Savannah Haire

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The Humanistic Emperor: Context for Wallace Stevens' "The Emperor of Ice-Cream"

Wallace Stevens' "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" is a difficult poem to comprehend. While some literary critics search for sense in the seemingly illogical lines, others claim that they are not meant to be analyzed, that it is not about what the lines say but how they say it. While appreciating poetry for *what it is* adds aesthetic value to the piece, it seems analytically lazy to abandon all search for meaning in this complex poem. Even Wallace Stevens said that "Emperor" was his favorite (of his poems) because "it wears a deliberately commonplace costume, and yet seems to [him] to contain something of the essential gaudiness of poetry" (Lehman 249). This emphasis on the commonplace, regardless of costume, resounds throughout his poetry. By considering "The Emperor of Ice Cream" in relation to several of Stevens' other poems, we may better understand the cryptic lines of this "commonplace" yet "gaud[y]" poem. In "13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" and "Sunday Morning," Stevens creates his own universe, a world in which the earthly is important and praise-worthy while the spiritual is over-reaching and nearly meaningless for humans since they cannot grasp it. "Emperor" is an extension of this world, an episode that adheres to the same principles established in the poet's other works. Reading this poem in light of the principles that Stevens creates in "13 Ways" and "Sunday Morning" may not give meaning to all of Stevens' puzzling imagery in "Emperor," but it may offer some clarity. In all of these poems, Stevens emphasizes the mundane and de-emphasizes the spiritual.

In “Sunday Morning” Stevens creates a world in which the temporal is holy and the everlasting is dead. Stevens’ elevation of the earthly over the divine is a reversal of the Christian anticipation of heaven and paradise. Christian faith focuses on the afterlife, what a person will achieve after death. In turn, the earthly is often ignored, even seen as a trial or punishment that one must endure in order to enter heaven. Stevens dismantles this idea in the first stanza by depicting an everyday, comforting scene juxtaposed against the overwhelming broad implications of religion. Stevens depicts a woman enjoying breakfast on what we presume is “Sunday Morning” from the title, significant since she is sitting outside on a Sunday morning instead of inside a church attending a service. This woman’s unorthodox Sunday morning routine is reminiscent of that of poet Emily Dickinson who “keep[s] the Sabbath . . . staying at home” (Dickinson Line 1-2). By evoking this image, Stevens leads the reader to believe that the woman in this scene is praising nature instead of participating in conventional worship. The woman’s praise, however, is not limited to nature. She admires “the green freedom of a cockatoo” that the reader realizes in line 3 is merely the image of a bird design on a rug (“Sunday Morning” Line 3). The enjambment of lines three and four serve as a cue for the reader, informing us that this poem is about praising not just nature, but mundane manmade objects such as a rug or the cockatoo within its threads.

In the fifth line the poem switches from narrative to abstraction. Suddenly, in harsh contrast to the light tone that opens the poem, there is mention of an “ancient sacrifice” (Line 6). The woman “dreams a little” (Line 6) until she is suddenly confronted with the “encroachment of that old catastrophe” (Line 7). The fruit and coffee that she enjoyed in the first lines now “seem like things in some procession of the dead” (Line 10). The woman’s mind

is overcome with thoughts of Palestine and its “blood and sepulchre” (Line 15). The “blood and sepulchre” in this line allude to the death of Christ. Palestine is the region in which Christ is purported to have lived and taught. According to Christian theology, his blood atoned for humankind’s sin and he “sepulchre” is the tomb from which he rose. The woman’s simple delight in oranges and coffee is ruined by thoughts of death, religion, and the afterlife. It is not death specifically that appears to bother her, but what she will leave behind. Her musings on heaven, a paradise where “there is no change of death,” reduce the temporal things that she treasures to meaningless objects in the grand scheme of eternity (Line 76). Joy Pohl notes that in this poem “the religious is associated with dark, distance, shade, silence, the diminution of life to a kind of reflective abstraction” while “the secular is identified by light, proximity, color, sound, a riotous concretion of experience” (Pohl 83). The woman decides that she is “content” (Line 46) with worshipping the temporal, that “death is the mother of beauty” (Line 63), and that what is truly precious are the things that someday come to an end. By reaching this conclusion, the character advocates a re-seeing of worldly pleasure, an idea that Stevens promotes throughout his work.

