

**seeing the self  
“in frame”: early  
new england material  
practice and puritan  
piety  
sally m. promey**

I offer here a set of observations about the use of pictures in the Puritan devotional practice of self-examination. Specifically, I consider a cluster of seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century gravestone carvings and one oil painting, the Thomas Smith *Self-Portrait* (c.1670–91). Both kinds of artifacts, on stone and canvas, might well be described as means of “framing” the godly self. If Puritan diaries and journals, elegies and meditative poetry, biographies and autobiographies are literatures of and about the self, the gravestones and portrait painting that constitute my subject facilitate the performance of similar introspective labor. The fact that Thomas Smith likely painted his own resemblance while looking in a mirror represents only the most literal assertion of relations between his picture and the Puritan piety of self-examination. In approaching these material objects as “technologies of the self” (to appropriate a phrasing pursued by Tom Webster with respect to diaries), I also resituate them in particular environments and contexts and in relation to common practices and patterns of vision and behavior. I begin to suggest, furthermore, the intimate connections between these objects-in-place and other pictorial and textual forms of contemporary Puritan manufacture and imagination.

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In these Exercises, my Heart was rapt into those heavenly Frames, which would have turned a Dungeon into a Paradise.  
Cotton Mather (1686, 110)

I offer here a set of observations about the use of pictures in the Puritan devotional practice of self-examination. Specifically, I consider a cluster of seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century gravestone carvings (for example, Figure 1) and one oil painting, the Thomas Smith *Self-Portrait* (c.1670–91; Figure 2). I focus my attention on a set of objects, on stone and canvas, produced in and around Boston between 1660 and 1720.<sup>1</sup> Both kinds of artifacts might well be described as means of “framing” the godly self. Indeed, if Puritan diaries and journals, elegies and meditative poetry, biographies and autobiographies are literatures of and about the self, the gravestones and portrait painting that constitute my subject facilitate the performance of similar introspective labor. These pictures participate in the formation of a “self-image,” the mental visualization of a spiritual self-portrait, in conformity with metaphorical images of the godly self and, thus, ultimately in conformity with the “Image” of the Puritan Christ. Painting and stones encouraged the imaginative engagement of a certain kind of, otherwise unseen and presently deferred, Christian self. This transaction involved a visual “objectification” of the self, for purposes of discerning, examining, performing, and reappropriating a new and newly

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**FIG 1**  
Jonathan Pierpont stone, Wakefield, MA, 1709. Photo: Sally M. Promey.



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**FIG 2**

Thomas Smith, *Self-Portrait*, c.1670–1691, oil on canvas. Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, MA, museum purchase, 1948.19.



sanctified subject anchored in a divine moral economy of grace.

The fact that Thomas Smith likely painted his own resemblance while looking in a mirror represents only the most literal assertion of relations between his picture and the Puritan piety of self-examination. In approaching these material objects as “technologies of the self” (to adopt a phrasing used by Tom Webster [1996, 40] with respect to Puritan diaries), I also resituate them in particular environments and contexts and in relation to common practices and patterns of vision and behavior. I begin to suggest, furthermore, a subject I will explore elsewhere in more detail: the intimate connections, a sophisticated inter-media artistry, between these objects-in-place and other pictorial and textual forms of contemporary Puritan manufacture and imagination (and compare St. George 1998). Puritan artifacts come mostly out of artisan traditions (of wood and stone carving; early print book illustration; funerary ornaments, pictorial broadsides); like colonial practices of literacy, they represent an aesthetic of repetition. There was a visual universe less sensitive to the rhetoric of originality than to the vocabulary of reiteration; such terms as “model,” “pattern,” “copy,” “likeness,” “resemblance,” “emblem,” and “type” are common to contemporary accounts.<sup>2</sup>

The analogical fluidity of Christian scripture, apparent in its treatment of the Christian savior as both picture

(“image”) and text (“word”), extended to highly flexible metaphorical understandings of human life and formation. Among colonial Puritans the multilayered use of analogy invited the building up of a richly polysemic “picture” of the faithful self—as, for example, an architectural structure, more specifically, a “temple” or “house” of God; a “lively stone” in this larger divine edifice; and a mirror, ideally a “Mirrour of Piety” (C. Mather 1706, 84). One set of meanings inflected and reinforced another, providing, through the repetitive, meditative practice of self-examination, a highly textured articulation of the individual’s place in a narrative genealogy of redemption. The godly self thus constituted a subject formed over time and with reference to various differentiated reiterative practices of seeing and imagination. In relation to this Puritan hermeneutical strategy, I suggest a twofold significance for the images under consideration. First, these material forms (with their combination of pictures and texts) represented an emblematical and typological portraiture or material biography of the particular self, asserting the specific individual’s resemblance to godliness. And second, through this character of representation, the depicted “saint” (the mirror of piety) was offered as a ready pattern or model, an invitation to imagine the beholder’s own life in a saintly “frame” and to bring this self into closer conformity to the divine image. What is original to my account concerns less these two levels of significance and more the particular symbolic and metaphorical strategies of operation represented in the Puritan arts I examine and the material practices of piety that informed them.

### Framing the Self

The title I have given this article, “Seeing the Self *in Frame*,” (as suggested in one frequent terminology used by contemporaries) asserts the *spiritual* work of the objects in question as it simultaneously indicates an important part of the actual *formal* work that they accomplish: they set the self in a godly *frame*. Several Puritan pictorial forms surround a “vacancy” in the center with images around the “outside.” While this visual labor is initially most apparent in the gravestone carvings, I will argue that it is also a key aspect of the Smith *Self-Portrait*. The painter, as he paints, is aware that, from the perspective of most of his mortal audience, the body he depicts in the center of his picture has already been translated out of this world. Like gravestone carving, portraiture is an art form haunted (literally as well as theoretically) by absence—and Smith’s painting might fruitfully be considered in concert with the stones and other formally and conceptually related pictorial objects where the pictures tend to migrate toward the frame, such items as the emblematic title pages or frontispieces of devotional texts (Figure 3) and the illustrated broadsides (Figures 4 and 5) that circulated funeral elegies, decorated the pillars of the belfries



**FIG 3**  
 Title page, Lewis Bayly, *The Practise of Pietie*, 1620.  
 Folger Shakespeare Library, STC 1604. By permission  
 of the Folger Shakespeare Library.



**FIG 4**  
 Upon the death of the virtuous and religious Mrs. Lydia  
 Minot . . . January 27, 1667, Cambridge, MA.: Samuel  
 Green, 1668. Massachusetts Historical Society  
 image number 0533. Courtesy of the Massachusetts  
 Historical Society.

from which tolls rang out for the dead, remained pinned or tacked to the coffin at burial, and adorned the walls of New England homes.

The Puritan notion of “framing” that I take up here was rooted in scriptural and ecclesial usage where to “frame” could mean to enclose, to embrace, to describe, to bound, to contain, to fence, to fortify, to encircle, to create, to construct. It was used to refer to the frame of a building (Ephesians 2:21); the frame of Solomon’s temple (Ephesians 19–21); the frame of a door or window; the “frame” or physical stature of the human body; framing or fencing (and thus “improving”) a field or lot or other “vacancy”; framing a question (in such a way that the answer could be found, as in the Protestant catechism); and framing the human self, especially the heart.<sup>3</sup> Most important for our purposes here, the ability to see the self “in frame” (and especially “in a heavenly frame”) was a desired outcome of Puritan devotional exercises. Puritan Jonathan Mitchell, for example, admonished those engaged in spiritual self-examination to “take advantage of special seasons of Meditation when your heart is in a feeling frame” (Mitchell 1721, 282). Edward Trelawney, a young merchant, wrote about the importance and difficulty of bringing the “heart into frame,” of conforming to a Christian pattern (Trelawney 1635). For Richard Sibbes, Christ was the “frame of heaven,” the “most excellent frame of all,” the recommended model for believers (Sibbes 1639, 259). William Morton, in his preface to John Cotton’s *Way of Life*, asserted the necessity of faith “to fence [and, earlier on the same page, to ‘frame’] both graces and comforts, to subdue those corruptions, to scatter those clouds, to dispel that smook, to beat back those oppositions, and so secure the soule from all invasions and incursions of the enemy” (Morton 1641, [iii]). Thomas Shepard insisted that his meditations “gave me much light and set my heart in a sweet frame” (Shepard 1641, 85). Jonathan Pierpont, whose gravestone appears here as Figure 1, discovered consolation, while visiting his ill father, in witnessing the older man’s “very heavenly frame” (Pierpont 1689, 257). Harvard College student John Brock rejoiced in his conviction that “my Frame is heavenly and chearly” (Brock 1644, 100).

