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THE AUTHORITY OF
SELF-DEFINITION IN
THOMAS SHEPARD'S
AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND JOURNAL

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During his trial-ridden lifetime as a first-generation Puritan preacher in America, Thomas Shepard managed to produce at least three kinds of texts. Those given most consideration by critics and scholars are his sermons, and understandably so, for they stand as thoroughgoing versions of the Puritans' reading of the Bible, of the opening and application of a spiritual text to a material and inscrutable world. Shepard's recently published *Confessions*, transcriptions of the public confessions of fifty-one people applying for membership in his Cambridge congregation from 1638 to 1645, comprise a new volume of extant writings ready for critical response, since they offer, at the very least, the interpenetration of public and private voice—here, the communal speaks through the church member who speaks through the transcribing pen of the preacher.¹ I am most interested in yet a third form of Shepard's writing, the most consciously and uncomfortably "private" form, his *Autobiography* and his *Journal*.

The preacher, of course, is sure of his audience; his sermons are texts partly motivated and defined by the fact of another who will hear and read them. The question of where Shepard stands in relation to the text, to himself, and to an audience is not so simply revealed, however, in the *Autobiography* and *Journal*. And, even though, as Daniel Shea notes, the *Autobiography* has been deemed exemplary by major critics (139), the problem of self-construction in these most self-conscious of texts has not been given careful attention.²

A reading of Thomas Shepard's self-fashioning in his *Autobiography* must also, to some extent, be a reading of Puritan epistemology, for that epistemology, coupled with Shepard's particular personality, complicated the rhetorical strategies of autobiography so that for Shepard, the writ-

ing of an autobiography engaged a paradox of drawing attention to a self whose referent is, at best, elusive.

Shepard opens the section of his *Autobiography* entitled "T. (My Birth and Life) S." with a description that links self to both history and religion. He identifies himself (or his father does so for us) according to the historical event that occurred on the day of his birth, which is then connected to the episode of doubting Thomas in the New Testament:

In the year of Christ 1604 upon the fifth day of November, called the powder treason day, and that very hour of the day wherein the Parliament should have been blown up by Popish priests, I was then born, which occasioned my father to give me this name Thomas, because he said I would hardly believe that ever any such wickedness should be attempted by men against so religious and good Parliament. (37)

It is a characteristically Puritan feat to analogize on these several levels at once, to see and record in a name the resonances of history, the Bible and the spirit of current faith. It is this vision of infinite referentiality that leads the Puritans through the world in an eternal present if not a transcendent atemporality.

Thus the *Autobiography* does not unfold according to a linear progress nor as a sequential narrative.³ Were we to read the work along such lines, we would have to conclude, for example, that Thomas Shepard's wife died several times, for he records her death when he describes incidents of their second journey to New England as well as when he arrives at the event in the so-called chronological flow of the narrative (63-64). The *Autobiography* is always written from the point of view of the present moment during which it is conceived, and there is no attempt on the author's part to put himself in a psychological past, before the events have occurred, and move toward them. The outcome is what Lynen describes as "making the past self so like the author that there is no development" (141); there is no authorial distance from the representation of the self in the text. More profoundly, in Shepard's case, the text implies a narrator who could know anything at any time or all things at all times. It implies either a god-like author or a God who authors a man's text. (Shepard, as I shall show later, was uncomfortable with either alternative.)

Like the *Journal*, the *Autobiography* presents itself as a record of thoughts that arise moment to moment according to God's will.⁴ It offers an epistemology that is more reliant on God than on external events or "reality." In Shepard's *Autobiography*, in contrast to Bradford's *History*, for example, a subjectivity willed by God takes precedence over an externality through which God speaks and which man may observe and

interpret. So, too, in Shepard, the individual experience is not subordinated to the group experience; rather, he uses group experience to make sense of personal trauma. He writes in his *Journal*, "And so I learned how a Christian is confirmed: (2) when he learns something privately and then he hears the same thing publicly" (122). Moreover, what causes Shepard much distress are the instances when signs of deliverance through the group stand in contradistinction to personal trial; he is always trying to link the two.

