Not only is there a question about the nature of the self of the person who is writing history; each of the persons written about had a self, the nature of which was not accidental or random. One task of the historian is to understand what some of the factors were that determined the relationship between each historic person's sense of himself and his or her context. This chapter does not pretend to give definitive answers to the question. Real life is much more complex and protean than any single mode of interpretation can capture. Different parts of the world have different kinds of context for selfhood.

This chapter was first delivered as a paper to the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations and then published in 1984 in a volume entitled Designs of Selfhood, *edited by the then-president of the society Vytautas Kavolis, a Lithuanian-American. (The publishers were Fairleigh Dickinson Press and Associated University Presses of London and Toronto). All of my chosen examples were Protestant Americans, reflecting not only my own background but also the majority "establishment" group in the United States throughout most of American history. Instead of Wallace Stevens, it might have been interesting if I had chosen Emily Dickinson as the third example, since female selfhood is not the same as male selfhood. Nevertheless, Stevens provides us with useful insights.*

Since this chapter was written, numerous memoirs in English have been published expressing the experiences and viewpoints of people from other backgrounds. They, of course, are also part of "holistic history." To have more complete understanding, we need to compare, systematically, the self/context relationships in many parts of the world.

CHAPTER 4

Some Varieties of Metaphor in American Images of Selfhood

Concern about the connections between civilization and selfhood raises the questions of the relation between the actual self and societal definitions of the self and of the relation between the actual self and cultural images of selfhood. These in turn suggest a third question, which is my theme, of how the cultural images relate to the societal (including political) definitions. Evidence from the American past appears to suggest that the cultural images of selfhood are not replications of the societal definitions, though they are not totally unrelated. Instead, whereas societal definitions emphasize the individual's partialness vis-à-vis the broader context, oneself as person, and as social construct, cultural images of the self attempt to restore wholeness both within the self and for the self even while it is in conjunction with its total context. Although societal definitions focus on rights, obligations, status, and function, cultural images may be concerned with relationships between body and soul, mind and emotion, the male and female principles within the self, and hence the relationships between time and eternity, self and other, public and private, the world and nature, and man and God. Because of the American "civil religion," the two kinds of definitions have been linked in some fashion. However, cultural images of the self often attempt to serve not to reinforce the societal definition but rather to compensate for the deficiencies it legislates.

The broadness of the topic raises issues about the nature of the evidence. Societal definitions of selfhood (or personhood) are provided in the law articulated by American courts concerned with white males at neither extreme of the social scale. To summarize as succinctly as possible the relevant trends in American case law over the first three hundred plus years: in seventeenth-century New England, status defined the person; the law emphasized individual statuses rather than individuals as such. Said John Winthrop, "God Almighty in his most holy and wise providence hath soe disposed of the Condicione of mankinde, as in all times some must be rich, some poore, some highe and eminent in power and dignities; others meane and in subieccion."[1] Status was taken into account in the earliest allocation of town lots. Voting rights depended on freeman status, church membership, or (later) property ownership. Sumptuary laws regulated the kind of clothing that could be worn by persons of various statuses.

Criminal penalties varied according to status. Courts reinforced a variety of prescriptive rights.[2] The general purpose of the law was to keep people in their places in a social order that God had ordained. But law-enforcement mechanisms treated individuals as if they were at least in part idiosyncratic, with status reinforcing rather than undermining their personal uniqueness.[3]

By the nineteenth century, some men saw the self as the seat of pain and pleasure, the locus of will based on interest or instinct. The frontiersman and the early free enterpriser might make of every encounter a test of self, as if the self were the sum of its victories or defeats. Mid-nineteenth century law seemed to favor ego-defined and ego-managed selfhood. The advent of universal white male suffrage was one evidence of this, since voters were no longer expected to act as passive channels for God's will but rather actively to express their own desires and interests. Many saw the self as built up and extended by the reach of power, of command over land and possessions. The law now assumed that land was an instrumental or productive asset. The essential attribute of property ownership was the power to develop one's property regardless of the injurious consequences to others.[4] In place of a former doctrine defining negligence as failure to perform one's duty, the nineteenth-century law defined negligence as carelessness and then added the concept of contributory negligence so that men "could not be held liable for socially useful activity exercised with due care."[5] Around the mid-nineteenth century, the law of corporations initially favored competition before it came around again to reinforcing various restraints on competition. Most important of all, nineteenth-century contracts came to be interpreted solely in terms of the will of the parties involved and "all preexisting legal duties were . . . subordinated to the contract relation."[6] The purpose of legal certainty was not to help individuals plan their affairs more rationally.[7] In the realm of consumer law, caveat emptor prevailed.

