Privacy in "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 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.[1]

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> ". . . there is a kind of secrecy between the poet and his poem which, once violated, affects the integrity of the poet."
> --Wallace Stevens, Letters, #362; 1937

As it happens, Wallace Stevens' "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" (1922), surely one of his most well-known poems, privately inscribes the issue of its own literary privacy. This inscription occurs on a number of interpretive levels, which I intend to discuss in the following essay.[2]

"Privacy," of course, has various social-historical meanings, each of them dependent on some immediate and prior notion of one's no less variable public sphere. All of us lead private lives--on condition that they could, if only theoretically, be made public. In this sense alone, privacy per se, or what one might term radical privacy, is an illusion, itself a social-public construction as, arguably, is the self, individualism, subjectivity or, as some recent critical theories have proposed, especially social identities as determined by race, gender, class, ethnicity, and/or sexual orientation.

Needless to say, the "public" itself entails such a construction. At any given time, it designates the cumulative result of certain high-profile mechanisms that help produce the impression of a demographic consensus regarding certain topics within a particular social field.[3] Among others, this complex embraces the rabid extension and influences of business, advertising, law, science,

education. Most noticeably today, it now includes the ever-expanding surveillance of persons and groups, their values and historical backgrounds, as disclosed in and by the World-wide Web, Facebook, Google, Twitter and the like. These all comprise aspects of so-called popular culture, along with notable persons who personify them in variously broadcasted venues like television, politics, sports and/or films of all kinds. Compounded in different degrees, these and other kinds of publicization purport to represent "we the people." Related to this essay's topic, the public realm in the United States throughout the twentieth and now twenty-first century also consists of various parochial identitarian groups--subcultural publics, which possess a certain but not necessarily a self-certain socially recognizable cohesion.[4]

But whether singular or multiple, subliminally assumed or consciously recognized as such, the "public," an inescapable if often elusive matrix of social activity, values, and group empowerments or their conspicuous lack, not only captures our private attention, but does so in ways that serve to define how we evaluate ourselves, our experiences and activities. We dress and think (and do criticism), or, in other words, "see" ourselves, *pro* or *contra*, according to prevailing styles and "interpretive communities," to borrow Stanley Fish's useful concept, which enlist such attention. As recent critical theories have also informed us, one can think to fashion or join counter-public spheres, there "performing" otherwise illicit roles in relation to the perceived dominant public, which out of egregious ideological motives (as some other publics would judge them), blocks one group's *de facto* access to it, whether unconsciously or out of putatively conspiratorial motives.

In short, everywhere one looks, public life absorbs the private, returning it in new ways to its archaic meaning of "privative," the lesser, the subordinate. Corporate or global capitalism, with its increasing dependence on mass communication and computerized instruments, turns us into fodder for statistically related "information."[5]Even morally endorsed communitarian theories of politics or literature, which try to resist this capitalist enterprise--mostly regarded as synonymous with a "white," mostly male, and/or mostly Judeo-Christian hegemony--make privacy itself (for instance of one's sexual preferences) a public issue, that is, when they do not rule it out of bounds as unimportant to take seriously. Not only this, but language too, the most primordial medium of all, always presses "I" to mean "we." When I write or speak, I do so as if with, and not merely to, others like myself. This is so even in the case where I happen to live in a situation where most people, I think, oppose my views, in which case I might presume to address a purely imaginary interlocutor.

Why fight City Hall? No hierarchical binary seems more intractable to revision let alone reversal than (capital intended) Public/private. In our time as well as already Stevens', the cap-

italist ethos dominating the public complex already was defining the terms by which would-be sub-publics could and would criticize it. Moreover, proving one aspect of Marx's criticism, that ethos induces us to construe all things as if they were commodities, not the least among them our own critical writings--hence our reliance on copyright laws or intellectual or legal concerns about plagiarism, or our anxiety as critics to be the first not simply to think such thoughts (since, in a phenomenological sense, almost by definition they usually strike us *as* first), but to profit, in whatever way, from having them recognized, i.e., "published." This mode of thinking actually enlists us in a *public* regime of "private property," the ownership of which remains governed by the capitalist public's economic and social (most often legally protected) protocols. As a consequence, one's intellectual work is always only conditionally private.