Late in the *Autobiography*, in describing the ship-borne journey from England to America, Shepard notes "a very great leak which did much appall and affect us. Yet the Lord discovered it unto us, when we were thinking of returning back again, and much comforted our hearts" (63). He immediately follows this sign of God's graciousness to the group with a remembrance of the storms that God caused and that eventually led to his wife's death: "We had many storms, in one of which my dear wife took such a cold and got such weakness as that she fell into a consumption of which she died" (63). Here, the moment Shepard notices group gain, he remembers personal loss—a tension that he goes on to try to resolve in the next sentence as he writes: "And also the Lord preserved her with the child in her arms from imminent and apparent death, for by the shaking of the ship in a violent storm her head was pitched against an iron bolt, and the Lord miraculously preserved the child and recovered my wife" (64). Now the group experience resonates in the personal; now all can be seen as a sign of God's goodness, but not so easily or not for long. When Shepard writes "this was a great affliction to me and was a cause of many sad thoughts in the ship how to behave myself when I came to New England" (64), *this* refers not only to his wife's accident or her imminent death but to the difficulty of understanding himself, his personal reality, in relation to the new group and the new cause of which he will be a part.

The first major group concern that Shepard records after their arrival in New England is his family's entrance into "church fellowship" (64). But again, as he remembers entering church fellowship, a sign of deliverance, he also recalls a personal affliction, a loss, as he writes "we did enter the year after about the end of the winter, a fortnight after which my dear wife Margaret died, being first received into church fellowship which, as she much longed for, so the Lord did so sweeten it unto her that she was hereby exceedingly cheered and comforted with the sense of God's love, which continued until her last gasp" (65). Here Shepard encloses the loss with signs of God's good will just as he had in describing the accident on the ship. Here, too, he uses the group event, entering church fellowship, as a lens through which to see the loss of his wife.

Now he can read her death as birth. Likewise he can, in the next paragraph, connect his self-trial with the community's being afflicted with Antinomianism: "No sooner were we thus set down and entered into church fellowship but the Lord exercised us and the whole country with the opinions of Familists, begun by Mistress Hutchinson" (65). The public, he tells himself, is as fiercely on trial as the private.

Shepard's relation to the public in terms of private suffering has distressing and more complicated outcomes in his representation of the war with the Pequod Indians. He begins by striking an analogy between the Pequods and the Antinomians⁵—two equally ill-motivated entities that rose and fell together (66–68)—and, in so doing, uses the event to displace or communalize his affliction: if the whole Puritan community is being tested, his difficulties must seem slighter or more bearable. But his casting the event in theological terms, as an incident authored by God, also enables him to justify violence and to depict the annihilation of a tribe of people with a strange mixture of proud indifference:

At this time I cannot omit the goodness of God as to myself, so to all the country, in delivering us from the Pequot furies.

* * *

But the English, casting by their pieces, took their swords in their hands (the Lord doubling their strength and courage) and fell upon the Indians where a hot fight continued about the space of an hour. At last, by the direction of one Captain Mason, their wigwams were set on fire, which being dry and contiguous one to another, was most dreadful to the Indians, some burning, some bleeding to death by the sword, some resisting till they were cut off, some flying were beat down by the men without until the Lord had utterly consumed the whole company.

* * *

Thus the Lord having delivered the country from war with the Indians and Familists. . . . (66–68)

Shepard grants the Pequods "otherness" through his careful qualification of Sassacus, "a proud, cruel, unhappy and headstrong prince" (66). The description is uncharacteristic for Shepard, who rarely lets his texts invent a personality in other than theological terms or as anything other than a type subsumed by God. Such a description gives the Indian an individual status that Shepard's text cannot abide and, thus, necessarily obliterates the Indian in the paragraphs that follow. In other words, Shepard uses the War with the Pequods (and Antinomianism) as a way of playing out textually a particular kind of self-mastery that real life refuses him. He begins by recognizing himself in the Antinomians and

Pequods as victim, and he goes on to use this identification as a means of transforming his position from victim to aggressor by way of textual authorship. It is as if Shepard is seeking to authorize his victimization, to, for example, gain mastery over his wife's death. His text, after all, destroys the Indians, as God did his wife, in the name of deliverance. But Shepard does not finally give himself even the authority to gain mastery over his afflictions by way of the text.

That he is ultimately dissatisfied with the way in which his religion insists he read his wife's death, that he remains in an unresolved relationship to authorship is signalled by the last line of the *Autobiography*: "Thus God hath visited and scourged me for my sins and sought to wean me from this world, but I have ever found it a difficult thing to profit even but a little by the sorest and sharpest afflictions" (71). Shepard's simultaneous desire to adhere to certain limits in his writing and to write an expansive self is best represented by the rhetoric of sincerity in his work.