“13 Ways of Seeing a Blackbird” advocates finding importance in the mundane through its suggestion that even the common blackbird can be seen from various competing perspectives. This poem is comprised of thirteen short sections, each offering a different way of seeing the same blackbird. While it is natural to expect these sections to relate to each other in terms of form or content, instead they serve to complicate the poem. Although they all reflect on the blackbird, the images do not fit together either logically or chronologically. Keith M. Booker seeks to explain the poem’s complex structure and to address the lack of consensus

among Stevens' scholars by viewing Stevens' work in terms of Bakhtin's theories of dialogism. According to Booker, Stevens is able to depict several ideas at once, adhering to Bakhtin's expectations of dialogism existing between poets, although the poets may do so unwillingly or unknowingly. Bakhtin asserts that poets have a social obligation to comment upon society. Stevens seems to reject this obligation. Stevens says that though he "might be expected to speak of the social," he is not obligated to do so. He terms social obligation "a phase of the pressure of reality which a poet is bound to resist or evade" (Booker 73). Despite this assertion, Booker argues that Stevens adheres to Bakhtin's obligation whether he would like to or not. While Stevens wants his poetry to be free of reality's obligations, he still comments on the state of the world in "13 Ways". Bakhtin calls for "a rich diversity of voices from a variety of social and cultural strata to participate in an ongoing dialogic exchange" in poetry (Booker 75). Stevens delivers several voices from several different perspectives in "13 Ways". As the title suggests, the individual sections provide different aspects or "ways of looking at a blackbird." While readers may try to connect these sections by reading them as a progressing narration, they do so in vain as each section expresses multiple and conflicting ideas. Perhaps, as Bakhtin suggests, these ideas come from one voice at different points in life or from many voices at the same point. Regardless, they depict Stevens' idea that "there are many truths/ But they are not parts of a truth" (Booker 75). In this excerpt, taken from "On the Road Home," Stevens insists that though many things may be true, those truths do not have to connect. Though every "way of looking at a blackbird" is true in itself, the ways do not have to lead to one essential truth.

Though one essential truth many not exist, readers have analyzed and found bits of truth in Stevens' "13 Ways". John V. Hagopian searches for truth in this poem by examining

more closely the images presented. He argues that “the first four stanzas merely show a growing perplexity concerning the blackbird” and that “the poet comes to realize and to accept the real meaning of the blackbird” (Hagopian 85). He refers to lines four through six in which the narrator describes being “of three minds,/ Like a tree,/ In which there are three blackbirds” (“13 Ways” Lines 3-6). These perplexing lines use an everyday image to depict an abstract idea of perception. Stevens credits the blackbird here, allowing this common bird to carry a complex idea. If Hagopian’s theory is correct, “the real meaning of the blackbird” would be revealed at the poem’s end:

> It was evening all afternoon
> It was snowing
> And it was going to snow
> The blackbird sat
> In the cedar-limbs. (#-#)

In this section, the narrator’s simple observations appear nonsensical, almost child-like in their nature. These deceivingly complex lines depict an image of a bird in a tree as it snows in the evening. As Bart Eeckhout notes, Stevens himself once said that this poem “is not meant to be a collection of epigrams or of ideas, but of sensations” (Eeckhout 148). These lines operate as sensations do, appearing as short bursts of information that one might expect from the brain as the senses are stimulated.

As in “Sunday Morning,” the idea of valuing the worldly over the heavenly is seen in “13 Ways,” particularly in the seventh section (significantly numbered for seven’s association with the holy.) In this section Stevens depicts “thin men of Haddam” who “imagine golden birds”

and do not recognize the blackbird's significance (Lines 25-6). W. R. Keast suggests that "their thinness is perhaps to be taken as a mark of their poverty of mind" since they focus on "golden birds" (Line 26) "which are the work of mere imagination, separated from reality" (Hagopian 84). Hagopian argues that the "golden birds" represent a "changeless world such as the religious imagination conceives of heaven" (Line 85). This notion that what is religious is changeless and subsequently lifeless, is identical to the idea in "Sunday Morning" that "there is no change of death in paradise" ("Sunday Morning" Line 76), though the woman in the first poem is unwilling to make the same mistake as the "men of Haddam" (Line 25). The blackbird that they overlook is obtainable, mundane, and real. They ignore reality for the promise of the otherworldly, for something that cannot be proven to exist.

