INTRODUCTION

Nul ne s’en doute.

(Seminar III 276)

Most readers of Wallace Stevens are aware of his interest in the human mind, which he was never tired of dealing with. Many of his critics believe that he was interested in ‘poetic uses of ideas’ and have tried to show his ‘anxiety of influence,’ immersing themselves in the tradition of literature or philosophy or other disciplines. In fact, this could be done with almost any poet, especially the modern poet, since it is not difficult to see the idea behind a particular phrase, or expression, or a set of lines, or even a poem. The next step is obviously to trace its echoes in the tradition of various disciplines and to find satisfaction out of it. While the ‘anxiety of influence’ cannot be totally dismissed, in tracing it to the origin one is likely to destroy the poet’s originality, and his poetics in some instances, by making mileages out of it in the name of evaluating the poet. In this, one runs the risk of emphasizing the poet’s scholarship and shrewdness rather than concentrating on the experience as genius from which issues the work, in which the experience is depicted. In the gap of time between the experience and its depiction, the poet is likely to pick up ideas, thoughts, or expressions around — and which, he being unaware of their use elsewhere, may not not be his own — in order merely to cast the experience in the mould of a language. It seems necessary therefore to distinguish between the experience and observations of the language employed even though it is from this language alone that the experience can be traced to — one could further add, without committing an ‘intentional fallacy.’ In a letter to Bernard Heringman, Stevens wrote, “While, of course, I come down from the past, the past is my own and not something marked Coleridge, Wordsworth etc. I know of no one who has been particularly important to me. My reality-imagination complex is entirely my own even though I see it in others” (Letters 792). This is enough to suggest that if Stevens uses ideas or language bits of others, it is to serve his own purpose of putting his experiences in language; in the process, he may even make advances over the ideas or thoughts of others as it suits his purpose.
Hines does well to agree with Doggett in saying that “while it may be interesting and profitable to follow up...the many possible sources of Stevens’ ideas, unless the critic pays close attention to the whole poem as a particular work of art he runs the risk of making a few lines of the poet’s verse sound like paraphrases of Santayana or Whitehead while ignoring the complexities of the idea as it is contained within a whole work of art.” He is certainly correct in reacting to Baird that it is not an imposition to use parallels with philosophers to explain poetry; however, he interprets Baird’s statement that the use of philosophical analogues “seem an imposition of the critic’s will [rather] than an exposition of the poet at hand” a little hastily. Baird’s statement is a part of an argument that proposes three points for a correct approach, which are: exposition of the poet, the critic’s own frame of reference, and preservation of the design of the poet himself as commanding. Yet, what Baird misses out is the possibility of a philosophical analogue as a fourth point, provided that none of those three is relegated to marginality. And what does he mean by design of the poet if not the originality of the poet’s own experiences? Rather, one should ask, what forms the design of Stevens if not his own experiences? Readers of Stevens do not seem to take seriously the fact that his is fundamentally the poetry of the self in the sense that they shirk emphasizing his poetry to be the poetry of experiences he himself had. When Stevens wrote that “Theoretically, the poetry of thought should be the supreme poetry” (emphasis mine; OP 187), he almost made it clear that practically speaking, nonetheless, the poetry of the self is the supreme poetry:

After all, Socrates left descendants, and one of them, in his youth, may choose to be concerned with the self, not in the sense common to youthful poets, but in the major sense common to the descendants of Socrates. Paul Weiss says in his Nature and Man that every object in the universe has some pertinence to the self. That is the sense of the self common to the descendants of Socrates.

When one says that the poetry of thought should be the supreme poetry and when one considers with what thought has been concerned throughout so many ages, the themes of supreme poetry are not hard to identify.

(OP 188)

With what has thought been concerned throughout so many ages if not with the self? Thinking of the supreme poetry that we call the Bible, the Bhagvat Geeta, should
confirm Stevens’ remark. Thus, even the poetry of thought is in the end the poetry of the self.