In the opening chapter of *Sincerity and Authenticity*,⁶ Lionel Trilling tries to locate the emergence of the concept of "sincerity" in time. Such a study is relevant to a consideration of the consciousness Shepard establishes through his language, for we know that Shepard titled a major series of sermons *The Sincere Convert*, twenty editions of which appeared between 1641 and 1812; that he believed in the possibility of a "sincere Christian" (*Journal* 110); and that, as Leverenz observes, "how to be sincere occupied almost all of his sermon time" (188).⁷ Trilling tells of the word's coming into usage in English in the sixteenth century, of the way it comes from the Latin, *sincerus*, meaning clean, sound or pure, and that it is made up of two words, *sine cera*, "without wax," thus referring to an object that "was not patched up and passed off as sound" (13). Originally, sincere could describe an object as well as a person, and, when it was applied to a person, it was used metaphorically to signify that the person, like a sincere wine or a sincere doctrine, was not corrupt. Later it came to refer to a congruence between "avowal and actual feeling" (4). Moreover, as Trilling points out, sincerity implied being true to oneself so as not to be false to others. Concurrently, the terms *individual* and *society* emerged, and Trilling links this emergence to the dissolution of feudal order and the diminished authority of the church in the seventeenth century. Prior to this time, people did not have a sense of internal space; nor did they think of themselves in more than one role, standing outside or above the personality; nor was "privacy" so much a concern. Autobiography also comes into being as a genre now, especially amid Protestants in seventeenth-century England.

Shepard grapples with a self that is neither comfortably present nor

absent in his *Autobiography* through his imagination of an individual who is both secret and sincere. Shepard's sense of a sincere individual is imagined through a concreteness of self that makes possible self-containment or self as container. And, he evokes an "internal space" when he describes himself as a vessel in such sentences as, "Whereupon walking into the fields the Lord dropped this meditation into me," or, "And I so found him in meditation that I was constrained to carry my book into the fields to write down what God poured in" (*Autobiography* 44, 73). He also speaks of sin as a "room" that the sinner must get Christ to come into (*Journal* 123); and, throughout the *Journal*, he depicts a mind into which things are ushered not so much according to a model of sensory reception that distinguishes inner and outer, but in terms of imagined doors within that open and close upon inner thoughts which we assume through God's will.⁸

Shepard elaborates this suggestion of internal space through countless uses of the word *secret*, from literal hiding to the unrevealed but endlessly sought after mystery of God. The journey toward secrecy and its attractive power begins early in the *Autobiography* with the description of Shepard's being moved from one "blind town" to another during a plague (38). This early inhabitation of either a backward town, or an unchristian place, or a remote village, is internalized in the *Autobiography* and transformed into spaces in the mind that Shepard resides in, always with the hope of someday discovering God there. Thus, on one level, *secret* is used in conjunction with feelings that only Shepard is aware of registering, "private" feelings, like "secret and hellish blasphemy" (43) or "secret pride" (55), secret "sorrow," "evils," "excuses," "hope, joy and love," "hints" and "distemper" (113, 127, 137, 152, 94). On another level, Shepard records the "secrets of his soul" (41)—the private realm that obsesses him and to which he has an ambivalent relation. This place is most provocatively written in the sentence, "I saw a secret eye I had to my name in all I did, for which I judged myself worthy of death and saw good reason to glory in nothing which I had or did" (93-94). The sentence implies an "I" looking at an "eye" contained in an "I"/"name" and the deeds of that "I"; it implies a self that can think of itself in more than one role, standing outside or above the personality. It is not clear whether we are to read the "secret eye" as sinfulness and hypocrisy as it leads Shepard to judge himself worthy of death, or the opposite—as God, the recognition of whom leads Shepard to judge himself worthy of death. It is perhaps more likely that Shepard is noticing something like an unconscious, attached to and motivating "self," detached from God. *This* secret self lacks sincerity because it does not

reflect the more profound and pure, the deeper space of God's secret self.

When Shepard refers to "God's secret decree" (93) and to God's "rules" and "good will" as his "secrets" (213), he engages the desire of an eternally internalizing impulse, the same that gave rise to Antinomianism. Thus Shepard is drawn to establish his secret soul in the text as reflexive of God's larger secret, but while he longs to search out God's secret and "waits for the Lord's more special and immediate witness unto him" (170), he also checks himself by claiming to prefer the outward recognition of this secret:

But I saw again after prayer how foolish and unreasonable my heart was to trouble itself about God's secret will which I cannot find out nor see immediately, rather than to believe God's revealed will who saith he will hear every prayer we make (185),

and, "I should look upon no other secrets but this revealed will of him" (170). In fact, what I would like to call Shepard's language of indirection, his way of getting at something through what it is not, also proves his desire to acknowledge the inevitable mediacy, as a member of a human community, of his relation to God. The words he is said to have spoken on his death bed, for example, "that little part that I have in Him is *no small comfort* to me now"⁹ (italics mine), mean it is a great comfort to him. Presence is attained through absence, affirmation through negation.