"The Emperor of Ice-Cream" is a difficult poem, known for being "unabashedly silly" (Ladin 32). Because of this label, a reader might be tempted to overlook the complexity of this "silly" work. In "Emperor" Steven creates a poem imbued with child-like whimsy, but how does this whimsy relate to the serious statements on eternity and reality that Stevens inserts into his other poetry? According to Joy Ladin, "Stevens' silliness is used to complicate the play of sense and non-sense, to conflict language that is both and neither" (Ladin 32). Stevens plays with language and image to throw the reader off balance, a tactic of which the reader is quite aware. For example, the "dawdl[ing]" "wenches" and "boys" who "bring flowers in last month's newspapers" ("Emperor" 4-6) that appear in the poem's first half are offset by the image of a "cold" and "dumb" dead woman in the second(Line 14). These two images, one light-hearted and full of life, the other lifeless and blunt, appear in stark contrast. The poem's "muscular" man who needs to "whip" "concupiscent curds" in "kitchen cups" (Lines 2-3) is likewise

startling. The alliteration used in these lines is reminiscent of a nursery rhyme. The odd use of the adjective “concupiscent”, which means “eagerly desirous; lustful” adds to the binary nature of this poem (“concupiscent”). The idea of lusting after “curds” is quite unappealing, but the presence of lust also contrasts with the first stanza’s light tone and whimsical imagery as well as the innocence that accompanies the idea of youth.

Stevens’ use of binaries and his complication of truth is reminiscent of Derrida’s theory of deconstruction. Deconstruction seeks to dismantle long-held ideals and truths. According to Jill S. Marts, deconstruction “relies heavily on Saussure’s notion of signs” (“Deconstruction”). While Saussure attempts to relate the human mind to words and their meanings and to give structure to the relationship between word and meaning, Derrida “posits that because meaning is irreducibly plural, language can never be a closed and stable system” (“Deconstruction”). For example, Stevens’ “13 Ways” may be interpreted differently by non-American readers. As Bart Eeckhout points out, Americans often refer to the crow as a blackbird while the Eurasian blackbird is lighter in color with a bright yellow beak. The Eurasian blackbird is known for its melodious call while the crow and its grating call is associated with mystery and even death. \ Marts asserts that “universal truths have gone unquestioned in terms of their ‘rightness’” when in reality “concepts are defined by what they exclude, their binary” (“Deconstruction”). “Universal truth” does not exist, especially in terms of global understanding. But as Derrida argued in the 1994 roundtable discussion at Villanova University, “deconstruction… has never, never opposed institutions as such, philosophy as such,” or “discipline as such” (Derrida 5). Deconstruction, and by extension Stevens’ work, is not the destruction of truth or reason. It is an attempt to find truth beyond “the structures in given institutions which are too rigid or are

dogmatic or which work as an obstacle to future research" (Derrida 5). Derrida and Stevens both question what has been deemed truth. They complicate truth by asking what it means to be true.

Perhaps the most striking and confusing aspect of "Emperor" is Stevens' use of bizarre imagery. According to Glen Macleod, Stevens employs strange, contrasting imagery because of his familiarity with Surrealism, which places "emphasis on the irrational" (Macleod 33). But before considering "Emperor" in terms of Surrealism, it is important to understand, as much as one can understand, the Surrealism movement. In his *Historical Dictionary of Surrealism*, Keith Aspley admits that surrealism "has always been hard to define" particularly because of "the overuse, even misuse of the word surreal" (Aspley 3). While surreal is often misused to mean "bizarre, fantastic," or "grotesque", the word is rarely used in terms of the Surrealism movement in art and literature (Aspley 3). The Surrealism movement "attempts to express the workings of the subconscious mind and is characterized by incongruous juxtapositions of images" (Aspley 3). André Breton, a forefather of Surrealism, defines the movement as "pure psychic automatism by which it is proposed to express [. . .] thought's real functioning" (qtd. in Aspley 5). He terms Surrealism "the dictation of thought, in the absence of any check exerted by reason, without any aesthetic or moral preoccupation" (Aspley 5). Breton describes Surrealism as a realm without the restrictions of reality, asserting that it is only in this realm that the true workings of the mind can be discovered. Salvador Dali's famous painting *The Persistence of Memory* (Dali) is reflective of this way of thinking. Dali's famous melting clocks became an iconic image of Surrealism. Dali takes perhaps the most mundane object, a clock, but depicts it without the restriction of nature and reality. By taking the ordinary clock and