Framing the godly self, as a form of mental and spiritual self-visualization, was a tool of the most common and important of Puritan meditative practices, the spiritual discipline of self-examination, taken up from the Augustinians and modified for Protestant use (Taylor 1989, 184). Following Reformer John Calvin on the role of the human person in the process of redemption, seventeenth-century American Puritans held not only that God elected only some of his human creatures to salvation but also that their salvation depended entirely on God’s work of election in them. Despite their utter powerlessness to influence God’s will in this regard however, Christians were nonetheless duty-bound to search



**FIG 5**  
*A neighbour's tears sprinkled on the dust of the amiable virgin, Mrs. Rebekah Sewall . . . Boston: Bartholomew Green?, 1710. Massachusetts Historical Society image number 0850. Courtesy of the Massachusetts Historical Society.*

their lives for signs of God's saving grace. It was this belief and practice that earned the system the label "experimental Calvinism" (Webster 1996, 33, 36). As one prominent pastor observed: "Frequent SELF-EXAMINATION, is the duty and the prudence, of all that would *know themselves*, or would not *lose themselves*" (C. Mather 1710, 35). This mandate to introspection urged constant scrutiny, most especially of one's inner self or "heart." Edward Pearse called this exercise "Soul-work" (Pearse 1678, 110). The process involved matching the self to a scriptural model, a set of images and analogies, and a search for likeness to them. Resemblance occupied a key position in this spiritual practice and aesthetic. The conversion experience initiated the Puritan believer into the lifelong task of self-examination (Hambrick-Stowe 1982, ix, 200–3). In the words of Puritan writer William Morton, "A Christian never wants [for] work, his work lies mainly within doores [inside the self/heart/soul]; He that knows his heart, knows how hardly it is brought into a good frame, and how soon it is out againe; . . . nor can be repaired in a day, in a month, in a year" (Morton 1641, [ii]).

Given death's situation as the "culminating exercise" of Puritan devotions, the "final test of faith," all Puritan activity of self-examination was ultimately preparation for death (Hambrick-Stowe 1982, 229, 216–9; Hall 1982, 102–2). Despite the fact that Puritans had no formal liturgy for funerals, Puritan death was a highly ritualized and scripted performance. Contemporary manuals of preparation preached the significance of dying well—and of living one's way toward the "good" death. Rejecting the notion of purgatory, Puritans maintained that individuals knew, at the precise moment of death, whether they were elect or damned. For the true saints, death was the moment of transformation, the event of ultimate consequence that connected life on earth to a process of celestial glorification that would take place in two distinct steps: the ascent of the sanctified soul to heaven immediately following earthly death; and the re-union of the soul and the individual's renewed corporeal body at the Resurrection of the Dead and the establishment of the New Jerusalem. Freighted with metamorphic significance, the actual deathbed scene was a carefully observed and frequently recorded "public" event, public in the sense that family, friends, and acquaintances gathered, hopeful that they would witness a righteous death, one attended by signs that granted them assurance of a loved one's election and functioned, at the same time, as a model for their own personal, future encounter with death. Loss, never a warrant for uncontrolled grief, constituted instead an invitation to self-scrutiny. According to Cotton Mather, "To have *no Sorrow at all*, Or to be *without Natural Affection* is to be *worse than Infidels*." Still, "To indulge *too much Sorrow*, and the fall into *Extravagant and Exorbitant Ejaculations*, this is to be *as bad as Infidels*." Idolatry was "spiritual adultery": like pictures and

words, people, if loved excessively or mourned too grievously, could become idols (C. Mather 1712, 4–5). The goal was to progressively shift the focus from the survivor's grief to the commemorated person *as a model of the sanctified self*, thus making the individual death exemplary and, consequently, of use to all who might find in themselves signs of resemblance to the saintly model.<sup>4</sup>

In their article on “Family strategies and religious practice,” Anne Brown and David Hall (1997, esp. 42–5 and 53–6) have demonstrated the extent to which two contradictory notions of covenant competed for the attention of New England Puritans from the time of colonization to the Great Awakening: an inclusive Abrahamic covenant (based on Genesis 17:7) according to which blessings descended genealogically along family lines; and an exclusive covenant of limited atonement that protected the purity of the visible saints by seeking to gather only the regenerate into the church. The splits produced by the two covenantal systems emerged not only between different individuals and groups but also within particular individuals at various points in their lives. In the burial ground, and especially as represented in the school of stone carvers I consider in this article, the Genesis covenant worked hand in hand with experimental Calvinism. Familial clusters of stones both asserted the salvation of loved ones and elicited in survivors a search for assurance of their own inheritance.

Gravestone carvings, like the printed artifacts of poetic elegies for example, did not simply honor and commemorate the dead—but also (and perhaps more importantly) they provided a means to make survivors more like them, at least more like their now idealized, sanctified selves. What the aged Reverend John Higginson had to say in 1697 of Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana* could as easily be said of these stone carvings. The stones “embalmed and preserved, for the knowledge and imitation of posterity, the virtues of the blessed just” (Higginson 1702, 69). Gravestone carvers represented the dead symbolically, in this case emblematically and typologically—and viewers who knew to see *themselves* in emblematic terms appropriated the emblematic images of the dead as their own, facilitating, as Jeffrey Hammond has claimed for the elegiac form, a “redistribution of the deceased's piety throughout the community” (Hammond 2000, 169). Spiritual biography (in both pictorial and literary forms) could function as a model in this fashion because, as Cotton Mather's elegy for Sarah Leverett made explicit, in the sense that they all shared the Image of Christ, all saints looked alike. In his poem, Mather first lamented that human manufacture did not invent portrait painting early enough to capture the faces of biblical women on canvas (“long did I vex in vain at Stupid Man, that ere Men found out Painting, so long Ages ran. Fair would I *Painted* to the Life have seen The Heroines that in past Times have been”). Still, he contained

his disappointment because Leverett made “an end of all complaints”; in her “ONE Matron gives a sight of *all* the *Saints*” (C. Mather 1705, 80).<sup>5</sup> Richard Sibbes agreed: “The liker pictures are to the first pattern [Christ], the liker they are to one another” (Sibbes 1639, 264).

In theory, Puritans prohibited overly ritualized funerary observances; the evidence suggests, however, that the rules were frequently bent if not broken altogether. Even in early times of strictest compliance, the funeral elegy apparently flourished. Broadside publication of the elegiac text (sometimes before and sometimes after the burial) was the common medium of dissemination beyond oral performance. Broadside might communicate the death in advance of the funeral, represent the voice of the deceased at the observance itself, and commemorate the dead after burial. Elegies, read aloud at the house of the primary survivors and/or at graveside, and represented in either broadside reproduction or manuscript form, were frequently tacked or pinned to the hearse or coffin, and often buried with the body (Brown 1996, 130). It is in this context that Cotton Mather’s poetic description of funeral elegies as “Paper winding-sheets” makes material sense (C. Mather 1685).

Certainly we know that people spent time in the graveyards when they went there in solemn procession with other members of the community for a burial. The literature also indicates that pastors and providers of spiritual advice construed the burial ground as a place of periodic repetitive meditation. Guidelines for reception surface in contemporary devotional manuals. In a book that was itself a part of the material culture of funerary practices (the title page indicated that it was “recommended as proper to be given at funerals”), Edward Pearse advised: “*The meditation of Death . . . is Life*; it is that which greatly promotes our Spiritual Life; therefore walk much among the Tombs, and converse much and frequently with the thoughts of a Dying-hour” (Pearse 1678, 86–7). Pearse’s book appeared in numerous London (beginning in 1671) and Boston editions. Edward Taylor’s copy is listed in the inventory of his library (Johnson 1939, 216 item 144).

Frequent visitation, however (walking much among the tombs), raised the likelihood, and even necessity, of seeing the graveyard, of being present in it, at different hours of the day and seasons of the year, in multiple conditions of weather—as well as visiting it in different psychological moods and spiritual states—and in different stages of the individual’s internal conversion narrative. In the latter instances, this would mean that the stones elicited different spiritual meanings and possibilities of identification at different times. The stones themselves presented dramatically different viewing experiences with relatively minor changes in time of day, lighting, temperature, and humidity. With seasonal shifts, bright sun virtually obliterated the carving on some slate or granite stones, replacing it

**FIG 6**

Mary Long stone, Charlestown, MA, 1681. Photo: Sally M. Promey.



with a dazzling, shining flat expanse; rain, on glistening slate especially, made most of the carving virtually invisible; snow covered the bases so that only a portion of the surface could be seen, sometimes snow or frost filled the inscriptions making the graven marks more insistently apparent than was ordinarily the case (Figure 6); icy ground created a reflective surface that supplied the stones with “twins”; shadows also “doubled” and “revised” the stones. An important part of the environmental message, then, as changing, fleeting light and moisture played over the surface of obdurate stone, surely concerned transience and duration, the operations of evanescence and eternity. The numbers of stones (Figure 7), consequent multiplication of imagery, and reiteration of subtly varying shapes and appearances registered, moreover, as an important aspect of the experience. If “plain style” was a desired aesthetic quality, repetition based on “resemblance” and on layering of multiple, reinforcing, pictorial and formal metaphor was an important aspect of what made plain style “plain.” The tension between uniformity and variety animated this artistic vocabulary.