The significance of secrecy in Shepard's text does not end here, however. One can read his early references in the *Autobiography* to having to hide or preach in private, to having to remain secret, as Shepard's way of drawing an analogy between his experience and the mystery of God, the great secret that cannot be known fully until death, a revelation that is only approximated or feebly imitated on earth. It could be, too, that what was originally a practical necessity became an internal overriding characteristic of Shepard's perception of God. In the *Autobiography*, Shepard talks about keeping his child secretly (34), praying in "secret" (40); he describes the way that "the Lord provided for my wife and self and friends a very private house where our friends did us all the good they could and our enemies could do us no hurt" (34). But *secret* also comes to refer, of course, to that internal space or part of the self that is inaccessible though sometimes revealed. Ironically, Shepard had to *hide* in order to be *sincere*. Understandably, the transition from sequestering the spiritual in England, where secrecy became a style for him, to preaching in public and hoping to live in a reliable external world in New England was a difficult one. Shepard was never totally free of the former habit of secrecy and its concomitant uses even as he claimed that the

period during which he had to be "kept secret in regard of the bishops" was the most "uncomfortable and fruitless time to his soul especially that ever he had in his life" (57).

Secrecy functions most profoundly, I think, in its relation to the "imprisoned" self in Shepard's text. Unlike Moses, who imagines God's word emanating from a burning bush that is not consumed by the flame, Shepard sees God "like a consuming fire and an everlasting burning, and myself like a poor prisoner leading to that fire" (43). At other points in the *Autobiography*, this self-representation expresses a disdain for projection: "I could do nothing but I did seek myself in it and was imprisoned there" (43); or, he thinks of his life in England as one of confinement: "Although it was true I should stay and suffer for Christ, yet I saw no rule for it now the Lord had opened a door of escape" (56). The journey to New England, as the *Autobiography* proves, is not so simply freeing, however. Secrecy becomes his way of having a say in the invention of the prisonhouse, it makes him the keeper of the key, and therefore offers him the possibility of, once again, authorizing his victimization. Ultimately, secrecy becomes a revelatory style. It leads Shepard away from "bondage" (44) and toward a bonding with God that he perceives as freeing.

As Tipson's translation of Puritan experience tells us, "a relentless search for grace best proves its secret presence" (75)¹⁰; or, the Puritan must believe in a quest even though he can neither claim nor justify arrival. If secrecy enables a covenant with God, "doubt" reinforces the bond between Shepard and God and, ironically, ensures the *sincerity* of their relationship. Shepard doubts if he is a true child of God and he doubts himself as an effective minister; most importantly, though, as McGiffert notes, he makes doubt "the basis of affirmation" (20). One of many paradigmatic entries from Shepard's *Journal* illustrates this process:

December 4: I felt a wonderful cloud of darkness and atheism over my head, and unbelief, and my weakness to see or believe God. But I saw that the Lord's ends might be these three: (1) by withdrawing the spirit of light, to give me a greater measure of it than ever I have had before, to give me a greater fullness by praying for more; (2) to humble me for my confidence in my light and knowledge past and in speaking so much with so little light, who knew so little; (3) to heal this wound, which was but skinned over before, of secret atheism and unbelief. (135)

In this way, doubtfulness never becomes a way out: doubting can only intensify Shepard's relation to an old language, it can never lead him to a

new way of talking about the world. Doubt helps make a certain prison a desirable home.

Shepard's incessant listing, numbering, and numberings within numberings also serve to contain his uncertainty, to make it more certain, while giving it a kind of spatial depth within the text that lends dimension to his relationship with God. At the same time, the limited linguistic repertoire of the *Journal* and *Autobiography*, even as it distinguishes the Puritans as a community, also seems to make the world smaller, more easily grasped. Unfortunately, in the case of Shepard, his imagination becomes tapered by a belief system whose adherents were too fervently checking themselves to see beyond themselves.

Shepard's capacity for imagining is painfully expressed and repressed in the two small words that are sounded in practically every one of his journal entries: "I saw." McGiffert calls this formula a "metaphor of enlightenment" (18); Tipson says that each time it can easily be replaced with the scientific, "I observed." I think it also establishes a connection between seeing and seeking, desiring and wanting, i.e., lacking; that each time Shepard writes, "I saw," he also means, "I read": the scriptures, his own sermons, the world as a poem written by God. From a psychological viewpoint, his obsession with seeing also expresses a desire to be seen, so that underlying his religious inquiries and doubts about the existence of God is the more threatening question of his own existence, a question that must be covered over in order for the culture and religion to survive. As Christopher Bollas notes, "Man develops faith in a deity whose absence . . . is held to be as important a test of *man's being* as his presence" (99; italics mine). Thus Shepard displays distress that God "hides his face" from him, but through both the denial of and search for God's face, Shepard tries to make up his own face on earth while imagining heaven as a place where *both* faces can exist and meet: "Now in heaven the Lord shows himself *extra vestigia*, without footsteps, face to face" (*Journal* 152-53).¹¹

