.

There is nothing overtly licentious in Smith's *Self-Portrait*. Yet, as in Thomas Dudley's self-elegy, with its vision of cockatrice-breeding libertines, the licentious is implicit. The conjunction of death and sexuality is, for example, distinctly a feature of yet another visual tradition to which Smith refers, one that links memorial inscription to the iconography of writing: namely, New England gravestone carving. One of the most striking aspects of the skull in Smith's painting is how unrealistic it is: the too perfectly rounded cranium; that neat circular shape almost comically exaggerated in the huge eye sockets; the excessive number and diminutive size of the teeth in the upper jaw; and the nose-hole in the shape of an inverted heart. When this rendition is contrasted with the depiction of a skull in the nearly contemporaneous Boston portrait of Dr. John Clark (fig. 6), and especially with Smith's very realistic portrayal of his own head, it is difficult not to recognize Smith's pointed allusion to the stylized death's-heads of seventeenth-century New England tombstones (fig. 7 shows an especially apposite eighteenth-century instance of this motif).¹¹ Heart shapes are common elements in such carvings, where they often symbolize the soul's dwelling place, love for God, or eternal life. But these hearts have not been evacuated of their corporeal associations with sacrifice, generativity, and erotic love. Spousal tombstones, for example, often employ heart motifs to commemorate the marriage relationship, which Calvinist doctrine celebrates as the legitimating framework for ritual violation, reproduction, and sensuality (fig. 8).¹² Further erotic imagery proliferates on Puritan grave-



FIGURE 5 *Hans Baldung, Death and the Woman, c. 1518–19, Kunstmuseum, Basel.*



FIGURE 6 *Artist unknown, Dr. John Clark, 1664, Boston Medical Library in the Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine.*

stones, where it works both to acknowledge and to commemorate the difficulty of withdrawing from libidinal attachments. Stylized breasts, which adorn stones for men as well as for women, express an assent to life and the exuberance of sexuality even in death (fig. 9).¹³ For Georges Bataille (11–25), this is the very definition of eroticism, and its consequence is the ongoing revaluation of continuity through reproduction and other forms of



FIGURE 7 *John Grover Stone, 1747, Boston. Photo by the author.*

self-bestowal — including, of course, sublimation and repression (Thomas Dudley, “no Libertine,” wants only to be a memorial for what was). Sensuality and its expression as character were heavily circumscribed within Puritan culture precisely because the Puritans took the immanence of dissolution so seriously. Whereas many Enlightenment responses to the Puritan prospect of dissolution (Benjamin Franklin’s, for example) would depend on an idealization of individual capacity — an idealization that would come to be seen as a prefiguration of the liberal ideology of self — Smith’s *Self-Portrait* solicits the viewer’s appetite for a way of being in the world that might exceed mere self-characterization.

EATING THE WORLD

Smith’s self-portrait is at once embedded in the late-seventeenth-century world of Puritan Boston and remarkably detached from it. As the earliest known self-portrait in Anglo-American painting, and as the only extant Anglo-American self-portrait from the seventeenth century, it stands *for* early American self-portraiture even as it stands *apart from* any historically reliable narrative of its subject’s self-relation. Vivid and realistic as his painted image is, the man is a kind of cipher. Here is the sum of what



FIGURE 8 *Sarah Long Stone, 1674, Charlestown, Mass. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass.*

we think we know about him: he was a mariner-merchant who painted at least eight portraits, including one of himself, and he died rich in Boston not later than 1691, leaving behind a wife, five children, and two slaves.¹⁴ None of this can yet be positively confirmed, and the rest is a mixture of family legend and scholarly speculation: he possibly came to New England from Bermuda in 1650; he may at various points in his life have spent time in England, the Netherlands, the Caribbean, and/or North Africa; and he may have been a Puritan.¹⁵

Smith may well have placed tokens of his proper self in his painting. For example, the red upholstered great chair in which he sits, the tasseled drapery, the tablecloth, and the lace neck cloth all loosely correspond to various entries in the “Inventory.” In sharp contrast to these interior details stands the tantalizing vagueness of historical allusion in the upper left corner of the painting. The scene through the window figured there is not



FIGURE 9 *Samuel Whiting Stone, 1719, Billerica, Mass. Photo by Tom and Brenda Malloy. Originally published in Tom and Brenda Malloy, "Gravemarkers of the Early Congregational Ministers in North Central Massachusetts," Markers 14 (1997), 36.*

known to depict a specific historical event, although it might. At least two of the ships are identifiable by their ensigns as English and Dutch, respectively. The nearer ship flies a red ensign cantoned with a St. George's cross at its stern, marking it as English; the ship behind it flies red-white-and-blue-striped Dutch flags at both stern and masthead. We see the orange fire and smoke of battle, and at least one ship is in the process of sinking. This battle scene could depict an episode in one of the late-seventeenth-century Anglo-Dutch wars; perhaps Smith fought in one. Then there is the fortress in the foreground. Of its two red flags, one features three horizontally configured yellow or white crescents: a North African privateer ensign. Thus, we may be looking at evidence of an Anglo-Dutch alliance against an Islamic foe. There may be other possibilities.

