1. PROLEGOMENA

Personality must be kept secret before the world.

(Letters 44)

This chapter aims at bringing into psychoanalytic light that major aspect of Stevens' character which receives no more than passing references. The reason of its neglect is probably that it is too obvious; or, perhaps it goes deliberately unnoticed out of a commonly held view of an artist as an eccentric person. It is like Poe's 'purloined letter' that, despite its centrality to the investigation, lies openly hidden. This study believes that the said aspect, for all its being open for all to see, still awaits to be 'purloined' the second time. That 'letter' of Stevens is simply located in this chapter since the purpose here is to only give indications of the 'theft;' the attempt to 'purloin' it will be made in the next chapter. This chapter, therefore, will sketch Stevens' character insofar as it is helpful to the chief concern of this study, which is to find out what the subject of Stevens' poetry is. That is – to imitate the question Rose asks apropos of the 'body' of Plath's writing (29) – what is the subject that Stevens describes? Stevens was aware of the fact that "Great number of poets come and go who have never had a subject at all" (NA 120). In this sense, one is certainly interested in the central concern(s) of his poetry. In another, who is the subject in his writing?; that is, who is it that he writes about? This question is difficult to answer. While this chapter attempts to show how the poet found the subject for his poetry, it defers providing an answer to the 'who' of the second question until the next chapter.

Wallace Stevens is easily one of the most significant and difficult major modern poets that dominated the first half of the twentieth century poetry in the English language, the others being, perhaps, W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. While Yeats and Eliot give of a sustained line of thought through most of their poetry, Stevens' critics generally find it difficult to see such line of thought in his poetry beyond certain issues repeated and scattered through it; Stevens' abstract thematic concerns and formidable linguistic virtuosity make the task even more difficult. As a result his critic is often sent to different thinkers in search of echoes of the ideas found within the poetry.
However, the self and the human mind being the closest concerns of Stevens, it should not be difficult to find out the poet’s sustained thinking in that direction as Thomas Hines’ attempt illustrates.¹ And Freud, Stevens himself agrees, being one of the most influential figures insofar as the arts of the time were concerned, one can not dismiss the possibility of the psychoanalyst’s influence on the poet, who was certainly attracted towards the legitimacy Freud gave to what he refers to as “the irrational element;” besides, Stevens had taken note of the fact that poetry was not much influenced by Freud as compared to other arts (OP 218-19). Stevens himself had studied ‘mental philosophy’ in his final year at the Reading Boys’ High School (SP 12), which might suggest that the seeds of his persistent interest in the human mind and existence were sown very early in his life. During the initial stages of my reading of Stevens I was struck by certain things, which led me to explore the poetry from psychoanalytic point of view. However, such a study requires — not as an imperative but as an advantage — the history of the person concerned. Freud considered the personal and social history very important for treatment; Juliet Mitchell writes of Freud’s interest in man’s history,

...what is of relevance is the importance he gave to an event in man’s personal and social history... Freud believed the tales his hysterical patients told him of their seductions by their fathers. Although Freud abandoned the particular event of paternal seduction as either likely or, more important, causative, he retained the notion of an event, prehistorical or actual. Something intruded from without into the [subject’s] world. Something that was not innate but came from outside, from history or prehistory. This ‘event’ was to be the paternal threat of castration.

(FS13)

The study of Stevens’ personal history is more rewarding than his social history, for it was a particular ‘event’ in his personal life that almost predetermined his social history; this is why it is not out of context to say that Bates almost hits the mark but misses the real thing through his emphasis on the prehistory and social history.²

Wallace, the second child of Garrett Barcalow Stevens and Margaretha Catherine Zeller Stevens, was born on October 2, 1879 in Reading, Pennsylvania. From whatever is known about his early life, he led a very normal childhood. The Stevens brothers were playful and mischievous. Holly Stevens, the poet’s daughter, has collected some of the
'souvenirs' of her father's childhood which in a sense do not 'prophecy' the life Wallace, also called Pat in his childhood, lived as an adult:  

Once, at the Stevens farm, [the Stevens brothers] discovered an old musket in the attic and paraded around with it rather recklessly, much to the dismay of their grandmother and a visiting cousin. When a street light on North Fifth Street shone into a neighbor's window, who then painted it green to reduce the glare, Pat would steal out at night, shinny up the pole, and scrape the point off, thus awakening the neighbor who would paint it again the next day. This cycle apparently was repeated several times before Pat was caught. Another story about the Stevens boys relates that when a steeple was being erected on a nearby church, they used to climb up and hide in the scaffolding. They would sit there, chewing tobacco, and at an opportune moment, often when a prominent citizen was passing below, would expectorate. According to the story, they were never caught. And, like all boys, they stole fruit from a neighbor's tree; when discovered, they called out as they ran away, "God helps those who help themselves!"

(parentheses mine; SP 8-9)

Recalling his childhood *memoires*, Stevens himself wrote Elsie in a letter of January 21, 1909,

...And I had a pirate period somewhere. I used to 'hop' coal-trains and ride up the Lebanon Valley and stone farm-houses and steal pumpkins and so on...with a really tough crowd...

...I was distinctly a rowdy...and there are still gossips to tell of it.

