

Bubbles and Skulls: The Phenomenological Structure of Self-Consciousness in Dutch Still Life Painting

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Abstract: In this paper I investigate the representation of self-consciousness in the still life tradition in the Netherlands around the time of Descartes' residence there. I treat the paintings of this tradition as both a phenomenological resource and as a phenomenological undertaking in their own right. I begin with an introductory overview of the still life tradition, with particular attention to semiotic structures characteristic of the vanitas still life. I then focus my analysis on the representation of self-consciousness in this tradition, identifying both a Cartesian mode of representation of self-consciousness but also a counter trend.

The proper methodology of phenomenology has been endlessly debated, and it is not my intention to enter here into that debate. But it is worth noticing an assumption shared by most of the parties to the dispute. Whatever the proper method for phenomenology -- be it empirical or pure, transcendental or historicist, straight- or hetero-, ... -- it is generally assumed that the product of phenomenology is words. Lots of them, preferably in German or French or academic English. The literary form of the product may vary dramatically (a Treatise or a Meditation, a Manifesto or Research Article, an Ontological Poem or an Essay), but the medium remains the same. This paper questions that assumption by examining a set of phenomenological studies undertaken not in words but in oil: Dutch still life paintings of the first half of the 17th century.¹

My most general thesis here -- that still life painting can be viewed as phenomenology -- may be surprising or indeed offensive to some. (I imagine the objection that one diminishes the art by treating it as some kind of cognitive science -- a complaint to which I am sensitive but by which I find myself

¹ For the canonical positions in the debate over phenomenological method, see Husserl 1913 and the respective Introductions to Heidegger 1927a and Merleau-Ponty 1945a. For recent naturalistic approaches to phenomenology see Dennett 1991 and Petitot *et. al.* 1999. On the contrast between 'straight' and 'hetero-' phenomenology, see Cerbone 2003. There are some important counterexamples to the general assumption that phenomenological articulation must be verbal. Most notably, Merleau-Ponty treats Cézanne's paintings as phenomenological studies (Merleau-Ponty 1945b). Foucault's treatment of *Las Meninas* is perhaps less directly phenomenological, but nonetheless serves as an important example of the use of painting to explore structures of representation (Foucault 1966). For a recent discussion of phenomenology in the medium of film see Dreyfus and Dreyfus 2002.

undeterred.) But in one sense the general thesis borders on the trivial: it is hard to deny that the still life painter undertakes studies (that is indeed what we call them) of the appearance or manifestation of things -- phenomena -- and expresses the result of this attention in the work he produces. The result is not *logos*, if by *logos* we mean narrowly words; but there is an articulation in Heidegger's sense: a disparting display of phenomenological results.² But I also seek here to defend a narrower and no doubt more vulnerable thesis, concerning specifically the phenomenology of *self-consciousness*. It is perhaps unsurprising to find that in a painting of a collection of objects we can find insights into the structure of our experience of such objects. The painter of the *trompe l'oeil* certainly exploits his understanding of our perceptual awareness in order to trick us into seeing what is not there. But it is more surprising to find here important insights into the elusive problems concerning the phenomenological structure of *self-consciousness* -- particularly since a still life typically displays only inanimate objects.³ Nonetheless I shall argue that we find in the still life tradition the working out of two rival phenomenologies of self-consciousness -- one Cartesian and one anti-Cartesian.

Let me take some care with these terms. I here take no stand on any questions of direct influence between the Still Life Masters and Cartesian philosophy. As we shall see, the painters of this tradition were conversant with philosophical ideas and figures from the history of philosophy. Moreover, the rise of Dutch still life painting coincides almost exactly with Descartes' residence in The Netherlands. (Descartes first visited with the army in 1618 and resided there from 1630 to 1649; the oil still life tradition in the Netherlands began around 1603 and reached its peak during Descartes' residence there.) But aside from one minor detail, I shall here make no claims about direct contact or influence in one way or another. Nonetheless I shall argue that there is a substantive sense in which Cartesian and anti-Cartesian views about the phenomenological structure of self-consciousness are worked out by rival schools in the Dutch still life tradition.⁴

² On Heidegger's treatment of assertion as disparting display, see Heidegger 1927a, §33 and 1927b, §17b.

³ The problems of self-consciousness have been among the most persistent and unresolved of the modern philosophical tradition since Descartes, and have resulted in a number of contortions within the specifically phenomenological tradition. The canonical sources are of course Descartes' *Meditations* (1641); Hume's *Treatise* (1739), particularly Book I, Part IV, chapter vi; and Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, 1789), particularly the Transcendental Deduction in B. For a survey of more recent treatments see Cassam 1994 and the essays collected in *The Monist* 87:2 (April, 2004). The most famous trace of Husserl's struggle over the problems of self-consciousness comes in a note to the second edition of the *Logical Investigations*, where after having insistently denied in the first edition that there is any self to be found in experience, he happily announces a decade later that he has indeed found one (Husserl 1913², V§8; B362).

⁴ This paper builds on work I started in my review of Mark Sacks' book, *Objectivity and Insight*, and I am grateful to Mark for drawing me in. A lot of people have since contributed research assistance. Let me thank specifically Leslie Bussis Tait (Metropolitan Museum, New York), and the many friends, colleagues and students at UC San Diego who helped me with this material, in particular Philip Gunderson, Nellie Wieland, Doug Ebrahimi, Donald Rutherford, Mason Withers, Dana Nelkin and Sam Rickless. Over the years a number of undergraduates have written papers on particular paintings discussed here, and many have provided information and leads that I exploit. I apologize for thanking them here only collectively.

§1 A Very Brief Primer on Dutch Still Life Painting

I begin with a short primer on Dutch still life painting. I apologize to readers for whom this background is familiar; I rehearse it here for several reasons. First, much of the argument and analysis that follows turns on semiotic analysis of some representative and exceptional paintings from the age of the Dutch Masters. Interpreting a Dutch still life requires sensitivity to its symbols, which are themselves rooted in and reflect the distinctive cultural context in which the tradition emerged and developed. So I here briefly sketch in some of that context as a prolog towards the interpretation that follows. I also try to be explicit about the background I presuppose here, in order to expose my assumptions to scrutiny and correction.

So start with basics. What is a still life? The still life is a genre of painting and drawing, standing alongside portraits, landscapes, etc., as a distinct formal subgenre of representational art. It is found across a range of media: in vase paintings, watercolors, drawings, etchings and photography, for instance -- and in oil. A still life painting presents an assembled array of objects, typically arranged on a table in an interior space. The objects are “still”, both in the sense of unmoving but primarily in the sense of not-living.⁵ This may include both inanimate objects (a coin or candle) and/or once-living things: a cut flower, a bowl of fruit. As we shall see, however, the principle of stillness was not always observed as the tradition progressively pressed the boundaries of this strictest of painterly disciplines.