This capitalist-marked public sublation of privacy notably marked the period when Stevens began writing his inaugural Harmonium poems.[6] What to do, were he so inclined, to protect his privacy as an essential aspect of composing them? Samuel Warren and Louis Brandeis had expressed one well-known US response in their 1890 law article arguing for "The Right to Privacy," and to which much legal attention has since been given. Beholden to an American liberal-individualist vision of government deriving from Locke's "social contract" theory, their thesis would protect personal privacy, specifically "the right to be let alone," from the kind of public scrutiny made available by "[r]ecent [technological] inventions and business methods," although it would not do so on the traditional legal grounds of libel laws. After all, capable of being defamed, a person's reputation is already a public *datum*. More relevantly, Warren and Brandeis based their argument on legal precedents for protecting "private property," but here on the basis of a person's "inviolate personality."[7]

But the defense of privacy as a species of private property weakens rather than supports the notion of privacy as an "inviolate" blockade against public notions of it. The same occurs if one tries to construe personal privacy as a "positive" moral value rather than a defensible legal "right." Using certain "behavioral markers," for example, one can respect or not another person's privacy as akin to an autonomous zone in which, among other things, this person possesses the freedom "to offer, or not to offer, [his or] her love to others through sexual contact." In this sense, either person can serve as "a potential originator of intimacy . . . ."[8] But as in the case of defining privacy in terms of private property, such "markers" not only depend on cues defined by public "behavioral" norms, they also presuppose the no less potential vulnerability of one's "intimacy" to public violations.

As I try to argue in the following essay, however, Stevens' "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" allows for readings that show it trans-

gressing what for him in principle comprise all available public constructions of privacy. Improbable as it seems, he treats poetic privacy neither as a given "right" nor a moral imperative. Least of all is it a masked communitarian longing for a substitute public stage at critical odds with his capitalist environment. For Stevens, poetic privacy remains an endlessly elusive goal rather than an "inviolate" *a priori* conviction. Or more precisely, privacy for him consists of experiencing its traces within the act of writing as if before such experience congeals into any public concept of a private poetry-cum-property. There is, to play with the poem's famous phrase, no finale, no secure imaginative conception of privacy either as "seem" or "be." The premise behind this practice looks deceptively simple: I think a thought in writing, but paradoxically, thanks to writing's ineluctable ties to its public reception, this is never the thought I thought. Therefore, Stevens can only come upon poetic privacy at the moment right before it dissipates by becoming disclosed as such. Each such moment requires subsequent acts of writing to elicit a pre-public poetic privacy as yet another subliminal occurrence.

But given the present public-academic climate, doesn't this goal in fact offer up Stevens for political second-guessing? One must ask whether his would-be poetic *enactment* of privacy does not manifest an implicit politics. At worst, his pursuit reveals a misanthropic attitude towards others; or perhaps a politically quietistic stance towards his micro- and macro-social surroundings. This is so because in social-democratic terms, people want and deserve more access to the public world, more voice in how it scripts their lives, not less. Think of a protections against private domestic abuse of a partner *or* the supposed "right" to own guns for no less supposedly defensive purposes. Aren't such examples reason enough to deny anyone's trying to elude the "public" altogether?

Besides, how is the notion of radical privacy possible at all? For example, how can Stevens' poem enact a series of "private" moves without his or our *thematizing* its resistance to various publics along the way, i.e., to privacy becoming always already public, like it or not? Moreover, both reformist and "establishment" or middle-class publics can threaten, separately or amorphously, to become ends in themselves rather than serve as pretexts for Stevens to enact the poem's private moves. What public formation, officially advertised or informally "private," and whether major or minor, does not finally hold out the attractive promise of a virtually omniscient reach? They each arguably partake of what Foucault termed the "panopticon" urge to traduce people into regarding their lives and that of others as subject to normative rules, subliminally enforced or not, and especially when disguised as unquestioned ideals.

At best, Stevens' effort to entertain poetic privacy could be taken to represent his "civic" disobedience towards the powers that

be. If his poetics of privacy at all mimics the goal of living "in the world but outside existing conceptions of it" ("Adagia," OP, 190), this hardly implies ceding the "public" to its capitalist determinations, what with there being other options available to his imagination of it. Writing, already a public medium *par excellence*, in the end doubtless presses Stevens to acknowledge all possible "public" worlds--such as the inescapable pull towards immediate recognition including that for pursuing privacy itself.

Yet on at least two counts Stevens poetic enactment of privacy in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" has positive political implications. First, if nothing else, it proposes a prescient alternative goal to today's technological incitements to participate in an electronic global village, and not merely as the latter would both reinforce and extend the worldwide dominance of a capitalist marketplace. Stevens himself was no doubt a "liberal" capitalist in his time, but he also only partially agreed with this kind of marketplace extension. "We lie in bed and listen to a broadcast from Cairo," he opined, "and so on. There is no distance. We are intimate with people we have never seen and, unhappily, they are intimate with us" ("Noble Rider," NA, 18; 1942). In a quantum move beyond this complaint, the post-Internet environment and its corporate progeny not only proffer a bastardized version of Habermas's idealized democratic public sphere, it also perpetuates the fantasy of what Stevens clearly disliked: an immediately accessible public meeting place of "never seen" or existentially incompatible others. In other words, in imaginary terms they serve to enforce the public sphere's totality within which, as in some Faustian bargain, it allows for private or idiosyncratic activities at the price of their essentially illusory status.