*(Letters 125, 126)*

At the same time, however, Stevens was coming forward as a very good student in the Reading Boys' High School. Stevens remembers, "And I studied hard - very" *(Letters 125)*. Barring the first year of his school (1892-93), which he 'flunked' "because of too many nights out" but also probably because he was seriously ill that year, and the third year (1895-96) when he was not rated as he could not appear at the examination at the year end due to illness again, Stevens made a good impression: at the end of 1893-94,
Wallace made the honor roll in history of Greece and physical geography; at the end of the second term during 1894-95, his rating was 8.37 on a scale that ran from zero to ten; again, at the end of the second term during 1895-96, he was ranked third (SP 10-11). During 1895-96, the third year of Stevens’ High School, the local newspapers announced a competitive examination in rhetorical contest for the Reading Eagle prize. The competition was held every year and the prize went to the best essay written on the subject announced by the principal, who supervised the examination, only at the time of the examination. Wallace Stevens was the winner that year. ‘Elocution’ seemed his favorite subject even as he took it during the first term of his final year at the school, 1896-97. On December 22, 1896, Wallace gave a speech at the ‘Alumni night.’ Holly quotes the newspaper report:

Wallace Stevens took the “Greatest need of the age,” for his topic, and handled it exceeding well... Rev. Dr. Gaul, of the judges, reported that they awarded the prize for oratory to Wallace Stevens. The judges were unanimous.

(SP 12)

At the end of that year, he gave another speech on “The Thessalians.” The report of The Reading Eagle of June 24, 1897 referred to his attempt as “a splendid effort” and praised him that he “spoke as though he were a veteran speaker accustomed to address large audience;” and according to the same report, his “patriotic sentiments were rewarded with loud acclamation” (SP 12; Rehder 12). As he himself recalls, “You know I took all the prizes at school!” (Letters 125). Wallace was not a bookworm, though; he was popular among the schoolboys. When he won the gold medal for oratory on ‘Alumni night,’ the newspaper reports, “...the boys in the audience broke loose, clapped their hands and applauded. The winner is a son of Garrett B. Stevens and a favorite in the school, as was proven by the send-off his classmates gave him. Then the boys gave him the school yell and a cheer” (SP 12).

After graduating from the school, Stevens went to Cambridge in 1897 and was enrolled as a special student at Harvard College, where his major concern remained literature — chiefly in English, but also in French and German. One of the most important things of this period is his otherwise taciturn father’s eloquent letters to him. The letters are full of “strictures and advice” (SP 13); and, often watchfully inquisitive,
they do not lack shrewd suggestions amounting almost to warnings. The puritanical message of hard work keeps resounding through them:

...the world holds an unoccupied niche for those who climb up — work and study, study and work — are worth a decade of dreams...

And there is no better exercise than an effort to do our best...  

*(Letters 14)*

I am still concerned about your progress in your study and on that score you seem a trifle reticent — I should like to know whether you feel that you are really improving your power to reach proper conclusions, and educating yourself in discerning that after all the positive knowledge the best have is mighty little...

Do not be contented with a smattering of all things — be strong in something.

*(Letters 16)*

I shall be glad to learn of your successful as well as pleasant pursuits of absolute knowledge and to know that you have discovered the thing for which you have aptitude or talent.

*(Letters 18)*

Keep hammering at your real work however my boy — for a fellow never knows what's in store — and time mis-spent now counts heavily.

*(Letters 26)*

Garrett, lest his son should mis-spend his time, did not want the son to waste even his leisure time, and pushed him on to be always busy in something that might be useful:

...when a fellow finds delight and recreation in exercising his mental powers and his study is not a bore and burden, look out for an accumulation of wisdom. The Dean must be careful, a competitor for his place appears.

*(Letters 20)*
If you have leisure I would say you would do well to study up the art of lights +
shadows — pen or pencil drawing — perhaps color too.

(Letters 18)

The letter of March 6, 1898 summarily and directly states the purpose of the father’s
letters; he wrote Wallace,

Glad to get your encouraging reports — and shall be happy always to get the
substantial evidence of your progress, for, as you are aware — you are not out on a
picnic — but really preparing for the campaign of life — where self sustenance is
essential and where everything depends upon yourself — for it is becoming
manifest to me, that while I can carry out my ambition to give the children a better
chance than I had — and equip them with a better education — and as valiant
spirits and brave hearts — that you will be like I was myself at 16 — bound to
“paddle your own canoe” without help from home of any substantial character.

I believe you realize this — and are alive to your opportunities.

(Letters 18)

Though Stevens wrote his niece in 1943 that his father “wasn’t a man given to pushing
his way” (Letters 454), Garrett’s letters to him reflect how he was keen on pushing his
say. His anxiety of influencing bore fruit as all the three sons decided to become, and
eventually became, lawyers like him. The poet himself, in the 1943 letter to his niece,
wrote, “When I was younger, I always used to think that I got my practical side from my
father...” (Letters 454). Had Garrett not been given to pushing his way, he would not
have interfered with his sons’ marriages to such an extent as to seriously harm
relationships (see B 258); in fact, Wallace suffered most from his father’s pushing his
way.