It is through an early and moving description of Shepard's infant son Thomas' near blinding infection that we can glimpse Shepard's face receding and advancing in the text and in the world. In the space of one page of the *Autobiography*, Shepard has recorded the death of his first son, Thomas; the dangerous journey to New England of his wife and second son, also named Thomas because believed to be a return of the first through God; and the consequent death of his wife. He follows this record with the fact of his son's near blindness and the thought that he must "have a blind child to be a constant sorrow to me till my death" (36-37). Shepard here refers not only to his son's eyes but to those who beheld him, and to the "Lord's" sight. He explains his child's recovery as

an outcome of God's seeing not only Shepard's sorrow but also his resolution "to fear nor care nor grieve no more, but to be thankful, nay to love the Lord's will" (37). He closes his presentation with a declamation to his son not to make his eyes "windows of lust, but give thy heart and whole soul and body, to him that hath been so careful of thee when thou couldst not care for thyself" (37). While the key to the passage is cast in the form of *spiritual* enlightenment, it seems motivated by the more familiar wish for his son to read the text that his *father* wrote for him. Shepard, no doubt, would want to qualify this self-assertion by emphasizing that his son open his eyes to read the text in the *proper* light, in praise of God versus man, implied, for example, by the prayer-like refrains throughout the first section such as, "Wonder at and love this God forever" (33).

In this section especially, Shepard engages a constantly shifting point of view that comments on his relation to the text, the audience, and the world. Sometimes he addresses his son directly as "you"; other times he refers to him as "the child." Sometimes he writes of "thy dear mother"; other times, of "the mother" (36). From sentence to sentence Shepard shifts between making self and other the audience. It is as if every now and then he is reminded that he is writing to his son but he cannot sustain a stance of speaking *to* so he reverts to speaking *of*. Is Shepard's text addressed to himself, to his son, or to God (as a prayer)? The text seems to ask, from what point of view do I speak? What fundamental relation is my communication based on? And it comes out juggling several modes at once because of an uncertainty of the relation between the three or a need to subordinate one to the other.

I read this shifting as a troubling indeterminacy between Shepard's relation to the world and his relation to the self. When he speaks directly to his son, the former relation is emphasized but then broken by a return to a text addressed to himself *or* to some larger audience with whom he is less intimate. The intent that his shifting point of view describes, I think, is one of loving the world with weaned affections. Such a reading, while it restates a common understanding of the Puritans' relation to their world, also points to the difficulties implicit in achieving a balance between detachment from and curiosity about the world for a personality like Shepard's, from which the world was always detaching itself even before he could establish a controlled relationship to it. In other words, one has to be attached to the world before one can wean oneself away from it. If the starting point is one of loss (Shepard lost his parents at an early age and then, as he grew older, lost several wives and children), detachment from the world as prescribed by his religion may mean the threat of self-annihilation rather than the prospect of self-creation.

The threat of an inwardly turning or an unsubstantiated self did not stop Shepard, however, from wanting to create himself in writing. In fact, Puritanism, I think, saved him from self-dissolution by offering him membership in a community, one in which he chose to speak to people on a weekly basis. Puritanism also engendered, however, an alternate conflict for him between his concept of self and his concept of God as potential "author." The questions that plague the *Journal* and *Autobiography* explicitly and dynamically are, "in whose name had I preached, in whose strength had I done this work today" (128) and, "Is my faith of my own making?" (144).

Baird Tipson refers to Shepard's *Journal* as a confession: "In the confessional the priest functioned for the penitent as God's voice; in the spiritual diary the writer has to create both parts of the dialogue" (69). In an autobiography or journal like Shepard's, the problem of authority never gets solved since the realm of the profoundly personal becomes an embodiment of and means to a concept, namely God, that transcends the personal, the particular, and melts into the universal. While Antinomianism asserts direct communication with God, autobiography, perhaps more daringly, assumes articulation of God. Ideally, the writer must speak for both himself and God, gain mastery over the tenuousness of either by the act of transcribing both from some tertiary, central point of view in which God and self are assuredly joined.