Beyond that, one raise the ante of this entire issue. Does it have US ideological ramifications, for example? As the pleasure-principle aspects of "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" could remind us, ironically or not the poem arguably plays out the individual's "pursuit of happiness" as scripted in the Declaration of Independence. At the same time, the poem would seem to revise the opening clause of the United States Constitution: "We the people, in order to form a more perfect union . . . ." The Constitutional text derives its authority from an invoked "people," the composition of which is, even at the time--why else qualify "perfect union" with "more"?--the US government's founding fiction. That union was and remains provisional at best, a tenuously compromised and possibly a mere grammatical "We" comprised then and now of different groups, different publics, each of which would otherwise seek to subsume others in order to form the former's version of a more perfect Public.

Stevens' poem's sketch of radical privacy works in the opposite direction to this ever uneasy pragmatic compromise, let alone to some utopian ideal of a perfect public sphere. To be sure, "The

Emperor of Ice-Cream" also begins by invoking "the people": "Call the roller . . . the wenches" and "boys." But this invocation occurs as a kind of ritualistic acknowledgment ("Let") of a public in order to pursue the possibility of a radically private poetic activity. In Stevens' hands, one might say, *E puribus unum* comes to mean not the ideal of one Public from many people's publics preferences, but rather: out of many such publics to realize one person's private and singular public alone: "The only emperor is the emperor of '"The Emperor of Ice-Cream'."

One could cite other US writers attempting to practice what looks like analogous pursuits of privacy. Consider works as diverse as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Thoreau's *Walden*. Thoreau not only went to Walden but wrote *Walden* "to transact some private business . . . ." But I would argue that Stevens' "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" goes both works one better regarding the issue of privacy. Ellison's alter ego arguably takes refuge in an "invisible public" lest he become otherwise subject to the totalizing surveillance of and by a dominant white society's values. And if Thoreau tried to realize his "private" goal by engaging only "the fewest obstacles," Stevens, because of the unavoidably "mass" appearance of his early twentieth-century public environment, perforce concerns himself with one too many such obstacles to avoid.[9]

In some ways, the notion that Stevens seeks a radical privacy in and through his writing is nothing if not an oxymoron. A synonym for such privacy might be his desire to come upon a non-committal sense of self--for example like Melville's Bartleby the Scrivener with his "I would prefer not to" or non-purposive response to his American-bureaucratic environment. To live at all, he must play the game, which he can never quite do. Bartleby exists as a social anomaly like Poe's "man of the crowd," Baudelaire's nineteenth-century urban *flaneur*, or the Whitmanian "loafer" who asserts a life apart from standards of the busy normalcy set by a growing and a mostly capitalist society.[10] But each such figure's pointless activity comes advertised to us as such, although made perplexing by Poe, admired by Baudelaire (and later Walter Benjamin), and energetically proposed as a newly revised democratic vision by Whitman.

Steven's privacy, I argue, does no such thing. It remains private, not posed or re-presented front and center. As readers we don't and can't take it as such. Rather, it heads towards a radical self-privacy--an anonymity without care, and so enjoyable as "ice-cream"--at least for Stevens, the singular inditer of the poem. But one can surmise this only after the fact, which makes it, too, at best a fictional move towards whatever privacy seems and still might be.

"Poetry constantly requires a new relation."
--Wallace Stevens, "Adagia," OP

In a poem that to most initial readings seems firmly to insist on the "finale of seem," we instead encounter a circular series of possible interpretations that seem (sic) to express indecision as to wanting the finality of appearance for the sake of being. Richard Blackmur first inadvertently expressed this confusion in a confusing manner:

> The less obvious sense of the [poem's final] couplets is more difficult to set down . . . . The connotation is, perhaps, that ice-cream and what it represents is the only power *heeded* [Blackmur's emphasis and in the following], not the only power there is to heed. The irony recoils on itself: what seems *shall* finally be; the lamp *shall* affix its beam. The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream. The king is dead; long live the king. (Blackmur, 79)[11]

Seventeen years after he wrote "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," Stevens himself showed how difficult it could be to paraphrase the meaning of the poem's most notable philosophical pronouncement: ". . . the true sense of Let be be the finale of seem is let being be the conclusion or denouement of appearing to be: in short, icecream [sic: here spelled as one word], but about being as distinct from seeming to be" (Letters, #387; 1939). Since the poem supposedly represents the "denouement" of this binary, does it point to how being can appear as such, and if so, how can one determine when and if appearance is no longer appearance? And how can "icecream," self-evidently a transient thing made even more evanescent by the reference to it in language, represent the supposed certainty of being? Is it, then, like the merely temporary satiation of appetitive desires à la "icecream"?

