

The Melting Moment: Stevens' Rehabilitation of Ice Cream

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THE EMPEROR OF ICE CREAM

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 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.¹

We are informed that Stevens "was once asked by the National Association of Ice-Cream Manufacturers whether he was for or against ice-cream."² Perhaps to refute the notion that poets are *unacknowledged* legislators! But they wondered what the ruling meant, apparently. "Legislators" seems a good point, indeed, at which to start one's examination of the poem. In the forensic peremptoriness with which it orders things to be as they are, "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" operates in the gap between "let" as austere, harsh imperative and the effete permissive gesture of someone who is "giving up."³

No doubt this "famous puzzle piece"⁴ will abide our question, for all the ingenuity of its explicators. In a recent book, James Baird rightly observes that "ice-cream, contrary to the opinion of some readers, is not death. Ice-cream is an American commodity."⁵ His literalism includes

the percept that "the remarkable third line 'In kitchen cups concupiscent curds' describes the rite of the milk shake." This is incontestable, but, as his analysis shows, the literalism cannot be sustained without missing some of the point.

The ice-cream, though idiosyncratic, is not unique in Stevens' poetry. It reappears in the lightning synecdoche of the phrase "children nibbling at the sugared void" (p. 43). Its context — it is from "The Comedian as the Letter C" — makes the image apply, not merely to "infants" eating ice-cream, but to the whole of our sensuous awareness in the world. In the poem, this "consumer" image is ironically applied to what might be called the "ontological quest" of the protagonist of the poem, Crispin: however "sublimated," his perceptions and his poetic programmes are equally those of a "consumer," a parasite on the world's fecundity, a "biological mechanism."⁶ Thus ice-cream is the cosmos considered as a sugared void, the world as seen in accordance with the Pleasure Principle.⁷ Immediately the Reality Principle is invoked, man is a "scullion of fate" (p. 6) rather than an emperor of ice-cream. The elegiac reverberations we hear in the strange line "The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream" are due to the fact that the Reality Principle is indeed being invoked.

This double-take of the poem — the preemptoriness and the elegy — is the source of its status as "puzzle poem." The preemptoriness is paradoxical. It is a decreative *fiat* which encourages things to go on as they are, an intoned refusal to indulge in "romantic intoning" (p. 387) over the dead person, in a fatuous "idiom of apotheosis" (p. 124).

In this poem, what seems like the beginning of an ethical arbitration of a traditional kind, having to do with the weighing in the balance of the faults and virtues of the deceased person considered as a candidate for something, dissolves hopelessly, as in a childish consciousness,⁸ into what comes naturally to be the object of attention: "Call the roll-/-er of big cigars." My artificial break is only a

crude dramatisation of the progress of the line, of how the mind goes to work on it. The "witness" is not to be an "ethical" person, but one who administers sensual satisfactions. Our doubts as to his "identity" — really about the propriety of his being there — are ironically "resolved" as we move into line 2: "Roller of big cigars/The muscular one."

Taking this for the moment as a line-unit, we could look on it as almost an ironical version of a line from, say, *Beowulf*. In terms of social hierarchies, however, "roller of big cigars" = anyone, man in the street: but as the "creator" of sensuous pleasure, he is an emperor, demiurge of process of law according to nature. The ethical or juridical (preoccupation of traditional rulers and gods) flashes across our screens with "whip" — but this hint of flagellation is immediately dissipated. This man's product (which approximates in force to the notorious "ice-cream" itself) is to be "concupiscent curds" (line 3). "Concupiscent curds" is an odd expression. Surely, we say, it is the desirability of the curds which Stevens wishes to emphasize, not their desires. This absurd construction contrives to suggest that the curds are indeed being punished for the sensual delights which they offer — and yet the whipping is encouraging the curds. Also this is a construction analogous to say, "hilarious trees" (p. 124), where the emotions of the human perceiver are "projected" onto the object. In any case, "concupiscent," with its bawdy suggestion, brings in the idea of all kinds of desires for "the things of the world" (O.E.D.). The message of the stanza is that traditional moral theology is without force, in view of the fact of death's finality, that there are no stabilities beyond the laws of nature.