Although most readers of Stevens recognize his interest in the self, the mind, there is dearth of a fuller, rigorous investigation of the poet’s thoughts on these ‘no­things.’ Now, if Stevens is to be regarded as a supreme poet, his thoughts must be original; and for them to be original, it is necessary that they be the outcome of his own experiences, and that they be new and newly said — “Originality is an escape from repetition” and “A change of style is a change of subject” (OP 177, 171). Available critical output on Stevens lacks precisely this linking between the poetry and the experiences; the latter receives far less emphasis, in fact. Vendler (Words Chosen out of Desire), Bates, and Hines come close to doing so. In her book, in a chapter entitled ‘Stevens’ Secrecies,’ Vendler speaks of the poet’s “strategies of concealment, chiefly concealment of the lyric ‘I’ and of substituting ‘I’ whenever Stevens says ‘he’ or ‘she’;” yet she fails, to use her own phrase, to unveil “the hiding-places of unintelligibility” in the poetry because she is unwilling to delve into the poet’s person (Words Chosen out of Desire 44,49). As a result, her interpretations remain within the insufficiency of the bounds of traditional methods. The title of Bates’ book encourages; the first paragraph of his ‘Preface’ promises a lot:

There must have been such a moment — repeated how many times since? — when the thinking animal, stooping to drink from a pool of water, stopped instead to drink in the mystery of his own image. Pondering that outwardness of the inward thing and the inwardness of the outward thing, he became Plato, Paul of Tarsus, Hume, Nietzsche, Freud, and the latest post–structuralist critic. He survived Narcissus to invent the myth of Narcissus and those countless myths of self whose book has yet to be written.

But it disappoints immensely when Bates begins the second paragraph declaring, “This is not that book; neither is it biography.” Beginning almost with a promise of psychoanalytic approach, he makes an immediate turn about to make his book a historical–biographical reading of Stevens. One cannot but feel that the thought of attempting a psychoanalytic reading of the poet might have crossed his mind. Did he lack the courage to do so? Thomas Hines’s work comparatively comes closer to tracing Stevens’ experiences, but it falls short of the desired level precisely because he treats the
poet simply as having thoughts similar to those of Husserl and Heidegger instead of emphasizing those thoughts as having come out of the poet’s own experiences. His limitations seem to be the limitations of the approach he chooses to explain Stevens. His investigation therefore remains limited to Stevens as “interested in the poetry of ideas” (18).

Even though J. Hillis Miller approaches Stevens’ poetry as a traditional literary critic would, he catches much of the essential that is there. The poet’s glosses on ‘being’ are well read between and recapitulated. Yet, he leaves out discussing the significance of the events represented in the two passages he quotes from Stevens: the first is from section IX of *Auroras of Autumn* where Stevens sketches the past when there was no feeling of alienation (“We were as Danes in Denmark”), and the second is from *Repetitions of a Young Captain*, which begins with the sense of an irreparable loss (“The tempest cracked on the theatre” resulting “in the spectacle of a new reality”) (see his “Wallace Stevens’ Poetry of Being” 143-44). Although it is a question pertaining to the whole humanity, and even if “Poetry is not personal” (*OP* 159), why could have Stevens felt it so acutely? After all, it is also a question of one individual. Unless this question is answered properly, it is not possible to see why the question of ‘being’ became so important for Stevens. Otherwise, i.e. if we take Stevens to be writing of humanity collectively alone, we would make him sound like a philosopher writing a treatise on the nature of existence, like Heidegger, or at least would leave him merely as one interested in the poetic uses of ideas. Solving the problem of ‘being’ or providing answers to it like a philosopher was never his aim. He was first of all an individual who had his own experiences of ‘loss’ and ‘being.’ This can be easily seen in the intensity of emotions and feelings in his poetry. The question of writing and universalizing the experiences comes later. Why do not we all think of or experience ‘being’ with such intensity as Stevens did? In other words, why do not we feel our alienation from it as he did? Miller writes in the same essay, “The human self, for [Stevens], is divided against itself” (146). Are we all, as we live our daily lives, troubled by this division, or even feel it? There are only a few among us who really suffer from this division; for most of us, that is hardly a problem. All this is to suggest that it is necessary, if not unavoidable, to see the roots of Stevens’ poetry into his person, without which much of his poetry would continue to remain obscure and distant. Besides, if we stay away from his person, it would not be possible to account for the shift in the import of ‘nothingness’ from the early poetry to
the later poetry. Though Miller notices this change, he does not account for it, and so goes further to make a comment which would be hard to defend in view of the change that he notices: "At the beginning Stevens is already as far as he ever goes" (146).