It is safe to assume that the drawing and painting of still lifes has long been used as an exercise in the training of painters. But it is chiefly among the Dutch Masters that still life became a high art in its own right. Even in the Dutch context, the repute of the still life is subsidiary. We all know the names of Rubens, Rembrandt and Vermeer, and perhaps a handful of other Dutch Masters: van Dyck, Frans Hals, de Hooch But these are chiefly painters of the human form. The names of their contemporaries in the still life tradition are for the most part quite obscure: de Heem and de Gheyn, Johannes Torrentius, Claesz-Heda and Claesz. But although their names may be unfamiliar their accomplishment was considerable. To some of these accomplishments a contemporary audience is now almost thoroughly deadened. The technological achievement of hyper-realistic representation is now everywhere in our lives -- at every turn and in many media. But in the 17th century, the art of producing (in any medium) a representation which can trick the eye was still novel and remarkable.⁶ The Dutch appropriated and perfected Italian techniques of perspective drawing and advanced the technologies for the manufacture and application of paints to produce obsessively exact representations of objects.

⁵ The French term for still life, *nature morte*, invokes the theme of death more explicitly; the 17th century Dutch term, *vie coye* (literally: calm life), conveys both senses of the English ‘still.’ See Bruyn 1951.

⁶ There are tales from Antiquity of paintings that fooled even birds (the grapes of Zeuxis) and horses (Apelles), but no such works have survived. For reports, see Pliny, *Natural History*, Book 35.

Three pieces of background concerning the Dutch context of this painterly tradition must be introduced here, since they are indispensable to an understanding of the tradition. The first point is political. During a period of Spanish (and hence Catholic) hegemony in western Europe, the Netherlands were unique in having fought off Spanish control. The Union of Utrecht (1579) is a landmark in the intense, costly and sometimes violent conflict between the various states of the Netherlands and Spanish/Catholic powers, and it led to the emergence of a Dutch Republic in the Northern Lowlands. Its political independence and relative religious tolerance made it a destination for many refugees of the period. Among philosophers the most famous are of course Descartes and Spinoza. Spinoza's family fled Spanish intolerance of Jews and became merchants in Holland. Descartes found in the Netherlands greater freedom from the Catholic censor but also (among other things) access to public dissection of human corpses, which was banned in Catholic lands.

The second piece of background is economic. In short, the Dutch of this period were rich -- fabulously rich. The title of Schama's study, *The Embarrassment of Riches*, reflects something of the scale and cultural context of an unprecedented accumulation of capital assets among the Dutch burgher class -- perhaps the greatest concentration of wealth on the planet until the emergence of Wall Street as a financial center in the latter half of the 19th century. The basis for all this wealth was banking and trade, set amidst the first stirrings of the global economy. The lucrative but risky traffic in spices, coffee, chocolate, rum, slaves ... was carried in Dutch vessels and financed by Dutch banking firms and some of the earliest stock exchanges. The Dutch East Indies trading company was formed in 1602, became one of the first corporations with global reach, and exerted considerable autonomy in its operations abroad. The Company eventually had its own standing army of 10,000 and was effectively the governing authority in many of the regions whose resources it brought to the European market. At its peak the Governors of the Company were probably the richest individuals in the world outside of royalty. Many in this new business class lived in a dense urban setting (hence *Burghers*), where dry real estate was perhaps the most elusive commodity -- another set of parallels to modern New Amsterdam.

The third piece of background is religious. The Dutch of this period were Calvinists. This statement is of course a massive oversimplification of an enormously complex matter. In fact there was an array of religious traditions represented in the Netherlands at this time, and the question of the toleration of religious difference was itself one of the central political, religious, and philosophical issues of the day. Nonetheless, the predominant religious institutions of Dutch life followed Calvin's central teachings, notably concerning the preordination of the select, salvation by grace, and the intense distrust of worldly goods and pleasures.

This background is of considerable importance for understanding the art of the period. If nothing else these developments had a rather dramatic effect on the structure of the art market. The iconoclasm of Calvinist religious practice and the effective banning of Catholic institutions meant the elimination of the church as the major financier of fine art. But at the same time the emergence of a wealthy burgher class

created a new market with a ferocious appetite. The private collection of art became a cultural and economic force which created quite a broad market. A visitor from England wrote home in 1641: “pictures are very common here, there being scarce an ordinary tradesman whose house is not decorated with them.”⁷ Some of those works were painted on commission, following the traditional market structure established by the Church, but there also emerged the novel institutions of the art gallery and auction houses, where uncommissioned works were sold to private buyers, principally for display in private homes and businesses.

It was not just the mode of exchange of art that changed in this new setting; its mode of production also shifted, and both the form and the content of the art itself. The demand for artworks produced a highly competitive marketplace. When we hear the term “Dutch Masters” we should think not only of the mastery of an art form (or of cigars!), but also the master of a workshop, where apprentices both trained and contributed to the production of a valuable commodity.⁸ A market of this structure itself had noticeable effects on the aesthetic values of the period. With many different workshops producing very similar paintings -- endless variations on a theme -- a premium came to be placed on virtuosity and technical accomplishment. In the still life tradition this meant choosing the most difficult objects to paint (delicate crystal or lace, for instance, intricate visual textures, multiply reflective surfaces) and then competing to recreate them as exactly as possible in oil. The vivid realism of Dutch still lifes was thus in part the product of a marketplace where the ability to outperform the competition marked the difference between business success and failure. But for our purposes the most important consequences of these other shifts in the Dutch situation concern the content of the art. In the combination of Dutch business success and Calvinist theology there emerges a kind of spiritual tension in the Dutch situation: unbalanced between unprecedented worldly success and anxiety over that success -- a situation perhaps not unlike our own today. I turn to the paintings to explore this tension.

Start with a late work from the period, but one that will serve usefully as a point of entry: de Heem’s *Vanitas Still-Life with Musical Instruments* (1661).⁹ The painting portrays, in vivid detail, a rich assortment of objects. The central panel of the painting is densely filled, with the presented space

⁷ *The Diary of John Evelyn* (1641); quoted in Schama 1987, 318.

⁸ On the 17th century Dutch art market, see Alpers 1988. Dash 1999 recounts a contract involving tulip bulbs (a capital asset in the Dutch horticultural economy), cash, and eleven paintings.

⁹ De Heem 1661. It has not been possible to reproduce in this volume all the paintings discussed in what follows. A list of cited paintings is included with the bibliography at the end of the paper, together with details of current provenance. Halftone reproductions of the six works most central to my argument are reproduced in an appendix; I am grateful to the museums for permission to reprint them here. Color reproductions of most of the works discussed here can be found in Chong and Kloek’s landmark catalogue (1999), which has been an indispensable research tool in this project. All of the works cited here can, at least at the time of writing, be found in digital color reproduction on various internet sites, and can usually be located quickly by searching for the paintings by artist and title. The quality of these reproductions vary dramatically, however, and in some cases even the titles are inconsistent. The titles of Dutch still life paintings are typically the product of some dubbing in the marketplace, in some cases centuries after their composition; hence one finds considerable variation in the literature. (Not only the painters but the paintings have a degree of anonymity.) In the critical apparatus of this paper, I have tried to follow the titles used by the current owners of each painting (using English translations where necessary), but even this is subject to variation and other scholars follow different conventions of naming.

intricately managed to maximize the visible array. In interpreting a still life, one must be guided in the first instance by the objects chosen for representation. The primary theme in this case is the delights of the senses. The collection is carefully arrayed to suggest an range of sensory pleasures, indeed something for every sense: music to be heard, ripe fruit to be tasted, the sweet smell of flowers and ripe, cut melons, the feel of satiny silk. The whole visual scene presents an array of delights. Hanging on the wall in a private home, such a painting bespeaks wealth: an extravagant sensory feast capped by the decadence of an overturned jug -- a symbol of wealth enough to waste, consumption without restraint.¹⁰