The recommendation to “walk much” did not just encourage visitation of one’s own family sites in times of bereavement or commemoration—but rather gave preference to a more comprehensive and general kind of transit as meditative practice. In terms of the actual material/physical context of the graveyard, the individual would be presented with a fluctuating set of extreme contrasts. On one hand were the elaborately carved stones representing Christian ideals and saintly spiritual progress. On the other hand, visitors to the burial grounds might well be sharing the space with renegade rutting pigs that dug up graves—and, less troublesome, with sheep and cattle pastured there to keep down the briars and brambles. This was an emotionally



**FIG 7**

Sibyll Wigglesworth stone, Cambridge, MA, 1708, showing context. Photo: Sally M. Promey.

and viscerally charged territory, where assertions of spiritual metamorphosis took place in the context of hard, cut and inscribed surfaces interacting with light and weather, where visitors might be enjoined to contort their bodies and endure physical discomfort to maximize vision, where the sight of one's own shadow cast on stone elicited both spiritual identification with the deceased saint and thoughts of impending bodily dissolution, where one was on occasion confronted by turned up bones and standing water, where it was sometimes very hard to ignore the sensory realities of rotting bodies.<sup>6</sup>

The process of self-scrutiny, of the sort evoked in the burial grounds, involved a fundamental activity of matching aspects of the individual life to an internalized visual and verbal glossary of biblical types and emblems, with recourse to Christian scripture as a kind of pattern or sourcebook of metaphors. Following a biblical admonition to search creation for evidence of sacred history, Puritan practitioners of the period were accustomed to seeing both pictures and words as "signs." Samuel Mather explained that "there is in a Type some *outward* or *sensible* thing, that represents an higher spiritual thing, which may be called a *Sign* or a *Resemblance*, a *Pattern* or a *Figure*, or the like" (S. Mather 1705, 52).<sup>7</sup> The vocabulary of emblem and type was one in which the Puritan population of seventeenth-century New England was well versed. The use of scriptural types and analogies, understood to be divinely instituted and to refer the beholder always back to the antitype or Christ, asserted the insufficiency of human language or art to adequately convey the glory of God in any direct fashion. In a theological system predicated on God's utter transcendence, typological and emblematic constructs worked through indirection, depending on metaphorical modes of thinking.<sup>8</sup> According to art historian Barbara Stafford, the analogical imagination, with its "double avoidance of self-sameness and total estrangement," encourages a conviction of connection across distinction, an intimate relation bridging an insurmountable gulf, between persons and God—and between persons and objects that elaborate the condition of relation and separation. The experience of ambivalence, born of the simultaneous assertion of continuity and difference, undergirds this equation (Stafford 1999, 8–10).

Seventeenth-century Puritans explicitly acknowledged the gap:

As there is a Similitude, a resemblance and Analogy between the Type and the Antitype in some things: So *there is ever a dissimilitude and a disparity between them in other things*. It is so in all similitudes, . . . There is a mixture of Consentaneity and Dissentaneity; or else instead of Similitude, there would be Identity. So here in these sacred Similes, it is not to be expected, that the *Type* and *Antitype* should . . . agree in all things. (S. Mather 1705, 57)

The perceiving self was always still suspended some distance from that with which it sought union, and, in the Puritan case, certainty of the outcome was deferred to the grave. Furthermore, in the sense that analogy displayed the capacity to temporarily “materialize” things unseen, it represented an “incarnational” performance. In Edward Taylor’s poetry this exchange rendered the Christian God a kind of great magician: Taylor described him as one who “dost use This Metaphor to make [Him]selfe appeare” (Taylor 1711, 229).<sup>9</sup>

### **“Portrait” Stones**

The question to which I now turn, then, concerns how it was that gravestones might function as “portraits.” One direct claim for this interpretation comes from contemporary epitaphs, that of William Pole (d. 1674 at age 81), for example, “which he himself made while he was still living . . . and left it to be ingraven upon his tomb y[e]t so being dead he might warn posterity.” By this means the stone then became, as Pole asserted, the “resemblance of the dead man bespeaking ye reader” (Pole 1674, 381). Beyond such explicit arguments for a gravestone’s “resemblance” to the person whose grave it marked, a more nuanced answer lies essentially in the Puritan typological imagination and, in the case of the cluster of stones I examine here, most particularly in Puritan appropriation and uses of the Hebrew scriptural imagery of Solomon’s temple and its typological linkage to Christian scriptural extensions of the temple of the New Jerusalem. Samuel Mather left no doubt as to the significance of this imagery: “Now the Temple is the Church of God; and we may apply this type in three ways: 1. To God and Christ. 2. To the Church. 3. To particular Saints” (S. Mather 1705, 455–6). According to Samuel’s influential younger brother Increase, Christ was “the elect cornerstone in [the temple of] Zion,” and the saints, at the moment of death, became the “lively stones” that built up God’s spiritual temple on this foundation (I. Mather 1686, 196; compare 1 Peter 2:4–7). Literary scholar, David Watters, who first pursued the subject of temple imagery and personal analogy in gravestone carving, charted the saint’s four-stage metamorphosis into a lively stone:

the heart [became] a temple for the spirit of Christ through grace, the person [became] a living pillar in the church on earth, at death he or she [was] made into a living stone in the heavenly temple, and finally, in the Resurrection [of the corporeal body at the end of time] he or she return[ed] to earth as a living stone in the New Jerusalem. (Watters 1981, 90)<sup>10</sup>

In a funeral sermon for John Hull, Samuel Willard lamented that when a saint like Hull died, “there is then a Pillar pluckt out of the Building, a Foundation Stone taken out of the

FIG 8

Thomas Kendel stone, Wakefield, MA, 1678, detail. Photo: Sally M. Promey.



FIG 9

Edmund Angier stone, Cambridge, MA, 1692, detail. Photo: Sally M. Promey.



Wall, a Man removed out of the Gap" (Willard 1683, 14). Hull could be pillar, stone, and person simultaneously. Rather than producing any felt disparity, the various reiterative analogues worked together, in and over time, to provide a more complete and complex "picture" of the faithful self.

Puritan stone carvers, too, articulated multiple facets of this temple equation. Perhaps most importantly, grave markers were themselves "lively stones," enlivened by their association with a particular saint, and signaling the passage or translation of this person (who was, biblically and figuratively speaking, also a "lively stone") from the earthly to the heavenly temple at the time of death. The inscriptions on the Thomas Kendel and Edmund Angier grave markers, for example, made clear this connection: Kendel (Figure 8) is a "Patarn of Piatl" and "Zion's stone." He is also "one of ye 7 of this Church Foundation," a reference to the seven pillars of Wisdom's house in Proverbs 9:1; and Kendel is represented here by the death emblem of the skull atop a pillar. Angier (Figure 9), for his part, "left his earthly, and entred into his heavenly house" upon his death in 1692. The Kendel stone pictured the two cherubim who guarded the temple and its sacred treasures; the Sarah and Mary Long stones did likewise (Figures 10 and 6). In many instances, the pictures cut into stone tympana asserted the ascent of the grave's occupant (most often depicted as winged skull or as soul effigy) through the veil of the temple (Figures 11 and 7), represented by a drape or scallop across the top of the tympanum. Christ was the antitype of Solomon's temple and its high priest. His sacrifice made the holy of holies, or heaven, accessible to the elect who themselves, in his image, might don the garb of the high priest ascending, as in the Abraham Nott stone of 1756 at Essex, Connecticut. Tassels, like those that adorned contemporary pulpit cloths in the meetinghouse and the pall over the coffin in funeral processions, decorated this temple curtain and appeared



**FIG 10**  
 Sarah Long stone, Charlestown, MA, 1674. Photo:  
 Sally M. Promey.

in a substantial number of slightly later gravestones (Figure 12). Typologically, the temple veil represented the flesh of Christ (rent on Good Friday with the crucifixion of Jesus) and thus also the sacrament of the Lord's Supper (Taylor 1696, 410–11; S. Mather 1705, 448; see also Watters 1979, 1981). The cutter of the Matthew Rockwell stone (South Windsor, Connecticut, 1782) juxtaposed the tasseled veil (the flesh of Christ or bread of the Last Supper) with a row of communion



**FIG 11**  
 Katharine Greenleafe stone, Cambridge, MA, 1712.  
 Photo: Sally M. Promey.



**FIG 12**  
 Rebecca Hale stone, Glastonbury, CT, c.1755–60, detail. Photo: Sally M. Promey.

cups. Significantly, for New England Puritans, the sacrality of neither the earthly church nor the heavenly temple depended on a particularly consecrated *space* but rather on converted *human beings*, the saints, the lively stones that most fundamentally constituted the celestial temple—whose image was restored in the burial grounds.<sup>11</sup>

Among the visual features of the temple most often represented in the stones were the two famous pillars, said to stand in the temple porch. Texts by Samuel Mather and Samuel Lee described these pillars in detail. In the course of his lengthy disquisition, Mather declared:

Particular saints are compared to *Pillars in the House of God*, Rev. 3:12 . . . There be two properties of a good Pillar, it must be straight and strong . . . upright and steady . . . These Pillars [in Solomon’s temple] were broken in pieces and carried away to Babylon, but living Pillars in the spiritual Temple shall . . . abide in the house forever, Job 8:35 . . . Thou art then a Pillar in the House of God, and shalt go no more out. (S. Mather 1705, 457)<sup>12</sup>

**FIG 13**  
Pillars, from Samuel Lee, *Orbis Miraculum, or the Temple of Solomon*, 1659, p. 68. Folger Shakespeare Library, L903.2. By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library.