"Concupiscent" is also being used in an illiterate, impressionistic kind of way ("You must become an ignorant man again" (p. 380) in a rather disconcertingly literal sense) to signify the process of becoming (desirable) on the part of the milk-shake. Stevens' poetry is pre-eminently the

poetry of process, and he is particularly aware of those words which have endings which signify "coming into being" on the part of "these -escent, -issant pre-personae" (p. 552). Thus it seems also legitimate to say that the whipper-up of curds is also "the Poet." This again is an extension of the fact that the poem's message is that "we can order things only in accordance with the Pleasure Principle in our imaginative life. Therefore no artistic effort will take the measure of things as seen under the aegis of the Reality Principle."

The sense of shock produced by the "callousness" of the poem, quite rightly insisted upon by Eugene P. Nassar,⁹ encapsulates a neutral notation of the finality of death. "Death is absolute and without memorial" (p. 97). Like Ted Hughes's pig,¹⁰ the dead person is too dead. Reduced to the status of thing, the corpse is unable to "seem" (line 7). The traditional frame for human seeming and being is an ethical one — as at the opening of *Hamlet*¹¹ or in *Measure for Measure*:¹² people seem virtuous and are vicious. In a "philosopher's" terms, however, people seem all their lives, being simultaneously subject and object, and the seeming stops only with death, when they have become pure object and have ceased to seem. Having grasped this fact, the attendants need have nothing to do with mourning what is now only an object in status.

Those significant newspapers (line 6) ("Who would bring today's?"¹³ as Blackmur has remarked) bring in "the maldy of the quotidian" (p. 96) — they are in fact a notation of our *general* attitude to death in an "always incipient cosmos."¹⁴ "Wenches" (line 4) is nice in that it tells the unvarnished truth about the girls, while at the same time sustaining the ironical "pomp" of the speaker (being a work of "poetical diction," possibly picked up from an epigraph of a poem by T. S. Eliot.¹⁵) Such focal points (lines 4-6) have a seriousness by which the levity is intensified, constituting an upright imperative to "dawdle" — superbly antithetical to what is required in a rite. Nassar

is right in insisting that we are not meant simply to acquiesce in the poem's "judgement," as it were, here, and it is appropriate to feel a sense of shock. But it is also important to feel that something positive (by way of judgement about "the nature of reality") is being established here too.

An intenser shock is, however, reserved for the imperatives of the second stanza. There is the sense of intrusion, the cold notation of poverty, the briefest of biographical intimacies (introduced only *en passant* in the course of the pragmatic need to cover up the thing). Not to speak of the corpse itself. With "on which she embroidered fan-tails once" (line 11) we are momentarily at the crossroads between pathos, comedy (if this is *the* relevant biographical detail) and the "*Verfremdungseffekt*" the speaker is inducing with his tone and posture, a freedom from "all the penumbra of conventional pathos."¹⁶ The sense of austerity is heightened if we refer to a famous passage in Thomas Hardy, where a similar sense of intrusion on domestic intimacy seems more poignant and effective than a conventional tribute. It is in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, on the occasion of the death of Henchard's first wife:

"Well, poor soul, she's helpless to hinder that or anything now," answered Mother Cuxsom. "And all her shining keys will be took from her, and her cupboards opened; and little things 'a din't wish seen, anybody will see; and her wishes and ways will all be as nothing."¹⁷

This quotation has been kept minimal, but perhaps it is also worth noting that the sympathy is evoked by Christopher Coney's Falstaffian stand: "Why should death rob life o' fourpence? Death's not of such good report that we should respect en' to that extent." This is exactly the mood, or mode, that "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" starts from. But the very starkness with which the "refusal to mourn" — that is to say, the dehumanized radical naturalism — is presented, of itself produces the shock which is

the reassertion of our humanity. Dehumanized itself, the poem is nevertheless a humanizing force.