But interwoven with this first theme we find a number of others. The human form is represented here, together with a number of variations on a sexual theme: the shape of the viola suggests the female form while a cut melon bespeaks female sexuality. The juxtaposition of the orifice of the mandolin and the bagpipes in the background symbolically convey a sexual act. This symbolic lead itself takes us to the deeper sense of the painting: this is not only a *celebration* of the senses but also a systematic documenting of the *passing* of such pleasures. The fruit is at the peak of its ripeness; soon it will begin to rot. The instruments are fragile and the pleasure they produce is fleeting. The sexual pleasure is represented here as passing: notice that the bagpipes are deflated, its pipes sagging; the overturned vase now a symbol of pleasures that have slipped away. To punctuate this counter-theme, and in violation of the principle that still lives must be still, we see the snail (itself a sexual image), sliming in from off stage, ready to transform ripe into rotten. This layering of meaning is characteristic of the still life. The painting pulls in two directions -- the two spiritual directions at the heart of the Dutch predicament: between enjoying and celebrating an unprecedented wealth, while also questioning its true worth.

This tension between themes is found in each of the main subgenres of the still life.¹¹ Within this tradition there were several established and recognized subgenres, each with recognized masters, and workshops largely keeping to their niche. Four in particular deserve mention. Beert's *Dishes with Oysters and Sweetmeats* (1615) is an example of the banquet piece [*Bancketje*]. A banquet still life presents us with a table set for a party, a lavish display of foods and tableware. The painting is again an invitation to delight, but the portrayal carries other symbols as well: here the seashells are a reference to the seafaring which brought the wealth; indeed particular species of shell are often painted to represent particular trading destinations of a patron. The method of composition in a banquet piece is additive: the scene was flooded

¹⁰ Naomi Popper Voskuil has suggested that this presentation of commodities in complete detachment from the mode of their production reflects the new form of economic life of the Burgers: consuming goods without any contact with their production, a novelty of emerging urban life. As we shall see, however, the form of production of the painting itself is often very elaborately represented within these works. See Voskuil 1973.

¹¹ Like a number of other fine art traditions of this period (notably the baroque musical tradition) -- the still life develops within a system of quite rigid rules. The principle of stillness is the first (and often the first to be broken with effect, as we see with de Heem's snail). The principle of realism is the second. The question of what amounts to realism in painting is a vexed problem of aesthetics. As we shall see, the still life painters themselves explored and struggled with it. Virtuosity, reflected both in the choice of challenging subjects and exacting execution was an ideal rewarded. The generification of the form is a less rigid principle, useful mainly to collectors and catalogists, but also notoriously a product of the market setting and commodification of art (witness contemporary music).

with bright light and the elements of the banquet were painted one at a time, under the illumination of candle arrays. Accordingly there is only minimal overlap or shadowing of the presented objects.¹² A closely related additive genre is the breakfast piece [*Ontbijt*]. Again here a meal is spread (not necessarily a morning meal, but any a meal that breaks a fast, perhaps at an inn after a journey). In this case the meal is set not for a party but for a solitary diner, changing the mood of the piece by a degree from festive to somber. Van Schooten's *Breakfast (Ontbijt)* (1640) presents the tableware of an inn, together with cheeses, fruit and bread. Once again we find the bivalence or tension of themes; a knife figures prominently (a hint of morbidity), and the broken crust of the mince pie suggests the decay of the body.

A third genre of the tradition brings us closer to recognizably philosophical issues. Van Hoogstraten's *Trompe L'oeil Still Life* (1666-68) carefully sets out to deceive the viewer into seeing represented objects as themselves physically present. It is certainly tempting to imagine Descartes, on arrival in Amsterdam, visiting one of the new Dutch galleries and musing over these reminders that the senses deceive. The senses, it seems, are both cognitively and connotatively dialectical, attracting us to false delights and tricking us into false beliefs. The best of the *trompe l'oeil* are astonishing in their illusion, and were often hung in ways that heightened the effect: a painting of a wall cabinet full of musical instruments deceives at the end of a hallway; a letter board is real enough to invite the viewer to reach out for one of the objects tucked in its straps. In the possibility of deception we find one principled extreme or ideal which defines a standard of realism in painting. The perfect realism is the complete illusion; this ideal serves to constitute a domain of representational practice.

The fourth distinct genre that deserves mention here is the floral display. Flowers have long been a Dutch obsession, and the rise of the still life market coincided with what has become known as 'tulipmania' or 'the war of the flowers.'¹³ Flowers exemplify the fragile balance between beauty and pleasure on the one hand and decay on the other: both a symbol and instance of beauty, they are always already dying at the peak of their bloom. The red and white tulip in van der Spelt's *Trompe L'oeil with Flowers and a Curtain* (1658) is a flower we find represented repeatedly in this period -- valued for its dramatic color variegation. The variegation was produced, as it happens, by infecting the sprouting bulb with a viral disease, thus reiterating the link between beauty and mortality. Van der Spelt heightens the illusion by including within the painting a realistic curtain, drawn to one side so as to suggest that the represented space of the painting is an interior space of the room in which it is hung -- a nook in which the floral display has been set. Much like a mirror, the curtain thus functions to create the illusion of additional space in the cramped internal quarters of a Dutch urban residence. As we shall see presently, the curtain also figures as one in a wave of symbolic images of death and human mortality.

¹² Bergström 1956.

¹³ A note on tulips: tulipmania reached its heights in 1636-7. At its peak a single bulb reached a peak price of 5200 guilders. By comparison, 40 gallons of brandy sold for 60 guilders; a ton of herring was 13 guilders. A well-off merchant might earn 3000 guilders annually. By comparison, Rembrandt's *The Night Watch* sold for 1600 guilders in 1642. Source: Dash 1999.

Themes of death and decay find their highest development in the so-called ‘vanitas still life,’ which receives its name from the opening passage of the Book of Ecclesiastes, usually quoted in Latin: *vanitas vanitatum. et omnia vanitas*: Vanity of vanity all is vanity. Vanitas is sometimes counted as a distinct subgenre of the still life, but it is better viewed as a theme that runs through all the genres, sometimes subtly, sometimes at a crescendo. Like the Book of Ecclesiastes, the still life tradition catalogs and celebrates the very worldly pleasures and accomplishments which it at the same time submits to a critique. In van Oosterwijk’s *Vanitas Still Life* (1668) we see the symbol of a merchant’s wealth -- a globe, a ledger and quill, coins and a money-sack -- and the pleasures that go with it: flowers, music, an exquisite Asian porcelain. But amidst all this comes the theme of death: sand run through an hourglass, a butterfly lives briefly and passes away, a skull. Formally, the vanitas still life is often very complex. The bright light of the banquet and floral pieces gives way here to a darkened space illuminated by a single light source; the objects overlap and reflect one another, multiplying the compositional complexity.¹⁴ We shall return below to its symbolic complexities.