If nothing else, this conceptual "obfuscation," as one critic puts it, likely provokes readers' attempts to resolve it. It has the same effect as the other referential lacunae in the poem, for not a few critics have differed on the poem's *mise en scène*--in short, has *invited* public discussions.[12] One need not focus on the poem's Hamlet-like "to be or not to be" conundrum in order to see how "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" everywhere raises questions making room for more such questions. Who is the speaker, who his intended interlocutor(s), who's the dead woman in the second stanza, and what does the speaker mean by his declarative refrain: "The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream"?[13]

For that matter, the poem seems to refer to the unidentified woman's wake as being held in her home with the speaker acting out the role of ontologically minded funeral director. This configuration comes dramatically to the fore in the second stanza, for in the first, the "Call" could merely refer to some house-party among

lower-class persons. Adopting what connotes an authoritative imperative tone, the speaker tells the funereal witnesses and less directly us readers to take this event and treat ("Let") "the bleak fact of death" as if it had "no significance" (Beckett, 79); "as an unavoidable aspect of being" (Longenbach, 68); as a "general fact of man's mortality" (Chavkin, 117). Moreover, the particular image of the woman's "horny feet," with "horn" being "death's color in Stevens' verse" (Ellmann, 91), punctuates the "pathetic ugliness" of her corpse and the destitute surroundings of her former life, both of which do little to "mask the universal conditions of death" (Silverman, 166). Nonetheless, the speaker directs us listeners not to dwell on that life, which here accounts for her anonymity. Instead, and unlike what occurs in religious funeral ceremonies, we should recognize the ephemeral or "seem" aspects of existence and end any attempt to make it otherwise meaningful.

"The Emperor of Ice-Cream" thus reduces to a Godless truism: face the fact of mortality without transcendental illusions. "Let the lamp affix its beam" on death, the "only emperor," just as imaged in the sheer coldness and stark thereness of this woman's corpse. Not simply the speaker's philosophical *dicta* but also his image of "the emperor of ice-cream" echoes with a "Hamlet" allusion: "Your worm is your only emperor for diet; we fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots; your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service; two dishes, but to one table: that's the end" (Hamlet IV, iii, 20-27). And this appears to have been Stevens' own position on the matter near the time he composed "The Emperor of Ice-Cream": "From time immemorial the philosophers and other scene painters have daubed the sky with dazzle paint. But it all comes down to the proverbial six feet of earth in the end" (Letters, #244; 1921).[14]

Truism or not, the effect of this attitude towards death is to make Stevens' poem disavow the entire "panoply of empty conventional mourning and empty conventional myths of death and afterlife" (Ellmann, 93). As if it were a mini-version of his earlier "Sunday Morning" (1915), "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" too, although mostly by inference, essentially opines "that traditional moral theology is without force, in view of the fact of death's finality" (Neill, 90).[15] In this context, for instance, one could plausibly claim that the dresser's three missing knobs "probably symbolize[] . . . the archaic supernaturalism of Christianity (the Holy Trinity) and other outdated religions" (Chavkin, 116). Similarly, the embroidered "fantails" on the sheet, arguably little more than an expedient shroud, constitutes a "blasphemous reincarnation of the sacred dove (the divine spirit)," here reduced to a commonplace "pigeon" (Stein). Or, if one accepts Stevens' assertion that these "fantail pigeons . . . should be *motifs en pigeon paon*" (Letters, #387; 1939), then they perhaps *ironically* allude to "a long tradition of religious symbolism of the peacock . . . the emblem of empresses,

who were thought to become deities . . . after their death." In the same way, the sheet taken from "the dresser of deal" here inversely serves "to cover the harshness of [this lower-class woman's] 'deal' in life, by a religious fiction" (Strobel, 34).

All this, one could say, manifests the poem's first "private" move: to deny the importance, otherwise taken for granted by vast numbers of people, of all kinds of formal, religious or other publicly sanctioned, consolations over death's blunt facticity. From this perspective, the central image of ice-cream takes on the ironic status of an unconsecrated communion food; the private household scene with cigar-roller, boys and wenches constitutes an ironic inversion of a church setting; the dead woman turns out a latter-day Christian figure *sans* any resurrection in the works, and certainly lacking any inspirational appeal for either intimate or distant public witnesses. Even the quasi-biblical intonation of the speaker's "Let" directives repeats these ironies, as when the "Let there be light" of Genesis turns into the speaker's "Let the *lamp* affix its beam," thus reducing the OT *fiat* as well as the NT "*logos* of the Gospel of John" (Stein). Here "the [divine] word is utterly dead" (Kravec, 10). The poem's words at minimum direct us to realize the imperial reach of death alone.

