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Death and Pleasure in Wallace Stevens' 'The Emperor of Ice-Cream'

by Thomas Dilworth

I scream, you scream, we all scream for ice cream.

—Tom Sacks, 1928

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Abstract: Unconcerned with preparations for a wake or funeral, 'The Emperor of Ice-Cream' is a general statement about life and in particular pleasure, which the speaker enthusiastically endorses and celebrates in stanza one. A pervasive motif of contained pleasureables and the presence of a corpse in stanza two support the speaker's implication that pleasure sometimes deviates from morality and sanity.

'The Emperor of Ice-Cream' is Wallace Stevens's most widely read (Beckett 79), best loved, most famously playful poem. Complex and riddle-like, it is art as Walter Pater describes it in 1877, 'always striving to be independent of the mere intelligence, to become a matter of pure perception' in a union of 'form and matter ... a condition which music alone completely realizes' (57). 'Always striving' implies that it never fully attains such independence. In this regard, Wallace Stevens follows Pater in saying that poetry 'must resist the intelligence / Almost successfully' (*Collected* 306). The form of 'The Emperor of Ice-Cream' involves the contrast, noted by many interpreters, between enthusiasm in the first stanza and cold realism in the second stanza, and it involves a good deal more. As Paul Valéry writes, 'the play of figures' in a poem 'contain[s] the reality of the subject' (192). In this poem, a shifting network of images achieves a complex articulation concerning pleasure, which is its primary subject. Interpreting the poem requires questioning with radical openness the meaning of 'ice-cream' and therefore of its

‘emperor’. Play in the poem includes unusual mind-teasing implications—some of them morally and emotionally uncomfortable—that have not previously been considered. Primary among these is the apparent contrast between what Sigmund Freud, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), calls Eros (or the pleasure principle or life instincts) and the death instinct. In implied reader response, the poem approximates Freud’s confusion about these and anticipates their synthesis in his later work and in post-Freudian consensus about the all-encompassing scope of eros.

Relationships between the reader of the poem, the speaker of the poem, and the figure of the emperor of ice-cream are complex and vexed. The sympathies of most readers are engaged in the first stanza but alienated in the second. As their response to the speaker becomes emotionally problematic, so does ethical reaction to the emperor of ice-cream. Faced with the uncomfortable choice of whether to accept what the speaker implies about the emperor, the reader must reach some conclusion about the meaning of the emperor, who is the key to the riddle that is the poem.

Determining the full significance of the emperor are two interwoven motifs, one dominant, the other subordinate. Unmentioned in prior interpretations of the poem, the dominant motif involves pleasurable contents within containers. This motif pervades both stanzas, helping to unify the poem. It establishes a theme that is at once hedonistic and epistemological. Some connotations of imagery and language are sexual and comprise the subordinate motif, which suggests sexual perversion. Hedonistic connotations are prevalent in the first stanza and subordinate in the second, where they remain as a subtext suggesting disquieting continuity between eros and thanatos, pleasure and death.

Similar disquiet, also arising from tension between Eros and Thanatos, troubles Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which was first published in English translation in 1922. Correspondence between his book and Stevens’ poem may not be coincidental, since Freud’s ideas were the subject of general intelligent conversation in the 1920s. We know that Stevens thought highly of Freud and that he read the 1928 English edition of Freud’s *The Future of an Illusion*.¹ In the late 1930s in a lecture on ‘The Irrational Element in Poetry’, he praises Freud as ‘one of the great figures in the world’ (*Collected* 783). In ‘Mountains Covered with Cats’ (1946), he writes, ‘Freud’s eye was the microscope of potency’, and his ghost now understands about the dead, ‘how truly they had not been what they were’ (*Collected* 319).

‘The Emperor of Ice-Cream’ was first published in *The Dial* in July 1922, so probably written before he could have read the English translation of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, if he

ever did. Yet he may have known its thesis and basic concepts, since it had been published in German two years earlier. In any event, Stevens deals with the same problem as Freud in that book and with greater subtlety and psychological insight.

Stevens critics like to read 'The Emperor of Ice-Cream' as a rollicking celebration of innocent all-American fun alternating with phenomenological exhortations which, while not enhancing pleasure, diminish or preclude pain. That is the conventional reading of the poem and a good one but, I think, incomplete. We shall see that the poem contains daring implications of erotic perversion that need to be addressed if the poem is to be more fully understood and appreciated.

The kinds and variety of the poem's images suggest that the concern of the speaker of the poem is not, as usually assumed, funeral preparations but life in general, about which he initially adopts the attitude of an impresario.² The main difficulty with the funerary assumption is that it renders incongruous the speaker's happy enthusiasm in stanza one. There are several other reasons to think that the speaker is not concerned with a wake or funeral. In stanza two he orders that a sheet be spread over the corpse 'so as to cover her face' (*Collected* 5), which suggests that the death occurred or was discovered only moments before. Covering the face is the first act conventionally done to a corpse (after maybe closing its eyes) and certainly precedes the making of funeral arrangements. Moreover, for a wake, the corpse is not covered with a sheet but dressed usually in the deceased's Sunday best. Nor usually is the face covered. It is doubtful, furthermore, whether flowers are brought even to working-class wakes or funerals in old newspapers. 'Wenches' attend wakes and funerals in their best dresses, moreover, not in 'such ... / As they are used to wear' (lines 6, 5). Encouraging or celebrating all these aspects of a wake or funeral would hardly precede the covering of the dead person's face. What the speaker envisions is, therefore, probably not a wake or funeral.