That Shepard often makes *Journal* entries after he has preached a sermon comments on the insecurity he feels in taking on any authorial position. The *Journal* partly grows out of the fear of his own authority, fear that he is too self-involved. For this reason, the *Journal* is, to a painful extent, self-deprecating.¹² But, even as it sounds out a desired diminution of his self, the fact is that he has written it, so that the *Journal* demonstrates a tension between feeling guilty about authoring his existence or describing reality to other people and longing to be able to do so. Shepard was no sloppy recorder of his thoughts. As one of the most influential preachers in the pulpit, he was well aware of the power of the word and employed an extraordinary control in relation to his material.¹³ On the other hand, Shepard's description of Bishop Laud's final words in silencing him in England helps us to imagine not only his struggle with this human authority but one element of his relation to God. Shepard remembered Laud's words of suspension in this way:

I charge you that you neither preach, read, marry, bury, or exercise any ministerial function in any part of my diocese, for if you do, and I hear of it, I will be upon your back and follow you wherever you go, in any part of the kingdom and so everlastingly disenable you.¹⁴

His complicated and unstable sense of his self in relation to the world, and in relation to God, moreover, speaks through various passages in the *Journal* when the *Journal* becomes a place for formulating internal spaces that he might reside in or proceed from, such as the following:

October 6. I saw in prayer that my great sin was my continual separation, disunion, distance from God, not so much this or that particular sin, lying out with a loose spirit of God. Hereupon I saw Jesus Christ near me, next unto me—next unto me because he comes in as mediator between God and my soul, as one in a pit, a mid-man holds both him below and him above. I saw that none could come into the chasm sin made, but him that satisfied justice, which is this mediator. Hereupon my heart was stirred up with thankfulness to lay hold upon this mediator, Christ Jesus, the object of faith being so near unto me and being of such worth as to fill up the chasm, and such love as to come so near unto me. I considered also that Christ was most near unto me by his word and the voice of that: Christ between God and me that were distant; the word between Christ and me; so faith closing with the word between the word and me, the word on Christ's part, faith on our part. (120)

This set of mediations does not, it seems, require an outside world. It defines what Delbanco calls the "Puritan imperative" of "self-examination"¹⁵ as an examination of how to recognize and where to locate God within the self, for a Puritan was supposed not only to wean himself away from the world but from himself; he can only claim to know even himself mediately and he cannot presume to know himself too thoroughly. In the *Autobiography*, Shepard notes that he was "troubled for this sin" yet "did not know my sinful nature all this while" (41). Yet, though Shepard adheres to the Calvinist dictum that "man can never know or describe the full extent of his own wickedness" (Delany 35), his writings and re-writings of his life and especially the preponderance of self-criticism in his texts imply that on some level he thinks he can know the depth of his wickedness, if nothing else.

Vanity, of course, is an issue for any Puritan writer. As Delany notes, "To undertake an autobiography, the author must have a sense of his own importance" (18).¹⁶ A related problem that emerges is that if the text is his own fabrication, it is damnable like all human works. "God's great plot" or "God's deep plot" (141) to humble men so that He may set His Son up is also death, is also the grave plot. But it is clear from the *Journal* that in spite of Shepard's hardships and confusion, and in spite of the fact that he sometimes "longs to die," he wants to live—not only in the world but in the texts that he has dedicated to his children: "In my

meditations at night I found my heart desirous to live in this world and do good here and not to die. Hence I asked my heart the reason why I should not be desirous to die" (119). And, when Shepard tells his son in the opening of his *Autobiography* that the moment he accepted his son's blindness, God saved his son, it is not entirely clear whether the son should thank his father for saving him or thank God. Like Augustine, who, as Paul Jay writes, "Exists in his own narrative less as a subject to be remembered in language than as a subject to be transformed by language" (23), Shepard as a subject is transformed through the various versions of his *Autobiography* as well as because of the transformative nature of words, because words refuse to stand still. But I think Shepard's wish is to be remembered as a subject in language. Shepard names the purpose of his *Autobiography* that his son remember, "learn to know and love," specifically the "God of his father" (33, italics mine); and, the passing on of the *Autobiography* to a second son who is named for him is a gesture indicative of the desire to sustain Shepard's identity through language. Moreover, though Shepard writes sentences such as "I saw how apt I was to think myself something and the Lord put me upon humbling work to see I was worse than nothing" (91), the fact that he begins to take personal responsibility for the hardships of others, e.g., by attributing his son's illness to his own sinfulness, speaks to a desired level of self-importance.