In the twentieth century the law has reverted to its reinforcement of statuses within the framework of a renewed emphasis on the relation of statuses to the common weal, but now the statuses are not so idiosyncratic as they were in the seventeenth century, having come instead to be based on membership in rather large generic groups or categories. For consumers as a whole, strict liability of manufacturers has replaced caveat emptor. The law can compel one to join a trade union or, under the National Industrial Recovery Act of the early 1930s, it could compel a company to join a trade association. Today, one has all sorts of job rights that are not expressly stated by contract, as well as rights to information and to nondiscrimination because of sex or race. Today, the law is more concerned with clarifying roles and group rights and obligations (the rights of women, children, racial groups, the handicapped, the elderly, criminals, and victims; the obligations of employers and professionals) than it is with rein-

forcing any concept of freewheeling autonomous selfhood. Private ownership of property has been circumscribed by all sorts of easements and public obligations, frequently in the name of environmental protection.[8]

When we turn to the other side of the ledger and look at images in the arts, we see quite a different story. To be sure, in each era, didactic literature articulated and justified or deplored the changing socio-economic and legal definitions of personhood or selfhood. Quite another set of concerns appears in the works of three representative poets, all from the northeastern part of the United States, all Protestant, and roughly out of the same tradition, but dispersed over time from the seventeenth century to the mid-nineteenth century to the twentieth century. The three poets are Anne Bradstreet, Walt Whitman, and Wallace Stevens. What they illustrate is a continuity of themes about the self that do not precisely match the law's dialectic, because their central concern has been with the ontological position of the self and its relation to the Absolute. They do illustrate that there has been a marked increase in ontological precariousness, if we take as evidence changes in the metaphors of selfhood. For Bradstreet, the self was a little city or country; for Whitman, it was leaves of grass; for Stevens, it was the possessor of a blue guitar, the imagination. There is something solid about being a little country, especially if that country is believed to be a microcosm of the universe. To be leaves of grass is at least to be rooted in Nature. But for the self to depend on what it can make of itself on the blue guitar of imagination is to rest on much less solid ground.

Differences between social (i.e., legal) and cultural definitions of selfhood were least marked in the seventeenth century. Seventeenth-century English law, as well as theology, thought that the little body of man corresponded exactly to the larger body of the world and the still larger body of the universe. All were composed of the same elements: earth, water, air, and fire. As John Donne wrote, "I am a little world made cunningly of elements." Man, world, and universe each had its individuality, yet each was involved with the others and all partook of God.

For all their sense of original sin and human fallibility, American Puritans shared John Donne's view of man as a microcosm of the universe, but they also believed that the individual was a microcosm of his country or city. Poetess Anne Bradstreet, daughter of one New England governor and wife of another, could write:

> As a man is called the little world, so his heart may be called the little commonwealth, his more fixed and resolved thoughts are like to inhabitants, his slight and flitting thoughts are like passengers that travel to and fro continually; here is also the great court of justice erected which is always kept by conscience, who is both accuser, witness, and judge.[9]

Puritans repeatedly invoked the image of a city as an armed camp, a controlled environment, outside of which nothing gained form. Economic activities within a city were regulated to serve the common interest. Bradstreet's use of the word "commonwealth" implied that the self was a microcosm of the political economy of which it was a member, which is to say that all of the self's parts had a responsibility to the whole self, the whole in turn being responsible to God. The poet's view reinforced the legal view of the individual self as a being defined by status rights and obligations, but the poet—more than the law—emphasized selfhood's wholeness, a wholeness that could not have existed without its replication of the patterns that existed in the larger wholeness of which it was a part.[10]

Running parallel to these ways in which American Puritan thought resembled English thought were other ideas that reinforced the transformation of America into a distinctly different set of ideas and institutions. Robert Bellah, in *The Broken Covenant,* notes that the idea of reform was central to Christianity, "the idea of conversion, the turning from evil to good, from self to God," and that the Reformation was a heightening and intensification of all these themes.[11] Sacvan Bercovitch, in *The Puritan Origins of the American Self,* speaks of "the baptismal efficacy of the ocean crossing."[12] Since in the Bible the wilderness was tied to the renewal theme, Americans thought of themselves as the chosen people, and of their America, the wilderness, as the locale of rebirth. Rebirth, renewal, in early times, meant a reinforced orientation to God, but the Founding Fathers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries spoke not of God but of "Providence," "Infinite Power," and so forth.[13] The American Revolution was a "born again" experience, but much of the emphasis had been translated from sacred into secular terms, into a "civil religion." The reformation of the self by renewing its ties to God could be transmuted into repeated reformation of the civil/moral commitments of the secular society, as, for example, when slavery was abolished. The idea of renewal did not require the idea of God. Also, there was nothing in the "civil religion" that required a regulated mercantile economy; free enterprise was possible.