Stevens may have had no particular setting in mind, since the poem was, he writes, 'an instance of letting myself go' (*Letters* 293). In its process of composition, it resembled automatic writing and may, therefore, have been composed largely by his subconscious. Automatic writing is the solitary, literary equivalent of Freudian free association and a means to achieving artistic spontaneity. If the action of the poem is not funeral preparation, it is part celebration of life and part simple statement about life as involving, among other things, wenches in ordinary dresses,

boys bringing flowers, plain wooden dressers, embroidered sheets, and a corpse. This last is a bit of a shock, but the inclusive, representative variety of items implies the whole of life.

That variety extends to the tonal difference between the two stanzas. In the first, language is exuberant, rhythm and imagery are vital, and tone and content harmonize. The speaker seems enthusiastically to initiate acts of vitality and approve expressions of desire. According to Stuart Silverman, he (the voice seems to be male) displays the crass enthusiasm of a circus-barker (168). In the second stanza, the primary subject is a woman's corpse. Tone ceases to be exuberant and becomes, instead, restrained, imperative, matter of fact. Here are the two stanzas:

Call the roller of big cigars,
The muscular one, and bid him whip
In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.
Let the wenches dawdle in such dress
As they are used to wear, and let the boys
Bring flowers in last month's newspapers.
Let be be finale of seem.
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

Take from the dresser of deal,
Lacking the three glass knobs, that sheet
On which she embroidered fantails once
And spread it so as to cover her face.
If her horny feet protrude, they come
To show how cold she is, and dumb.
Let the lamp affix its beam.
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream. (*Collected* 50)

The discrepancy between subjects and the unsympathetic tone in the second stanza constitute the initial interpretive challenge of the poem.

In the first stanza, the speaker repeatedly uses the hortatory verb form: 'Let the wenches dawdle / ... let the boys / Bring / Let be be,' and in the second stanza, 'Let the lamp affix its beam.' These soft imperatives establish rhetorical affinity with the biblical God, who nine times creates by means of hortatory injunction: 'Let there be light Let there be a firmament Let the earth bring forth grass Let there be lights in the firmament,' etc. (Genesis 1:3-26). Both the speaker in the poem and God at the opening of Genesis are concerned with light. Emphasized by the biblical echoing, the power of the speaker is, however, largely illusory.

Whether or not he commands that the roller of big cigars be called to do something he would not otherwise do, the speaker is certainly saying ‘Let the wenches’ and ‘the boys’ do what they already do and would do anyway. John Dolan has noted this ‘lack of power over the event’ on the part of the speaker (215). Rather than exercising agency, he is indulging in celebratory approval. The evocation of archetypal creative power ultimately suggests that power in this poem is a mere figment, something no sooner implied than shown to be irrelevant or illusory. The God of creative power may initially appear to be the speaker’s underlying archetype, but it is an archetype denied. This is borne out as we go on to discover that the emperor (of whom the speaker seems to approve in stanza one) is not a doer or maker but solely an enjoyer, and the speaker is not a doer or a maker but a mere knower.

At the conclusion of the first stanza, the speaker adds, ‘The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.’ What precisely the emperor symbolizes has been a matter of considerable debate, which during his lifetime Stevens declined to adjudicate. When informed that the emperor in his poem was interpreted by some as life and by others as death, he (to quote Richard Ellmann) said, in effect, “So much the better!” and refused to choose between them—not that the emperor must be identified as or aligned with either life or death or, as Ellmann argues, a combination of both (93). The meaning of the figure of the emperor is determined by context, especially the phrase identifying him. The word ‘emperor’ connotes neither life nor death but power or dominion. Having power over ice-cream initially makes little if any apparent sense. The phrase ‘the emperor of ice-cream’ is an oxymoron. The power you can have over ice-cream is to consume it or not, to let it melt and go bad or not. In other words, you can only enjoy it or not. The initial imputation of power is nearly illusory, like that of the speaker in comparison to the creative power of God in Genesis. Occurring at the end of the first stanza, which celebrates pleasurable vitality, ice-cream is the paradigm of pleasure. In the phrase ‘the emperor of ice-cream’, pleasure eclipses power. Dominion becomes appetite or enjoyment, and the emperor becomes a representative embodiment and symbol of hedonism.

As such he is antithetical to the biblical archetype of power: the emperor represents unrestricted pleasure while the biblical God arguably restricts pleasure by designating forbidden fruit growing on the Tree of Knowledge. As an enjoyer, the emperor seems aligned with the speaker as knower in denying the biblical archetype of creative power.