Let me conclude this brief primer with a few more theoretical remarks. The first concerns the semiotic structure of the paintings. Semiotics is the study of the structure of meaning in signs and symbols. As we have seen, a still life painting is dense with symbols, and seeing the work comes in part by way of understanding and responding to that symbolic code. The requisite literacy rests in large part on a common stock of cultural symbols derived from the lived world of everyday life, combined with what Grice called natural signs. (No convention or intention is needed to link the skull with death, but to appreciate the significance of a quill or hourglass one must know something of how they are used.¹⁵) But there is also an underlying formal structure to this symbolic code. Here I resort to some semiotic jargon: call this structure ‘dialectical polysemy.’ ‘Polysemy’ here means simply a multitude of meanings, the accumulation of multiple symbolic codes. A polysemic accumulation is dialectical where one set of meanings (pleasure, accomplishment) is balanced by an opposing one (vanity, death). It is in part this dialectical structure that makes the paintings such hermeneutically rich objects -- particularly in a cultural setting that is itself caught in a tension between accomplishment and anxiety. In this sense the semiotic structure of the paintings articulates a structure of meaning in the world of Dutch burghers.

Having recognized these tensions, it is natural to ask whether the paintings provide any resolution of them. Do the two themes remain in tension? Does one side ‘win’ in some sense? Is there some resolution the paintings preach? Here it is useful to distinguish between semiotically open and semiotically closed systems of representations. In a closed semiotic system, a particular set of meanings predominates and dictates a particular interpretation; to miss it is simply to be wrong. Street signs are semiotically closed, so are waving flags on the Fourth of July. A semiotic system is open where it leaves unresolved

¹⁴ There is much more work to be done on van Oosterwijk’s painting. I chose it as exemplary of vanitas, but have since discovered that this designation is disputed, and it may well be more exceptional than exemplary. Its most prominent motto: SELF-STRYT (self-strife or self-struggle) provides occasion for another paper altogether.

¹⁵ On the notion of natural meaning, see Grice 1957.

what meanings are to be taken from it; the chaplain's parable in *The Trial* is semiotically open. In many still life paintings one finds semiotic closure, often effected through the use of a motto, usually taken from Biblical or Classical sources (particularly the Stoics) or from common proverbs. Torrentius' *Allegory of Temperance* (1614) presents a glass between a jug of wine and a jug of water (themselves rather dramatically gendered) together with a horse's bridle mounted on the wall behind. The message here -- that worldly pleasures must be taken in moderation -- is rendered explicit as the lyric in a score set beneath the assembled objects. It reads, "That which is without measure is immeasurable evil" -- a maxim the painter seems to apply both to wine and to sex. But the lessons of a still life are not always so clear and explicit. What lesson does one take from the insistent reminder of the vanity of worldly pleasure and accomplishment? What ethics is prescribed by a skull? Here we may be tempted to close the semiotic structure by presupposing a Christian moral: Lay up your stores in heaven; live not for pleasure but for final judgment; pursue the good rather than delight. As we shall see, however, the paintings sometimes resist or at least question such hopeful closure.

This brings us to the final point in our primer -- the issue of hope. Part of the perennial attraction of the vanitas tradition lies in its visual exploration of nihilistic themes. Indeed in retrospect we can see in Dutch still life a first exploration of nihilism -- the themes of skepticism, somber morbidity, even despair that reappear with increasing insistency in the modern period. The very term 'vanitas' suggests a connection with nihilism. *Nihil* - nothing, *vana* - empty: the two Latin roots are nearly synonymous. But one must tread carefully here. There is considerable danger of anachronism in reading modern nihilistic despair back into these art works from an intensely Christian context. For the Christian (as indeed for the Platonist) the death of the body marks not so much ending as beginning.¹⁶ The passing goods of the world are balanced by genuine and lasting goods, with the painting then serving as a spiritual exhortation to pursue the lasting goods rather than the fleeting pleasures. I do not wish to deny that this movement toward a hopeful semiotic closure is present in the paintings, but we should not simply presuppose it. As we shall see, there is within the tradition an opposing theme, a movement toward a nihilistic closure.

§2 Bubbles and Skulls: Pieter Claesz and the Transformation of a Visual Theme

I turn now from generalities to something more specific, particularly with an eye for phenomenological leads and clues. Start from bubbles. Soapbubbles and various other bubble-like objects are not uncommon in the still life tradition, and when they appear they can seem oddly out of place. In David Bailly's *Vanitas Still Life with Portrait* (1650, see figure 1), a group of bubbles floats through an otherwise somber but familiar vanitas scene: broken instruments, an hourglass running down, a skull. The

¹⁶ This is complicated considerably by the Calvinist context, which is distinctive among the Christian traditions in its insistence on predestination.

painting is unusual for a number of reasons, most prominently for its inclusion of a living man, an African bearing a chain. The man in turn holds a second portrait, in this case of the patron. We shall return to the issues pose by such iteration below, as also to the inclusion here of the artist's own palette and brushes, but consider first what the bubbles are doing in this somber scene. No small part of the answer must involve the painterly challenge bubbles present: how does one create, in oil, a convincing representation of a maximally transparent object? It is worth taking note of the technique that is used: a light circle conveys a visual edge, while the distortion of a doubly-reflected window (top-left, bottom-right) is used to convey the bulbous form. In short, one paints a bubble by painting what it reflects. Bubbles also capture, reflect, and thereby reproduce light, yielding a glimmering effect in the darkened spaces of a vanitas composition.

But what do bubbles contribute to the semiotic complexity of the painting? Here it useful to draw on an older but related representational art: the emblembook, of which Visscher's *Sinnepoppen* (1615) is perhaps the most famous. An emblembook typically collects together several woodcuts or etchings, usually combined with moralizing verses or mottos. In this older (and cheaper!) medium one finds the concatenation of bubbles and skulls, often combined with the figure of the putto: a cherubic young child. Hendrik Goltzuis' *Quis Evadet?* (1594) draws on a common emblem: a young child happily blows bubbles while leaping over a skull and other symbols of death -- a smoking lamp, wilting flowers. The motto makes the lesson clear (*Quis evadet?:* Who escapes?), while an accompanying text elaborates the moral.¹⁷ Here the symbolic significance of bubbles seems clear. Bubbles are objects of childlike delight, but also of ephemeral pleasure and (particularly in conjunction with the skull) symbols of death. In another of Goltzius' etchings the association is made explicit: *Homo Bulla Est*: man is a bubble.¹⁸

But I believe we must look further to appreciate the concatenation of bubbles and skulls. Start with one of the most important paintings of the tradition, and one of the oldest. De Gheyn's *Vanitas Still Life* (1603, fig. 3) is probably the oldest surviving Dutch still life painting, and is still very directly connected to earlier Germanic representations of the macabre: de Gheyn's skull is gruesome, its setting a gravesite. We find here many of the symbolic elements to be found in the later paintings (tulip, coins, and smoking lamp), albeit in this case dramatically subordinated to the presentation of the skull. The motto, inscribed in the capstone of the arch, reads '*Humana Vana*': human emptiness. But the painting also tells a more specific story. The tomb, it seems, is a royal tomb, and the painting contains multiple references to Catholic monarchy. The most prominent and specific are the two coins at bottom left and right, showing obverse and reverse of a Spanish coin, minted to commemorate the Habsburg Emperor Charles Vth, and his mother, Joanna of Aragon and Castile. Death, we are shown, befalls even the mighty. But what place does

¹⁷ "The fresh silvery flower, fragrant with the breath of spring, withers instantly as its beauty wanes. So the life of man, already ebbing in the newborn child, disappears like a bubble or like fleeting smoke." The Latin verse is due to Franco Estius, the humanist poet; this translation is modified from Walter L. Strauss (ed.), *Hendrick Goltzius: The Complete Engravings and Woodcuts* (New York: Abaris Books, 1977), p. 588. I am grateful to Donald Rutherford for his assistance with the Latin.