But if these same ironies disqualify religious types of consolation, they still leave possible the deployment of informal, secular types, such as the speaker's calling the poem's anonymous figures (and us) publicly to reckon with the woman's death. Embodied by "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" itself, poetry, that is, can reestablish a means, however a transient thing like ice-cream, to share the fact of death in common. This accords with the view that during the period of the poem's composition, death "brought [families] together in a community of grief," and also--unlike earlier periods in America--"into contact with a funeral director."[16] Doesn't that role apply on a symbolic level to the poem's speaker?

Nonetheless, one can still maintain that "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" appears even to undercut this minimal invocation of an intimate public congregation. On one hand, contemporary "funeral services . . . became more private, isolating the family and intimate friends from the more public ceremonies of earlier times" (Green, 141).[17] On the other hand, the speaker conspicuously fails to call familial figures to attend this putative wake--can we regard the young "boys" and "wenches" among the woman's *intimate* relatives let alone even friends? What kind of informal scene of consolation is this? Moreover, the poem noticeably shifts our attention away from a communal ("kitchen") household space to a separate room where the corpse is laid out. This is indeed a more private space, which the poem metonymically further emphasizes by the room's single lamp. One can claim that the notable narrative movement between stanzas towards a scene of utter privacy itself signifies a thematic shift from "illusion" to "reality" (Bedetti, 96). Thus, the speaker's

call for what at first seems a party-like event, replete with "impermanent and expendable" items (Kessler, 40) such as ice-cream curds, cigars, "used" dresses and dated newspapers, turns into his effort to fix his and our attention on the one and only "reality": the permanent fact of the woman's laid-out corpse (Baird, 250).[18]

The second stanza's abrupt change in setting and theme also refers us to the poem's own relation to the topos of death. By its effort to focus on the privacy of this woman's corpse, a privacy underscored by her anonymity or lack of any public identity, "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" still presupposes witnesses. That becomes a poetic consolation, then: allowing for *some* public sharing, which would mitigate any hardcore real experienced alone, and thus in effect take us back to (and justify) the poem's opening, party-like atmosphere. Neither can the poem convey a universal message about the fact of death as a radically private event since it perforce remains an artifice. Like the woman's dresser and her embroidered shroud, poetry can only "fail to hide the cold, horny feet of reality" (Kessler, 41). Via the poem's images, it can intimate the death of a real person, but can" it bring us to face her "face" and so the desire to "cover" it? Yet the poem at least expresses *something* of that reality. Put another way, the movement from the first to second stanza marks the poem's ability to express a modicum of pleasurable consolation. It allows one a mitigating acceptance of an otherwise implacable "Reality Principle" (Neill, 89).[19]

But if it fails its charge for a full-fledged non-religious kind of consolation, the poem nevertheless leaves open room for a public *wish* for one. Leaving in its wake the hard effort to accept the finality of death, poetry also turns into a consumable pleasure like ice cream: finite as opposed to permanent; commonplace as opposed to unique or special. It is as if the poem were in fact concerned with the demise of elegiac poetry itself, whether traditional or modernist. "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" scandalously refuses to mourn the cited woman's death in this manner, although in doing so it itself moves towards a more private mode of elegiac writing for us readers to consider.

In old New Critical fashion, for example, one could argue that the commonplace imagery of replaceable consumerist goods ironically symbolizes--like the corpse--the poem's resistance to anthropomorphic symbolizations of the death scene it here depicts. From this angle, the speaker's philosophical-like commands obversely verge on parody. Unwittingly or not, he exposes elegiac poetry's philosophical pretensions, such as that death doesn't make life meaningless, which the poem's impoverished dead woman might otherwise lead us to suppose. Moreover, this is an atypical elegiac poem insofar as it notably fails to concern the death of a subject elevated to heroic status. In an easily invoked comparison, the speaker's focus on the lower-class woman differs from any Keatsian "Cold" (a.k.a. "ice-cream") pastoral elegy where the call for consolation remains front

and center. The speaker's imperatives themselves constitute a "cold . . . and dumb" response to his subject, which effectively contrasts with Keats's poem as being, like its artistically embalmed bride, "still" invested in the urn or poem's representations of a public, festive occasion.