This conflict between the affirmation and negation of Shepard's composing self manifests itself profoundly on the level of form. Though Murdock argues that Puritan literary style was plain because Puritans did not find words for their intensely religious feelings, it may be more likely that they did not want to validate their feelings because the text of the only true self—God—was already written. Delany attributes the lack of effort in establishing autobiography as a literary genre in the seventeenth century to being "caught up in the turmoil of contemporary religious and social struggles," so that Puritans "cared more for the content than for the style of their works and aimed at functional cogency rather than aesthetic perfection" (174). For Shepard, I think, it was not an ignorance of style that affected his work. Rather, Shepard's profound discomfort with the making of an authorial voice threw form itself into question, exposed its fragility. Delany quotes Bunyan in uncovering the influence of epistle writer Paul on spiritual autobiography: "It was Paul's accustomed manner (Acts xxii), and that when tried for his life (Acts xxiv), ever to open, before his judges, the manner of his conversion, he would think of that day, and that hour, in which he first did meet with grace; for he found it support unto him" (29). Shepard imitates this strategy when, for example, after one of his reflections inward he

notes, "this was on a Saturday evening." But, to the reader, this movement outward into objective temporality is jarring. It is a sign of Shepard's difficulty with and wish for fixing his conversion in time and place while acknowledging it as something continual. The form is desired even as it undermines the function. A self is sought after even as it distances one from God. And, a fear of this self-assertion, the anxiety produced by its conception, leads Shepard's *Autobiography* toward an ill-defined style or a shuffling of styles.

The *Autobiography*, after all, presents itself in three versions: the preface-like version addressed directly to his son, Thomas; the longest section entitled "My Birth and Life"; and a third part entitled "The Good things I have Received of the Lord." Perhaps these three attempts, re-writings of each other, indicate Shepard's search for a true form. However, Shepard's probable fear of either the self-enforcing or self-negating consequences of writing led to a mistrust of form or a dissatisfaction with representation generally. In the sermons, those texts most consistently addressed to an audience outside of himself and therefore most committed to representation as a way to conversion, Shepard most insists on the limitations of language. In *The Sound Believer*, Shepard says, "A man will not be afraid of a lion when it is painted only upon a wall," and "The soul doth not see painted fire but sees the fire of God's wrath really." Or, in *The Parable of the Ten Virgins Opened and Applied*, he tells us, "Saints do not only see things in letters and syllables and words, but see things as they are in themselves"; and, in *The Sincere Convert*, he challenges his reader by writing, "Jesus Christ is not got with a wet finger."¹⁷

The language of Puritanism, while it does not enable Shepard to see God face to face, more importantly offers him a place to live in. On at least two occasions, Shepard describes his near self-annihilation, his wish for violent suicide. In the *Autobiography*, he writes, "For three quarters of a year this temptation did last, and I had some strong temptations to run my head against walls and brain and kill myself" (13). In *Certain Select Cases Resolved* (1648), he tells of having been "by grievous and heavy perplexities almost forced to make an end of myself and sinful life, and to be mine own executioner," but the Lord came "between the bridge and the water."¹⁸ It is as if Shepard knew that by becoming his own executioner he could desperately achieve either a desired union or a kind of self-creation—the enactment of a new self-image that psychologists cite as one motive for self-murder. Puritanism was the impetus that kept him from absolute withdrawal, but that could never liberate him.

When Delany places spiritual autobiography in the context of Job and the major prophets, the theme that emerges is "the plight of the indi-

vidual who attempts to live justly and holily in a corrupt and confusing society" (28). Shepard's *Autobiography and Journal*, in a Puritan context, imply a self who lives thankfully in a punitive environment. Puritanism attracted Shepard as an alternate reality, one that could accommodate his definition of himself as someone longing for freedom but convinced of his unworthiness. It offered him a survival whose price was a conflict with authority he could neither escape nor resolve but only endure.

NOTES

1. In their introduction to the *Confessions*, Selement and Wooley note that Shepard was one of the few Puritans to transcribe such "confessions of progressive steps to saving grace" (2). The manuscript also seems an available source for discovering the place of the female voice in Puritanism. Caldwell, in her ground-breaking comparative study of these "publicly delivered relations" (6), enables us to begin to consider the confessions as extremely provocative literary phenomena.