Perhaps, one is not doing justice to Stevens until one grants without reservation or hesitation that his is the poetry of his own experiences that he universalizes. Baird, in this sense, seems to be right when he writes, "Wordsworth’s energy flows toward a Kantian noumenon. That of Stevens remains within [his] sense of the physical world" (xiv). One must not overlook the fact that his poetry, really, reveals the "I" in the very attempts at its concealment. If he seems to conceal the "I", or his "I", he did not do it purposely for he himself did not know what he was; his poetry, for the most part, is the cry of "what I am" (CP 298). If one wants to know what he was or what the "I" is, there is hardly a better means than psychoanalytic approach since, apart from literature, no other discipline addresses the question with such an investigative rigor as it does. Fortunately, some readers of Stevens like Alan Bass, M. Keith Booker, and C. Roland Wagner seem to have realized this; they may be said to have opened Stevens' poetry to psychoanalytic interpretations. Bass's article, denying the possibility of any synthesis in "Snow Man" (CP 9-10), uses the theory of fetishism to deal with the poem's reality; he keeps speaking of neurosis and psychosis and never ventures to say that the experience contained within the poem is that of Stevens himself. However, his view of the poem as a "fetish-like construction" sets Stevens in a wider context (323). Booker, too, restricts himself from commenting on Stevens' person, but he has some worthy observations on the poetry with regard to its affinities of thought with Lacan. Wagner's article transcends the limitations that Booker and Bass reflect in that he acknowledges the relation between the poetry and person of Stevens: "Traditional literary critics try to keep their eyes averted from the merely 'personal' elements in Stevens' poetry, or at least keep them from corrupting the pure act of literary understanding" (83). He is bold enough to make certain comments that others restrained themselves from but which, I believe, reflect the true character of Stevens. All these three attempts, being article length studies, lack the depth and scope of investigation; although Bass goes deeper, he deals with only one poem and is a little tentative in his assertions regarding the fetish object of the poem's meditation precisely because he does not see it in Stevens' person, which in fact provides an answer regarding the poem's resistance to closure or synthesis (301).
The present research was undertaken partly because of a sense of dissatisfaction with the existing critical output on Stevens and partly because of the sense that something more or/and different is there in his poetry. That ‘something’ seems to be concealed to some owing to the poet’s attempt at universalizing it, which is also the cause of the element of impersonality in the poetry. However, in Lacan’s words, “But hide as one may behind a curtain, there is always a big pair of shoes that stick out” (Seminar III 276). It is this pair of shoes that one has to locate first in order to find out its wearer in Stevens’ poetry. But, sometimes even the ‘shoes’ are not directly seen; the problems or things that Stevens dealt with are very often not directly stated. Yet, things are not hopeless, for there are traces left by the ‘shoes’, i.e. the issues that Stevens handled or even was faced with. And since all these problems are related with the mind, it is most certainly interesting to know the mind at work as well. What make Stevens’ poetry unique are his keen observations of the mind and its processes. What emerges out of these observations is not only the picture of his mind, but in his universalizing them one sees the picture of the human mind and its functioning. It is because of this that Stevens’ poetry gives of a sustained line of thought, or to use Stallknecht’s expression, of “a good deal of philosophical energy.”