But are the speaker's imperatives--spoken as if by him as himself an emperor of sorts--as self-certain and "cold" the way they at first seem? Stevens' poem does not bar one characterizing them as locutions anxiously masking the speaker's own "disgust" and even "anger" at the scene he is depicting (McDermott, 88). Or if not angry, his command-like dicta may be "hortatory, not descriptive," or even "buoyant" and motivated by defiance of what he cannot avoid witnessing (Ellmann, 92). Just as likely, then, the speaker is addressing himself as well as others, thus expressing his own ambivalent wish to linger in the precincts of "seem" even as he realizes that he too--and not only those whom he's addressing--should face death as it is ("be"). Taken as a whole, and with the poem understood as the speaker-persona's own representative *agon*, "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" ends up expressing not merely the inescapable fact of death, but also a complex of "the force of being . . . as including life, death, and the imagination . . ." (Ellmann, 94).[20]

Just as the first six lines of both stanzas paratactically delay the speaker's subsequent and would-be philosophical demands, so this reading of the poem as a kind of dramatic monologue allows us to regard his notice of consumable objects not as further instances of insignificant things--like "ice-cream" associated with the woman's corpse--but as postponing any terminal vision of life. For that reason, he first calls for a cigar-roller, someone who makes cigars by a manual and time-consuming process, and for him also to make rather than buy already made ice-cream. He also calls for, which is to say himself wants ("Let"), the wenches to "dawdle," and to do so "in such dress" or appearances "As they are used to" wearing, which implies their repetitive and continuing usage. Like the next image of the old but here renewably useable newspapers in which the boys are to bring flowers (but for whom, the girls or the dead woman?--another delay, this time of reference), these "used" items suggest a casual rather than tense relation to what they presumably will have to face: the uncovered "face" of the dead woman.

One could argue for the same kind of verbal postponement in the second stanza, which most critics regard as expressing the speaker's unrelenting determination to have us face an inconsolable death. For example, he points out the dresser's lacking the three glass knobs, which of course would at least delay, however briefly, anyone's effort to open it to retrieve the "sheet"-cum-shroud. The woman's "once" embroidery of this sheet-before-shroud also calls attention to a formerly sustained act of labor. Even the speaker's request to cover her now inexpressive face would literally deny one's facing the fact of her death. As for her protruding "horny

feet," he only possibly anticipates they might ("If") show, and if they do, only then would "they come/ To show how cold she is, and dumb." That is, their significance requires spelling out, meaning that it's not yet self-evident, regardless how likely. More, their then signifying her as "dumb" at once swerves from the word "dead" and, in its allusion to speechlessness, also in effect points to their inability to signify simply either life *or* death.

For that matter, the speaker's penultimate commands beginning with "Let" in both stanzas could represent his (subjunctive) *wish* rather than demand that we confront the real of death "without the assurances of the past or the disguises of religion or artistic creation" that propose to transcend "the world of fact" (Kessler, 40-41). Both "Let be be finale of seem" and "Let the lamp affix its beam" come down to *preparatory* gestures towards facing a straightforward end to life. At most, they express a desire--not *yet* realized--to do what they state. In addition, a "finale of seem" cannot quite signify finality. In one sense, the speaker's dictum here itself only *seems* to be definitive; it could also signify "the effete permissive gesture of someone 'giving up' or resigning himself" to the finality it might be (Neill, 88).[21] In another sense, though, the statement could refer to the speaker's frustration at the way everything tends to assume the status of "seem," and so the difficulty of arriving at "be" or final judgments. And again, we hear here his desire alone that he might come to believe it, which then would finally (sic) make *him* "the emperor of ice-cream," that is, the over-comer of mere appearances. In any case, his directives performatively postpone the imminent vision of such finality. After all, while a musical "finale" occurs at the end of an entire musical score, it also recalls and celebrates, i.e., prolongs the vitality of, the musical score's former themes--besides obviously occurring before the score's literal end.

Whatever the speaker's motives, they all testify to his ambivalence in touting the truth of to "be." Conversely, his rhetoric no less noticeably testifies to the being of "seem" by its rhetorical forestalling of the finality of "being." It is as if "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" were itself deferring that finality through its own verbal embroidery, or else by metaphorizing itself as an ice-cream-like commodity always yet to be fully consumed. "A victualer of the words['] worth, [the speaker] serves up his flavored platitudes about things as-the-ought-to-be or might-have-been in recipes of language . . . never to come to be . . ." (Stein). These inwrought self-references in turn work to transform the poem into a kind of anti-elegy: a public, dramatized object-lesson of its speaker at once trying and yet rhetorically indulging a desire not to imagine the final fact of death. Instead, he illustrates poetic truth's essential ambiguity--life as trapped *in medias res* or being always between life and death.