¹⁸ For a classic discussion of this theme see Janson 1937.

the bubble have in this work? Certainly the association with death predominates over any hint of innocence or pleasure. The bubble might be taken as a hope for immortality (a soul rising from the body) but when we look closer we see that there is more than this. Notice first that the bubble is used here to make a political point. Reflected within it we find a further set of objects, a motley assortment, difficult to discern. Several of these reflected objects allude further to royalty (a crown, a scepter); and the most prominent object -- the wheel at lower right in the bubble -- is the rack of torture, a reference to the methods of Spanish and Catholic power in this period. The bubble is thus used here as a representational medium of its own, and provides a commentary of its own -- a painting with a painting.

In de Gheyn's use of the bubble as a representational medium, we find a technique that would be refined, perfected, and exploited in the subsequent tradition. It is in this device, I want to argue, that we find a first exploration of the phenomenological structure of self-consciousness. Before taking up this issue directly, however, we should take note of a much more direct relation to philosophy inscribed with the de Gheyn painting itself. Mottos attributed to philosophers (particularly to Seneca and other Stoics, but also to Lucretius) are not uncommon in vanitas paintings. But de Gheyn is notable for including representations of the philosophers themselves. Standing top left and right, in the positions that might be occupied by angels or saints on a Christian tomb (notice the halo on the figure at left), de Gheyn incorporates statuary figures of Democritus and Heraclitus. They are identified by an implicit reference to a saying attributed to Seneca: "Heraclitus weeps while Democritus laughs." (The reference is to *On Tranquility*, Seneca's answer to Serenus, section 12.) The two are indeed presented as weeping and laughing while pointing down at the bubble below. The pre-Socratic figures are included here as symbols of ancient materialism, and in their placement serve as emblems of a counter-Christian metaphysics, a counter-weight to Christian hope. If all is atoms (Democritus) and everything changes (Heraclitus), then the hope for immortality expressed by the rising bubble is void. We thus find here an example of the resistance of the paintings to a Christian appropriation, and indeed a gesture toward a fully despairing semiotic closure: worldly accomplishments and pleasures are fleeting vanities and there is no enduring soul; nothing survives death hence there are no lasting goods.¹⁹

Rather than pursuing these metaphysical leads further, however, I want now to keep our focus on the use of the bubble as a representational sphere -- a use established by de Gheyn and developed in the

¹⁹ For discussion of the Democritus/Heraclitus theme see Blankert 1967. Wind 1937 traces some of the history of what he calls *Democritus Christianus* and *Heraclitus Christianus* and includes a reproduction of Rubens' renderings of the pair. See also Voskuil 1973, 68-9 and fig. 15. A related example of this counter-Christian closure can be found in an even older German composition: Barthel Bruyn the Elder's *Vanitas Still Life: Omnia Morte*, (undated, mid-16th century). In Bruyn's composition we find a skull and jawbone being scoured by a housefly, alongside an extinguished candle. The motto is a saying attributed to Lucretius: *Omnia morte cadunt, mors ultima linia rerum*: everything passes with death; death is the ultimate limit of things. Here again we find the counter-Christian conclusion: death is not a passing but an ultimate limit. In Bruyn's work, this message is itself hidden on the back side of a portrait, a radical device for balancing opposed semiotic structures. Note, however, that in both these cases the ancient reference may also sustain a non-Christian hope. For Seneca the laughter of Democritus is explicitly identified as an expression of hope, and Lucretius' poem had famously argued that death at least is not to be feared.

subsequent tradition. Among the masters of the still life, the inclusion of bubbles and bubble-like objects becomes increasingly common and complex. A prominent example is the Römer, the heavy-stemmed, bulbous goblet that is found in an enormous number of still lifes from the period, typically set in the background of banquet setting or breakfast-piece. The bubblelike Römer serves a number of aesthetic purposes and presents a complex technical challenge, with each facet of its knobbed stem providing occasion for a further study in reflective projections. But I would also like to argue here that these representational spheres themselves reflect and articulate a model of the self-conscious representation of objects – in short: a phenomenological model. The viewer is invited to see himself in the bubble, and indeed to see himself as seeing from inside a representational sphere.

I have previously tried to make this case in connection with Claesz's 1633 *Still Life with Römer and Tazza* (Fig. 5).²⁰ In this piece we find Claesz taking up the genre of the breakfast piece, albeit now with the formal complexity and somber, almost monochromatic palette of a vanitas composition. The piece presents the aftermath of a solitary meal: pewter plates scattered with crumbs, empty oyster shells alongside an overturned platter. Here again we see the use of a bulbous form as a representational medium: the visually complex tazza is here carefully and systematically distorted in the projected reflection on the various bubble-like surfaces of the glass. Notice that the Römer has moved here from its traditionally subordinate place to become the centerpiece and focal center of the composition. My admittedly adventurous thesis about this painting is that we find in it a systematic self-consciousness. Indeed there are at least two forms of self-consciousness suggested in the painting. The first comes by way of the olive. Still life paintings often include references to the painter's own art; we have seen an example above in the incorporation of a painter's tools in a vanitas assemblage. This might be read as an expression of modesty, a key Calvinist and Stoic virtue. The inclusion of a palette or brushes marks the painter's accounting of his own accomplishments -- however hard won -- as among the ephemeral goods of the world. In Claesz's breakfast piece, the olive stands as a kind of ironic self-reference to the painter's art of deception. In a painting portraying dozens of circular forms (count ten in the base of the tazza alone), each represented in two dimensions as ellipses, the olive is an object which is actually elliptical in life. The olive thus reminds us that the work is the contrivance of a painter, and that its representations, however exact they may seem, are themselves deceptions.²¹ If this is right then we can see a number of themes of Cartesian philosophy worked out in the painting: the study of geometry and optics, the concern with perceptual deception and skepticism.

²⁰ Martin 2001.

²¹ In reading Claesz's olive as a commentary on the deceptive art of painting, I follow Chong and Kloek 1999, 143. Several formal features of the work serve to draw attention to the olive. It is brightly illuminated by the light reflected from the base of the tazza, and it is a small, visually dense object placed in the position on the canvas where an eye accustomed to reading (left-to-right, top-to-bottom) naturally comes to rest. The placement of small, dense objects in this position was often used to provide a clue for unraveling hidden meanings in a painting. Another example can be found in de Heem's snail, discussed above.