The most shocking parts of the poem are lines 13 to 14, the confrontation of the corpse itself. This is the central fact of the poem from which our interpretation radiates out. Richard Ellmann has said that in Stevens "horn is the colour-sign of death," citing, very usefully, "Cortege for Rosenbloom."¹⁸ Nevertheless, there is an error of presentation here, since it almost sounds as if "horn" were a mere token supplied arbitrarily by Stevens to designate "death": but with horrid "accuracy"¹⁹ this is appropriate to the off-white of the corpse. And here, as applied to the feet, it is even more effective than in "Rosenbloom" with its suggestion of callosities. And this is the poet who was known, particularly on the strength of *Harmonium*, Stevens' first book of poems, in which "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" appears, as a dandy, an aesthete, an ivory-tower-man(!)

The poem's shock-tactics are sustained by "come" in line 13, a savagely ironic "portent" — the attribution of action or process to the ultimate "being" — which ties together both stanzas. This, then, is the sense of human limit, with which the imagination (the "lamp" of line 15), must come to terms: the Darwinian cosmos. It must order and direct its potential insight in accordance with this percept, and also (*le fait est dur*) in accordance with the fact that actuality is not changed as a result of its operations. An "emperor of ice-cream" is not the less a "native of poverty" (p. 322). Indeed, the one is implicit in the other.

So far, so good. But I have an uncomfortable feeling that even this is not quite adequate as "paraphrase," that the poem is asking me, as it were, to darken the tone still further and say that the "beam" of line 15 is also a grin, and a fixed grin at that, like a Cheshire Cat, grinning after the *raison d'être* of the grin has gone.

This Cheshire Cat is Art, the imagination with its perpetually grinning "affirmations:" the Voice which speaks the line is now a native of poverty, a Philistine: "let the lamp affix its beam! What difference does it make?" To here hear that Voice — essentially the voice of the mass-man in the élitist parterre of this very "exclusive" poetry — perhaps goes some way to explaining the particular fascination this poem has undoubtedly had; although this is only one possible source of its effectiveness: "The deep / Moans round with many voices." And if we close with this famous couplet as a summary of one's gist

Natives of poverty, children of malheur,
The gaiety of language is our Seigneur (p. 322) —

we must give due weight to the limitations implied by the statement before it can stand as a summary of "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," which seems to me one of the great poems of this century.

NOTES

- ¹Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems*, (New York: Knopf, 1955), p. 64. Page numbers in the text refer to the *Collected Poems*. Permission to quote has kindly been given by Faber and Faber and Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.
- ²See S. F. Morse, "The Native Element," first published in the *Kenyon Review*, XX (Summer, 1958). Reprinted in *The Achievement of Wallace Stevens*, eds. Ashley Brown and Robert S. Haller, (New York: Lippincott, 1962), pp. 193-210 —to which my page number refers: p. 206.
- ³The mode of Stevens' poetry, particularly the later, is characteristically that of exhortation: cf. "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction," *Collected Poems*, pp. 380ff., in particular "Let Phoebus slumber and die in autumn umber," where there is a similar "ambiguity." It means either "Don't indulge yourself in this (archaizing) fashion," or "Don't worry, young man ('young man' because Stevens is addressing his 'ephebe,' his 'figure of the youth as virile poet') it seems like dry and empty artifice to me, too." It could be shown that the "subject matter" of the exhortations in the early and late poems (sc. "Emperor" and "Notes") is the same.
- ⁴F. Kermode, *Wallace Stevens*, (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1960), p. 41. Kermode says that it has been "frequently explicated, several times by Stevens himself." This is doubly disappointing, firstly since it gave Professor Kermode, who was obviously pushed for space, an opportunity *not* to comment; and when we turn to the source of the

remark (in Morse's "Native Element," pp. 206-207) we find the example of Stevens' "explication" given to be a beautiful piece of escapology, a thoroughly generic, almost coy exception to the notion of self-explication.