Because of changes in the economic system, by the 1850s it was before the law and in emergent economic practice rather than in poetry that the self was a little commonwealth, and this no longer implied that the individual must occupy a specialized social role in order to fulfill the obligations of membership in a larger civic commonwealth. Instead, everyday emphasis was on the natural autonomous man whose economic desires and even greed were part of the plan of the natural universe and automatically served a social and national purpose. (If original sin persisted in social manifestation, the remedy was spasmodic social and political reform.)

In the middle third of the nineteenth century, the metaphors that poets used for the self were not the same as those used in the law or in economic and political theory, though there were some analogies between the law's emphasis on individual autonomy and the Romantic concept of a monologic self-contained self whose outreaches were simply extensions or projections of inner feelings and who saw the whole world as grist for or projections of itself. In the nineteenth-century context in which Walt Whitman found himself, Romantics saw the self in terms of will, feeling, and action—incomplete, trying to gain completion by attempts to fuse with the ideal. It was its sense of incompleteness that led the self to action. For mid-19th century poetry, the self was problematic, probably because the economy and law had "liberated" the person from many constrictions.

Bercovitch argues that the Puritans regimented selfhood by insisting that each person should live up to the example of Christ. And, since America itself was "representative of universal rebirth," the whole country was expected to live up to Christ's example.[14] It was a collective person. Therefore, the concept of "Americanus" designated "a comprehensive social-divine selfhood that surmounts the anxieties of secular time, since the very notion of 'social' has been transformed (by association with the idea of the new continent) into the realm of rhetoric—of sacred past and sacred future unified in self-celebrating imagination."[15]

Bercovitch also argues that for Ralph Waldo Emerson, as for Jonathan Edwards, the image of the New World invested the "regenerate perceiver with an aura of ascendant millennial splendor; and for both of them, the perceiver must prove his regeneration by transforming himself in the image of the New World."[16] The Emersonian triad was "American nature, the American self, and American destiny."[17] In short, Emerson's Transcendentalism was not far from earlier themes of rebirth and redemption. Although he stressed the individual, the idea of America as a collective person was an antecedent premise.

Trends toward democracy and hypothetical egalitarianism complicated the problem of selfhood. John O. Lyons, in *The Invention of the Self,* points out the impact of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century revolutions: "There is a gamut in Liberty, Equality, Fraternity. The first frees the self to discover what it is to find truth in its own memories, experiences, and reason. The second suggests a reservation, for to be equal with others is to imply that our Truth is conditional—it is only ours, or it is only true, as it conforms to that of others. And Fraternity insists that we merge our unique self with that of others, and deny ourselves uniqueness—perhaps the self itself."[18]

At the same time there was a transformation in the ideas about soul. The Old World idea of the soul was of something that did not really belong to the self

but was "a gift from out of the bag of eternity," placed in the individual's incompetent keeping, weighed upon by his animal flesh, and subject to manipulation by Church and State.[19] More modern thought tried to tie the soul and body together within skin-encapsulated ego-directed selfhood. New questions then arose about ties between flesh and spirit, time and eternity.

All of these questions or problems were alive in Whitman's world. Whitman began his "Song of Myself" with the image of a unitary separated self:

> Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am,
> Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary.[20]

In "Song of Joys" Whitman also celebrated the simple separate person:

> O to struggle against great odds, to meet enemies undaunted!
> To be entirely alone with them, to find out how much one can stand . . .
> To be indeed a God![21]

But this was a vulnerable kind of self, subject to defeat, alienation, and despair, so Whitman set out on the open road on a journey to discover a larger, more viable self. And this entailed openness to and dialogue with external reality and with other people:

> There was a child went forth every day,
> And the first object he look'd upon, that object he became,
> And that object became part of him . . .[22]

One does not move toward self-discovery through suppression, denial, or elimination, Whitman said. Instead, one moves toward completeness only by plunging into existence, by taking the risks of openness. Self-discovery is a process, a lifelong endeavor, a problematic journey.[23]

The "I" is historical, temporal, and transient. It participates in the change and development of the concrete world. As Whitman wrote: "This is the city and I am one of the citizens."[24] And: "In all people I see myself."[25]

In the dialogue with the world and others, Whitman began to find his larger self in "One's-Self I Sing" (*Leaves of Grass*):

> One's-self I sing, a simple separate person,
> Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.[26]

Thus, Whitman surmounted the threats to the self from Fraternity by reidentifying with "Americanus," in effect reaffirming the "civil religion."