Moreover, because ice cream has been a treat available to virtually anyone in the USA, it is symbolic of democratic happiness, which Americans have a constitutional right to pursue. From 1921, the year before the poem was first published, ice cream was served to all immigrants to the United States upon arrival at Ellis Island. (During the Second World War, the Japanese discouraged the eating of ice cream as betraying pro-American sympathies.) The final statement of the first stanza, and subsequently of the poem, seems therefore to contradict or at least radically to modify evocations of divine power and imperialism by replacing the supremacy of individual power with universally accessible pleasure. Ice cream reduces imperialism to egalitarianism. The emperor of ice cream is anyone experiencing pleasure, including a child engrossed in one of the most pleasurable experiences of childhood. The speaker seems to approve, and so probably does the reader, eager to celebrate and enjoy life.

In the first stanza, the speaker's tone—his enthusiasm and playful alliteration—generates the atmosphere of an arcade, which is the modern debasement of Arcadia. The association with Arcadia was made by Maureen Kravec (8), who reads the poem in the context of Renaissance Arcadian literature. But the Arcadian evocation is, I think, primarily to a theme in historical Western painting, with which Stevens was, of course, familiar. The corpse in the second stanza corresponds to the skull present in the corner of Renaissance paintings of an otherwise idyllic scene to express the motif *et in Arcadia ego*, the words of Death: 'Here I am, even in Arcadia.' Conventionally, this topos alters appreciation of the idyllic scene. The corpse in the second stanza certainly does this, although it is not, like skulls in such paintings, small and peripheral but occupies four of its eight lines. In response to the new, cadaverous content, the speaker's tone in this stanza seems incongruous. Although no longer exuberant, he seems emotionally detached.

In stanza one, the speaker combines enthusiasm for life with matter-of-fact realism. In stanza two he becomes solely a matter-of-fact realist. In Freudian terms, the 'reality principle' entirely displaces the 'pleasure principle'.³ The detached tone in the second stanza seems continuous with that of the anomalous penultimate line in the otherwise rollicking first stanza: 'Let be be finale of seem.' The line means, 'Accept appearance as the whole of reality.' Even in this line, however, 'seem'ing or appearance is influenced by what Carmen Ludowyk calls 'fanfare', for as Milton Bates points out, 'finale' is from the vocabulary of 'theatrical or musical performance' (23). The repetition of 'be' is awkward and therefore slightly playful. In the

penultimate line of stanza two, the speaker makes a corresponding statement at first glance utterly devoid of fanfare or fun: ‘Let the lamp affix its beam’ (line 15). The line implies awareness that some, perhaps most, would prefer not to see the corpse but to keep it in the dark, out of sight, out of mind. (In this regard, he anticipates what has been general reader response to the poem.) The injunction is linked to its counterpart in stanza one not only by parallel placement but by verbal high jinks, albeit only at the syllabic level. The doubling of the ontological verb in line seven (‘be be’) is echoed in line fifteen in the word ‘beam’, a joining of ‘be’ and ‘am’, the latter also present in the word ‘*lamp*’ (my italics).⁴ But in context here, the speaker insists that we look at what many would rather not see. This, his final injunction, would be a good motto for interpreting the poem.

Confirming the meaning of line seven (‘Let be be finale of seem’), in stanza two the speaker implies that appearance—‘how cold she is, and dumb’ (line 14)—is all there is. (His peculiarly specific descriptive references—to month-old newspapers, the missing ‘three glass knobs’, and ‘horny feet’—serve to emphasize appearance/reality in its specificity.) Accept what you see, he implies, without grief, anxiety, disgust, or any further thought.. Freud writes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, ‘Most of the unpleasure that we experience is *perceptual* unpleasure’ (111). As if in agreement with Freud, the realist-speaker urges a purified stoical perception. He wants us to accept all appearances, even that of death, as merely real and not as eliciting subjective responses such as grief or regret. As we shall see, discouraged ‘perceptual’ reactions may also include moral response.

The sympathy of the reader with the speaker changes. Most if not all readers would endorse the implied preference for pleasure over power in stanza one, but readers tend to fall out of sympathy with the speaker in stanza two—as generations of critics have attested (Dolan 209, Vendler 52). Upon realizing that ‘she’ in line 11 is a corpse, the reader may feel a degree of surprise, sympathy, regret, or even fear or disgust, or expect at least some indication of some such feeling from the speaker, who has known the woman or known about her. Moreover, she had a life that was to some degree creative: ‘she embroidered fantails once’ (line 11). But the speaker expresses no sympathy, no regret. One critic calls him callous (Naasser 129). Another blames him for ignoring human anguish (Halliday 37). Moreover, implicitly telling the reader (in lines 7 and 15) ‘accept appearances and do not wonder, analyze, or feel beyond the limits of pure sensation’ is a little like urging, ‘do not think of an elephant’, which ensures that the hearer

cannot but think of an elephant. To say 'Let be be finale of seem' may paradoxically invite the very wondering and emotion it urge against. Why is the speaker so uncaring? Why is emotional—and even (as we shall see) perhaps moral—response forbidden? One answer is that he remains aligned with the emperor as embodiment of the pleasure principle to this extent, that what he advises prevents displeasure. Yet his injunction has for many the opposite effect since, by the end of the poem, they are inclined to adopt, instead of the speaker's point of view, that of a person who feels poignancy in the face of death, who regrets mortality, or who expects some sorrow for a woman's death.