**FIG 14**  
John Brown stone, Wakefield, MA, 1717.  
Photo: Sally M. Promeey.

Lee’s large-format illustrated text pictured the two pillars (Figure 13), as did the Geneva Bible which, along with the more intellectual Authorized Version of 1611, remained a popular translation among Puritan New Englanders (Stout 1986, 25–6; see also Daniell 2003, esp. Chapters 17, 20, 24–5). As shown in Lee and other contemporary books and prints, these double pillars topped with spheres bear a striking resemblance to the two “pillars” flanking the gravestones examined here (Figure 14). Given the tendency of the carvers, beginning in the seventeenth century, to represent the spheres topping the pillars as portrait heads of the deceased (e.g., Figures 1 and 15), it is useful to know that the scriptural text named the two pillars as though they were human: “Jachin”





**FIG 15**  
 Pierpont portrait (detail) from Jonathan Pierpont stone  
 (see Figure 1). Photo: Sally M. Promey.

and “Boaz” then represented (respectively, and based on the translation of their Hebrew names) fixedness or firmness; and strength (Lee 1659, 69–70; S. Mather 1705, 453–5). Like the named pillars in the scriptural temple, named believers took the place of these upright and up-righteous supports. This devotional context for early carved portrait heads qualifies the claims of scholars who assert a connection between the appearance of portraits in gravestone carving and a decline in Puritan piety (see, e.g., Ludwig 1966, 316–22; Benes 1977, 132, 166–9, and 192–4). Given the profusion of floral and vegetal motifs on the carved stones, it is noteworthy that the Samuel Mather text described carved decorations of flowers and fruits on these named scriptural pillars and Cotton Mather’s *Bonifacius* connected devotional practices concerning self-scrutiny and meditation on death to Christian fruitfulness: “And if such an exercise were often attended, Oh! How much would we regulate our lives, how watchfully, how fruitfully would it cause us to live” (C. Mather [1710] 1966, 36). Gravestone carvers pictured this ideal in symbols of spiritual fruitfulness and abundance, including female breasts, in some cases doubling as figs, gourds, or melons, among visual emblems of sacred nourishment (see Figures 7, 11, 14).<sup>13</sup> The Pierpont stone (Figure 1) explicitly praised the Wakefield pastor as a “Fruitful Christian.” The Edmund Angier stone (Figure 9) depicted two sets of pillars, an inner “plain” set and an outer set of ornamented portrait pillars.

### Mirror Images

Gravestones enjoined living beholders, walking among the tombs, to examine themselves to discover the fruits of their own faith. The move from the decorated spiritual appearance of the deceased to resemblance in the survivor was facilitated by an aesthetic of imitation that prized reiteration. In a sermon Edward Taylor explained typology in relation to this aesthetic: “God doth as it were pensill out in fair Colours and [ingrave] and portray Christ” in the Hebrew scriptures (Taylor 1702b, 269). The image as it appears in these types is imperfect; in Christ this image is perfected. According to Taylor:

We were made, and formed with an Imitating Principle in our Nature, which cannot be Suffocated, or Stifled, but will act in Imitating Some Example; God to prevent us from taking wrong Patterns to follow, hath presented us with a perfect Pattern of right practice in our own nature in Christ, which is most Exemplary, being a most Exact Coppy. . . . Hence our Imitation of him is His due, and our Duty, and to leave this Pattern, is to dishonour him, deform our Lives, to Deviate from our Pattern, and to Disgrace [dis-grace?] our Selves. (Taylor 1701a, 34).

Because the saints most effectively imitated the pattern offered by Christ, they too became patterns worthy of



**FIG 16**  
John Person stone, Wakefield, MA, 1679.  
Photo: Sally M. Promey.

imitation, “living” types of the antitypical (original) Christ. “Visible Holiness in everyone,” Taylor asserted, “is exemplary, and gives forth influences of holiness attractive to draw others on to the Same” (Taylor 1702a, 244). In pictorial form: “Thou [God] portrai’d art in Colours bright, that stick Their Glory on the Choicest Saints, Whereby They are thy Pictures made” (Taylor 1695b, 99). In a related metaphorical usage, Puritan writers also equated both “saints” and scriptural “types” (as well as the Bible itself) with mirrors or looking-glasses. Titles of numerous emblem books designated as “mirrors” or “glasses” of godliness the emblems contained therein. In 1706, Cotton Mather, for example, referred to the sanctified dead as “Mirrours of Piety” (C. Mather 1706, 84). Thirty-four years earlier, just after poet Anne Bradstreet’s death, John Norton II described her as a “Pattern and Patron of Virtue,” a “Mirror of Her Age” (Norton [1672] 1968, 460).<sup>14</sup> The images carved into the stones, thus not only provided “figurative” portraits of deceased saints but also, by “reflection” and analogy, offered exemplary spiritual visages that survivors might appropriate as their own. Looking at the godly images carved on the saints’ stones, believers saw themselves, their own spiritualized selves, looking back.

The amenability of the stones to the task of eliciting self-visualization was surely enhanced by the fact that the bilateral symmetry of the stones reiterated a formal analogy to the human body. In terms of their shape and appearance the “living” stones might be said to *re-member* the dead as a way of imagining the sanctified self. This “temple” was also a body: its pilasters or pillars the appendages or arms, its tympanum a head, the temple interior, the central, framed space or “vacancy” of the stone, upon which the person’s name was written, was the “heart”—and on some gravestones this was literally the case (Figures 6 and 10, and compare Figure 16 where the heart is implied). That the death’s head or soul effigy could be imagined as an actual visage of a person is apparent in a number of contemporary texts, including an elegy written for Thomas Dudley eight years before his death. With an anagram of Dudley’s name as its title: “Thomas Dudley/Ah! Old must dye,” the poem included the lines: “A death’s head on your hand you neede not weare! A dying head you on your shoulders beare. You neede not one [a death’s head] to mind you, you must dye, You in your [very] name may spell mortalitye” (Anonymous 1645, 505).

If one stone signified the bodily person of the individual saint, grouped together, as they were in context, the stones represented the bodily self as part of a community of saints that breached the bounds of time, connecting past to present, and present to future, and future to eternity. The invitation to see the self not only in relation to the familial inheritance of the Abrahamic covenant, but also as one of the gathered saints would have been especially important in the 1670s to 1720s, just the years for which there are fairly

dramatic increases in the numbers of carved stones. These were times of particular anxiety for Puritan clergy who feared a waning of piety (with or without demographic evidence). A monumental set of genealogical ancestors thus enlivened the Church's past and asserted its connection to the present at a moment of perceived generational crisis.

With the pictures pushed to the frames, the centers of the stones provided a surface for reflection, a place to imagine one's own name inscribed—for, while there is a fair degree of variation in inscription, the one constant is the most stripped down of biographical sketches.<sup>15</sup> With the typological, emblematical self on the outside, the named individual and the chronological span of their mortal existence appeared on the inside in the registration of names and dates. The stones thus incorporated both generalized saintly pattern *and* biographical specificity.<sup>16</sup> The activity of inscribing names, however, could also be linked to scriptural sources and, in particular, to temple imagery. Samuel Mather's gloss on the biblical texts elaborated this theme. Christ, as high priest, would enter the heavenly temple with the names of the saints carved into the precious stones ornamenting his priestly garments. The names on these stones would be "in everlasting remembrance" before God: "Their names are engraven in his sight, that he cannot look off from them" (S. Mather 1705, 505–9; compare Taylor 1695c, 281–3; Lee 1659, 89).