For Whitman, as it was for earlier writers, the problem of the self was a problem of the relation of the soul to the body, for he believed that the soul was that aspect of God or the Absolute that every man possesses; the soul informs and

gives meaning to the self; it relates the self to the eternal;[27] and the eternal constitutes the truly significant reality. Whitman's answer was that the division between the I and soul is a microcosm of the division between temporal and eternal, so that the fusion of the soul and I can only occur on the same ground that the fusion of temporal and eternal takes place. In "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,"[28] Whitman discovered that the absolute or spiritual was to be found in the moment through his encounters with objective reality and through communication with others. He transcended time by joining past, present, and future in the lived present moment. In the experience of the community mind and the wholeness of living, Whitman broke through to mythic time. When the eternal is concentrated in a particular moment of human time, the fusion of soul and I takes place, he said.

> There was never any more inception than there is now,
> Nor any more youth or age than there is now;
> And will never be any more perfection than there is now,
> Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.[29]

> I am an acme of things accomplished, and I am an encloser of things to be.[30]

> I hear and behold God in every object.[31]

> (I am large, I contain multitudes.)[32]

For Whitman, a leaf of grass came to be a symbol of the totality of life, the journey-work of the stars, a symbol of the unity of life, God, and death, a uniform hieroglyphic. It was above all a symbol of selfhood.

To a late nineteenth-century plutocrat, the self might be defined in terms of action and power (male) or ostentation (female). The middle-class person might define the self in terms of character (adherence to a code of "virtue"), decency, and improvement according to external standards. When a bureaucratized society was emerging, unwittingly helped along by middle-class reformists, psychologists William James and George Herbert Mead were defining the self in ways that emphasized individualistic precepts and constructs as shapers of pluralistic reality. James said that any individual had a variety of selves, ruled over by pure ego having no absolute oneness but a center that remained steadfast through shifting experience. Mead said that the "I" is that which wills and thinks "me," the self as object. The "me" is an organized set of social attitudes that the "I" assumes and introjects. Mead's model of the self was like that of a company with the "I" as manager and the "me" as the workers who had a

later role as consumers.[33] The total self was not a content but an activity. The ultimate unit of existence, he said, is the act, which takes place over time. The self is always in process.

The self these men defined was no runaway imperialist; it was tempered and meliorist. It was not solipsistic but rather in dialogue with other selves and internal circumstances. Desire and activity helped to expand the self. But the creativity of the self had to contend with boundaries imposed as a result of struggles and bargains with other people. It was just at this time that the law was beginning to shift away from nineteenth-century individualistic patterns.

Twentieth-century American literature about the self has been divided. On the one hand some white Southern writers and certain ethnic writers have hunted for the self among traditions that are slipping away, all the while suspecting that selfhood might somehow be beyond tradition.[34] On the other hand, writers in general—these included—have taken the self to be more of a problem than ever. Lyons' diagnosis is: "From the Romantic period to our own day literature has largely been concerned with the methods by which men disguise from themselves the gap in their beings where the soul once resided."[35] "A man's fear before the Romantic age was that his soul would be corrupted or . . . some . . . devil would abscond with it. The modern fear is very different. It is that this private and precious self might be duplicated in another, and so our unique individuality would be denied."[36] The mask of the personality "is a protection from the void within," as well as a protection against the world.

Although the law now imputes status, in the name of job rights, and wraps the individual in a net of reciprocal obligations and protections, writers have seemed to feel that the self is fragmented, lost, caught in a plight, and in danger of disintegration. And one reason seems to be that the macrocosm has lost its anthropomorphic identity. God and nation are no longer role models for selfhood. Man is not one with or a miniature of the universe. Despite the influence of Keynesian economics, the political economy is not really a commonwealth. The nation-state is not self-contained, and the interdependence of the world is also laced with hostile assertions of independence. There is no suitable model for the self either in civics or in nature.