The portrait's consignment of this scene to a retrospective, anterior view—over and behind Smith's shoulder, through a casement that frames a temporally as well as spatially distant scene—suggests a historical world left behind in favor of the spiritual world to come. "Why why should I the

world be minding,” he asks at the beginning of his self-elegy. Yet “minding” the world remains his business, inasmuch as the painting of the portrait must have come after (or at least coincided with) the composition of poem. “Minding” suggests a range of activities, from heeding to disliking and from caretaking to remembering. It also suggests a way of naming whatever it is that the skull is doing to the poem—particularly to the “world” caught in its teeth.¹⁶ The plaintive form of the question (“Why why”) betrays its sham rhetoricity; the question is real. For if Smith as the subject of portraiture will not turn around to face the world through the casement, Smith as portraitist is doing just that. And, by keeping that world in view, he suggests that for both artist and viewer historical knowledge remains relevant and of value—a value brokered by the gaze of Smith’s bulging blue eyes.

Seventeenth-century Anglo-American portraiture tends to insist upon the presence of the sitter *and* upon the presence of the beholder—never more so than when the sitter looks at the viewer, as Smith does here. He asks us, in effect, to look into his eyes and invites us to answer their obscure appeal: “What do you see?” We see, first of all, a consciousness of being beheld. His eyes say to us: “I am not alone with my thoughts, whatever they may be. I am with you.” His focus is on us, rather than on any of his valued objects, or on the memento mori that supports his right hand, or on the distant abode of the “Eternall,” whither, as he says in the poem, he is being drawn. His gaze seems to say, “I will continue to make myself available to the world, even as, and even after, I leave it behind.”

The particularism of portraiture, in Smith’s Puritan context, might be seen here to yield to a vision of community, a kind of covenantal gaze, that transcends personal bounds—even, or especially, the bounds of mortality.¹⁷ Samuel Sewall, in his diary, makes multiple references to a townsman named Thomas Smith whom he first encounters as an exemplar of the businessman: “*June 16, 1676.* Went with my Father to Mr. Smith’s, there to see the manner of the Merchants” (1: 18). Twelve years later, Smith serves Sewall as an exemplary figure for the ultimate worldly transaction: “*Nov. 8.* Capt. Tho. Smith dies about 5. mane; buried Nov. 10. Where the Corps was set was the room where first my Father Hull had me to see the manner of the Merchants. . . . The Lord grant I may be ready when my turn shall come to be becken’d away” (1: 183). Smith may be seen to have extended the exemplary function of his own body—in what Sewall encounters as its pre- and

postmortem occupation of the same household space—by figuring it “to the Life” in his *Self-Portrait*. To Sewall, Smith’s corpse looked “ready” for grace, the very look he and many New Englanders wanted for themselves. They struggled still over the institutionalization of grace and the conundrum of seventeenth-century Puritan ontology on which it was based: one must not only be, but also be seen to be, that which one hopes to become. An important expression of this ontological principle was the doctrine of hospitality, as championed, for instance, by John Winthrop, who sought to welcome the stranger from a world of difference into the inward-looking community he called “the household of faith” (30). Seventeenth-century Anglo-American portraits, too, which frequently take as their setting the subject’s home, welcome the stranger, the viewer, into the subject’s inward spaces.¹⁸

Yet hospitality is only one of portraiture’s aspects, yielding at various thresholds to modesty, reflexiveness, and refusal. Among these thresholds were the physical divisions of space within larger seventeenth-century dwellings, such as the house that a wealthy, Restoration-era Bostonian like Thomas Smith may be presumed to have inhabited. When it came to the “disposing of pictures and paintings,” William Salmon, who visited Boston in the 1670s, recommended that family portraits be secreted away from the eyes of one’s guests. Salmon takes his reader through various rooms and spaces, specifying the kind of painting (e.g., history, still life, pastoral, royal effigies) appropriate to “Porch,” “Hall,” “Banqueting-rooms,” “Dining Room,” “inward or with-drawing Chambers,” and so forth, reaching finally the bedroom, where, he says, “your own” picture belongs, “as only becoming the most private Room, and your Modesty” (196–98).¹⁹