For such readers the final line of the poem is problematic. Reacting negatively to the apparent heartlessness of the speaker in the second stanza, these readers would probably regard the refrain as insensitive or emotionally shallow and harsh. If the 'only emperor' is 'the emperor of ice-cream', in the presence of death anyone with feelings or personal attachments would hardly honour, respect, or wish to be or be associated with such an emperor. Or the suggestion that pleasure replaces power may seem ironic, since death ends pleasure.

But the speaker is urging the reader against precisely such negative reactions. He is saying that death merely produces a corpse that should simply be seen clearly as that. His point of view changed, he no longer expresses the apparent enthusiasm of the first stanza. But in stanza two he neither endorses nor contradicts hedonism, and it may be unfair to call him callous. The realism he urges requires a degree of concentrated awareness of the sort advocated by Eastern religions, an awareness that only 'the now' is real, that there is no truth or reality in what was but is no more: to regret absence or loss is to wallow in illusion and to indulge in the emotional equivalent of attempting to exercise power over mortal life, which is ephemeral, like ice-cream. The speaker seems to say that the only honest response to reality, including corpses, is to accept it apathetically or with detachment and equanimity. As we shall see, he is also challenging the reader to accept with equanimity the possibility of more than mere death.

At the end of stanza two, what does the repetition of the refrain mean? How does it correspond to the principle of acceptance of appearances as reality without negative response? If instead of reacting, the reader can join the speaker in stoic realism, then the repeated statement is not ironic: the only power is in enjoyment, i.e., power is replaced by, or is merely a means to, enjoyment. That is what he means, although in saying so he also asserts and demonstrates the alternative value of awareness. In this respect, the speaker is a foil to the emperor of ice-cream,

though the latter is a symbol rather than a character. What then is the relationship between the realism of the speaker and the hedonism symbolized by the emperor?

In the context of the speaker's insistent realism, the title of the poem and the declaration that concludes both stanzas may recall 'The Emperor's New Clothes', a cautionary tale against pretending to see what you do not actually see. The fairytale has not previously been considered in relation to the poem—despite a chapter in *Teaching Wallace Stevens* entitled "'The Emperor' and Its Clothes," which concerns only the 'costume' of the imagery in the poem (Bates 24). As though agreeing with the moral of the famous fairytale, the speaker in the poem advocates sensation without interpretation. If in the first stanza he seems to advocate enjoyment of experience and, through his choice of words, to indulge in revelry; he also urges acceptance of semblance as the whole of reality (line 7). Now in stanza two, he forgoes enjoyment but once again urges realistic awareness: let the corpse be seen neither sentimentally nor, as Lucy Beckett asserts that he sees it, cynically (79), but clearly and merely as a fact of life (line 15). In the fairytale, it is the emperor who is finally seen as he actually is, naked. So here the challenge may be to see or understand what the emperor of ice-cream really is. What does it mean to be the archetype of hedonism? To fully appreciate the emperor, let us look more loosely at the imagery that is a large part of his determining context.

Most of the imagery of this poem contributes to a thoroughgoing motif of contents within containers. Although not previously considered by interpreters, this is a formal aspect of the poem with important thematic implications. The motif occupies most of the first stanza. The 'roller of big cigars' (line 1) probably makes cigars by wrapping in tobacco leaves the inner column of shredded tobacco. Some see 'the roller' as a smoker rolling his cigar between thumb and fingers before and while smoking (Baird 249), but idiomatically that would be a 'smoker', not a 'roller'. He whips 'cuds' 'in kitchen cups' (line 3). If we take the word 'curds' literally, his activity makes no sense. Curds are presumably dairy, however, and therefore related in essential substance to ice-cream. If 'curds' can be taken as a metaphor for ice-cream lumps, he may be asked to whip lumpy ice-cream into soft ice-cream, a gratuitous act and unusual, although most of us have done it. He cannot, however, be about to make ice-cream or, as some suggest, milkshakes (Baird 249, Neill 89), since neither can be made in 'kitchen cups', which are presumably tea or coffee cups. Whatever he is to whip, it may be enough to see the act as energetic and the result as edibly enjoyable. 'Wenches' are in 'such dress / As they are used to

wear' (line 5), which means—in the year of first publication of the poem—ordinary neck-to-calf-length dresses. Boys bring flowers in 'last month's newspapers' (line 6)—which in being so far out of date have no purpose other than to wrap flowers. (These together with the word 'wenches' suggest that the setting and its occupants, though perhaps not the speaker, are working class.) In each instance the materiality contained substance—tobacco, curds, wenches, and flowers—as an object of pleasure. The momentum of this motif implies that wenches, too, are pleasurable. In each instance except that of the cigar, the containers are merely useful—kitchen cups, ordinary dresses, old newspapers)—contrasting in this respect with their pleasurable contents. The last line of the stanza establishes ice-cream as the paradigm and subsuming symbol of all the preceding sources of pleasure. It is also significant that none of this containing is complete, that in every instance the contained substance, objects, or object is partly visible and, by implication, accessible.