Wallace Stevens, who died in 1955, may not be an entirely representative poet for the twentieth century, but he does express something of the new mood. Although he was an entirely different kind of man from Whitman, his poetry bears Whitmanesque traces. The key difference is a loss of belief in any kind of Absolute. From Bradstreet through Whitman through Stevens, more and more responsibility for creating the self and its meaning has been placed back on the individual human self. Thus Stevens has written that our divinity lies in our capacity for "Celebrating the marriage / Of flesh and air"[37] because the earth is

"all the paradise we shall know." We are alone in this world; no benign spirit watches over us:

> We live in an old chaos of the sun,
> Or old dependency of day and night,
> Or island solitude, unsponsored; free,[38]
>
> The lean cats of the arches of the churches,
> That's the old world. In the new, all men are priests.[39]
>
> . . . God and the imagination are one . . .[40]

This is not to say that Stevens believed there was no reality external to ourselves. But what Stevens desired was an encounter with reality on terms of equality. The world is a beast, a lion, a monster, which might be mastered and purified by imagination ("The Man with the Blue Guitar"):

> That I may reduce the monster to
> Myself, and then may be myself
>
> In face of the monster, be more than part
> Of it, more than the monstrous player of
>
> One of its monstrous lutes, . . .[41]

In "The Auroras of Autumn,"[42] Stevens depicts the consciousness as a male force, with the strength of subjectivity and individuation, playing the ardent lover of reality, which has a female nature, the mother principle. In Steven's poetry, it has been said, "the world is variously and continually realized by a concretion of the possibility it holds for individual experience." "Burgeoning within the projected without, the self creates the nature of its occurrences through its individual vision of things."[43] In "The Sail of Ulysses," Stevens portrays

> The self as sibyl, whose diamond,
> Whose chiefest embracing of all wealth
> Is poverty, whose jewel found
> At the exactest central of the earth
> Is need.[44]

And, in "Credences of Summer," he describes:

> Three times the concentred self takes hold, three times
> The thrice concentred self, having possessed

The object, grips it in a savage scrutiny,
Once to make captive, once to subjugate

Or yield to subjugation, once to proclaim
The meaning of the capture, this hard prize,
Fully made, fully apparent, fully found.[45]

The self is an artifact. As Stevens said in "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," "I was the world in which I walked."[46] And, in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,"

There is a month, a year, there is a time
In which majesty is a mirror of the self:
I have not but I am and as I am, I am.[47]

One of the primary servants of the self is imagination, for which Stevens used the symbol of the blue guitar. It is imagination that enables us to soar beyond the self. The paramount concern of the imagination is the relationship of things, the order to which everything belongs, and expects of this order a cosmic harmony. The imagination must remain faithful to things as they are. The act of the mind and the object are distinct existences united by the relation of compresence. But then

. . . The blue guitar

Becomes the place of things as they are.[48]

Stevens is not saying that the reality of the self is created out of abstractions. Rather, he puts his greatest faith in sentience:

With my whole body I taste these peaches.[49]

To be released from abstraction, he wrote in "The Latest Freed Man," is

To have the ant of the self changed to an ox.[50]

The self is the center of the world it conceives and experiences, the pure center to which everything must be related in the present moment of consciousness in the eternal vivid moment of time. Each moment has a fresh universe. The self is forever perishing, but the "idea of man, of the hero, of God—all are projections of self and examples of the spontaneous act of personification by which man continually interprets the world."[51] The richness of each moment, the degree of eternal in the moment, and therefore the moment-by-moment

quality of selfhood, depend on the reach of imagination. In "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War," Stevens extols

> The highest man with nothing higher
> Than himself, his self, the self that embraces
> The self of the hero, the solar single,
> Man-sun, man-moon, man-earth, man-ocean.[52]

And the ultimate hero, Stevens said, is he who practices best the art of imagination, for it is he who reaches through to the ultimate order of things.

> How high that highest candle lights the dark.
>
> Out of this same light, out of the central mind,
> We make a dwelling in the evening air,
> In which being there together is enough.[53]

There is an ultimate order or harmony of things but there is not just one truth; there are many truths. As Stevens wrote, in "On the Road Home,"

> It was when I said,
> "There is no such thing as the truth,"
> That the grapes seemed fatter.
> The fox ran out of his hole.[54]

What do we make of this fragmentary evidence? Simply this: that whereas present-day socioeconomic, political, and legal structures tie individuals into an ever more complex interdependent system, the American poet has become increasingly aware that he creates his own universe, though he has not ceased to believe that he creates it out of something that is bigger than he is. There is more of an analogy between twentieth-century Stevens' concepts of self and mid-nineteenth century legal-economic treatments of the individual than there is between Stevens' thought and present-day legal conceptions. In contrast to Whitman's time, it is clear that the public world has ceased to supply a viable metaphor for selfhood, though there is still considerable evidence of a civil religion. Though the contemporary American has an array of statuses, an interdependent society, and a public/private fusion resembling some earlier patterns, he does not have a commonwealth of the sort in which Anne Bradstreet lived. Perhaps the individual must be his own god because he no longer has a commonwealth. Or perhaps the American no longer has a commonwealth and struggles to find selfhood because he no longer has a common god.