After Harvard years, Stevens moved to New York in 1900 and spent the next
sixteen years in the city taking up different jobs. This period of his life proved very
crucial in the sense that it shaped his future life as poet, lawyer, and person. Things were
still ordinary until 1904, when after passing the bar examination for lawyers and being
admitted to practice, he went to Reading. It was a long stay at the hometown. Since most of his Reading companions had married or were away, he had to suffice himself with the younger acquaintances. One evening, the younger brother of his friend John Replier took Wallace to Elsie’s home at 231 South Thirteenth Street. Elsie was easily the pick of the Reading girls, and Wallace soon found himself deeply in love with her. Unfortunately, the correspondence before 1907 between Wallace and Elsie has been destroyed owing to the latter’s “strong regard for privacy” (Letters 75); only some sections of those letters Elsie did not want preserved in whole are copied out by her. Yet things are not hopeless, for it is not impossible to guess the general contents of those letters. The one thing that strikes the reader from the preserved correspondence is that Elsie did not write Stevens as she should have or as the lover expected of the beloved to. Elsie’s seeming indifference began to show as early as September 1904. Stevens’ journal entry of September 13, 1904 goes: “I could write to her every night — but she will answer only once a week, and then four pages are all I get” (SP 142). Again, the journal entry of November 7, 1904 says, “Last week was the first since Elsie and I began to write one another that I have not had a letter from her;” Stevens even thought of “feigning” the novelistic “indifference” towards her and wondered whether they would be “two happy ones” (Letters 77). Once he wrote her, “you have neglected me, Miss Shameless, but it is all right...” (Letters 109). He often had to remind her to write very often (Letters 135, 137). One feels that something was definitely wrong, for Elsie not only did not write him very often but also destroyed most of the correspondence before 1907. The poet’s daughter feels the same as she writes, “Wallace was deeply in love, but apparently all was not going well in the courtship” and that the journal entries from 30 April 1905 on “indicate a certain depression and dissatisfaction” (SP 146). One of the reasons that problematized the relationship could be Elsie’s, what her daughter refers to as, “persecution complex which undoubtedly originated during her childhood” (SP 137); however, it could also be that Stevens had started realizing that she was not exactly the sort of girl he wanted, or at least wondered whether she was. In any case, it was his attachment with or love for her that kept the relationship going. Her indifference must have had a certain unconscious effect on the sensitive Wallace as it often has in a love affair — that of the expectant getting more obsessed by the one who seems or is indifferent. One remarkable feature of Wallace-Elsie courtship is that he felt more comfortable with her when they were not together (Letters 96). Strange as it may seem,
but the only reason could be that when together he could quarrel with her as to why she behaved the way she did, thus making her feel grieved and spoiling the date. Without her, he could allow his imagination to paint only a happy relationship, for then there would be no quarrels. In his imagination, she was more perfectly herself to him, which made him more perfectly himself to her; there, she would grant every demand of Wallace; she did not make him “beg so hard there” (Letters 96). Thus, it is easy to see how Elsie became the fantasmatic object of the poet’s desire.

This very desire complicated Wallace’s relationship with his father. Garrett Stevens could not approve of the idea of his son marrying Elsie and put up a strong resistance. The father and the mother seem to have had strong views about their children’s marriages and so created problems. They did it with their eldest son’s proposed marriage with Sarah Stayman. Mary Catharina Sesnick, the daughter of Stevens’ elder brother Garrett, Jr. and Sarah, says, “They sent someone to Carlisle to check my mother’s parents out to see if my mother was good enough to come into the family. Mama said her mother and father were indignant over that. “The idea! To look over my family to see if it was good enough for them.” She never forgot that” (B 258). This had endangered the prospect of the marriage. In the footnote to the page, Brazeau notes, “Crisis seemed to run in the family when the Stevens children contemplated marriage. Elizabeth Stevens, no less than her brothers Garrett and Wallace, found out her parents had definite ideas about a suitable mate. In Elizabeth’s case, “there was a young man in Reading, but he was a catholic and they were strict Presbyterians,” Mary Catharina Sesnick recalls. The young couple “just had a terrible time: so she gave him up. I think that, too, alienated her from her family to a certain extent”.” The Stayman family was “quite prominent in Carlisle;” Sarah’s mother prided over “her grandfather being the first country superintendent in Cumberland county” and her father being “a trustee of Dickinson College” and her family being related to P. B. Shelley (B 258). Wallace’s father and mother, of course, approved of these connections very much. Thus, in a letter of 17 November 1907, when Wallace was contemplating marriage with Elsie, his father shrewdly wrote him about “how useful Garrett, Jr. was finding his wife’s connections now that he had moved to Baltimore, where Mrs. Stayman knew “good, strong, plain people: Doctors and Preachers and others of importance” to whom she could introduce him” (B 259). However, Elsie came from a desolate background. Her father, Howard Irving Kachel whom her mother had married when she was five months
pregnant with Elsie, died the next year. Elsie's legitimacy was already in question. They were very poor and had to live with Elsie's grandmother. After Howard's death Elise and her mother stayed on with Catherine Smith's family until her mother married Lehman Wilkes Moll seven year later. Elise had to give up her school education during the first year and to go to work in order to support the family. She worked in a departmental store where she played the piano in the sheet-music department; she also gave piano lessons. There was nothing in her background that could have cheered Wallace's parents; she did not belong to the class they had worked hard to join.

Although disturbed at Wallace's resolve to marry Elise, his father, as his letter of 22 March 1908 suggests, preferred not to interfere: "From the fact that I hear nothing from [you] I may assume that you are absorbed in personal matters — and as you want your own way about them I do not want to butt in" (B 262). However, owing to ill health and financial difficulties that he was going through, Garrett Stevens lost self-control and did butt in. Sometime between March and November 1908 the father and his son had a quarrel over the matter. On a rare occasion Stevens told John Ladish, an office assistant, that "He'd rush over to the girl's place, and [the Stevens] family would never see him until it was time for him to leave" for New York again... "After that had gone on for sometime, his father said, 'If you're going to consider our home just a hotel, just a place to bring your laundry, you might as well not come at all!'" (B 256). It was probably at this point that Wallace burst out, “I'll never come back. I'll never come back into the house!” recalls Mary Sesnick (B 262). Thus, when he visited Reading for Thanksgiving, he stayed at a boarding house instead of his parental house. The antipathy was such that Wallace never spoke to his father again, nor did he have any relationship with any other family member until his younger brother John Stevens' death. Wallace had to choose between Elsie and his family, and he preferred Elsie. However, he was a very sensitive person; his father died on 14 July 1911 “without ever having spoken to him,” says Ladish, “He regretted this very much ...He brooded over that over the years” (B 256). Perhaps, as the following lines suggest, he felt guilty:

It may be that one life is a punishment
For another, as the son's life for the father's.