But what is more central to my argument here is a second trace of self-consciousness in the painting, in this case connecting specifically to the Cartesian model of consciousness as a sphere of representation, a mediating sphere on which things are projected for experience. The representational sphere in this case is the Römer, which resembles a bubble both in its physical form and in the compositional strategy Claesz uses to represent it. Claesz's bubble, I suggest, is specifically linked with his own self-consciousness as a painter: in the curved shadow in the lowermost reflected window we can discern the artist's silhouetted head, partially blocking the light as he constructs the represented scene -- as if from inside the bubble. This last claim may seem fanciful, and indeed I myself advanced it somewhat fancifully in my earlier discussion of this work. But I can now provide some supporting evidence for this thesis in the form of an obscure painting, hanging in (of all places) the French galleries at the Getty Center, Los Angeles. *Vanitas Still Life* (1634, fig. 6) is probably not a work from Claesz's own hand. The Getty attributes it simply as "after Claesz"; likely it is the work of an advanced apprentice from Claesz's studio, with the composition established by the master. The painting is dramatically divided into two fields -- a technique that became common in the later development of the still life tradition. To the right we have a vanitas assembly: shells, a ledger and quill, a skull and bones, a Römer. The gleaming diagonal of the ceremonial cup divides the assembled objects from a reflective orb or spherical mirror presiding over the left of the panel. I believe that this painting, though perhaps not executed at the same level as the others we have been considering, serves to confirm a number of the claims I have been advancing.

Certainly it is tempting to interpret the work in the framework of Cartesian dualism: divided left and right the painting can be read as a representation of mind and body, with a toppled urn signifying the union of the two, now severed in death. But what is important for my argument here is specifically the representation of self and self-consciousness in the work. By 1634, the objects represented on the right side of the painting all have clearly established symbolic significance: shells for seafaring and trade; ledger, quill and sealed contracts for commerce; skull and bones for death. But what should we say of the bubble-like sphere at left? If we look closely we see that it is used here to represent the painter himself, whose figure is hidden but unmistakable, sitting at his easel, brush in hand.²² The sphere is in this way explicitly linked to self-representation; it is a self-portrait, albeit a highly unusual one. And how does this portrait represent the self? The parallels to the Cartesian ego are striking: the self is shown here inside a bubble, engaged in the act of representation. The bubble itself is a representational medium, reflecting and re-presenting the other objects in the painting. As viewers we can see that those representations are themselves distortions, twisted by the medium of representation itself. But to one who understands the principles of optical reflection (as clearly the representing painter himself does) those distortions betray a systematic and fully intelligible order. The spherical mirror thus reiterates the form of the bubble, now as a

²² A zoomable, high resolution color reproduction of this work is available on the Getty Museum website: www.getty.edu, where it is possible to study the self-portrait in closer detail. In preparing this essay for publication I have also been made aware of a virtually identical use of the glass orb in a work by Claesz at the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg: *Vanitas Still Life with Violin and Glass Ball* (1628).

maximally *reflective* rather than maximally transparent object. This bubble, however, is neither fragile nor ephemeral, but solid and enduring: a symbolic rendering of the Cartesian hope for the immortality of the representing self.²³

This form of self-representation is not unique to Claesz, by any means. The inclusion of self-representations in a spherical mirror can be traced back to van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* (1434). We find it in the still life tradition as early as 1612 in the paintings of Clara Peeters, where a ceremonial cup is covered with bubble-like protrusions, each of which captures and reflects the figure of the artist, peering out from inside a representational sphere. (See fig. 4.) My conclusion regarding bubbles is accordingly as follows: From symbols of transient pleasures and fragility in the Emblembooks, bubbles become in Claesz's still lifes a symbolic enactment of the Cartesian mind: site of consciousness and self-consciousness, locus of the self as a cognitive representational medium, and crucially: marking a division between what is inside the bubble (the representing subject: the self-conscious painter and his representations) and what is outside it (a represented world, the objects of such consciousness).

Having come this far we must now at least acknowledge the historical elephant in this argument: Although I have been calling all this Cartesian, it seems it cannot be derived from Descartes himself. The *Discourse on Method* was not published until 1637, the *Meditations* not until 1641. Rather than counting this an objection, however, or speculating about some independent knowledge that Claesz may have had of Cartesian philosophy, I suggest that we find here a striking confirmation of a thesis advanced by Hegel, Marx and Heidegger and emphasized more recently by Charles Taylor and Hubert Dreyfus: philosophers do not invent their philosophies out of whole cloth, nor are their works isolated and wholly rational cultural phenomena; rather, philosophers distill and articulate their philosophical views from the cultural practices in which they are embedded. In this case we find that central elements of the Cartesian account of the phenomenological structure of our self-conscious relation to the world are worked out and manifested in 17th century Dutch practices -- in particular the representational practices of the still life tradition -- in advance of Descartes' own verbal distillation.

§3 The Temporality of Self-Consciousness in a Late Painting of David Bailly

In this section I turn to a defense of the second part of my thesis; I argue that the broadly Cartesian phenomenology of self-consciousness we find in Claesz's work is challenged within the still life tradition

²³ There is much more to be learned about this spherical object. It figures in a number of contemporary emblems identified as a tool of learning, specifically in connection with geometry and astronomy. It seems likely that it was also a painter's tool, used to study the projections that the painting reproduced. In some paintings it is also used to echo the spherical form of the Earth or as a symbol for the astronomical heavens. For a discussion of the technology of hyperrealism see Hockney 2001. For some examples of the spherical emblems in connection with the sciences, see Goltzius' emblems of the Muses (1592); repr. in Strauss 1977, vol. 2, figs. 299-307.

by a rival, counter-Cartesian articulation of the phenomenology of self-consciousness. I focus my attention here on a single painting: David Bailly's 1651 *Vanitas Still life with Portrait of a Young Painter* (fig. 2). This painting is enormously complex, and there are many issues about it which remain unresolved. The sheer number of objects and symbols is here overwhelming: an assortment of portraits, a Römer and skull, bubbles, an hour glass, a curtain and table cloth, two books, a pipe, a knife, a string of pearls, a smoking candle, two statues, several flowers in a vase and others scattered on the table, a tall half-filled flute glass, two musical instruments (the partially hidden recorder on the table and the lute in the uppermost portrait), two pieces of paper, a scroll, coins, a silver orb on a chain, some kind of open silver box, two pieces of painterly equipment (the palette hung on the wall and the long maulstick used to steady the painter's hand), at least one unidentified object (the silverwork standing on the book) and a motto: *vanitas vanitum et omnia vanitas*. The whole assembly comprises more than fifty discrete objects. Once again here we find a sharp division of the visual field. But where Claesz had played very strictly within the rules of the still life, Bailly actively challenges them. The division of the field in this case produces, at right, a vanitas assembly, and at left a collection of portraits -- a crossing of genre boundaries that Bailly had explored on other occasions. (See fig. 1) Notice that two vertical forms separate these two fields of the painting: the vertical form of the candlestick and the vertical line created by the protruding interior corner of the room. I return below to consider Bailly's use of these dividers.

Although Bailly's painting does indeed include bubbles and skulls, I shall argue here that it does not simply reiterate the treatment of self-consciousness we found in Claesz. In order to see this, however, we need to know more about the painting and the circumstance of its composition. The first thing to know is that Bailly was by profession not a still life painter but a portraitist, and a very successful one. He had trained with the younger Jacques de Gheyn (himself a portraitist), and had a successful studio near the university in Leiden. In 1650 he was named Dean of the Guild of St. Luke.²⁴ There are a few earlier still lifes among Bailly's portraits: he seems to have painted in a small still life arrangement for a portrait his friend de Keyser made of him, and we have already seen the 1650 vanitas (fig. 1);²⁵ but he seems to have taken up the still life form seriously only late in life, after a very successful career in portraits, and quite probably in response to personal tragedy. It is perhaps worth noting that the professional portrait artist makes a business of putting people in bubbles -- the standard oval framing common in commercial portraits then and now. Bailly includes a humorous reference to this practice in the copy of the famous Frans Hals lute player, which here hangs nailed to the wall; Bailly has altered the composition to place the player inside a portraitist's oval bubble.