We don’t know what room (if any) in his home Thomas Smith selected as a suitable place to show or conceal his *Self-Portrait*. But the painting itself, as a self-portrait, also conjures the physical and conceptual thresholds of self-regard, against which the viewer’s invitation to look must be measured. The look, that is, beckoned by the outward stare of the subject is not exclusively, or even primarily, that of the viewer, but also that of the painter beholding himself in a mirror. Self-portraits “station us,” as Joseph Koerner puts it, “in the position of [the artist] contemplating the mirror that will be his painting” (56). Thus, the “look” of a self-portrait is both reflexive and entreating. On one hand, the presence or particularity of the viewer is displaced by the evidence of the artist’s self-contemplation: Smith

has been looking at himself all along. On the other hand, the fiction of the direct gaze borrows intensity from the evidence of self-scrutiny: a closed circuit the viewer is able to interrupt, to enter, and therein to imagine the possibility of seeing how Smith actually sees himself. Finally, though, Smith's gaze seems in its very directness to communicate a refusal (or is it a carefully masked failure?) to make himself available to the world. We might be inclined to associate this look of refusal with a character defect: fear, or pride, or even melancholy, one of the late seventeenth century's models for interiority.²⁰ Whatever the term or mode of self-withholding, I wonder whether we can draw some sort of analogy between it and the painting's own failure to make itself available to the work of historicism. What *is* the work (that is, both the process and the end result, or artifact) of historicizing character?

I MADE YOUR EYES

The economic theory of Protestantism suggests that you make yourself, in the way that you make yourself appear, via your transactions in commercial society. The traffic in appearances in protestant societies like Smith's becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish from the traffic in commodities, and trade continues to draw its world-making power from people's burgeoning reliance on commercial transactions to manage their ambivalence about the ambition to be seen. The affirmation of self-fashioning conferred by the augmented authority of commercial transactions is at the dead center of Smith's *Self-Portrait*, where the expensive and bone-white lace neck cloth competes for attention with the skull as yet another figuration of Smith-as-subject. Ultimately, though, it is in Smith's eyes that subjectivity is amassed and through which Smith apprehends interiorized perception as being coextensive with the world.

Smith's prominent eyes are especially remarkable for their blueness—remarkable because brilliant blues are uncommon in seventeenth-century American painting, and because the particular blue Smith used here—ultramarine, fabricated from lapis lazuli—was among the most expensive of all pigments: “the best and dearest of all blews” (Salmon 208). In the seventeenth century, the virtually exclusive source of lapis lazuli was the Kokcha valley in present-day Afghanistan. It was imported into Europe chiefly through Aleppo and Venice for painters who could afford it. And

its cost in the American colonies—at an even further remove—was even greater.²¹

The etymological significance of its name—ultramarine: the rich color from a realm “beyond the sea”—helps underscore the potential variety of Smith’s imaginative as well as practical relations with a global mercantile economy linking Boston, south-central Asia, the West Indies, the Mediterranean, West Africa, France, the Netherlands, and England. Smith’s roles—as mariner, merchant, slaveholder, soldier, and consumer of luxury goods—within that economy and his travels in its various realms remain historically obscure, as I’ve explained. One very material connection, however, may yet be brought forward into view. For the precious pigment in Smith’s eyes is also present in just one other element of the painting: the blue stripes of the Dutch flags.²² What shall we make of this line, or genealogy, of sight? In trying to see himself, to see into his future as well as his past, Smith “sees” the flags of the Dutch ships—why? What history of, or potential for, interaction is reflected here? Is memory revealing itself to be a literal sedimentation of experience in the body, or is it being projected as imagination? Does knowledge of self proceed through the body into the world, or vice versa, from the world into the body? Is Smith hereby figuring the historicity of his own imaginative vision, and thus by extension that of its reciprocal figure: the eye of the beholder? Do “outside” and “inside” achieve a kind of simultaneous visibility in this painting? Is this the way interiority *looks*?