The motif of content in containers continues in the second stanza but with important changes. The 'dresser' (line 9, echoing the 'dress' of the wenches) contains a sheet embroidered with 'fantails' along the top edge (line 1), where they would show on a bed above a blanket or bedspread. (This sheet is the only content entirely contained, if and when the dresser drawer is closed.) Having symbolically subsumed cigars, flowers, and wenches, ice-cream now also includes the sheet—which is white, as all bedsheets then were. If the commodities and the wenches of stanza one give pleasure, so does the sheet, even though its pleasure in this instance is aesthetic rather than merely sensory. The motif of containers-and-contents goes on to include the sheet almost wholly covering, and in that sense containing, the corpse—apparently the sheet is too short to cover her face and feet at once. The motif implies that ice-cream, which is almost always contained (by cartons, cups, bowls, and cones) and which symbolically incorporates the other contained pleasurable, also symbolically subsumes the woman's corpse. However odd and unappetizing, the implication is that 'she, too, gives pleasure. The corpse especially corresponds to ice-cream because, as Ellmann first noted, it is cold (line 14) like ice-cream (94). More than anything else in the poem, except possibly the 'curds', the corpse when covered by the white sheet resembles vanilla ice-cream, and a huge portion at that. The hedonistic motif that dominates stanza one survives in stanza two, therefore, as an implied subtext. As in the first stanza, the motif culminates in the figure of the emperor of ice-cream.

Unlike ice-cream, the corpse is probably not pleasurable for the reader, who may feel revulsion at the idea of a pleasurable corpse. Neither is it pleasurable for the speaker of the poem. As a realist, he is merely calling a corpse a corpse and symbolically (through the motif of incomplete containment) designating it as a potential source of pleasure. In the second stanza, he is no longer celebrating pleasure. Instead, he is expressing 'the whole truth' about pleasure by implying that its scope includes perverse erotic pleasures. Neither would it make sense to say that the emperor enjoys corpses. He is not a living agent but a symbol. The emperor does, however, represent uninhibited taking of pleasure of any sort, and while this undoubtedly includes all innocent pleasures, erotic or other, it must also include pleasure that most of us would consider immoral or unnatural. This is simply to say that the speaker insists not merely on only knowing (without imposing response or meaning) but on knowing as much as possible, including aspects of reality that may be objectionable. In the second stanza, the point of view of the speaker differs from the significance of the emperor. What the speaker does (he knows) and what the emperor signifies (enjoyment) are distinct from one another, although they are not oppositional. Instead, one contains the other: what the speaker knows and urges us to know largely includes enjoyment as its object.

The speaker's knowing and his phenomenological imperative may, furthermore, be affirmed by the motif of containers and incomplete containing, which seems to imply a pun on comprehension as being always incomplete. 'To comprehend' means, first of all, to know and secondly 'to contain, to embrace, to include', so seeing is the way of comprehending, and in that sense containing, the real. And so incomplete comprehension implies containing or acknowledging not all of reality, which is impossible, but as much of it as possible..

The inclusion of perversion within the scope of pleasure might seem too much to claim as a topic of the poem. It would be if based solely on the motif of incompletely contained objects of pleasure. But there is also a good deal of sexual vocabulary in the poem. The alignment of the corpse with the other sources of pleasure, especially ice-cream as symbol of all pleasurable commodities, is emphasized and sexualized by two nearly synonymous modifiers, which establish a verbal correspondence between 'concupiscent curds' (line 3) and 'horny feet' (line 13). 'Concupiscent' curds is oddly inappropriate and so ought to draw attention to itself, but its correspondence with 'horny' feet has gone unnoticed because the word 'horny' is sufficiently employed in (and therefore camouflaged by) denoting callused skin and/or age-thickened

toenails. Moreover, to most readers, if not to the speaker or the emperor, sexual ‘horny’ness in this context would be repugnant. Owing to centuries of colloquial usage, however, ‘horny’ does connote lust and in that sense echoes ‘concupiscent’ even though that word denotes a wider range of desire. The feet of a corpse cannot be sexually horny, of course, but neither can curds really be concupiscent. ‘Concupiscent curds’ is a metaphor in which attribution is reversed: the curds are actually desirable, not desiring. Correspondence with ‘horny feet’ implies that the corpse or, more precisely its feet are also desirable, in this instance, sexually. The implication operates as part of the subtext of the second stanza.

The word ‘come’ (line 13) is idiomatically inappropriate and, like ‘concupiscent’, calls attention to itself. The adjectives ‘concupiscent’ and ‘horny’ and the verb ‘come’ extend sexual innuendo already well under way in ‘the muscular one’ who rolls phallic ‘big cigars’ and ‘whip’s, in the wenches who dawdle, and in the boys who bring flowers probably to the wenches. Silverman notices the sexual connotations of ‘horny’ and ‘come’ but, uncertain about how they contribute to the poem, writes only that they ‘emphasize the final silence of the body’ (167). We have seen that they do more than that. The addition to this sexual motif of a woman’s corpse may imply necrophilia, and the focus on its feet may imply fetishism; there is no reason to exclude this from the range of possible pleasures. In the Old Testament, furthermore, feet are euphemistic for genitals. This poem is not the Old Testament, of course, and all the sexual connotations in the poem may imply no more than the underlying erotic nature of even apparently non-sexual pleasures—but then the relation of the corpse to pleasure is thrown wide open. The point is that anything that may be construed as pleasurable to someone falls within the domain of the emperor. To him it is all ice-cream. As such, it is also within the domain of the speaker, whose business is to know about it. In combination with the sexually charged vocabulary in the poem, the motif of contained pleasurable implies that pleasure is sometimes erotic and that a source of pleasure may be a woman’s death or her corpse. This, implicitly, the speaker knows.