(\textit{CP 323})
This is not a simple expression of guilt feeling; it is a rare instance of the melancholic’s mourning in Stevens, one that is very hard, almost impossible to overcome since the lost father cannot be substituted in adult age; in fact, owing to precisely this possibility of overcoming the loss, Freud distinguishes mourning from melancholia, which defers the recovery from the loss. Moreover, the loss was marked with a sense of guilt in Stevens’ case. This must have had tremendous psychological repercussions on Stevens since it is directly related with the problematization of the resolution of the Oedipus Complex. In discussing *Hamlet*, Lacan says, “...at the bottom of...mourning, in *Hamlet* as in *Oedipus*, there is a crime,” and that in both plays, “Up to a certain point, the whole rapid succession, one instance of mourning after another, can be seen as consequences of the initial crime.” He also brings to notice, “For Freud...the crime of the primal murder of the father forms the ultimate horizon of the problem of origins. Note, too, that [Freud] finds it relevant for every psychoanalytic issue, and he never considers a discussion closed until it is brought in. This primal patricide, which he places at the origin of the horde and at the origin of the Judaic tradition, clearly has a mythic character” (Lacan clarifies that by ‘myth’ he meant ‘ritual reproduction’); he further comments on Oedipus’ situation, “Oedipus, who is actually completely innocent, unconscious and unaware, manages without realizing it – in a sort of dream (life is a dream) – to renew the channels of access from crime to the restoration of order. He takes on the punishment himself and at the end seems to us castrated (“Desire” 41-43). While Oedipus saw his crime long after it was committed, Stevens knew it from the start; thus, his punishment – castration – begins from the point of the ‘crime’ itself which, unlike in Oedipus’ case, is concurrent with the point of the sense of the ‘crime.’ In Seminar III Lacan emphasizes that “the coloration of guilt is so fundamental in our psychological experience of the neuroses... so fundamental that it was by its means that we explored the neuroses and that they were structured in a subjective and intersubjective mode” and adds that “It’s a question... of a mode of constructing the Other...,” i.e. of constructing the loss as the ideal into the unconscious. Elizabeth Grosz writes, “The real father’s authority is never so strong as in his absence or death. The dead father, murdered by the primal fraternal horde, founds an inexorable law, more powerful and effective than his supervising presence” (68).

With this loss, Stevens only had his mother, forming the dyad. Normally, the son invariably finds a substitute for the mother (when the father figure is alive), union with
whom is a taboo. Elsie was going to be the substitute. Unfortunately, it was at this time
that Garrett interfered, thus barring his sensitive son’s access to manhood. In this way,
the one who is supposed to teach his son manhood finally ended up with resisting it.
Although Wallace did ultimately marry Elsie, it must have been difficult for him to
forget the events of 1908, alienating him from his family; to further complicate the
matter as it were, his father died in 1911, without ever having spoken to the son after the
family row of 1908. Wallace kept remembering his father until as late as (notably) in
Auroras of Autumn of 1950 and even after.

Wallace married Elsie on 21 September 1909. And the couple lived in New York
until 1916. Stevens did write when he was at Harvard, but nothing of that period seems
significant. It was only after the deaths of his father and mother (in 1912) that anything
of significance started issuing from his pen. As he himself said, “when I got to New
York [1900] I was not serious about poetry... I wrote occasionally... It was not until ten
or fifteen years later when some friends of mine came down from Cambridge that I
became interested again. After that, I began all over” (B 8). It is between those “ten and
fifteen years” after Harvard (1900) that his parents died. Walter Arensberg, who had
moved to New York from Cambridge in 1914, and some other friends formed a small
literary circle. This group of young writers merely provided an opportunity for the
irruption of Stevens’ suppressed, secret emotions and feelings. At Harvard, he had
impressed “literary eminences” like George Santayana and his English professor Barrette
Wendell with his “marked literary aptitude” (B 8). But the real strength of his literary
aptitude started showing when he was well over thirty. His “Songs for Elsie,” and a
“book of verses” that he presented to Elsie in 1908 on her 22nd birthday, suggest that “he
made a new start in 1907,” writes Rehder, “but it was only in 1913, after his marriage
(1909) and the death of his father (1911) and mother (1912), that he began seriously
‘trying to get together a little collection of verses again’” (46; Letters 180). There are
strong psychic imprecations in his poetry that must be heard, the roots of which point
invariably to the events that took place over a period between 1908 and 1912.

In fact, it was not only his poetry but he himself had changed due to those events.
There is a considerable difference between his personality in childhood and in adulthood.
He was the best orator in his high school and “spoke as though he were a veteran speaker
accustomed to address large audience;” he was “a favorite in the school, as was proven
by the send-off his classmates gave him;” when he received his medal for oratory on
‘Alumni night’ “the boys gave him the school yell and a cheer.” Who could have believed then that this same boy would be afraid of speaking in front of people when grown up? Would it have been possible for anyone then to believe that this playful and mischievous boy would live the life of a loner later? Stevens himself felt the change and gave way to the poignant feeling in a letter of 3 December 1908 to Elsie:

I wonder that I am anything at all after an argument I had at the table tonight. The subject of the debate: Why is it that school-boys who win gold-medals... never amount to anything afterwards? Pop out of the box they brought up Lincoln... I denied that gold-medal boys never amounted to anything afterwards, said that so-and-so was a nobody...

...It is such on odd thing that bright boys should be expected to be successful men. Brightness is so small an element of success. Brightness disillusions...

and a little further writes,

Poor old Lincoln (the boarding-house Lincoln, not the historic one) drives me out of my wits with his anecdotes. He caps everything with a story. Tonight he said, “Well, Mr. Stevens, Stephen Douglas thought that Lincoln had no ability, but he changed his mind. When Lincoln was inaugurated he stood beneath him and held his hat.” At that all the school-marms glared... What had Lincoln’s immense ability to do with gold-medals?