But the poem goes one step beyond exhibiting rhetorical slow-downs that turn its "embroidered" vision of one's resistance to death (beauty and truth here combined, as it were) into a complicated if existentially accurate affair. Stevens further practices linguistic excesses that tamper even with his speaker's still sharable if ambiguous monologue. The poem's title, for instance, ostensibly the provenance of the poet if not his persona in the poem, surely treats the subject of death "in trivial terms" (Piccioto-Richardson, 602). To be sure, literary works, including those written in the first person, charge readers the entrance-fee of suspending belief in any actual difference between a text and its title. But "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" converts what at first seems a pleasurable topic, namely its inevitable association with the special pleasures children take when eating ice-cream, into what seems a serious intimation of death. Nor does the poem's use of lower-class and even vulgar or vulgarized figures (e.g., "the wenches") diminish its staging of the "countervailing force[s] of life *and* death" (Burney, 58; my emphasis). As I have previously noted, the poem at first seems to express--and is usually taken to signify--how these forces affect everyone.

But then comes the poem's drift towards a series of covert puns that makes "Stevens" a noticeably supererogatory and so all but private agency interfering with his speaker's discourse. For example, one can read the dresser "Lacking the three glass knobs" as referring to "'nobs (important persons)" (Stein). Or, as previously mentioned, it could serve to deflate the speaker's apparently serious intention by a mock allusion to the religious Trinity--why else use that specific number? Moreover, inadvertent or not, the excremental connotation of "roller of big cigars," in line with a series of cited waste-products (outdated newspapers, a broken deal dresser, an old sheet, and above all the corpse), effectively tugs at the poem's primary concern with death. Indeed, ice-cream itself could be considered--no doubt perversely to an average middle-class audience--a kind of excremental food. Harry G. Frankfurt, for example, notes that "Excrement may be regarded as the corpse of nourishment," that is, food devoid of essential nutritive value, and so which makes it a "representation of death . . . that we ourselves produce . . . ."[22] In that sense, what else is "ice-cream" here if not a supra-disguised example of non-nourishing, excremental death, which happens to define the subject matter of Stevens' poem? With all of its "waste" imagery, does the poem undermine the speaker's high-toned speech by punning on the woman's death via the vulgar truism that "It's all shit"?

Other aspects of the poem emphasize its own vulgar appearance as a commodity. Despite his imperial tone, the speaker's language plays to others' basest public desires. The poem, too, for example, could be said "deliberately" to wear a casual, commonplace "dress/ As the wenches are used to wear," in other words itself to possess

a cheap and therefore easy to grasp significance. Likewise, "the dresser of deal" doubles as a pun that both supports the poem's serious topic as "a costumer of 'deal,' i.e., of the lot we receive in life," but also reminds us of the dead woman's "'bad deal'" in life and "the transient sufferings fate hands mankind" (Strobel, 94). Put differently, the common "deal" dresser calls to mind its once valuable commodified status, and like that dresser, the poem, too, seems to address "a big deal": the brute fact of death. But then it undercuts that theme by noting the woman and her room's impoverished items, including the dresser in its present barely usable state. Again like that dresser, then, the poem's value itself amounts to "no big deal," or as if it were nothing more than one more dysfunctional and useless commodity.

Whether as accidental or intentional, one has to account for such latent puns, particularly since they tend to compel a slang and therefore ironic reading of the poem's so-called emperor. Why does the poem "degrade the poetic act into a game," as Stein terms it, "of wordupmanship"? A street-jargon synonym for "eye," the word "lamp" in line fifteen likewise tends to mitigate the philosophical import of the speaker's command to "Let the lamp affix its beam" on the dead woman. Does the line instead come down to, "Take a gander at this corpse"?[23] Not immediately evident, of course, wordplay like this would exceed attempts even to rationalize it as ironically exposing what Stein terms the "imposture" of traditional poetic and especially romantic conceits about death.

Such embedded puns appear everywhere in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream." What of the embalmed (sic) series of puns in the very first two lines? The "roller of big cigars,/ the muscular one," serves as a trope for an undertaker, someone, as we say, "strong enough" to deal with a human corpse without flinching. Moreover, a "corona" is a popular cigar, a word that refers to a crown, i.e., say of an emperor? But "corona" is also close to a homonym of "coroner," a public official who investigates suspicious deaths of "big cigars" or corpses.[24] Whether as a coroner or an undertaker, the "muscular one" underscores a public function as such. For example, in keeping with the poem's "dress" allusions, that of the "wenches" and the deal dresser, "the roller" figures someone who embalms, dresses up and/or sanctions corpses so as to allow them to seem palatable--like "ice-cream" in a parallel sense--for public consumption.[25]

3

"... we all scream for ice cream"
--Anonymous

At the very least, the *sub rosa* puns that cruise within "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" in effect transform its death topic into a pretext for the pleasures of poetic play. A second interpretive template might go so far as to maintain that such pleasures express

the speaker's and even the poem' position towards the scene in question. This hardly constitutes a far-fetched view given the epicurean proclivities of Stevens himself, who found it easy to record the pleasures of reading the newspaper and thinking "of the cherries I ate [for breakfast], of the strawberries . . . of the canteloupes [sic] & sweet potatoes & that one massive huckleberry pudding--and the ice-cream. Also of the cigars" (*Journal*, SP, 140; 1904).