Speaking of Lucretius’ genius, Santayana wrote, “The greatest thing about this genius is its power of losing itself in its objects, its impersonality. We seem to be reading not the poetry of a poet about things, but the poetry of things themselves” (Three Philosophical Poets 34). The greatest thing about Stevens’ poetry is not only its impersonality; there we do not seem to be reading poetry of things alone. Stevens never relegated the human element to background in his observations of reality. His poetry is both of ‘things as they are’ and of ‘things as they are seen;’ and the mind’s eye that sees things is not only that of the poet, it is also the eye of the “universal mind” (NA 145). In this sense, his poetry is more “fundamental” and in that sense “even older than the ancient world” (NA 145), more ingenious. Santayana himself adds further, “Of course, the poetry we see in nature is due to the emotion the spectacle produces in us; the life of nature might be as romantic and sublime as it chose, it would be dust and ashes to us if there were nothing sublime and romantic in ourselves to be stirred by it to sympathy... the poetry of nature may be discerned merely by the power of intuition which it awakens and the understanding which it employs” (35). Most of the critics have seen the universal mind in Stevens’ poetry, but his own mind goes unseen to a large extent. His quest for
‘being’ is obviously a part of his own mental experience. However, to equate the ‘nothingness’ of his early poetry with being, as Miller would seem to do ("Wallace Stevens’ Poetry of Being" 157), is anachronistic. For such an observation is a failure of seeing that ‘being’ is gradually led up to as it becomes more prominent in the later poetry. It also speaks of a failure to see that Stevens was a developing artist. To trace his progress in brief, one could say that at the beginning he was concerned with the question ‘what am I?’ Then he may be seen to be formulating the imagination in terms of its relation with ‘reality.’ Next he tries to formulate ‘reality’ itself. Finally, he is seen concentrating on the question of ‘being.’ However, one should not take this strictly to be a linear progress as such, for all these issues are so interrelated and inmixed that it is useless to study or speak on any one in isolation. Their inmixing, as in a Borromean knot, is reflected in Stevens’ poetry as well. Yet, the chapter titles of this study would seem to isolate them, which is not really so; but it seemed necessary to do this in order to show that Stevens kept developing — until the very end, like Shakespeare.

In order to study this development, I use psychoanalytic thoughts and methods propounded by the French psychoanalyst Jacques-Marie Émile Lacan, a follower of Freud. This is not the first study showing affinities of thought between Stevens and Lacan. M. Keith Booker to my knowledge is the first, though not the only, to do so before. However, Booker does little more than show some similarities of thought; besides, his being an article length study, he does not go beyond surface level similarities. The basic argument of the present study is that while there are similarities of thought, Lacan’s methods of analysis can also prove instrumental in analyzing Steven’s own person. In other words, it is profitable to show and treat Stevens as a patient in order to study his development both as person and poet. This may be a little shocking to some; but as I have already emphasized, his poetry takes shape out of his own experiences; his development as a poet owes much to his development as man. I would like to attract the attention of those who might find the idea shocking to the articles of Alan Bass and C. Roland Wagner. While Bass does not say explicitly that Stevens suffered from some mental disorder, he had to explain “The Snow Man” on the basis of fetishism, which is in relation with the loss of reality, hence with mental disorder. Wagner, however, directly says, “There was a strong component of primary process thinking in [Stevens’] secondary process discourse, typical certainly of the mental life of the creative artist, but
also probably symptomatic of neurosis or some developmental failure” (86). Unfortunately, Wagner does not go deeper to study Stevens as patient.

The present study is the first in the sense that it also verifies, using Lacan, a possibility of examining Stevens as patient in order to explain the poetry. Some things need clarification beforehand, however.