(SP 196-7)

When the New England Equitable Insurance Company announced on 8 February 1916 that it was going out of business, Stevens found himself out of a job. Fortunately, one of his friends in the insurance business, James L. D. Kearney, then head of the bond department of Hartford Accident and Indemnity company at Hartford, offered him a job in his company. Stevens moved to Hartford in May 1916 where they lived the rest of their lives. Stevens did not have close friends at Hartford. The general picture of the poet, as emanates from the memories of those who knew him, is that of a loner and a whimsical person at times. He always preferred to stay away from people. “I don’t think he was too much of a social creature,” says John Rogers, manservant to the officers of the company including Stevens (B 20). Many persons who came in contact with him
found him “very cold, very distant,” “extremely detached” (B 16). Nobody knew him well enough as a person. Clifford Burdge, Jr., one of Stevens’ lawyer-assistants, opines, “He had difficulty relating to people... he was sort of a loner” (B 27), and that “He was a very difficult person to figure out. He was a sort of sane schizophrenic” (B 28). Being in company with people induced a sort of fear in his mind; when in company with people he avoided speaking. Thus, he stayed from participating “in civic or community events;” at a conference of all the vice-presidents and the president of the company, the president wanted the vice-president to put forth the problems of their departments, whereupon each vice-president got up to describe his problems, and when it came down to Wallace Stevens he simply said, “The surety-claims department has no problem.” Herbert Schoen, a research lawyer who tells this anecdote, says that he never saw Stevens address large company gatherings: “It was the kind of thing he avoided” (B 59). Although Stevens worked hard to prepare for lectures at universities, says Schoen, he did not like to lecture at universities perhaps because “He did not like that milieu. He didn’t like the crowds of people, he did not like the social gatherings which [lecturing at universities] usually entailed” (B 58). As we know, Stevens did lecture occasionally during his life; yet, he did have some kind of phobia even as late as in 1951, when he was to speak in front of an audience at the Museum of Modern Art in New York; Holly, his daughter, Elva McCormick and another girl, both of whom worked in the Lewis Street Bookshop, and Isabel Wycoff, a Stevens fan, all had planned to attend the talk, but Stevens was reluctant and tried to prevent them from attending it in a letter to his daughter saying, “Please do not come to my reading in N.Y. It would make me nervous and self-conscious at a time which, for me, is bad enough already. Moreover, I have engagements before and after” (B 120). Stevens seldom related himself with people; opening with people was “like the plague” to him (B 121); as he himself confessed, “getting acquainted with people is difficult for me” — this was written as an apology to J. Ronald Lane Latimer who had been corresponding with Stevens very often in a friendly manner during the two years before Latimer proposed to see Stevens personally (B 99).

There are still more stories related by people who came in contact with Stevens and found him a queer man, and reading them obviously raises the question whether something was terribly wrong with him, answering which in the negative is very difficult. He never spoke to anyone about the problem though. Figuring out the problem
could be a very delicate, sensitive, and intricate matter. However, there is a certain aspect of his general behavior that might help: he spoke very abruptly, almost insultingly, to or about people; he seems very egotistic in most of these instances; his general manner itself was like a man having a strong ego, and one often suspects that he did it conspicuously and deliberately. Charles Beach, an underwriter at the Hartford home office, gives his impressions of Stevens, "...he conducted himself in such a way that would impress you" and that "You immediately had respect for him" (B 11); his huge built was a natural aid to him in this. A company field man and bond special agent, Robert De Vore, tells us, "Mr. Stevens acted with great authority and was rather final in his assertions. He didn't mince words. He would be quite direct in what he would do and what he wouldn't do. You just had the feeling that this fellow was different than the common herd." "He was a fellow you always felt somewhat in awe of" (B 13,14). Manning Heard, Stevens' assistant and later president of the company, says, "He was the type of individual who didn't relish a skirmish with a mentality that he considered a little bit lower than his" (B 15). His abruptness in speaking to people was incisive; though what he said would be funny, it hurt people since they found it insulting (B 29). Even though he treated Leslie Tucker, an assistant superintendent of bookkeeping, "like a gentleman always," she holds the same opinion: "he did have a caustic tongue" (B 31).

Herbert Schoen recalls an incident:

There was a social gathering the night before [Stevens was to receive an honorary degree at a university], and it was in the home either of the president or one of the senior trustees of the university. He escorted [Stevens] in and he said, "Mr. Stevens, what do you think of my home?" And Stevens took a look around and said, "My wife and I have tried very hard not to create this effect."

(parentheses mine; B 58-9)

The questioner, here, must have felt like getting slapped on the face. One of the directors of Hartford Live Stock Insurance, Arthur Polley, has a memory of an equally interesting event: one day, for his usual walk, Stevens went to Farmington and there he met the president of the company on the way; Stevens greeted him with "My god, can't a man go anywhere but he has to meet people he knows!" Polley further explains Stevens' eccentricity, "He loved to shock people, and he didn't care a damn who they were" (B
Those who knew Stevens' ways were really anxious and on tenterhooks if he was speaking to or about them. Once Stevens was introducing a surety lawyer A. J. Fletcher to someone; he said, "Mr. so and so, I want you to meet Mr. A. J. Fletcher. He is the best surety lawyer between Richmond and..." — here, Fletcher was afraid whether Stevens was going to say Petersberg, which was "right next door," but felt relieved when Stevens next said "the equator" (B 44). Even in his letters he could be terse, even curt at times, as they contained simply one or two words like a ‘No’ or ‘Come ahead’ (B 56,41). His business letters were always very effective in any case.