Puritan poet Anne Bradstreet, at the end of a long piece titled "Contemplations," counted on another scriptural context for interpreting stone inscriptions like these: "O Time the fatal wrack of mortal things/That draws oblivions curtains over kings. . . . But he whose name is grav'd in the white stone// Shall last and shine when all of these are gone." Her "white stone" was taken from the Book of Revelation 2:17; the Geneva Bible that she might have used glossed the stone as "a token of God's favor and grace; . . . a sign that one was cleared in judgment." With quiet and final authority, the white stone signified the named individual's sure election to grace (Bradstreet n.d., 174).

For the Puritan Samuel Sewall, choosing names for his children was no small task. Names had to be carefully selected and considered for their possible significance, especially with respect to scriptural precedents (see Sewall November 25, 1694, 324; compare Hall 1989, 218). Names, further, bore a special sort of likeness to the individual, such that the name was understood to carry hidden spiritual messages relevant to the person—these secret meanings were often evoked to greatest effect around the time of death in elegiac anagrams, acrostics, and puns on names in funeral broadsides (Webster 1996, 46–7). Edward Taylor arranged his elegy for Charles Chauncy, president of Harvard, in the shape of a tombstone, and called the text "A Quadruple Acrostick whose Triple is an Anagram." The anagram, a form



**FIG 17**  
Emblem book, "The Table of the Heart," *The School of the Heart*, p. 104, showing the law being inscribed upon the heart. Folger Shakespeare Library, H 184. By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library.

that rearranged the letters of an individual's name to reveal hidden sacred messages, "became the signature formal device of New England elegies" (Hammond 2000, 173). The anonymous author of Lydia Minot's broadside elegy (Figure 4) found three anagrams in Minot's name ("I di to Al myn," "I di, not my Al," and "Dai is my Lot"), building a short poem around each of the three; the last poem was also an acrostic of her name (Fairbanks and Trent 1982, 129–31, 313–14). Acrostics, in which the letters of an individual's name registered as a vertical column providing the first letter of each line of a verse or poem, also appeared on gravestones; the Dorchester, Massachusetts, stone (1686/1731) for James Humfrey is one example.<sup>17</sup> The judgment represented in the inscription of names could be negative as well as positive. A passage that appeared frequently on gravestones all over New England, "The memory of ye just is blessed" (Figure 9), was but the first part of a verse from the book of Proverbs. While the stone carvers did not usually provide the citation, any contemporary viewer could have supplied the second line from Proverbs 10:7: "The memory of the just is blessed—but the names of the wicked shall rot."<sup>18</sup> Looking on these saintly "mirrors" could be a sobering, even frightening, experience as well as a reassuring one.

### Heart Religion

In the terms of its practitioners, Puritanism was "Heart Religion": personal religious experience constituted its core (Hooker [1633] 1975). Richard Baxter described the aim of his own exercise of self-examination in these terms. He searched himself to see or "trace the workings of the spirit upon my heart." He called his spiritual autobiography his "Book of Heart Accounts" (Baxter 1696, 6; Baxter 1662, 304; Webster 1996, 43). Cotton Mather defined Puritan practice as "the Art of managing our Hearts" (C. Mather 1705, 82). A critical task of Puritan meditative exercises was the transfer of knowledge of God's truth in one's head to faith in that truth in one's heart (Hambrick-Stowe 1982, 163). The admonition was scriptural, and its scriptural foundation featured hearts in company with stones; the righteous have God's laws inscribed on their hearts instead of on tablets of stone (Ezekiel 11:19; Jeremiah 31:33; Hebrews 8:10, 10:16). The carver, cutting a heart into stone, rehearsed the anticipated transformation: he wrote and drew on stone, but God would write and draw on the living, beating human heart. The Decalogue, on tablets of stone, became, by Christian metamorphosis, the vital, pulsing engine of life. The heart was, furthermore, God's spiritual temple. With the destruction of the historical temple of Solomon, the deity took up residence in the believing heart (see, e.g., Taylor 1703a, 370–1; compare Fish 1978, 69–73). This metaphoric set of associations (Decalogue, gravestone, temple, heart) found expression in popular Protestant emblem books (Figures 17 and 18) and on the stones themselves (compare

Figures 6, 10, and 16). This is not surprising given that the stones are, perhaps most essentially, about metamorphosis—about the transformation of the self from one state to another, an orthodox and beneficent form of image-magic in which the image of the self in the self becomes the image of Christ in the self. The unidentified artisan of the “BW” stone at First Church, Windsor, Connecticut, made it perfectly clear in the poetic inscription he carved that he cared little for the shape of his words on stone: what he intended was that his message be interiorized, impressed upon the “REDERS MINDE” and heart. The “softened,” “melted,” or “broken” heart was, in Puritan terms, the preferable spiritual alternative to the hardened, cold, or inflexible heart. Taylor once described his own “rocky heart” (Taylor 1695a, 57; compare Ezekiel 11:19). The goal was to be pliable, shapeable, amenable to union with Christ; the souls of both men and women, in this context, were gendered female.

The heart, the generally agreed upon location of the soul, provided the ideal surface or ground for both text and image. The human heart became God’s tablet for inscription (Figure 17), the mirror for Christ’s reflection, and the canvas for the divine “portrait”—and these equations (the heart as God’s tablet, mirror, and canvas) belonged to the seventeenth century. In a sermon preached by Edward Taylor, God’s work of regeneration involved “a renewall of his holy Image on man . . . afresh upon his Soule in Evangellicall Colours” (Taylor 1702/3, 314). Adam, the original creature in the “Image of God” was a “Sparkling Looking Glass, representing the Glorious Image of his Maker” (Taylor 1693, 53). The original image, stained, compromised, even destroyed, by Satan’s design in original sin, would be restored to the godly self. The divine image or portrait, banned from Puritan churches, was reinscribed on the Puritan heart: “the transplendent Glorious Image of the Son of God in Sparkling-glorious Colours is portraied again upon the Soule” (Taylor 1701b, 97). This Christ was not just the artist, but also the self-portraitist: “It is Christs Workmanship in portraying his own image upon the Soule” (Taylor 1703b, 453). And God’s work was first “drawing out” “the Portraiture of Christ” in scriptural types: “[God] draws out the very Effigies of his Son upon so many glorious Types and sets them before our Eyes to behold him in” (Taylor 1694/5, 312). “Christ as it were is God’s masterpiece” (Sibbes 1639, 259–60).

God, the ultimate artist, was a portraitist who painted, drew, inscribed his image, and the image of his divine son/self, on lively stones and human hearts as the believer’s own true portrait. This view of divine activity is particularly revealing of a culture in which the most frequently surviving paintings are portraits. In any and all “types,” the spiritually conversant viewer could see the image—the “portrait”—of Christ. With an astonishing degree of uniformity, contemporary writers agreed that while mortals see “through a glass darkly,” in heaven



**FIG 18**  
Emblem book, *Pia Desideria: or Divine Addresses*, p. 104, showing the trying of the heart in the mirror of scriptural law, which has been substituted for the mirror of vanity. Folger Shakespeare Library, H 3351. By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library.

“we shall have full views of his face, full visions of his Glory” (Pearse 1678, 213–14). In heaven God would no longer be represented by his name only, the lettered Hebrew acronym YHWH (see Figure 3, upper right-hand corner), but by his own clear shining countenance, a brightness reputedly so intense that the sun grew dim by comparison.

The heart on the stone asserted the soul (and the face of God reflected upon it) in its absence. Calvin’s thoughts on representing the visible aside, much of New England Puritan aesthetics is involved with indirectly representing what is *not* there, or what is presumed to be present but invisible. The “frame” contains the absent or invisible element. Both the winged death’s head and the soul effigy represent the transformation wrought by death, a transformation marked by the soul’s ascent to heaven and its subsequent absence from earth (and from the body) until the end of time. The paired contrast of vacancy and indwelling, emptying and filling, describes a constant tension that marks the richly analogical world of Puritan imagination. The task at hand was to empty the self of “self” (Luxon 1995, 104; see also Bayly 1613). The contours of this vacancy then allowed space for the image of Christ, provided a frame for the divine portrait. Sin was, most basically here, the fundamental iconoclast. Sin “[destroyed] the image of God upon thee” (Taylor 1693–4, 201), creating “a greate Vacancy as to . . . the Image of God on man” (Taylor 1702/3, 315; see also Sibbes 1639, 260).

Increase Mather encouraged self-examination in order to see, to recover, the Image of Christ in the self and, through seeing this image, to experience what he called a “Facial Vision” of God. Furthermore, he continued, “This Meditation should [make those who practiced it] willing to be absent from the Body, so that they may be present with the Lord” — thus simulating what was believed to happen at Puritan death. Mather expected that this spiritual exercise would be “attended with a Transformative Power, changing them [practitioners] into the same Image” as Christ himself (I. Mather 1705, ii–iv). Thomas Shepard pleaded: “O Lord, imprint this image upon me” (Shepard 1641, 94), and Taylor prayed that Christ would: “Begin to draw afresh thine Image out In shining Colours, on my Life, and Heart” (Taylor 1700, 277). In this way, Richard Sibbes maintained, “Christ is alive” in the world “in the hearts of gracious Christians, that carry the picture and resemblance of Christ in them” (Sibbes 1639, 264). The heart or soul was both canvas and reflective surface, the looking-glass that “portrayed” the image of Christ.