It is difficult to look at Thomas Smith and not to see someone who saw himself as extended, multiple, and various—as a body, for example, resolving itself into things that are not the body, mimicking the work of death through textual and painterly compositions that are also de-compositions; as a dying man seeking to trespass the discontinuous boundaries between persons that death polices. Smith’s lapis lazuli eyes symbolize a conceptual nonpolarity of self and world that might have been more comfortable—even apparent—for Smith and his contemporaries than it is for us.²³ The consequences of this comfort would include, of course, the perpetuation of chattel slavery in seventeenth-century New England, where Thomas Smith’s executors listed two absent men in their inventory of his estate: “A Neagroe man George at Sea” and “A Neagroe man Sampson taken by the French.” These entries are of exceptional interest, as evidence not only of the still poorly remembered and understood existence of slavery in colo-

nial New England but also of the plastic status of persons and their transactional afterlives. The tantalizing glimpses of personal biography afforded by the phrases “at Sea” and “taken by the French” figure Sampson and George not only as potentially irrecoverable losses to Smith’s estate (that is, to the volatile substance of his own transactional afterlife) but also as yet unwritten lives. Who will find them? What processes of social transformation have they yet to undergo?

Looking at the *Self-Portrait*—where its lapis-eyed subject invests himself in the precipitates of material existence and inscribes his longing for what remains to be seen—we may imagine Thomas Smith asking such questions himself. We have no way of knowing his particular attitude toward slavery, and we have no certain knowledge that the painter and the slaveholder were the same man. The fact that they might have been reminds us that any uncritical identification with another person, past or present, embodied or inscribed, is full of potentially appalling risks. How might the study of commemorative self-inscriptions like Thomas Smith’s further instruct us in forms of attention paying that would neither discount nor flee such risks? And what would be the consequences of such instruction for our own ambivalence about the ambition to be seen? Looking at Smith’s *Self-Portrait* implicates us in a reciprocal fantasy of disclosure that might reveal some unapprehended, disorienting angle on the world’s acknowledged power to outlast us. Who will find us? What processes of social transformation have we yet to undergo? These are questions Smith poses in his *Self-Portrait*, with himself in mind, and with us in view.

NOTES

This essay first took shape as a presentation to the History of Material Texts Seminar at the University of Pennsylvania and benefited from the responses of members of the group.

1. Color reproductions of the painting can be found in Fairbanks and Trent 3: 441, and on the homepage of the Worcester Art Museum at www.worcesterart.org.
2. Lillian B. Miller made the initial identification, and she discusses the painting in light of these documents (173). Though credible, the inference that the author of “The Will of Thomas Smith” and the painter of the *Self-Portrait* were one and the same man runs up against some inconsistencies that have yet to be resolved. Chief among them is the contents of the will’s accompanying “Inventory of the Estate of Capt. Thomas Smith.” Extensive and detailed, the inventory nevertheless mentions no items directly related to the craft of painting—no pig-

ments or brushes, no frames or canvases, no portraits or any other paintings. The most suggestive items are several framed looking glasses, the reflexive tools of self-portraiture. Also mentioned: a “Small Bellmettle Mortar” and a “Pewter Limbeck” (alembic), which could possibly have been used in the preparation of pigments.

3. Joseph Allard, for instance, concludes that Smith “was a Puritan in the best sense of the word, and that he attempted in oil paint to deliver the same message that Cotton Mather and others of the clergy attempted in their prose at the end of the seventeenth century” (348). Roger B. Stein corrects for Allard’s disregard of form, yet also unequivocally aligns Smith’s painting with Mather’s pietism, asserting that it “shows us how an artist shapes for his audience a structurally coherent vision from the disparate materials of word and picture, of image and emblem, just as the theological tradition of Cotton Mather insisted that the viewer perceive his or her universe typologically, christologically, soteriologically” (324). David Bjelajac’s brief commentary reiterates Stein’s notion of an isomorphic relation between Smith’s “vision” and “Calvinist doctrine” (68–71).
4. For an extended meditation on “care” as a figure for our primarily visual relation to the phenomenal world, see Silverman.
5. On this mobility, and its termination in the evil eye, see Lacan 105–19.
6. On interiority as a work of recovery, and on the attendant limits of disclosure, see Levinas.
7. See Brown 320–21 and Draper 93–120.
8. On the classical origins of the composite elegy and its practice in English poetry, see Scodel 86–109.
9. On realism and “break-ins” of the real in mourning discourse, see Breitwieser 8–16.
10. Joseph Leo Koerner limns the symbolic horizon of the bite in his discussion of Baldung (305–15).
11. Stein makes the connection with the Clark portrait, but notes only grudgingly that Smith’s decision to go for a more stylized depiction is “at least in part a choice, not merely a failure of technique” (321). He is not the only one of the painting’s commentators who wants to insist upon Smith’s crudity. Miller, for instance, writes that, “despite his effort to establish his figures within three-dimensional space, his portraits remain essentially two-dimensional; and although he obviously knew something about shadowing to achieve roundness and volume, he was not able to create these convincingly” (173).
12. See, for example, the chapter “Of Chastity” in Ames 320–25.
13. On the co-implication of eroticism and spiritual nourishment in gravestone breast motifs, see Ludwig 155–60.
14. The seven extant portraits commonly attributed to Smith are *Captain George Curwin*, c. 1675 (Peabody Essex Museum, Salem); *Portrait of a Man (Probably Elisha Hutchinson)*, c. 1675–90 (Harvard University); *Major Thomas Savage*, 1679 (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston); *Captain Richard Patteshall*, c. 1679 (private