One wonders why at all he would behave like an egotistic or arrogant person or love to shock people. A couple of persons who worked with him have made an observation on this side of Stevens, and they seem to be far more accurate than they might have thought: Herbert Schoen opines, "...I, personally, always thought he was merely using words to get your attention" (B 59). Arthur Polley has a similar opinion: "He just loved to shock people, just to see their reaction" (B 64). A comment by Clifford Burdge, Jr. that Stevens "was a very shy person, basically" would look very odd considering the way Stevens spoke with people, but what he says next to it is more important from psychoanalytic point of view: "and as many shy people are apt to do to cover up their shyness, they adopt an air which can be mistaken for arrogance, aloofness or just plain coldness" (B 29). Now, far from being shy Stevens was very bold and self-confident in his childhood as some of the things he did suggest. Where did his boldness and self-confidence vanish? And if — as Stevens says in a poem — “Two things of opposite natures seem to depend / On one another” (CP 392), then did he feel something lacking in him so that he had to put on an air that would cover up the lack? If yes, when did it all happen? The answer to the last question would invariably point to the events between 1908 and 1912, during which Stevens underwent the most difficult events of his life that changed him almost for the lifetime. Interestingly enough, the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan has something that accommodates Burdge's comment quoted earlier. Lacan uses the term 'castration' for perhaps what is very vaguely and generally referred to as the inferiority complex. And when this complex, which everyone has to some extent, exceeds a certain limit in a subject or person, he is referred to as neurotic, whose ‘castration’ is purely imaginary. Lacan writes,
The neurotic has been subjected to imaginary castration from the beginning [of his neurosis]; it is castration that sustains [his strong ego, so strong, one might say, that its proper name is an inconvenience for it, since the neurotic is really Nameless. Yet, it is beneath this strong ego, which certain analysts choose to strengthen still more, that the neurotic hides his castration that he denies.

(parentheses mine; Écrits 323)

The above passage would be a little obscure to those who are uninitiated to Lacan, but suffice it for the moment to suggest that the general air of superiority that Stevens put on must have been related to the castration that was not normal in his case. The implications of the passage will become clear through the present study as the terms are clarified. For the present, however, let us only note that Stevens had some problem, that of ‘improper castration,’ which made him behave so strangely with people. He had to hide it after all, and this is how he hid it. This is precisely the essence of Freud’s statement made in his correspondence with Fleiss: “Sie leben also den Wahn wie sich selbst. Das ist das Geheimnis;” i.e. “Thus they love their delusions as they love themselves. That is the secret” (qtd. and trans. in Seminar III 214). The necessity to hide the problem may be seen in Freud’s use of the word ‘leben’ or ‘love.’

The strength of the neurotic subject’s ego is particularly manifested in his dealing with equals or with those who are, or suppose themselves to be, superior in some way to the subject. Stevens’ behavior with such persons was no different. He even confessed it in a journal entry of 23 April 1908: “I do not get on well with my equals, not at all with my superiors. Ego, I have no friends” (qtd in Richardson, The Early Years 289).^ Manning Heard recalls a bond contract of over a million dollars the Hartford had signed for construction of a large diesel engine, which did not “live up to any of the specifications called for in the contract. So the government, through a Mr. Nicholson, refused to accept the engine and made a claim for the full amount of the bond.” Negotiations leading to a settlement or a suit by the government followed, in which participated the representatives of several other companies with which the Hartford had reinsured liability. Mr. Nicholson wanted to record the discussions. Looking at the recording device and realizing its purpose, Stevens was the first to tell Mr. Nicholson outright, “I won’t say a word if anything I say is taken down.” Subsequently, all others refused to speak. Mr. Nicholson was obviously a high level official in the government,
and must have felt a little humiliated when the negotiations began on a note of his defeat. Then, "In one of the conversations...[Stevens] called Mr. Nicholson a silly old fool. Mr. Nicholson got up and said, "I refuse to have any further conversation with this gentleman. As far as I'm concerned as long as he participates, our conversations leading to a settlement of this case are closed" (B 14–15). Heard's observation on this is that Stevens "didn't relish a skirmish with a mentality that he considered a little bit lower than his" (B 15). In a similar large bond case, Stevens headed it on behalf of his company and lost. "At that time," remembers John Rogers, "Hartford accident and Indemnity was a subsidiary of Hartford Fire, and the president of Hartford Fire was a whipper-snapper. Just coincidentally, the president of Hartford Fire was walking through the hall when Stevens came in the door. Abruptly, without hailing Stevens — this was Bissell's way, he was very abrasive — he said to Stevens, "How did we make out on the case?" Stevens answered him very abruptly, as acidly, back. "We lost the damned case!" And walked right by him to his office." Rogers further comments, "There were very few guys would have done that. No one ever intimidated Wallace Stevens" (B 21). Both these incidents suggest that Stevens did not allow any other to hold an upper hand, did not want to be dominated by others. He knew too well that he was one of the best in the business, and this knowledge could also have helped him behave the way he did.

Stevens' treatment of or attitude towards persons from the field of literature was much the same. A lawyer in the company, Hale Anderson, Jr. recalls having read in Stevens' files his criticism of someone in the field of literature, and describes it as "almost...savage" (B 24). John Ladish, a mailboy cum runner at the company, remembers a striking incident involving the poet Archibald MacLeish's visit to Trinity College:

Odell Shepard was one of the professors over at Trinity; he was having Archibald MacLeish come up. He called Wallace Stevens on the phone and asked if he could bring Archibald out to Mr. Stevens and have a little session. Stevens said, "Well, I don't think you'd better. Tell him when he gets a reputation, I'll be glad to see him." That was when MacLeish was head of the Congressional Library. (B 26)
Stevens himself earned his reputation as a poet very slowly. His jealousy or the air of superiority is apparent here. Richard Sunbury, mailboy in the bond-claims department, once mentioned Edger Guest to Stevens, “and he just looked aside. I guess he was just not interested in Edgar Guest” (B 37). Similarly, he derided some poet from Cornwall as “Just a writer of verses, not poetry” (B 92). There is no denying that Stevens was a very accomplished poet, but what hurt him was the lack of response from readers of poetry during the initial stages, which spanned many more years than one could imagine. Stevens must have been very confident of his ability and views; he was certainly capable of spotting weaknesses and limitations of other writers, and therefore did not really like them. It was perhaps the slowness of reputation or the readers’ lack of response that gave a biting edge to his reaction about other well-known contemporary writers. Once he was established as a major poet the scathing derision gave way to a cautious response. That is the reason perhaps why Manning Heard has a different opinion than many others: “He never said anything which would be that derogatory of anybody’s poetry, but he just said, for instance, that he didn’t like Frost, didn’t like his poetry. But he [never] said anything that was derogatory of anybody’s efforts or their character; he would just say, “I don’t happen to like it” (B 68). In Frost’s case, Stevens knew too well that he had a tremendous reputation and that there was definitely a lot of worth in his poetry; yet, a good reader of poetry would know that Frost’s poetry is more often incidental and does not have as much of a sustained line of thought throughout as Eliot’s poetry has. But, where Eliot’s thought is dominated by religious faith, Stevens’ is secular and the experiences depicted in his poetry are more common and may be experienced by any human being as opposed to the uniqueness of Eliot’s religious experience. This is why, perhaps, Stevens could speak directly to Frost, “The trouble with you is you write about things” (B 160); however, he never said directly that he did not like Eliot, though in fact he did not, as Jose Rodriguez Feo felt from the way Stevens talked to him about Eliot; yet, Stevens did grant that Eliot was a good poet (B 139). The fact that Stevens said to Monroe Wheeler of the Museum of Modern Art in New York that he “didn’t want to be accused of being influenced by [Eliot]” goes to suggest that Stevens might have got something from his knowledge of Eliot and that there might be some influence, if ever so slight (perhaps that of the impersonal element?), that Eliot had on Stevens (B 192). Thus, Stevens’ secret respect for Eliot may be gauged. However, his “caustic tongue” wagged and became the cause of his encounter with the novelist Ernest Hemingway in 1936,
when the novelist was enjoying a lot of popularity and Stevens was not yet popular. Once Stevens was visiting Key West with Judge Arthur Gray Powell, one of the very few close friends of Stevens, when Hemingway also happened to be there. The novelist’s own version of the encounter suggests that “his sister had come away from a Key West cocktail party in tears because Stevens had spoken badly of him. Hemingway then set out to confront Stevens, meeting him just after Stevens had left the party boasting that if Hemingway had been there he would have flattened him with a single blow. Stevens tried to do just that but missed, whereupon Hemingway knocked him down several times. When Stevens finally did manage to land a punch, he broke his hand on Hemingway’s jaw” (B 98). What could have prompted Stevens to speak badly of the novelist? His idea of the post World War I generation as ‘disillusioned’ and ‘lost’? Probably; because Stevens’ motto was to be ‘happy’ (CP 185), his poetry speaks very positively and hopefully of human life. The only problem was that he was yet far away from popularity, unlike Hemingway.

William Carlos Williams had a very different sort of experience with Stevens, who had asked Williams several times “to stop off at Hartford to see him” on his way to the north. Once, when he came to lecture at Hartford, Williams did stop for a night — not at the Stevenses, to his dismay, but “at a nearby hotel” (B 113). A few days before Williams’ visit, Stevens confided to his Cambridge friends Richard and Betty Eberhart how anxious he was about the visit. As Richard remembers, “Mr. Stevens was visibly perturbed because he’d known Williams for a long time [and] he had no way to entertain him. This really aggrieved him. He told me how it was. He asked my advice. ‘What can I do? I can’t have him at my house!’” (B 114). It had to do with Mrs. Stevens who, according to Betty Eberhart, “didn’t want to have people in the house. Wallace felt very bad” (B 114). Who knows whether the Eberharts were not made to believe that the problem was with Elsie? And there is a scope to have this doubt. Elsie might have always “resented anyone’s wanting to know anything about their lives,” she might have been very eccentric, but Stevens was “very much the gentleman about allowing no distemper or rancor to be visible. He very often made it seem to be his shortcoming rather than anything of hers,” says Samuel French Morse (B 157-8). Morse also tells us how Wallace, who didn’t (like to?) travel much apart from the necessary business trips at the start of his career and the later enjoyable trips to the South, refused to go to Paris for a UNESCO meeting of artists and writers “partly by saying Mrs. Stevens was not a good
traveler,” thus perhaps falsely blaming it on Elsie (B 157). Stevens was very good at using the language, and the possibility that he may have made it look like Elsie’s problem while speaking to the Eberharts cannot be dismissed forthwith. Besides, if Elsie had a strong regard for privacy, so did have Stevens, who always kept people at arm’s length. Entertaining someone at the house would have been breaching it. Stevens was a man who neither encroached other people’s privacy nor did allow anyone to encroach his own. It may be that the problem was with himself. Moreover, Williams was an equal — a poet, well known and popular. Besides, the longstanding friendship between the two poets would have made it impossible to be formal during Williams’ probable stay at the Stevenses. And this was something that might have brought the guest closer to what the Hartford poet was hiding so carefully, namely, his castration.