The perverse extremes of hedonistic possibility are disquieting to most readers, as they may be also to Stevens critics, since they have declined even to acknowledge them. The reader may prefer innocent, emotionally healthy pleasures, but pleasure and goodness and mental health belong to three distinct categories of meaning, which do not always coincide—some pleasures being immoral or deviant. In their discomfort, readers resemble Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure*

Principle, who announces that his view is ‘*dualistic*’ (53) and that he cannot reconcile the pleasure principle with the death instinct, even when the later is outward-directed, i.e., cruel or sadistic (53). Just as Freud wished to separate life-affirming pleasure and perverse behaviour, most readers personally abhor perversion. Abhorrence may influence interpretation, as it evidently has with this poem, but remember, we are reading, not expressing sexual or moral preferences.

An important element of the sexual motif that supports the inclusion of erotic perversity as a possible pleasure is the embroidery on the sheet. ‘Fantails’ can only refer to fantail pigeons—the word has no other meaning. These birds are usually seen by interpreters of the poems neutrally ornamental, but in relation to art, to the (former) woman, and to the bed, they evoke the doves of Aphrodite. The designations ‘pigeon’ and ‘dove’ are interchangeable because they belong to the same order of birds. Shakespeare writes of ‘Venus’ pigeons’ (*Merchant of Venice* II vi 5). Oliver Wendell Holmes writes of Venus,

The lady of a thousand loves,
The darling of the old religion,
Had only left of all the doves
That drew her car one fan-tailed, pigeon. (238)

Sexual love or hope for sexual love in the embroiderer may account for the fantailed pigeons on the bedsheet. Instead of, or in addition to, sexual love, she received death, symbolically related in the Renaissance to ‘the little death’ of orgasm. So the evocation of the goddess of love is ironic, but the irony may extend to erotic desire sometimes being perverse. The only critic to have noticed the evocation of the doves of Aphrodite is James Baird, and maybe his sense of its significance is not as outlandish as it seems. He writes that the dead woman is Venus (250). Insofar as she felt erotic desire when alive, or her living body was, or her corpse is, an object of sexual desire, her underlying archetype is inevitably Venus.

At the end of the poem, ice-cream must be one of two things: 1) literally ice-cream, or 2) everything and anything that is enjoyable. The latter is more likely. Otherwise the poem loses meaning, unity, and wildness. And there would be no point to the resemblance between vanilla ice-cream and the white-covered ‘cold’ corpse. If the emperor’s sole concern (all that remains of imperial dominion) is enjoyment, so that pleasure is all that matters to him, the distinction is clear between him and the speaker whose main concern is truth. So is the tension between most readers and the emperor.

As we began to see when considering the Renaissance Arcadian trope, there is in this poem a motif of mutability. The newspapers are old, their written contents no longer news. Their material contents are cut flowers, which will die sooner than if they had not been cut. ‘Wenches’ will become corpses, as will the ‘roller’, the ‘boys’, the speaker, and the reader. Only the emperor is immune to the passage of time, since he is a universal archetype rather than a living person. He exists as long as there is pleasure anywhere for someone. Ice-cream melts. All pleasures pass, as do all sources of pleasure (In this regard, interpreters have made much of ice-cream melting as somehow defining the significance of the emperor. His domain is, however, solely ice-cream, not the sweet, flavoured cream remaining after the ice in ice-cream has melted.) The motif of mutability is ambiguous in its possible effects, an ambiguity captured by two medieval tropes: *sic transit gloria mundi* (‘so passes the glory of the world’), urging detachment from worldly pleasure, and *carpe diem* (seize the day’), an abbreviation of the stoic slogan, ‘Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.’ Throughout stanza one, the stoic speaker joins the hedonistic emperor in seizing the day. But in stanza two at least, mutability does not motivate him; it is merely part of what he implicitly knows.

Before ceasing to consider pleasures that violate moral taboos, let us address the possibility that the woman has been murdered—a possibility that no one has mentioned in publication but which Alan Caldwell raised when a student of mine. However unlikely murder may seem, it is supported by Stevens’ early flirtation with Henry Wotton’s proposition in Oscar Wilde’s *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* that murder might afford ‘extraordinary sensations’ (Bates, *Mythology of Self* 111). As an epigraph for an early poem, Stevens uses words by the French soldier Eugene Emanuel Lemerrier urging the aesthete to recognize ‘*la beauté triomphante de toute violence*’ (*Collected* 539), in particular the ‘beauty’ of murder. If the woman is murdered for pleasure, her killer would have as his archetype, during the killing, the emperor of ice-cream.