Seeing the self in frame was a way to locate a useful “reflection” in time and space. As a mirror of piety, the saint was a glass turned heavenward to reflect the divine, to resemble the divine in terms of typological attributes—then turned back toward earth to reflect the image onto the believer. The object of pious self-examination was eventually

to discern or discover the image of Christ in the self. This was a sort of Protestant pictorial *imitatio Christi*. “My Heart shall be thy [Christ’s] Chrystall looking Glass,” Taylor wrote (1716, 452). In the “mirrou of piety,” the Puritan sought not his or her own image but Christ’s image; the construction of a godly self was finally, in fact, the self’s transformation into the “Image” of Christ. Again, the source was a scriptural one, taken from 2 Corinthians 3:18: “We all with open face beholding, as in a glass, the Glory of the Lord; are changed into the same image” (R. Mather 1652, 23; see also Pierce n.d., 113–16; Sibbes 1639, 205–98). This exercise of self-examination allowed the practitioner to imagine the self as Christ, and to bring the self into conformity with a true image and a true icon. A contemporary glossed the text:

The *Reflexion* of his Beauty shall be *imprinted* upon our persons, whilst we *behold* him. As for *Example* . . . when we look upon a Glass, which by being *Polite* [i.e., polished], but not *transparent*, reflects the Image of our persons, ’Tis called a “*Looking-Glass*” very fitly; because in our *looking* upon *It*, It seems to be *looking* upon *Us* too . . . Now our Persons in Heaven will be so polished, (*when this Corruptible shall have put on Incorruption.*) that we shall be in respect of *God*, what *Looking-Glasses* are in respect of *Us*; we receiving *his* likeness, as they do *ours* . . . We shall be *Mirroirs* exactly made; a kind of *Looking-glasses* with *Eyes*; whilst by *seeing* as we are *seen*, and *representing* the *Image* of what we *see*, we shall therefore be *like* unto *God* himself, because *we shall see him as he is*. (Pierce n.d., 115)

Mirrors were ultimately about the transformation of the individual, the construction or framing of a godly self which was, in fact, finally the self’s transformation into the “Image” of Christ.

Given this historical context, it is not difficult to imagine emblematic gravestones that represented individual saints (though only some included physiognomic portraits) and their virtues as mirrors framed with the typological ornaments of the fruitful self. Walking among the tombs in the burial grounds, believers might find “looking-glasses” that brought their own “reflections” into conformity with the image of the godly saint and in which they were expected to imagine their own names inscribed.<sup>19</sup> As Jason LaFountain has observed, in some cases the symbolic capacities of a stone’s particular material qualities reinforced this meaning. Glorified selves, as looking-glasses reflecting the dazzling “lustre” of God’s own face, would “shine” and “sparkle,” like the sun-struck surfaces of the mica-flecked rough-hewn stone that marked Israel Smith’s grave (1783) in the Glastonbury, Connecticut, burial ground, for example (LaFountain 2004; compare Pierce n.d., 112–13).



**FIG 19**  
 Frontispiece, John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*, 1749. William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California, Los Angeles, PR3330.A1 1749.

### The *Self-Portrait* of Thomas Smith

I want to redirect attention now to the Thomas Smith *Self-Portrait* (Figure 2) and to consider the painting in relation to what I have said about gravestone carving and Puritan meditative practices of the self. In this painted artifact, Smith is, in fact, an artist working in the genre of spiritual autobiography or self-presentation. He is also an artist observing his own features in a mirror; so the image is, quite literally, about self-examination. The formal organization of this work reveals something of the process of its production. That is to say, with the important exception of the carefully articulated face, the canvas might be imagined as the vacant space of the mirror's reflective surface surrounded or framed by objects, emblems, and types. Thomas Smith is not only painting in a mirror, but also literally and figuratively painting his life "in frame." Were we standing before the painting, we would see that he does so in almost perfect life-scale; he is the beholder's mirror image. We know very little about Smith's actual biography. There were at least a dozen men of the same name who might have been the artist. Only two pieces of evidence seem firmly attributable: the painting itself (it is signed), and a record indicating that Harvard College hired "Major" Thomas Smith in 1680 to produce a copy of a 1633 painting of Puritan minister William Ames. The original by Dutch artist Willem van der Vliet crossed the Atlantic with Ames's widow a few years after its completion. Smith's copy has disappeared, and is thought to have been destroyed in a fire in 1764 (Dresser 1935, 133–8).<sup>20</sup> The original now belongs to Harvard University.

When I began my research, I was struck by the loose similarity between the Smith *Self-Portrait* and the frontispiece of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (Figure 19). Bunyan published the first edition of his book in 1678—the volume was immensely popular, exported widely, immediately, and, importantly, to Boston. Numerous editions followed in rapid succession, with a first Boston imprint in 1681. But the frontispiece that caught my eye was a 1728 version (similar to the 1749 image shown in Figure 19). When I began to do some background checking, I discovered that the 1684 version lacked the prominent skull, which seems not to have appeared before 1695, where it showed up as a small skull and crossbones on a coffin. Here I thus wish only to suggest (and I feel secure in doing so) that the Smith *Self-Portrait* exhibits some of the same habits of imagination, vision, and thought, as the Bunyan frontispiece and the story it summarizes. The Bunyan picture too, based on English artist Robert White's so-called *Sleeping Portrait of Bunyan*, surrounds a portrait bust with emblems of Christian pilgrimage—and Bunyan, too, tells a tale of the progress of the Puritan Christian soul. Bunyan and Smith were both deeply engaged in artistic projects that involved searching the self for resemblance to types of Christian piety and to

patterns of Christian life trajectory; both inhabited a culture that described this sort of “progress” as pilgrimage.

The Smith *Self-Portrait*, the carved gravestones, and the Bunyan frontispiece all feature a named self in the center, surrounded and framed by typological or emblematic life-references. In Smith’s case the emblems include a maritime battle scene out the “imaginary” window in the painting’s upper left corner, the poem and the skull upon which Smith’s proper right hand rests, and the curtain with tassel in the painting’s upper right corner.<sup>21</sup>

Of the Boston-area Thomas Smiths who might most likely have been the painter, several had maritime careers—and a number of historians who have written about this image in the past have attempted to identify the battle represented in the window. This is a worthwhile task (in its particularity this fight does seem to indicate a specific historic referent), but it is not the one I undertake in this article. Despite the painter’s elusive earthly biography, he almost certainly shared his contemporaries’ estimation of the faithful Protestant life as spiritual warfare. Popular devotional writer Edward Pearse maintained his own certainty that

this life is little else but a perpetual war and conflict with Lusts, with Devils, with Afflictions, and with Temptations; hence 'tis call'd a *fight*, a *warfare*, and the like: and the enemies with which they in this warfare have to grapple, are formidable enemies: *We wrestle not, says the Apostle, with flesh and blood, but with principalities and Powers, and Spiritual wickednesses*, Eph. 6, 12, 13. (Pearse 1678, 203–4)

With life a perpetual warfare, only God’s gracious gift of faith provided any fortification or defense for the soul. “Death, when ever it comes,” continued Pearse, “will turn your Conflicts into Victory; this . . . Field of Blood (for such is this world) into a . . . Throne of Glory” (Pearse 1678, 203).

The poem that Smith painted at the lower left communicates a similar world-view:

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 Eternal Drawes to him my heart  
By Faith (which can thy Force Subvert)  
To Crowne me (after Grace) with Glory.

Here death, the skull, as Max Cavitch has pointed out, literally consumes “the World” (Figure 20; Cavitch 2002, 100). The poet Smith maintains, however, that Faith subverts the World’s “Force” and Glory sustains the soul.