- ⁵James Baird, *The Dome and the Rock: Structure in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1968), p. 248. He cites, as being in error here, Alfred Kreymsbourg, "An Early Impression of Wallace Stevens," *Trinity Review*, VIII, 3 (May, 1954), 15. For Richard Ellmann, in "Wallace Stevens' Ice-Cream," *Kenyon Review*, XIX (1957), p. 94, "ice-cream . . . is both death and life."
- ⁶Stevens, "The Irrational Element in Poetry," in *Opus Posthumous*, ed. S. F. Morse (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), p. 220.
- ⁷Stevens' essay, "Three Academic Pieces" (in *The Necessary Angel* (New York: Knopf, 1951), pp. 71-82, is of interest here in its application of the Pleasure Principle (together with what might be judged a Freudian base in "narcissism") to a poetic doctrine of pleasure in resemblances and "metamorphoses" as they occur in the world-as-perceived. Stevens evokes the Reality Principle in the guise of Freud and positivism in "Imagination as Value" (*Necessary Angel*, pp. 131-156), and then feebly tries to shoo both away: feebly, because in reprehending Pascal, in the same essay, his implicit base is indeed positivistic. R. H. Pearce, in "The Last Lesson of the Master," considers that Stevens' poetry assumes the limitations of a Freudian Reality Principle up to the last poems. This essay is to be found in *Act of the Mind: Essays on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, ed. R. H. Pearce and Joseph N. Riddell, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1965). See especially p. 123.
- ⁸Stevens — for what this is worth — wrote R. P. Blackmur informing him that his daughter "put a superlative value" on ice-cream. Blackmur presents this information in a light-hearted way, but that Stevens was partly thinking of a child-like attitude to the world (and sense of priorities) might reasonably be supposed. See R. P. Blackmur's "Examples of Wallace Stevens," which first appeared in *Hound and Horn*, V, (Winter, 1932). It has been reprinted in several places, including the collection already referred to: See *The Achievement of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Brown and Haller, pp. 52-80.
- ⁹See Eugene P. Nassar, *Wallace Stevens: An Anatomy of Figuration*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1965), p. 129.
- ¹⁰See Ted Hughes, "View of a Pig," *Lupercal*, 1960, p. 40.
- ¹¹See Hamlet's reproach to his mother, "Seems, madam! nay, it is; I know not seems" (I.iii) and the context of that.
- ¹²See, e.g. the conclusion of the Duke's speech in *Measure for Measure* (I.iv): "Hence we shall see/ If power change purpose, what our seemers be."
- ¹³R. P. Blackmur's "Examples of Wallace Stevens," in *The Achievement of Wallace Stevens*, pp. 59-60.
- ¹⁴"July Mountain," in *Opus Posthumous*, p. 115.

- ¹⁵Cf. the context of this word as used in the passage cited from Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy* which stands as epigraph to Eliot's "Sweeney Erect" ("Look, look wenches!"): see T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 44.
- ¹⁶A phrase used by Richard A. Macksey (in *Act of the Mind*, p. 205) discussing "The Climates of Wallace Stevens," showing how, even in an apparently small matter like the use of the indefinite rather than the definite article, Stevens is eschewing "all the penumbra of conventional pathos."
- ¹⁷Thomas Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, (London: 1886), Chap. XVIII, last paragraph.
- ¹⁸R. Ellmann, "Wallace Stevens' Ice-Cream," 91-92. For "Cor-tege for Rosenbloom," see *Collected Poems*, pp. 79-81.
- ¹⁹I have in mind the near-parodic opening of "Three Academic Pieces," *Necessary Angel*, p. 71: "The accuracy of accurate letters is an accuracy with respect to the structure of reality."