So far, there is no evidence indicating even a remote possibility of Lacan and Stevens knowing each other in any way. Lacan’s first book, *Écrits*, was published in 1966 in French. He had started giving his famous seminars in the early 1950’s, but Stevens had already written most of his poetry by that time. However, Lacan’s first public speech was his paper on the ‘mirror-stage’ that he read at the fourteenth International Psychoanalytical Congress held at Marienband in August 1936; its English translation appeared in the January 1937 issue of *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*. Before that, he had contributed some articles on paranoia in the French journal *Le Minotaure* in 1933. Nevertheless, to say that Stevens might have came across Lacan’s early publications, i.e. of 1933 or 1937, will be out of context since his poetry written before 1937, or even before 1933, already shows what the psychoanalyst started doing then, namely, the ‘decentering’ of the human subject. In short, the poet had been thinking independently on the same lines as Lacan and further pursued in the same direction and made progress in his own way. Similarly, there is no mention of Stevens in Lacan, neither is there any proof of his knowledge of the poet. Yet, there is one possible connection between the two, which could be said to have been responsible for their progress in the same direction: Freud. Lacan himself has acknowledged Freud’s debt to him on countless occasions in his own works. Stevens, on the contrary, was not particularly fond of acknowledging anyone’s importance to him. His *Letters* has only two references to the psychoanalyst, and he is mentioned only once in the *Collected Poems*, in a poem “Mountains Covered with Rats” (*CP* 367-8); but *The Necessary Angel* shows that he had read Freud as he quotes from and comments on his *Future of an Illusion* (see *NA* 14-5, 139). One can see Freud’s significance to the poet in his remark on the founder of psychoanalysis as “One of the great figures in the world...” (*OP* 218). Stevens can be seen almost thanking Freud when he says of him, “…he has given the irrational a legitimacy that it never had before” (*OP* 219). Stevens’ interest in the irrational element in poetry, which dominates much of his own poetry, might indicate his knowledge Freud’s “The Uncanny” (*SE* 17: 217-52). One of his statements in a letter to
J. Ronald Lane Latimer attracts attention; he wrote, "The pseudo–primitive of which you speak is, I am afraid, unconscious" (Letters 287); those who have read Stevens' poetry should be in a better position to realize the recurrence of the image of this "pseudo–primitive" in it (for example, simply recall the titles: "Less and less Human, O Savage Spirit" [CP 327], and "Primitive Like an Orb" [CP 440]). This indicates his interest in dealing with the unconscious through his poetry. Freud, in dealing with a case of paranoia, suggests the unconscious's relation with the savagery and primitiveness in accepting Carl Jung's assertion that the "mythopoeic forces of mankind are not extinct, but that to this very day they give rise in the neuroses to the same psychical products as in the remotest past ages;" he, therefore, makes a thesis: "In dreams and in neuroses,... we come upon the savage" (SE 12: 82). Avid readers of Stevens know that one comes upon the 'savage' in the poetry many times.

I would also like to make it clear that this study is concerned less with how the thoughts of Stevens and Lacan are similar without their knowledge of each other's works than with the development of both Stevens and his poetry in order to render the poetry more accessible. Lacan is used more as a tool to understand the development although, at times, it will be necessary to explain Lacanian concepts and thoughts so as not only to make the study readable to a layman but also to make explicit the profitability of those concepts and thoughts. This study will be the first in two senses: it attempts psychoanalysis of the poet's own person as we know it from available sources; it also, consequently, shows how the development of the person and his poetry go hand in hand to a large extent, thus putting Stevens in a different – perhaps, more proper – context.

Speaking of development naturally anticipates stages of development that have already been suggested a moment ago. However, I must repeat that it is very difficult to study them in crass isolation. In selecting certain representative poems to study those stages, it was necessary to keep track of the dates of composition of the poems. But, at times, it becomes difficult to know the dates. Besides, one cannot overrule the possibility of the violation of chronology by the poet himself in case of some poems when he arranged the sequence before publishing the Collected Poems. One more obvious thing is that some verses have been written out of preoccupation with a certain theme or experience, which thus appears repeated in poems from different periods, or volumes. These things allowed this study to violate the chronology of dates and go thematically although it takes into account the importance of chronology wherever necessary as the
requirement of such a study. Instead of laying out the structure of the present study in terms of the dates of volumes or poems, or even titles of volumes, therefore, I do it thematically.

Chapter 2 deals with poems related with the structure of the human subject, the "I". These poems are directly concerned with that structure and lay it out insofar as it manifested itself in Stevens' experience. Browsing through the *Collected Poems* reveals that, like imagination and reality, Stevens was kept interested in the nature of the "I" for a very long period of time; this indicates that the question of 'What is I?' was not conclusively answered. Manifestations of the unconscious dimension are part of that structure, even though its otherness is acutely felt. These poems obviously reveal the inner reality, which is not separable from the outer reality however.