**FIG 20**  
Thomas Smith *Self-Portrait*, detail of Figure 2,  
showing skull, poem, and “heart” in lace.



The appropriation of a skull in this fashion was by this time, of course, a familiar device on both sides of the Atlantic. In Smith's own Boston community, Puritan minister John Cotton had commented, in a passage that recalls the hazards of visiting seventeenth-century burial grounds, on the uses and abuses of obtaining such things as skulls for memento mori objects: "A man passing through a burying place may see a dead man's scalpe cast up, and thereby [justifiably] take occasion from the present object to meditate (for the present) on his mortality, and to prepare for like change" (Cotton 1642, 20). Despite Cotton's subsequent cautionary remarks against taking the skull back home to be used repeatedly, to be depended upon, as such an aid, Calvinist Protestants clearly did employ skulls and other death objects in the practice of meditation on death, or at least they were happy to represent themselves doing so.<sup>22</sup>

I will return to the skull, but first a few words about the drapery in the upper right-hand corner of the painting. Like the view out the window and the memento mori arrangement of skull and poem, the drape or swag in the background was a conventional standard of western portrait painting by the seventeenth century. Smith's drape, while entirely ordinary, served several functions. Its sense of "staging" heightened the drama of the scene, it implied (as in the Bradstreet poem quoted earlier) the "curtain that draws time's oblivion over

kings.” It also represented the veil of the temple, signaled so frequently in gravestone carving of Smith’s time and place, through which the elect entered into heavenly glory. The golden tassel, as drapery tie, thus had both general and specific significance—which comes into focus when considered in the context of this article’s earlier discussion of tassels on pulpit drapings, palls, and gravestones (Figure 12). While such tassels were common features of portraits elsewhere in the colonies and in Europe, this painting is the only known seventeenth-century Boston portrait to depict such a prominent golden tassel. In addition to its standard domestic signification, here it also indicates the temple veil, the sacramental veil of flesh opening into the heavens. Diagonally across the painting, Smith opposes the veil’s flesh of Christ (consumed by earthly Christians in every celebration of the Lord’s Supper) with death’s consumption of the World.

This painting might be justifiably considered as a double self-portrait. Smith is represented both by his mortal visage and by the skull he grasps. The skull speaks in the first person as Smith: “Why should I [Smith] the world be minding.” And yet this skull, with its too-round eyes, its inverted heart nose, and its regular row of way-too-many tiny teeth, is not a “real” skull, but a deliberately stylized one.<sup>23</sup> This skull is the skull of the stone carvers (compare Figures 20 and 21), not the remains of a human body. Furthermore, as Roger Stein (1984) first pointed out, the odd tilt of the poem on the table serves another purpose besides allowing the beholder to read the words inscribed on the sheet. Smith’s stylized skull with framed text below announces its visual correlation with the carvers’ stones in the burial grounds. A part of the eeriness of this painting resides in the fact that death (the skull) and not Thomas Smith most directly addresses the viewer. The aging artist assumed posthumous beholding. And the visual rhyming of skull/inscription and head/lace is striking enough (to the extent even of the “twin” inverted heart in the lace

**FIG 21**  
Jabez Fuller stone, Middleborough, MA, 1728, detail,  
showing skull with inverted heart nose. Photo: Sally  
M. Promey.



itself; Figures 2 and 20) to suggest conscious analogy, a visual parallel between one and the other.

Smith's visual punning expands upon the two hearts (in skull nose-hole and lace) and draws attention to the dark-on-light light-on-dark reversal of text and lace. The picture links writing on a page, or stone, with "writing" on Smith, inscribing his body or "heart." The lace also shares certain visual characteristics of the floral motifs carved on gravestones. Like Thomas Dudley, Smith already carries a death's head on his shoulders.<sup>24</sup> Both "*lively stones*" (in the burial ground) and the speaking dead (Smith) catch the eye and activate self-examination as well as memory. Smith assumes that his *mortal* self is mute—which makes this a haunted picture. Though Smith speaks, through the skull, like a ventriloquist, from beyond the grave, he claims authorship and voice in the elegiac mode, in which, customarily, the words of the deceased address survivors at the graveside in poetic form.<sup>25</sup>

Under ultraviolet illumination the letters "Tho S AET" are visible just to the left of the TS monogram on the poem (Fairbanks and Trent 1982, 474). In this "correction," the artist replaced the more usual identification of the sitter by name and age with his own monogram. This emendation highlights the painting's departure from expected "portrait" conventions; and, in a related strategy, it provided Smith with an opportunity to sign both painting and poem at once. For whatever else this painting is, it is also a visual assertion of artistic vocation. As the poem and vanitas skull suggest, Smith is not without ambivalence about his art. The painter might, in this ambivalence, be profitably compared with preacher/poet Edward Taylor's anxieties about his literary art and with John Cotton in the latter's explicit efforts to balance "arte and prophecy" in sermon writing (Gordis 2003, 7). Smith affixed his name to, he "signed," both painting and poem, which in themselves ultimately functioned as "signs" of his own Christian pilgrimage and election by grace.

In fact, if the reader assents to the skull-and-tilted-page tombstone analogy, Smith signs painting, poem, *and* carved stone. He thus sanctifies all three arts in the service of a godly ideal; and he demonstrates his own proficiency in two of them. (In this context, it seems useful to point out that carvers sometimes added their initials to the stones they produced, as in the Pierpont stone on which a youthful Nathaniel Lamson collaborated with his father; Figure 22). Furthermore, not only has Smith, painter, "stone carver," *and* poet, composed these verses, he has also written them out in his own hand on the painting's surface. Literacy in the seventeenth century did not necessarily carry the assumption that the reader could also write. Handwriting was an additional skill, not acquired by everyone. It carried elevated associations of art and learning as well as commerce, since merchants were among those who needed to learn to write (Thornton 1996, 3–18).



**FIG 22**  
Pierpont stone, detail of Figure 1, showing carver's initials at top left and right of celestial floral motif (NL for Nathaniel Lamson). Photo: Sally M. Promey.

More than simply the frame of the mirror into which he peers so intently, more even than the “frame” of life emblems he paints around his mirror image, Smith’s “frame,” as his poem suggests, is a frame of “Glory.” The artist construes as his own both heavenly glory and the glory of his artistry in its service, salvation coexisting in balanced tension with a measure of earthly fame, self-examination with self-display. Like his contemporary John Bunyan, Smith gives us a Puritan pilgrim’s “allegory” of vision and creativity, human and divine. Eyes, as organs of vision and as portholes or windows of the soul, loom large in this picture—and Smith underscores his interest in this visual sensory organ by painting his piercing blue eyes with costly ultramarine pigment.<sup>26</sup>

Smith painted himself “contained.” Placing art in the frame of Puritan belief, he looked at his reflection, not at the beholder (only his reflection looked back at the descendants he assumed would stand before the painting). In his mirror, Smith examined himself as Puritan and as artist: this was both a spiritual and an artistic exercise. Given the Puritan theology of mirrors that the man of letters who wrote this poem and painted this picture likely knew, it is tempting to speculate about the actual object of Smith’s sight. Looking in the mirror of piety, the saint ultimately and ideally saw not his own countenance but the Image of Christ looking back. This vision would have assured—and empowered—Thomas Smith the artist and Puritan—and his familial beholders.



**FIG 23**  
Thomas Smith *Self-Portrait*, in 1934 pre-restoration photo, Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, MA, conservation files.

Increase Mather was typical in leaving his spiritual autobiography for his descendants as he neared the end of this life. The text he produced was also typical in its representation of the practice of the self embedding itself, framing itself, in time and eternity (I. Mather [1685–1715], 277). “Writing of your former and present life,” Puritan Jonathan Mitchell maintained, “is a *thing of endless use*, gathering up God’s mercies, and your sins in writing sometimes,” to rise above sin into divine embrace (Mitchell 1721, 282).<sup>27</sup> Likewise the aging Thomas Smith, painting his self-portrait, observed and recorded his former and present life, his spiritual pilgrimage. In the process, he set his own image in a godly frame and he offered this pattern to his family as part of their inheritance. Simultaneously an assertion of Smith’s sanctification (and the sanctity of his vocation as an artist) *and* an invitation to repeated introspection extended to members and generations of his household, Smith’s painting remained among his descendants until 1948 when Edmund B. Hilliard sold it to the Worcester Art Museum.

As a work addressed to the beholder, and because Smith himself “speaks” to the (familial) beholder, the poem reads “forward,” oriented to the perspective of the person standing in front of the painting, and not in mirror image. The Thomas Smith *Self-Portrait* belongs to a larger context of devotional practices that relied on a fluid relationship between image and text and on multimedia and inter-media reiteration—*re*-reading, wandering *often* among the tombs, looking *again* and again. Puritan “plain style,” in pictures as in texts, concerned neither artlessness nor overt stripped-down simplicity. The key, instead, was correlation with the stylistic conventions of Christian scripture (compare Bercovitch 1975, 29–30). Overlapping metaphors and interconnected narratives, verbally and visually expressed, constituted, in Jonathan Mitchell’s terms “thing[s] of endless use” (Mitchell 1721, 282); their layered, inclusive referents contributed to the “plainness” (in the sense of clarity achieved by reiteration) of plain style.

The faint trace of a familiar shape shows up in a 1934 pre-restoration photograph (Figure 23) of the Thomas Smith *Self-Portrait*—and perhaps someone among his relations at one time or another, in wit or wisdom or both, deciphered the painting as Smith’s tombstone. More likely, a mid-nineteenth-century family member applied a bit of historicism in the form of a frame with a rounded-arched, probably gilded, liner in an effort to “update” the painting to suit a new decor. Though rounded-arch tabernacle frames were certainly available in the seventeenth century, it would be entirely too extravagant to imagine that the elusive ghost painter himself framed his proleptic picture to accentuate its formal and conceptual association with contemporary gravestones.