distorting it, Dali comments on the relevance of time. Similarly, contemporary artist Vladimir Kush employs the ordinary butterfly in his *Departure of the Winged Ship* (Kush). This painting depicts a ship with butterflies replacing the sails. True to Surrealism, Kush presents us with an ordinary concept but makes it exceptional by disregarding "any check exerted by reason" (Aspley 5). Ships and butterflies seem to have nothing in common. Ships are big; butterflies are small. Butterflies are living and can move independently; ships are inanimate and need sails to move. Kush puts the two together and presents us with an image that resembles a whimsical dream, free of the laws of reality.

Of such surreal images, Stevens once said "these are not things transformed. / Yet we are shaken by them as they were" (Macleod 33). There is nothing astounding about "cigars" (Line 1), "last month's newspapers" (Line 6), or "ice-cream" (Line 8). These are all commonplace items with which any reader is familiar, yet Stevens presents them in a way that strikes us with their vivacity. Instead of simply using words to express his ideas, Stevens employs lasting images, such as an emperor of ice-cream. By combining ordinary objects in unexpected pairings, Stevens creates a jarring and perplexing poem. He takes the ordinary things that he so praises in his other works, emphasizes their mundane natures, and then surprises us with their complexity.

In his poetry, Stevens uses mundane imagery to comment on the relationship between reality and appearance. Ladin argues that by depicting the ordinary as remarkable, Stevens is able to say what would usually be unsayable. In this way he makes possible the impossible. "Let be be finale of seem" (Line 7) functions as "another in a string of silly orders, evocative but not-quite-construable metaphysics, and… a serious statement about the relation of semblance to

being" (Ladin 32). As a command, this line sounds like mere nonsense, a request that whomever the speaker is talking to cannot possibly fulfill. At the same time, these lines are a riddle, implying that things are not what they seem to be. This idea of seeming and being is reminiscent of Hamlet's assertion, "seems madam? Nay, it is; I know nothing of seems" (Shakespeare 1.22.77). These words comprise Hamlet's response to his mother when she asks why he "seems" so upset about his father's death, since she and her new husband have ended their public mourning. Hamlet says he does not seem, he only is. He is asserting that he is genuine while at the same time implying that his mother and her husband are not.

Similarly, "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" takes place at a funeral. The narrator desires a world in which what "seem[s]" actually is (Line 7). The narrator's desire for truth provides a guide for interpreting the rest of the poem. According to Jaimie Crawford, "the muscular one" in line two is the "caterer", there is a "corpse" in the second stanza, and the narrator seems to be a disgruntled relative of the deceased. Though this poem can be interpreted as the recorded experience of attending a funeral, there seems to be a more encompassing meaning. Like "13 Ways," this poem is driven by simple images, although these images become complex when combined. "Wallace Stevens, with a hint of guilt, explains poetry as 'a simple desire to contain the world'" (Crawford). Instead of presenting the reader with a continuous narrative, Stevens writes in little bursts of action. If it is his "desire to contain the world", this poem fulfills that desire (Crawford). In reality, there is no backstory. People sense their surroundings (and what is happening around them) and put things together in order to figure out their situation. For example, "The Emperor of Ice Cream" recounts the experience of a funeral attendee who enters a funeral home only to be immediately confronted by a person shouting orders at

others. ut similar to the blackbird that can be seen in at least thirteen different ways, this poem offers many possible interpretations, including the sarcastic internal commentary of a speaker who mocks those who cannot see things as they are. Here, the elusive line "let be be finale of seem" shows the speaker's desire for truth, for the genuine. The speaker comments on the social practices of a funeral in lines one through six: smoking cigars, cooking, dressing up, and giving flowers. These commands seem sarcastic because of the change of tone that comes with "let be be finale of seem" (Line 7). The speaker implies that the actions listed above are not genuine. They seem genuine, but they are the actions that people engage in only because they are expected to do so. The persona seems to advocate allowing things be what they are without all of the pretending. This interpretation is validated in the second half of the poem.