The faculty of imagination was not to escape the poet's observation. In some poems, which are dealt with in chapter 3, Stevens shows keen interest not only in formulating its praises but also in trying to formalize it. But more importantly, he attempts to elaborate its functions, as they revealed to his experience, in order to gauge the significance of its role in the mental structure. Critics have referred to the poetry concerning this faculty as poetry "concerned with the problems of epistemology." This observation is far more correct than even what those critics might have thought of the poet's view of the imagination. Stevens had realized that without this faculty it was impossible to see or know reality or even have the inner reality. Whether inner or outer, reality is reality. But what is reality and what is not? Is what he calls the 'unreal' really unreal? If reality cannot be without the imagination, is it not the same with the 'unreal'? Through attempting to find answers to such questions Stevens kept on polishing his sense of reality, and at times came to merge the inner and outer realities; yet, his sense of reality often retained its otherness to himself. While Chapter 4 deals with his own reality, the inner reality, Chapter 5 attempts to take a view of his conception of reality. Both these chapters depict his grappling with reality and the *jouissance*, which includes both pleasure and pain, thereof.

All of Stevens' quests have interrelations. They are not to be viewed as distinct from one another. Thus, it was not possible not to speak of any other issue while dealing with one of them. And all the issues this study deals with resisted yielding themselves conclusively to the poet's experience or knowledge. However, during his researches, he
could attain supreme moments in his experiences of the three major issues that I deal with in this study. I have tried to collect some of these 'apogees' in the final chapter.

Stevens believed in "pure explication de text" (Letters 793). I, too, found out that there was no need to go beyond and make my own presence as commentator felt. I have therefore tried to restrain – as much as possible – my commentary insofar as making generalized statements is concerned, though it is not strictly observed. The purpose behind this was to allow the reader to see Stevens as independently as possible and also to be more true to this more strange poet's progress from patient to sorts of psychoanalyst, from – to use his own words – 'neurosis of winter' to 'the rock'.

Before going ahead, it seemed necessary to clarify the scope and value of this research. Stevens' published works is the basis of the research. There is invariably the feeling that Stevens is not read as well as the other contemporary poets. The primary aim of this study therefore is to read him better. To this end, a psychoanalytic approach was preferred as necessary since, without it many of the inherent difficulties in the poetry and its general obscurity go unresolved as the available criticism on Stevens shows. Lacan's psychoanalytic thought and theory are used as a tool to resolve the difficulties in the poetry. It must be clarified that no other psychoanalytic theory is used, for – apart from reasons of space – the study would have faced the danger of becoming an archive of psychoanalytic theories; besides, Stevens' thought is closer to Lacan's thought than to anybody else's. It also allowed to concentrate more on Stevens' word. The value of this research thus lies in the resolution of the difficulties in Stevens' poetry and to contribute to Stevens criticism — so as to fill its incompletenesses to some extent. Another important aspect of this study is that it sees Stevens, availing of the said psychoanalytic framework, in a different light that many would hesitate to shed on him. This is also an applied research in the sense that it fruitfully employs Lacan’s thought, and shows how useful it is, in the diagnosis of Stevens as a psychic patient.

The study may also prove useful in the pedagogical milieu because of its emphasis on reading Stevens' poetic language as such. It avoids wherever possible the technical terms that the stylistic approach must use heavily, giving the teacher freedom to use them at his or her discretion. The suggestive remarks and questions strewn through the study while analyzing the poems will help the students think on them and come up with different answers than those provided here. Since many younger students of literature find the application of postmodern thought to literary works difficult or
impracticable, this study might alleviate their hunch and encourage them: to this end, the
study shows that the practical reading is not avoidable, that it is our ordinary responses to
the language of a literary work that allows to bring in the theory for proof or elucidation
or further interpretation, that the reverse is artificial and need not be practiced.