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## notes and references

<sup>1</sup> The stones around which I build this article are found in the vicinity of Boston in burial grounds that the Charlestown carver and the Joseph Lamson family of carvers served. For these burial grounds, I can demonstrate a large Puritan presence substantiated by genealogical data. The Thomas Smith *Self-Portrait* also belongs to this milieu. I turn to a number of later stones from Connecticut burial grounds (including Figure 12) for purposes of interpreting subject matter where overlap (based on common scriptural appropriation) can be shown to exist. While I focus my investigation on a relatively small

number of Boston-area burying grounds and acknowledge a rich variety of pictorial stones and, further, significant local and regional variation, I believe that major aspects of my argument withstand scrutiny for other New England gravestones beyond these geographical limits. I wish to emphasize here, however, that mine is not an exclusivist interpretation; additional meanings can be ascribed to the same stones. For example, this article does not explore the important significance of gravestones as doorways (another kind of "frame") and/or beds (taking footstones as well as headstones into

account); neither does it consider connections between material artistry and early print culture in New England, nor between notions of figuration in gravestone carving and the sorts of figural objects associated with image-magic in this period. These questions I intend to pursue elsewhere.

<sup>2</sup> A longer version of this article, to appear in a volume-in-preparation (Wilfred McClay, ed. *Figures in the Carpet: Discovering the Human Person in the American Past*), explores the extent and nature of American Puritan iconoclasm, arguing that pictures and decorated objects occupied a carefully modulated conceptual space of unresolved ambivalence (neither wholly positive nor wholly negative) in colonial New England. A complex fabric, a delicate balance, of images and texts and conflicted ideas about them motivated the interpretive culture of seventeenth-century Puritan material practices of the self.

<sup>3</sup> On the relation of the body to a building, see St. George (1998); on Protestant catechizing in this context, see Fish (1978).

<sup>4</sup> I am indebted to Jeffrey A. Hammond's argument (2000, 134–7) with regard to elegy and the exemplary death.

<sup>5</sup> As others have noted, the word biography entered the English language in 1683; see Murdock (1955, 223–4); see also Webster (1996, 44), on "the biographical explosion of the 1650s and onwards."

<sup>6</sup> On the material realities of burying grounds, see Sewall December 24, 1685, 89–90; July 9, 1689, 227; December 11, 1703, 493; and August 1, 2, and 25, 1712, 696–7; and Geddes (1981, 147–51).

<sup>7</sup> This volume was published in London and Dublin; while it was not widely available in New England, the Massachusetts Mather family possessed a copy. This Samuel Mather (1626–71), the older brother of Increase, graduated from Harvard College

in 1643, entered the ministry, and soon returned to England and then Dublin for the duration of his clerical career, remaining in correspondence with members of his family in the colonies. His thinking on matters of idolatry and metaphorical pattern is consistent with usage elsewhere in Puritan diaspora.

<sup>8</sup> On Puritan convictions regarding the insufficiency of language, see Hammond (2000, 133).

<sup>9</sup> In Puritan devotional practice, analogy thus recapitulated, in each instance of use, a central mystery of the faith—the visible appearance of the invisible; see Stafford (1999, 24).

<sup>10</sup> See also Watters (1979, 25–36). Mark A. Peterson (1997) explicates the imagery of temple and garden in a context that meaningfully separates the two. In the work of stone carvers, the two sets of metaphors came together, reinforcing the image of the faithful Christian.

<sup>11</sup> With their own interests in Solomon's temple, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Freemasons in New England appropriated this stone type and elaborated it to their particular purposes.

<sup>12</sup> Lee (1659, 70), expresses the same conviction. For various and useful pictorial representations of the temple and its parts, see Tuzi (2002).

<sup>13</sup> On the spiritual significance of breasts, see, e.g., Dillon (2001). John Cotton titled his popular seventeenth-century catechism *Spiritual Milk for Babes*.

<sup>14</sup> Elsewhere authors of devotional texts likewise held up "[looking] glasses of godliness," lists of desirable attributes, and encouraged readers to discern in them their own improved "reflection," to see themselves in these "heavenly frames" (see Benedict 2002, 321).

<sup>15</sup> In addition to name and dates of birth and death, many stones included some recitation of familial

relationships, lines or verse praising the deceased or listing their virtues, exhortations to the living (generally in the “voice” of the deceased) regarding death, and/or a scriptural quotation.

<sup>16</sup> Hammond (2000, 158–9) argues for the elegy, by contrast, an emphasis on godly pattern over individual biography.

<sup>17</sup> Jason LaFountain pointed me toward this acrostic stone.

<sup>18</sup> Because of the significance of names, slander and defamation carried stiff punishments, one of which included a kind of shaming or humiliation in the form of a negative reversal of the practice pinning elegies to coffins: pieces of paper identifying the person and their infraction were attached to them, and especially over their heart or mind. “Bad” words as well as good ones could be “written” on bodies (see St. George 1984).

<sup>19</sup> A motif carved in reverse or “mirror” image into a later eighteenth-century stone, the 1790 Margaret Cumings stone of Billerica, Massachusetts, with the same scriptural “Corruptible/Incorruption” passage from 1 Corinthians 15:43–4 and 53–4 at its foot, suggests that contemporary viewers were conversant with this metaphorical assessment. Jason LaFountain brought this stone and its implications for my argument to my attention. Furthermore, in and after rain (and ice in some conditions too) horizontal slab markers (e.g., tablestones and tombstones, which I do not discuss here but which were in use in the seventeenth-century burying grounds I explore) became literal surfaces of reflection. Given the horizontal disposition and size of the stones (which approximated the length of an adult corpse), these objects in these circumstances invited viewers to glimpse their own reflections “framed,” laid out over the biographical inscription, and thus to imagine their own bodies in the grave and, simultaneously

(because the sky reflected too), in the heavens. In bright sun, with the beholder’s shadow cast across stone, a similar dynamic relation of beholder’s body to stone prevailed. The stones’ shadows, too, further augmented this choreography of materiality, movement, and engagement. An elaborate Puritan theology of shadow suggests further intriguing possibilities for the material reception and interpretive context of the stones.

<sup>20</sup> See also Thomas Smith pages on the Worcester Art Museum website <http://www.worcesterart.org/> (accessed November 15, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> With so little definite biographical information available, scholars cannot be absolutely certain that Smith was Puritan. The content of his poem, his dress and comportment, his hair style, his employ by (Puritan) Harvard College to copy the painting of the Puritan divine Ames, and the fact that other portraits by the same hand depict eminent Puritans, however, provide substantial ballast for my identification of Smith as Puritan.

<sup>22</sup> Such images appear on numerous frontispieces, e.g., Williamson (1613). On the subject, see Cotton (1642, 20); also “If he . . . keepe that dead mans scalpe in his Closet, or Bed-chamber, to be an ordinary helpe to him, to put him in minde dayly of his mortality: Now in so doing he make an Image of it.” Hambrick-Stowe (1982, 234–6) concludes that there is evidence that New Englanders nonetheless did regularly use “death objects” in their meditative practices and even “in their devotional Closets.” Cotton discussed this subject in the context of his criticism of “set formes of prayer.”

<sup>23</sup> This stylization has already been noted by such historians as Roger Stein (1984) and Max Cavitch (2002).

<sup>24</sup> According to Josiah Flint’s epitaph, stones *did* speak, *did*

re-present the deceased in a manner that implicated readers/listeners: the "lamenting stone doth speake/his tomb stone crys repent and souls to save/doth preach repentance from his very grave" to those who walk among the tombs (Flint [1680], 382). A viewing context in which the portrait was likely seen in a domestic space incorporating tomb-shaped broadside elegies pasted to the walls supports this interpretation. Portraits in New England were often associated with the absence of the one depicted; family members sent portraits across the Atlantic to keep a loved one in memory over time and space. Death was here the final absence. Contemporary portraitists, furthermore, would also have been familiar with the iconography of death. In addition to their other tasks, they were employed, for example, to paint death's heads on coffins, design funerary broadsides, and to paint funerary hatchments with coats of arms.

<sup>25</sup> On elegy and "ventriloquism," see Brown (1996, 132).

<sup>26</sup> Ultramarine, a costly import, would have been a highly unusual pigment in a colonial context where sign paint was the standard. (Note, in the Bunyan frontispiece of 1749, the gates of the temple, with orb-topped pillars framing a winged bust, at upper right.)

<sup>27</sup> Juliet Fleming has analyzed the "physical properties of language" for this period and the century earlier in her book on writing practices in early modern England and the "social and physical materiality of texts"; Fleming (2001, 12–13, 18).

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