2. Shea notes that Muller and Johnson chose Shepard's *Autobiography* as the sole representative of its kind in *The Puritans* and that it is the only autobiography treated at length by Murdock in *Literature and Theology* (1949). Shea's reading notices aspects of the *Autobiography* that had been ignored—that there are three autobiographical compositions in the manuscript, and that Shepard records historical events at one point in the main *Autobiography*—but he does not take these observations to an illuminating end. Murdock's book, while a useful introductory guide to Puritan literary context, is limited by its need to apologize for rather than to explore the un-literariness of Puritan writing. McGiffert's introduction to *God's Plot* (1972) remains the most deeply interpretive essay on Shepard's *Autobiography and Journal*. McGiffert represents Shepard as a devoted seeker of order in the light (or darkness) of recurring unsettledness from childhood onward, as a mind constantly engaged in self-trial. He goes on to interpret the Puritan psyche as one in which assurance and anxiety have a symbiotic relationship. The introduction also contains some lucid remarks on Shepard's writings on hypocrisy. Finally, based on the observation that "among his contemporaries, Thomas Shepard spoke most on the subject of the self" (159), Delbanco provides a richly contextualized reconstruction of that self in terms of the external circumstances of history through and in which it evolved, e.g., the migration from old to New England. In a study primarily of Shepard's sermons, Delbanco intends to show the ways Shepard translated "revulsion into promise" (161).

3. For a cogent discussion of this process, see Lynen: "If he [a Puritan] writes his life story, he views the events episodically as a series of tableaux each of which contains the whole truth, rather than as happenings in a causative sequence" (75).

4. Many of Shepard's *Journal* entries begin with such phrases as "it was darted into my mind" (194), or "I say suddenly this thought came in" (159).

5. I come to this observation independent of Kibbey's book, an in-depth study of the intents and consequences of the making of this analogy by Puritan leaders; a study of the "real" connotations of the unstable relation, established by their rhetoric, between the literal and the figurative. To the extent that my reading of Shepard's text is psycho-biographical (examining ways his conflation of secular and religious events is used to a private

end), my reading emphasizes not his power as a participant in racial and gender-based prejudice but the impotence engendered by the threat of autobiography. This is not to say that the two cannot be linked.

6. Trilling cites the "cognate ideals of sincerity and authenticity historically considered" as the subject of this book. In this well-informed chapter, he describes the genesis of concepts of "sincerity," "individuality," and "society" and their relation to the rise of autobiography as a genre in the early seventeenth century.

7. Leverenz reads Puritanism as an "ambivalent psychological response, expressed in theological language, to various tensions and conflicts in an age of dislocation—especially in male roles and male authority" (188). He ranges from larger themes, e.g., New England child-rearing, to closer readings, e.g., selected chapters on Hooker, Shepard, Franklin, and Edwards. Shepard, according to Leverenz, is suffering from "separation anxiety."

8. In this same light, the heart or mind is often written as being in a particular "frame."

9. Cited in McGiffert (237).

10. As the first critic since McGiffert to pay close attention to Shepard's *Journal*, Tipson understands its repetitive form according to Shepard's conception of conversion (as it exists somewhere between notions previously set in motion by the Pietists and the Reformers): ". . . though Shepard understands conversion as a life-long struggle, he wants not only to know when that struggle has commenced but also to take some comfort in that knowledge" (72). Tipson compares Shepard's *Journal* to Augustine's *Confessions*—while the latter "constructs a paradigm complex enough to account for his experience," the former "orders experience around a simple meditative paradigm" (76).

11. References to seeking for the hidden face of God abound in Shepard's *Journal*. See especially 114, 152, 153, 173.

12. Shepard feels justified and compelled, in fact, to fill two-hundred pages or more of his *Journal* with what one eighteenth century diarist refers to as "self-emptiness, self-loathing . . . and deep unfeigned self-abasement." See David Brainerd, "Preface to Meditations and Spiritual Experiences of Mr. Thomas Shepard," *Three Valuable Pieces*, ed. Thomas Prince (Boston, 1747), v. Quoted in Shea 141.

13. The life-changing quality of Shepard's sermons is discussed in many critical works, as well as Albro's *Life of Thomas Shepard*, where members of the congregation are quoted. As Parker notes: "Harvard College was eventually established at Cambridge at least partly because of Shepard's impressive effectiveness in preserving his congregation there from any taint of Antinomianism at a time when many members of the church were inclined to follow Mrs. Hutchinson and the Reverend John Wheelwright" (140).

14. Quoted in Selement and Wooley (11).

15. This passage can be further illuminated by what Delbanco refers to as Shepard's "Christology." In a discussion of the complicated position of Christ for Shepard in restoring the "father-son relation between God and man," Delbanco notes, "Now the son is merely means to the father; now he is personally vibrant; now he is abstract, the divine will working through human agency" (166).

16. Murdock and Webber both note that seventeenth-century spiritual autobiographies were not meant to have wide circulation or even to be published but were kept within the family or shared with one or two friends—otherwise the author risked the danger of "sinfully exalting himself" (Murdock 54).

17. Cited respectively in Delbanco 170; Parker 154; and Delbanco 170-71.

18. Cited in McGiffert (45, n. 16).

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