This possibility is strengthened, if only by way of example, by a current widespread association between ice-cream and an actual emperor. The legendary originator of the prototype of ice-cream was Nero. He is widely credited with creating the first frozen desert by mixing snow bought from the Apennines with spices, crushed fruit, and honey. This was the first gelato, more like sorbet or a snow cone but generally acknowledged to be the origin of ice-cream, which became a dairy desert at the end of the eighteenth century. I do not know whether Nero was popularly associated with ice-cream when Stevens wrote his poem, perhaps not, since the

association has little or no basis in classical texts. I can find no mention of Nero flavouring snow, though he did have snow brought to Rome and stored in pits and used in summer to cool his bath-water (Suetonius IV xxvii 2). He also experimented with snow, using it to cool boiled drinking water (Pliny the Elder XXXI 40), and we know that his wealthy contemporaries cooled wine with snow (Pliny the Younger XAI to Septitius Clarus).

Regardless of whether he invented the prototype of ice-cream, Nero serves as a historic example of the perverse possibilities symbolized by the archetypal emperor in the poem. During his fourteen-year reign, Nero was a dedicated hedonist and prolific murderer. He exemplifies perversion within the totality of pleasure, symbolized by the emperor in the poem. Among those Nero murdered were his mother, his adoptive brother, his first two wives, scores of strangers periodically killed in the streets for fun, and the hundreds if not thousands of Romans who died in the famous week-long fire of 64 AD, which if he did not set, he certainly declined to extinguish. About the fire we colloquially remember, ‘Nero fiddled while Rome burned’, words reflecting ancient reports that, after praising the beauty of the flames, he accompanied himself on a lyre while singing about the burning of Troy (Suetonius IV 39 2). It is inconceivable that the pleasure of this historical emperor would be in the least diminished by a corpse such as that in the second stanza of this poem. Nero is proof, if we need it, that pleasure can be perverse. This is not to say that the emperor in the poem would, if he were a person, behave like Nero, but he well might.

In the poem, ice-cream as a symbol includes every innocent pleasure, and the vast majority of pleasures are innocent. But its symbolism also includes perverse pleasures, such as, fetishism, necrophilia, and murder. The phenomenological realism of the speaker insists on this. Since some people kill for pleasure, ice-cream as symbol of all pleasure must include murder. This is implied as at least a possibility by the presence of the woman’s corpse. Together with erotic imagery, sexual language, and the motif of contained pleasurable, the corpse implies that ice-cream includes sexual perversion. All this makes sense as the intended meaning of a speaker dedicated to the whole truth, however unpleasant or deplorable aspects of that truth might be.

He does not bring moral judgment to knowing. What amounts to his avoidance of mortal judgment resonates with his (and the emperor’s) symbolic displacement of the God of Genesis in stanza one, God being the source of the first prohibition, which gave humanity (Adam and Eve) a mortal life.

The poem challenges readers much as Freud is challenged in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* when he opposes the death instinct, which he says is of the ego, ‘to the sexual instincts of which the libido is the manifestation’ (61). This opposition is owing partly to Freud’s basically Kantian identification of pleasure with life and the verbal opposition of life instincts to death instincts. It also reflects his resistance to Jung’s contention that the libido encompasses all instinctual forces (53). Yet Freud himself is troubled by this ‘great opposition between the life and death instincts’, for, as he writes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*:

From the very first we recognized the presence of a sadistic component in the sexual instinct. As we know, it can make itself independent and can, in the form of a perversion, dominate an individual’s entire sexual activity But how can the sadistic instinct, whose aim it is to injure the object, be derived from Eros, the preserver of life? Is it not plausible to suppose that this sadism is in fact a death instinct which, under the influence of the narcissistic libido, has been forced away from the ego and has consequently only emerged in relation to the object? (53-4)

About displacement of the death instinct, he goes on to admit, ‘I am not convinced myself’ (59). He attempts to reassure himself that ‘we need not feel greatly disturbed in judging our speculation upon the life and death instincts by the fact that so many bewildering and obscure processes occur in it—such as one instinct being driven out by another’ (60)—the ego’s death instinct driving out the libido’s life instincts, which are erotic and pleasure-seeking. He admits, ‘It looks suspiciously as though we were trying to find a way out of a highly embarrassing situation at any price’ (54). His conundrum resembles that of readers of Stevens’ poem who want its pleasure principle, embodied in the emperor of ice-cream, to be entirely innocently life-affirming and who wish to see the woman’s corpse as having nothing to do with pleasure. Unless those readers imaginatively detach from their preference, they resemble the majority of spectators in the fairytale about the emperor in being willfully blind to the implication that, for some, pleasure is uninterrupted or even enhanced by death, murder, fetichism, or necrophilia. This is, I think, undeniably implied by the corpse, the motif of contained pleasurable, and the speaker’s sexual vocabulary.