There is one more thing that Stevens tried hard to avoid; that is, talking about his own poems or poetry. James L. D. Kearney, who brought Stevens to Hartford and gave a job, was not only a friend of Stevens but had a taste for literature as well. As John Rogers says, “Kearney was the most literate man I’ve ever known. He held Stevens in very high regard. Kearney was a man who would appreciate a poet;” yet, surprisingly, there was not too much talk about Stevens’ poetry by him (B 19). He either did not understand the poetry well enough or, more probably, he knew Stevens’ reluctance to discuss it with anybody. It could be that Kearney talked to Stevens about it for clues to a better understanding and the poet refused to discuss or was reluctant to. Stevens turned down the request of Hale Anderson, Jr. for clue or key to understanding his poetry very curtly; upon the request, made when the two were walking together, Anderson says, “We walked several paces, and then, with a combination of chuckle and snort, he said, ‘Oh, forget it. You’re much too literal-minded!’ ” (B 23-4). Leslie Tucker once asked Stevens a few things about The Man with the Blue Guitar (CP 165-84), and she met his indifference; she says, “...he wasn’t too anxious to discuss them. He would answer my questions, but in a way that [indicated] he wasn’t interested in talking about it” (B 32). Herbert Schoen the research lawyer also tried something similar and had a similar experience with the poet, who “would discuss the words that he would want to discuss,” but “he would not discuss his poems or poetry” (B 57). Charles O’Dowd, who read Stevens’ correspondence, once told Stevens off, “Mr. Stevens, I just can’t understand your stuff. If I had to choose between you and Robert Service, I would take Robert
Service because I can understand Robert Service;” Stevens’ response was at once genuinely artistic and shrewd:

Chawlie, it isn’t necessary that you understand my poetry or any poetry. It is only necessary that the writer understand it. I’ve got paintings in my house, and I don’t understand. But that isn’t necessary; I think they are very beautiful. What the painter is trying to say, I don’t know. But it isn’t necessary that I understand it; it isn’t necessary for you or anybody else to understand my poetry. I understand it; that’s all that’s necessary.

(B 42-3)

Stevens believed in “pure explication de texte” (Letters 793), leaving the onus of interpretation on the reader; thus, the response is very appropriate. As he himself says in a late poem, he

was glad he had written his poems

and further down says,

It was not important that they survive.

(CP 532)

Yet, the reply to O’Dowd did also help him avoid discussing his poetry.

The Hartford poet never told anybody that he wrote poetry. People knew it from other sources always. Through a company business Stevens got acquainted with Judge Arthur Powell in early 1922 and with whom he enjoyed the closest friendship of his mature years. From the very beginning, their friendship was close and almost informal because of the unreserved frankness of the southerner, who was not “a man with whom you have to take any trouble, because he needs no thawing” (Letters 493). Stevens, who had difficulties in getting acquainted with people and for whom life was an affair of places rather than people (OP 158), very quickly found himself at home with the judge, and traveled with him on a vacation to Long Key as early in their friendship as in January 1923. Although their “acquaintanceship, even from the first, was rather intimate,” yet, says Powell, “until 1927 I did not know he had ever written anything,
other than a business letter or a legal document” (B 103). Even as late as in 1947 when Stevens was being questioned by Jose Rodriguez Feo, who wanted to translate his Esthetique du Mal, Stevens was very cautious, coy, and reserved (B 139). Many others tried to open him up on his poetry with little success. He obviously did not want to make people privy to his poetry. One wonders: what was there in the poetry after all? Not all of the inquisitors of his poetry did not have knowledge of literature; not all of them were like Charles O’Dowd. In fact, Stevens deliberately avoided the men in the literary circles. Brazeau comments that though Stevens did not keep it a secret from his office staff that he was a poet, yet

It was another matter...with men in the field [of literature], with whom Stevens had little personal contact. He was inclined to keep his poetry a secret from these men, many of whom knew him only by mail. In the mid-1920’s, for example, when it was common knowledge among home-office staff that he was a writer, Stevens cautioned a lawyer in the field who had stumbled upon Harmonium “not to speak of his literary efforts among our acquaintances...”

(B 48)

and the reason for that secrecy, as he told the lawyer, was that it might have hurt his business influence — a poor excuse, obviously. When Stevens had begun writing seriously just before the start of World War I and after the deaths of his father and mother, about his writing he cautioned his wife, who was vacationing away from New York in 1913, “Keep all this a great secret” (B 48; Letters 180). However, there were the reactions of the people who read his poetry, that they did not understand it; moreover, though Stevens must have felt aggrieved due to the lack of response to his Harmonium, he might have, ironically, felt relieved that people found his poetry difficult and ununderstandable. He then merely had to try to avoid discussing it with people or giving clues to understanding, which he did. Something there was that loved the wall of obscurity; something there certainly was in the poetry that he did not want to give away, to let others know. It was his personality. “Personality must be kept secret before the world,” he once wrote; there is a solecism in the statement: for it to be grammatically correct, either the word ‘secret’ should be followed by the preposition ‘from’ or the word
should be spelt ‘secretly,’ making it an adverb. And what Wallace tried was both; he tried to keep it secret and also kept it before the world secretly — through the poetry.

To conclude, he was definitely trying to avoid something from letting the others know and his poetry contained or revealed, despite himself, the very thing he was hiding. His poetry contained his castration, his neurosis, which he did not want to reveal. This is precisely why his ways of behavior looked strange; he did not want to be inimical to others, but he had to guard himself somehow; this is the reason why he avoided discussing his poetry. He might have explained some things from his poetry to some people like Jose Rodriguez Feo or Latimer, but he either explained those things where he did not have to reveal his secret or explained them in a way that would accomplish the purpose of secrecy. Much of his poetry deals with his own reality, his ‘problem’ and his struggle to overcome it, and the experiences thereof; hence Frank Jones’ feeling that Stevens “was trying to come to grips with the so-called actual world, the real world” (B 124); and the loss of reality is very much caused by some mental disorder. After all,

Everything comes to him
From the middle of his field.

..............

................There as he is
He is.

(CP 237)

As what was he? Or, to return to the question posed at the beginning of this chapter, who is the subject that Stevens writes about in the poetry? The rest of the study will try to find an answer to it, but not conclusively though, for his poetry might be described thus:

Usually this is music without a subject
(emphasis mine; NA 120)