²⁴ Biesboer 1989.

²⁵ On de Keyser, see Adams 1985. In addition to those just mentioned, there is a very early pen-and-ink miniature vanitas still life inscribed by Bailly in his student days in the *Album Amicorum* of Cornelis de Glarges. (An *Album Amicorum* is the 17th century Dutch equivalent of an autograph book.) For a reproduction see Bruyn 1951, fig. 1. It is worth noting that the same Album also includes an inscription by Descartes himself, providing one indicator of the proximity of the philosophical and painterly communities.

The next thing to know is that the portrait is here a self-portrait. We can recognize in the eyes that distinctive self-examining stare characteristic of self-portraiture. (It is almost impossible to paint one's own eyes in any other way.) Indeed the painting is usually taken to be a double self-portrait. Almost everything in the painting is doubled here: there are the same number of flowers as figures, and most of the represented objects have clear (or hidden) counterparts within the painting (two glasses, two papers, the curtain and table cloth, the shape of palette and lute, etc.). The two self-portraits depict the painter as a young man (the largest figure, seated at left) and then greyed and aging (in the oval portrait). Clothing is here used as a clue for the pairings: notice the similarities of dress between the two primary male figures, as also between the oval female portrait and the bust of the Bacchante. All this systematic pairing reflects one of the primary themes of the painting: this is a painting about love, about marriage, and about loss.²⁶

To fill this in we need two further biographical details. First, the work was painted in 1651, when Bailly was 67 years old. Hence the closest self-portrait here is not the youthful figure at left but the older figure in the oval portrait.²⁷ The second detail concerns Bailly's wife, Agneta van Swanenburgh, who had been gravely ill, and according to many accounts had recently died.²⁸ In a second oval portrait we see Agneta, whose figure is echoed by a ghostly portrait painted into the surface of the wall behind the half-filled glass. The wife's illness may also be remembered here by way of the figure of Saint Sebastian -- the standing figure in statuary, portrayed in his traditional pose: tied to a tree and stuck by arrows. Sebastian was a figure from the 3rd century (a victim of Roman persecution of Christianity under Diocletian) but he is also closely associated with the Great Plague, which was said to strike down its victims as if by random arrows. The painting, then, presents a study in mourning and remembrance: a self-portrait undertaken as a form of grieving. In this unique representational medium we find once again an exploration of the phenomenology of self-consciousness. Grief and mourning is itself a form of self-awareness, as a survivor comes progressively to terms with his vulnerability and loss. Here the self-consciousness theme is

²⁶ There is a long-standing scholarly dispute about the identification of the figures in Bailly's paintings. I here follow Bruyn (1951) and Voskuil (1973) in treating the piece as a double self-portrait. This interpretation has been vigorously challenged by Maarten Wurfain (1969, 1988), who argues that the young painter is Frans van Mieris and the woman in the oval portrait is Anna Maria van Schuurman, perhaps with the image of Anna Roemers Visscher painted into the wall. Wurfain's reading in turn shapes the treatment offered by Svetlana Alpers in *The Art of Describing*. But recent treatments have largely returned to Bruyn's position. Chong and Kloek 1999 go so far as to describe Wurfain's proposal as "a theory both unconvincing and irrelevant" (Chong and Kloek, p. 191, n1). Voskuil's position is that the representations are idealized self-portraits. ("The similarity is obvious from the similarity of features, postures and details of the garments" Voskuil 1973, 63.) Chong and Kloek call this reading 'the most convincing and most poetic' (Chong and Kloek 199, 191, n1.).

²⁷ Even this may not be the painter as he saw himself in the mirror in 1651; the oval self-portrait seems to have been executed around ten years earlier. By the time Bailly was 67 the portrait was indeed an object among the others on his studio table. Bailly had used this technique of copying his own self-portrait -- a reiteration of self-representation -- in some of his portraits. For an example see *Portrait of an Unknown Professor or Preacher*, reproduced in Bruyn 1951, fig. 13. Recall that the 1650 vanitas (with slave and bubbles) also used the iteration of portraiture.

²⁸ There is scholarly disagreement on this point as well. I follow Bruyn's treatment in assuming she was dead, but again Wurfain denies it and claims that Bailly was outlived by his wife by some 13 years. There seems little dispute that she was in fact ill (she composed a will in 1644), and the painting incorporates a number of references to her illness: the ball and chain is a Bezoir (a 17th century medical device for steeping medicines); the flute is a glass used at funerals. For a systematic assessment of the evidence see Voskuil 1973 and Chong and Kloek 1999.

intensified by the complex act of self-portraiture: the artist must have spent many hours in the studio, studying and remembering himself while also remembering and mourning his wife. How, then, is self-consciousness understood and articulated in the painting? Here, I submit, self-consciousness is portrayed not as life inside a Cartesian representational bubble, but rather in terms of its distinctive and paradoxical temporality.

Time is a pervasive theme in Bailly's self-portrait. The composition explores a number of temporal complexities and directly challenges some of our common assumptions about the temporal structure of experience. To unravel the temporality of the work, start from the vertical dividing lines identified above. Notice first that the vertical line formed by the corner of the wall also serves to bisect the artist's contemporary (aging) self-portrait and the bubble above it, serving thereby as a marker of the present moment. The folding of the rear wall then serves to divide the painting into a brightly illuminated past (the young artist with his unused palettes), the present (the aging self-portrait), and a darkened future: the many symbols and reminders of death. The vertical established by the smoking candlestick then fittingly serves to divide the living from the dead in this temporal sequence: to its right are the two images of the deceased wife, along with the skull and figure of St. Sebastian; to its left lie the portraits of the living artist and various other references to living contemporaries. (The uppermost portrait is an homage to Frans Hals, Bailly's near-exact contemporary and fellow Antwerper, still living at the time of this composition.) The painting in this way plots the familiar time line, left-to-right, of past, present and future.

But there are other temporal structures at work here as well. Many of the assembled objects are very specific markers of events in Bailly's life. He had first copied the Hals luteplayer from an intermediate copy as a young painter; the Sebastian is likely a figure he encountered and painted on his Grand Tour;²⁹ the portrait of his wife is an idealization of the portrait he made at the time of their wedding; and of course the two self-portraits mark his own youth and maturity. What we have here in short is a narrative of Bailly's life, knit together by way of reproductive reenactments of his labors as an artist. This marks the first in a series of dramatic contrasts to the Cartesian model of self-consciousness. For Descartes the privileged moment of self-consciousness is always the present instant. "So long as I think, I am and know that I exist," he famously writes in the second meditation.³⁰ In Bailly's painting, by contrast, self-knowledge and self-representation is essentially narrative and hence diachronic: he comes to self-knowledge by knitting together and making present these episodes of his own past and projected future.³¹

²⁹ The worship of saints is of course not a feature of Calvinist religious practice. Wurfbain suggests that Bailly's model was the Alessandro Vittoria sculpture in the Venetian church of San Francesco della Vigna, but this attribution has been challenged by Voskuil, and there are countless other candidates.