Since human experience testifies so insistently to the pleasure of aggression, consensus in psychoanalytic circles eventually turned against Freud’s antithesis between pleasure and death instincts.⁵ In writing published after *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, even Freud backed away from his strict dualism. In ‘The Economic Problem of Masochism’ (1924), he writes that when death instincts are directed outward, they mix with life instincts ‘so that we never have to deal

with pure life instincts or pure death instincts but only with mixtures of them in different amounts' (164)—an admission that aggression 'is always fused with some quantity of libido' (Slap 372). In his essay on 'Humour' (1927), Freud considers 'pleasure that has been obtained in the service of aggression' (163). In 'Moses and Monotheism' (1939), he writes, 'If the id in a human being gives rise to an instinctual demand of an erotic or aggressive nature,' the satisfaction of the demand 'is felt by the ego as pleasure' (116).⁶

For the reader of Stevens' poem, especially the sentimental or romantic—or at one time, Freudian—reader predisposed to think of pleasure as solely life-affirming and therefore incompatible with murder or perversion, the challenge is to see that the death of another and erotic perversion do not necessarily preclude pleasure. In fact, to see dualism here is to commit a category error by confusing hedonistic possibility with moral approval or mental health.

What is the point of view of the reader of Stevens' poem at its conclusion? He or she is likely to have reservations about the speaker but to feel closer now to him than to the emperor. The motif of *et in Arcadia ego* may generate fear in the reader that diminishes pleasure. Death elicits aversion that diminishes or precludes pleasure. Many readers will disapprove morally of some varieties of pleasure and therefore react against the amoral emperor, for whom all pleasures are only pleasures. Most readers will be inclined to side with the speaker, if only as an available alternative to absolute hedonism. The speaker's rhetorical force and the plausibility of his strict realism—along with its affinities with eastern meditative concentration on the here and now—resist an emotionally or morally charged alternative point of view. Moreover, not to align with the speaker is to fail to acknowledge the existence or possibility of perverse forms of hedonism, which are implied by the imagery of the poem and which, we all know, do exist. If the reader abhors necrophilia or murder, he or she is going beyond the insistence of the speaker that we merely acknowledge what is.

The speaker seems to endorse the emperor of ice-cream at the end of stanza one, and as readers most of us join him. At the end of stanza two the speaker repeats what seemed an endorsement but now must instead be seen as an expression of stoic apathy and unflinching realism. The reader may disapprove of the absolute hedonism symbolized by the emperor of ice-cream if only in disapproving of the perversions encompassed by absolute hedonism, but the reader can hardly disapprove of the speaker's unflinching awareness. It is good to know the truth. The whole truth has unappealing aspects, and some readers—resembling Freud in *Beyond*

the Pleasure Principle—will wish to exclude perversion from the scope of reference in what they want to be a simple, happy poem expressing (despite its emphasis on the corpse) innocent vital enjoyment. But the poem they prefer does not exist.

Symbolically the reader inhabits the poem by aligning with either the emperor or the speaker as knowing about the emperor. If the poet symbolically inhabits the poem, where is he? Most readers assume Stevens' identification with the speaker, and it is true that the speaker does his work for him. But if the poet corresponds to anyone or is symbolically present in the imagery, he is the artistic 'she' who 'embroidered fantails once'. Metaphorically the poem is the poet's remains, his corpse, which the reader enjoys. But does the reader merely enjoy it, like those who decline to follow the implications of the poem into moral and emotional discomfort? Such readers resemble the emperor, dedicated solely to pleasure. Those who follow the implications of images and language into areas of moral darkness and psychological deviance may begin by liking the emperor but they conclude by siding with the speaker and, like him, the whole truth or any part of it on which 'the lamp' might 'affix its beam.'

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Notes

¹ Stevens' marked copy is in the library of the University of Massachusetts-Amhurst. My thanks to Glen MacLeod for this information.

² R.P. Blackmor was the first to make the assumption, writing in 1932 that 'the poem might be called Directions for a Funeral, with Two Epitaphs' (117).

³ In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud writes that 'the reality principle ... does not abandon the intention of ultimately obtaining pleasure, but it nevertheless demands and carries into effect the postponement of satisfaction, the abandonment of a number of possibilities of gaining satisfaction and the temporary toleration of unpleasure as a step on the long indirect road to pleasure' (10). My references here and subsequently are to the *Standard Edition* of Freud's works, since the 1922 translation by C.J.M. Hubback is stylistically inferior without significant difference in meaning.

⁴ For noticing this syllabic play, I am indebted to the medievalist Lois Smedick in conversation. For suggesting the epigraph of this essay.

⁵ Joseph Slap observes that H. Hartmann, E. Kris, and R.M. Loewenstein write in a 1949 essay entitled 'Notes on the Theory of Aggression,' that 'the very fact of discharge of aggressive tension is pleasurable' (370). In his 1967 Study, Slap adds, 'There is no reason to suppose that the discharge of the externalized death instinct toward objects cannot afford pleasure' (371).

⁶ Freud's corrective second thoughts are actually a return to his earlier, less confused assumptions before feeling in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that he had to disagree with Jung. In 'Joke and Their Relation to the Unconscious' (1905), he had written of the 'comic pleasure' resulting from 'aggressiveness, to which making a person comic usually ministers' (200), and in 'A Childhood Recollection from [Goethe's] *Dichtung und Wahrheit*' (1917), he had written 'There is no need to dispute a child's enjoyment of smashing things' (153).