7. CONCLUSION

An understanding of the personality behind a work looks an old-fashioned idea — rather, it is no less than a literary crime or even sin in view of the contemporary literary scenario; the psychoanalytic approach is feared to commit it. The attempt to bring psychoanalytic theories in to read and interpret literary works is not new to students of literature. However, there is a general scarcity of such attempts, most probably owing to the threat of becoming author-centered; the threat looms ever large especially in this age of disbelief in the author’s life or existence insofar as reading of literature is concerned. This study of Stevens, however, believes that the ‘death of the author’ is an extremist belief. At the same time, though, it does not attempt to restore the place of the so-called ‘author-god’ as such. Let it be said that it tries to seek a mean between the ‘death of the author’ and the ‘place of the reader.’ It seemed necessary and worthwhile to make such an attempt since the belief in the author’s death tends to forget, after all is said, that the reader is still at the mercy of the language-as-Other that he follows as he reads, that there is no reader without the writing, that whatever his responses, they are ultimately governed by the suzerain language that he reads, that the author “speaks” both “By sight and insight” (CP 473), that the language of a work one reads is peculiar in the sense in which it combines the various codes, elements, or discourses of a language. Thus, while it was necessary to read Stevens’ poetry ‘practically,’ it seemed no less important to observe the peculiarity of its language, the way it combines various codes of the English language, and to account for the peculiarity.

The present research entertains the hypothesis that the peculiarity of Stevens’ language stems from his neurosis, that his poetry is the incarnation and revelation thereof. Thus it began with the assumption that our knowledge about Stevens’ personal life, that he was a neurotic, and our understanding of Lacan’s thought and theory, as a contemporary thinker and psychoanalyst, can help resolve to a considerable extent the obscurity inherent in Stevens’ poetry. After having critically analyzed a number of Stevens’ poems from this point of view, the study has arrived at the conclusion that the
assumption has proved to be true. This study, therefore, is an attempt to vindicate that the obscurity in Stevens’ poetry has resulted from his neurosis, and that our understanding of the reasons of his mental crisis, aided by our knowledge of Lacan’s thought and theory, certainly enhance our comprehension of Stevens’ poetry and poetics.

The study also attempts to show his struggle to overcome his crisis through a reading of his works. It hopes that all this has been adequately supported, elucidated, and confirmed through a practical reading of the poet while availing of Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory. This study is not only a reading of a literary work but also a foray into evaluating it apropos of one of the post-modern theories that decenter and divide. The research is interdisciplinary but, more importantly, it is an applied research in the sense that it shows how Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory, or Lacanalyse, can be fruitfully used for the diagnosis of a psychoanalytic patient’s crisis as reflected in his discourse. Besides, a very few attempts like this have been made — in fact, insofar as recent book length psychoanalytic studies of a single author are concerned, the only attempt that comes to mind is that of Jacqueline Rose, who has successfully approached Sylvia Plath’s works. Rose, however, does not conform herself to any one psychoanalytic thinker or model, whereas this study uses only Lacan — not simply believing him to be the most significant of all (Freud excepted of course) but, apart from reasons of space, to avoid the stuffing of the study with different theories and thoughts so as to be able to focus more on Stevens’ writing and thought — which I believe are more close to those of Lacan than to anybody else’s — with a view to accomplishing the aim of reading Stevens and place his work in a more appropriate context.

As stated at the beginning of the final chapter, ‘Apogee,’ the study leaves the question of Stevens’ recovery or cure open-ended; this is the reason why the poems discussed in the chapter are discussed in the order in which they appear in Collected Poems. For the same reason, the chapter ‘Bits of Blue’ is not immediately followed by ‘Rubbings of Reality,’ which would have been coherent and logical. All this is done to undermine any conclusiveness or closure that both Stevens and Lacan defy through their work. However, since the present study has come to its conclusion, the temptation to compare Stevens and Hamlet could not be resisted, for, from Lacanian perspective, the crises of both are similar if not identical.

In many of his poems Stevens speaks of the phallus; the word is not directly mentioned as such, but while the metaphors and imagery in some such poems are highly
there is the mention in certain other poems of a “syllable” or “alphabet” that is “fusky” or “without meaning.” All these poems reveal his desire for ‘it.’ This is what Hamlet bears out until the very end. Both realize that they lack/desire ‘it.’ Hamlet, however, is more keen on having the phallus; his endeavor is constantly directed towards striking ‘it.’ In Lacan’s view, having or being the phallus is not possible, but one gets that feeling through its ‘dialectization’ since it is a signifier per se. While Stevens shows the awareness that it is a signifier, Hamlet’s attempts at striking it reveal it as entertaining the status of a thing in his fantasy. In other words, the Shakespearean hero seeks it as imaginary object (-Φ), which in fact does not exist but ‘ex-sists’ since it belongs in the real order. There is one common element in both the cases nonetheless: the phallus goes with the father as he vanishes into the field of the Other, from where he cannot return.