³⁰ "And deceive me as he will, he can never bring it about that I am nothing *so long as* I shall think I am something. ... 'I am, I exist' is necessarily true *every time* it is uttered or conceived." Descartes 1641, 2nd Meditation.

³¹ This is the place to resist Alpers thesis that Dutch painterly practice contrasts with the Italian tradition in being descriptive rather than narrative. Alpers 1983. I am not qualified to assess this thesis in its generality, but it is hard to see how it can be applied to Bailly's Vanitas, which is rich with narrative structure. Even if one follows Wurfbain's questionable lead in repudiating the double self-portrait, the backbone of this autobiographical structure remains: even Wurfbain recognizes that the oval male portrait is Bailly's self-portrait, and that the Hals copy is a work of Bailly's

Amid these several temporal structures in the painting, however, the most important is the temporal paradox at the heart of the painting. Taken together the two self-portraits present a temporal anomaly: a young man holds a picture of himself as an aging gentleman. I am aware of two interpretative approaches to the temporality of the portraits, themselves curiously opposed to one another. One approach treats the relation between the two portraits strictly in terms of the passage of time, with the two portraits reiterating the ephemerality of human life, and the artist thereby modestly including himself among the passing vanities of the world. The opposed treatment sees here a celebration of the artist's power over time -- the power to stop it with his preserving art (note the paper halted in flight) or to reverse it with the deceit of his brush. On this approach the painting is an arrogant celebration of the power of the painter to overcome death and achieve immortality with his brush. But while each of these interpretations makes sense of various elements of the temporal structure, neither offers a direct resolution of the temporal anomaly. Is this deceit simply a lie?

At the risk of rather dramatic anachronism, it may help to approach the problem by way of two other famous paradoxes about experienced time. Start with Wordsworth's temporal paradox in his motto to *Intimations of Immortality*: "the child is father to the man". Though we ordinarily think of parents producing their children, there is a sense in which children produce the adults they themselves become. Applying this to the present case, we might see the young artist displaying in prospect his own progeny: his older self, and the work of his career as a painter. His endeavors produced not only works of art but also the mature artist himself. The young painter faces his future (note the empty, as-yet unused oval palettes), showing us the ambition of what he himself will become and accomplish (the painted ovals of the portraits). We come closer yet to a solution if we recall the whole of Wordsworth's motto:

The Child is father to the Man.
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.

There is in Bailly's painting an attempt to bind together the events of a life, to knit together the elements into a whole that makes sense. In this undertaking Bailly's self-conscious subject is not alone inside a reflecting sphere, cut off from the world by a deceptive veil of perception; he is much rather embodied, situated among things, and under the gaze of others. Note the gaze of the unidentified bearded man, looking directly into the young Bailly's eyes. Along with the reference to his contemporary, Hals, and the images of his wife, the portraits display self-consciousness not as solitary (as in Claesz and Descartes) but as intersubjectively situated.

But we come closer yet to a solution in one of Heidegger's temporal paradoxes: the thesis that Dasein is always outside itself in time -- what Heidegger dubs the ekstastic character of temporality. To be

youth, set along the unused palettes. Despite this difference with Alpers, I wholeheartedly endorse her treatment of the painting of this period as 'experiential observation' (Alpers 1983: 107); that is in part what I mean by calling it phenomenology. I return briefly to the Baconian aspect of Alpers' treatment below. On narrative knowledge see, inter alia, Danto 1985.

self-conscious, in Bailly's rendering, is to confront one's own embodied mortal existence as unfolding among things, before others, in time, and toward death. This temporal structure is anything but simple. In part it is a progression from past through present to future -- represented here in the folding of the chipped and pocked wall against which the scene is set. But at the same time Bailly's temporal paradox alerts us to a very different temporal structure, captured here in the temporal anomaly. Experienced time runs in two directions: a young man projects himself into a finite future that inexorably approaches him (the remainder of his terrestrial life, available to make himself into a good husband and a great painter); a looming future approaches which inevitably includes one's own death. This future which approaches me is what Heidegger called 'the existential concept of the future' -- a time 'available for this or that,' a time whose direction is not trailing off into an infinite distance, but much rather comes inexorably toward the present moment, looming from up ahead.³² The temporal anomaly displays this double direction of time in self-consciousness: from past to present to future, but also from a looming future back to a fraught and complex present. As to the question of what happens after death, the painting presents a skeptical balancing of opposed metaphysical possibilities. To the right, the figure of the immortal saint is bathed in light, with the ghostly Agneta gazing upon it. But the other figures here all face away from this Christian hope, and in the figures of the lute player and the bearded man we once again find the rendering of the counter-Christian figures of Democritus and Heraclitus, laughing and mourning, and separated by a bubble.

In her classic and controversial study, Svetlana Alpers argued for an interpretation of Dutch painting in terms of the Baconian ambition to make things show their nature through being subjected to a disciplined observation -- rigorous experiments designed to squeeze the nature of a thing into view. In this sense, Alpers argues, the enterprise of the Dutch Masters should be seen alongside the endeavors of the fledgling Royal Academy as answering to this Baconian call. Applied to the works we have been here investigating, we can say that they too set out to use disciplined observation to articulate and describe the attributes or natures of the things they present. Bailly's painting presents us with many materials and physical media (wood, clay, silk, glass, silver, ...), each painted so as to display its characteristic materiality and distinctive mode of appearance. Among the natures described in the painting we must include human nature, and in particular the distinctive nature of self-conscious human existence. Its nature is made to show itself through Bailly's exacting observation, which reveals its distinctive ekstatic self-relation and temporality.

³² Heidegger 1927b, §19b. See also Heidegger 1927a, §§67-71.

§4 A Concluding Word about Two Portraits

A famous portrait of Descartes hangs in Gallery 27 of The Louvre. It is a copy of a work by Frans Hals, the same painter whom Bailly honors both early and late with his portraitizing copy. There are a number of questions about the provenance of the Hals' portrait, and in particular about how many portraits Hals actually painted. An apparently identical painting is listed among the possessions of a Berlin archive³³; and countless copies have appeared on textbook covers and professorial walls. The original seems to have been lost. In addition to the copies and forgeries there may also have been a number of preliminary studies by Hals himself. What we do know, however, is that there was at least this direct contact between the painterly and philosophical masters: Descartes must have sat for many hours for the painter. In one of the smaller Hals' portraits Descartes has a more wild and disheveled appearance, suggestive perhaps of Hals' own lost rendering of 'The Boy in the Bubble.'³⁴ In that study of Descartes, Hals gives the philosopher the characteristic eye-locking stare and pose of a self-portrait -- a feature which is preserved, albeit less dramatically -- in the Louvre portrait. In casting Descartes' portrait as a self-portrait, Hals shows his understanding of the basic doctrine of Descartes' philosophy: the insistence that self-conscious self-knowledge is the foundation of philosophy and the defining characteristic of human nature. There is at least this evidence, then, that the painters of this period were conversant not only with the great philosophers of the classical tradition, but also with the philosophical developments among them. If we find in Hals' portraits an understanding of Descartes' most fundamental doctrine, we find in the contemporary Dutch still life tradition both a visual articulation of Cartesian self-consciousness and a phenomenological analysis pointing beyond the limits of the Cartesian account.

³³ *Berlin Archiv for Kunst und Geschichte.*

³⁴ For a reproduction see Schama 1988.

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