- collection); *Mrs. Patteshall and Child*, c. 1679 (private collection); *Self-Portrait*, c. 1680 (Worcester Art Museum); and *Maria Catherina Smith*, c. 1690 (American Antiquarian Society, Worcester). In 1680, Harvard College commissioned Thomas Smith to copy a Dutch portrait of the covenantal theologian William Ames (Dresser 11). This copy no longer exists. “The Will of Thomas Smith” names a wife, Rebecca, and five children: Ann, Thomas, John, Elisabeth, and Rebecca. “An Inventory of the Estate of Capt. Thomas Smith” lists “A Neagroe man George” and “A Neagroe man Sampson.”
15. On the sources of the Bermuda supposition, see Dresser 11. Miller takes it for granted that, “as a ship’s captain, he must have learned something about art either in England or Holland” (173).
 16. It suggests, furthermore, an alternative to the figuration of mind as what Vincent Crapanzano calls one of the “most preeminent *loci* of the self” (111). “Minding” describes the relation to the world of a transactional rather than autonomous self.
 17. This fantasy of reciprocity has roots in Smith’s social milieu. His picture evokes, for example, the “mutual watchfulness” of late-seventeenth-century New England’s congregational polity. This interpersonal disciplinary practice, often referred to as the “brotherly watch,” helped communities like Smith’s to police the boundary between covenantal ideals and individualistic concerns (see Cooper 124–26). New England self-portraiture itself might well be understood as a secularized “ritual of relation,” emerging with Smith and other regional artists alongside the Puritans’ reconceptualization of individual and communal boundaries (see Seligman). It is plausible that his *Self-Portrait* was for Smith and some of his contemporaries an expression of their enduring lay commitment to church discipline.
 18. Indeed, portraits were in almost every sense objects of the home. As items with little or no residual market value, whose function, according to Margaretta M. Lovell, “was to present the achieved self to the self and to one’s immediate circle,” portraits tended to remain household goods, displayed in the home and transmitted, like Smith’s *Self-Portrait*, down through the family line (“*Terre Inconue*” 70). See also Lovell, “Bodies of Illusion,” and Breen.
 19. Faith in an ideal of stable, bourgeois privacy and the embrace of domestic refinement proceeded unevenly in Boston—and not only because of the increasingly visible disparities of an expanding economy. Salmon’s proto-Georgian world of domestic withdrawal and genteel enclosure contrasts sharply, for example, with late-seventeenth-century householders’ reports of “afflicted” dwellings. Many New Englanders seem to have displaced anxieties about body intactness and spiritual declension onto their homes, which they saw as vulnerable to destructive supernatural visitings of one sort or another. In the face of providences and magic that could seem to shake the world loose from its foundations, “houses,” as Robert Blair St. George puts it, “were no place to hide” (181).

20. See, for example, the chapter on melancholy (“De *Tristibus*”) in the medical treatise by Smith’s townsman, Cotton Mather, in which the author, with a surprising and appealing modesty of his own, foregrounds the alterity of inward experiences: “How the *System of our Spirits*, comes to be dulled, and sowred, in this Distemper, lett them, who *know*, Declare; They who can only *guess*, will be Modest and Silent” (*Angel* 133).
21. See Plesters 37–41; Harley 43–46; and Fairbanks and Trent 3: 451.
22. In their summary of the results of a comprehensive pigment analysis of 19 Boston portraits from the seventeenth century, Fairbanks and Trent observe that “ultramarine blue was discovered only in the light blue eyes of Captain Thomas Smith and in the blue of the Dutch flags on the ship in the same painting” (3: 451).
23. Igor Kopytoff observes that the “conceptual polarity of individualized persons and commoditized things is recent and, culturally speaking, exceptional” (64). I am relying here on his analysis of slavery as the commoditization of persons. For a very different way of naming “the presumption of likeness between people and objects,” see Kibbey 42–64.

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