There is a difference in the treatment of the phallus in Stevens and Shakespeare’s play. Hamlet does not seem to elevate it to sublimity; his desire to strike it keeps suggesting that he feels much closer to ‘it;’ all his acts suggest that, in his view, his mother and Claudius, the stepfather, have had the phallus when they killed his father, that they purloined it, and that he must retrieve it. This is the reason why he cannot distinguish between Claudius and the phallus, and keeps procrastinating his decision of killing the stepfather lest it should vanish once again. It is only after he is able to distinguish between the two (“The body is with the King, but the King is not with the body” [Act IV, Sc. ii]) that he is really prepared to kill Claudius. And yet, his thinking that he must kill Claudius in order to retrieve the phallus suggests that it is not really a separation, that ‘it’ is still the imaginary object of desire for him. In this way, he is constantly in the vicinity (biologically, one might say) of the phallus; his acts like striking behind the arras and, after thus killing Polonius, saying, “I took thee thy better” (meaning, I thought you to be Claudius/phallus; [Act III, Sc iv]), support this view. Stevens’ situation is different in that there was no one to make him feel in the vicinity of the phallus. Its repression into his unconscious seems to border on its foreclosure. This almost turns it into a mythical object of desire for him; its radical otherness with reference to him is the cause of the imagery that sublimes it and makes into a “sacred syllable” (CP 530). This would mean that Hamlet’s situation is less ‘grave’ than that of Stevens. Yet, the intensity of Hamlet’s search or desire for it is greater; his feeling of being in its vicinity sends him on a mad pursuit and makes him take to impracticable
ways in order to strike it. This literally sends him to his grave. On the contrary, its almost foreclosure in Stevens’ case seems to have saved his life.

Although Stevens realizes toward the end of section I of “Prologues to What Is Possible” (CP 515-17) that the phallus is the prologue to making the impossible possible, yet poems like *The Rock* compel to think that the poet was really interested in the (m)/Other, which seems to have remained his ultimate desire, unlike Hamlet. This could be the reason why, after all his life-long resistance to ‘god’ and religious faith, he embraced the austere Catholic God as he became a Catholic; if not the (m)Other, he hoped to seek the God as the Other of his desire, thus filling the (m)Other’s lack with the Catholic God. From Lacanian perspective, this is suggestive of feminine structural position and potential, for this is abandoning the phallic pleasure in favor of the Other jouissance. Studying Stevens’ poetry from the viewpoint of feminist poetics might yield rich results; this possibility is supported by Melita Schaum’s attempt at collecting articles on the feminine in Stevens’ poetry. In this sense, the poet’s abandoning of masculinity may lead to speculations that Hamlet was better ‘placed’ in the social structure of sexual identity. However, this is forgetting that Stevens protected his virility by identifying himself with feminine, that Hamlet remained impotent insofar as his desire for the phallus remained unrealized. Ultimately, what matters is one’s virility, the ability to create; this is the real that one must never fail to desire. The sexual identities are symbolic, secondary, perhaps socio-politically motivated (Grosz 121), and therefore not real. Thus, it does not matter whether Stevens recovered or not; it was important that he could create:

Ariel was glad he had written his poems.

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It was not important that they survive.
What mattered was that they should bear
Some lineament or character,

Some affluence, if only half-perceived,
In the poverty of their words,
Of the planet of which they were part.

(CP 533)
The phallic signifier, having been radically repressed into the unconscious, which as Lacan says is the discourse of the Other, it is in this Other of speech that “the [neurotic] subject locates himself and recognizes himself” (Seminar III 162). The discourse between the neurotic or psychotic subject and his Other is one that “is essentially directed at something for which we have no other term than being” (Seminar III 138). Stevens’ poetry reflects the desire to locate and recognize himself in the Other; at times, it also shows the fear of being disowned by the Other, for it is the relationship with the Other that sustains the psychic subject at the level of being. “And what, therefore, could be the subject’s noumenal being,” Moustafa Safouan asks, “if not that aspect of the same body which remains invisible to the subject?” (FS 134). Stevens kept moving toward his noumenal being as he sought the “wholly other” (OP 237) Other towards the end of his poetic career and life, thus belying Baird’s view that “Wordsworth’s energy flows toward a Kantian noumenon. That of Stevens remains within [his] sense of the physical world” (xiv). Stevens, at best, uses his sense of the physical to approach his noumenal being. To conclude, it may be reiterated that it does not matter whether he recovered or did not insofar as he was able to sustain, even intensify, his dialogic relationship with the Other, “Within its vital boundary, in the mind,” “In which being there together [was] enough” and where he experienced “the intensest rendezvous” with his being (CP 524).