In the second stanza of the poem, guests continue to try and disguise the truth of the funeral: death. The same commanding lines- are used in this stanza, but again there is a hint of sarcasm and a shift in the speaker's focus. The speaker notices the small details of the scene: that the dresser is "lacking the three glass knobs," that the deceased had "embroidered fantails" on the sheet (Lines 10-11). The speaker even notes unpleasant details such as the dead woman's "horny feet", "how cold she is, and dumb" (Line 13-4). Declaring this woman "cold" and "dumb" is perhaps the most honest thing that can be said of the dead. While it is proper social practice to honor her body by having a funeral, she is no longer living. Although the realities of death are unpleasant to witness, the narrator orders that "the lamp affix its beam"to shed light on this social event and to reveal the death that the guests wish to ignore.

Perhaps the most puzzling aspect of this poem is the emperor himself. He appears in both the title and the poem's refrain. Jaimie Crawford argues that the emperor is "a fraudulent

contradiction who reigns as sovereign over the essence of “seems,” a substance greater than the sum of its parts fated to melt in minutes” (Crawford). The emperor represents seeming, but like ice-cream, his façade cannot last and the truth will be revealed. But ss the speaker trying to validate the emperor’s rule or is the speaker saying that the only entity that restricts us is this emperor of seeming? In accordance with the rest of the poem, it seems to be the latter. There is an awful lot of “seeming” throughout the poem, and the narrator implicitly resents that what is true is not apparent.

The emperor can also be seen as characterized by ice-cream. This would not be a stretch since Stevens places so much emphasis on the worldly. What is more worldly than ice-cream? It is comfort on earth and it is short-lived, either melting or being eaten too quickly. If ice-cream is “the only emperor,” then perhaps the daily motions we go through, the niceties that cover up the truth, are meaningless. Perhaps what really rules is the human craving for worldly desires made even more enjoyable by their temporality (Line 8). Because the line comes after the descriptions of social expectation and the famous “let be be finale of seem,” the statement about the emperor seems to be the speaker’s answer to this request. How can we let things be what they are? By admitting that it is human desire that is the driving force behind our existence. The same applies to the second stanza. After depicting an image of a woman dead under a sheet, the lines demand that the “lamp affix its beam” (Line 15). Because this line is followed by the refrain about the emperor, the speaker suggests that truth is what the reader will find by shedding light on this image. The dead woman proves that our desires rule us. She has no desires anymore because she is dead, and Stevens makes her meaningless without them, “cold” and “dumb” (Line 14). In this deceivingly simple poem, Stevens portrays the

world's simplest truth. The driving force behind humanity is desire, the enjoyment of being human.

"The Emperor of Ice-Cream" is Stevens' call for a genuine society, one that admits that our greatest motivation is our own pleasure and satisfaction. He describes a funeral to reveal just how contrived society has become, covering up the truth of death with formal attire, potlucks, and flowers. Many of Stevens' works call for the truth in a world of appearances and seeming. He places emphasis on the mundane, presenting it as holy, divine and comforting. Organized religion, social obligation, and close-mindedness become unnecessary social trappings that restrict human experience and hide the truth. In his poetry, Stevens creates a whimsical world in which oranges are holy, blackbirds carry philosophical meaning, and ice-cream is ruler of all. Although this world seems like a place of fantasy, Stevens suggest that this world is the true world, one hidden beneath unnatural and restrictive social structures. Without the context of Stevens' other works, "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" seems more like a nursery rhyme than a commentary on what humans view as important. When the principles established in "13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" and "Sunday Morning" are applied to this poem, however, it becomes evident that "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" is a part of the same universe that critiques the human focus on *seeming* instead of *being*. Stevens desires us to see what is clearly in front of us.

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