It hardly strains credulity, then, to claim that the cigar-roller himself stands for the "emperor," a trope for the "'creator' of sensuous pleasure" (Neill, 90). The poem also projects "the transitory joys of ice-cream" as "the only real god, the only emperor one can submit to in a mundane world" (Chavkin, 116). One way or another, the emperor figure represents "the cold god of persistent life and appetite . . ." (Vendler, 51). This view makes it possible even to construe the poem's funereal scene as "designed to promote life and sexual pleasure" (Strobel). Far from ambivalently dramatizing the need to realize the limitations of life given the fact of death, the poem's speaker would have his listeners focus ("Let the lamp affix its beam") on the pleasures of life exclusively, or to "turn [our] attention" completely "to living, seize the day" (Hass, 64). He wants us to enjoy life entirely in "the present moment" as opposed to "praying to a religious fiction" that would prevent us from doing just that (Strobel, 35). This is why the poem also leaves the woman anonymous: knowing her identity would inevitably remind us of her past life and thus distract us from construing her death as one more reason to affirm the absolute or "only" importance of life: to indulge in the innocent, ice-cream-like pleasures it can afford us, however transient they will eventually seem.[26]

Of course, one can infer that such puns--if they indeed exist as such--repeat these pleasures at the level of Stevens' composing his text. But insofar as they at best remain marginal to the poem's otherwise accessible or public expression of *carpe diem* pleasures, they also signify a more private expression of them. As I have noted, this "private" move occurs in the poem in various ways, such as from a party-like scene in the first stanza to a conspicuously private space and figure in the second. In a more general public context, this scene of death tangentially reflects the increasing privatizing of death-customs in the early twentieth century. The lower-class figures in the poem's scenario could easily instance an unofficial or socially "private" sphere within the larger public realm associated with the standards set by genteel, parvenu or middle-class cultural groups. The poem's most accessible theme, facing death without religious consolation, itself exemplifies an attenuation of this dominant ideology. Hannah Arendt, for example, argues that "in the [modern] age," one experiences "life and death . . .

not only in isolation but in utter loneliness" and/or with "the almost complete loss of authentic concern with immortality . . . ."[27]

If publicly established conventions of reading and criticism don't proscribe such "wild" speculation, one could also claim that the secreted puns in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" could serve *actively* to resist the official public world in Stevens' period. The poem's encrypted pun of cigar/corona/coroner exemplifies just such resistance. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, relatives began reporting the deaths of family members to government officials, and the coroner would then often come as the public's representative to certify the occurrence of these deaths.[28] Recasted in the poem as a cigar-roller, Stevens' "coroner" in effect parodies this public official's role by making the woman's death subject to a privately inscribed pun.

On the other hand, another notable pun in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" still keeps it within acceptable as well as popular public contexts. In a frequently cited remark, Stevens depicted this poem as possessing "the essential gaudiness of poetry; that is the reason why I like it" (Letters, #292; 1933). And nothing seems more gaudy than the pun lurking behind the poem's central image of ice-cream. As a sheer social cry of child-like pleasure, however latent it remains, "I scream" vis-à-vis the children's ditty falls within one of the poem's most accessible themes, for instance its abjuring any "inherited Christian concept of death," whether theological or literary (Piccioto-Richardson, 602). Emphasized by the hyphenated spelling of "ice cream"--Stevens' consistent practice in his journal entries and letters--the "I scream" ditty doubles this last theme. It makes for a notable juxtaposition between a harsh, adult vision of death and a child's wish to disregard death altogether. Many critics have noticed the poem's own childlike aspects: "The gaiety here is not satirical but childlike" (Burney, 58); ". . . in a context redolent of carnival, [ice-cream evokes] cheap childish pleasures and the world of make-believe" (Silverman, 167). Biographical information more or less supports such surmises. Richard Ellmann cites Richard Blackmur's letter from Stevens claiming "that his [young] daughter put a superlative value on ice-cream." Ellmann speculates that she may even have "asked [Stevens] to write a poem about it." Although Holly was not born until two years after Stevens published "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," Ellmann's speculation may still be observant: ". . . there is a child-like quality about the poem," especially with "its absence of taboo" (Blackmur, 79, n.2; Ellmann, 94).

Regardless of its contingent (thus relatively private) occasion as a poem perhaps scripted for a child, the poem's "I scream" allusion could still express a cry or insistent demand for pleasure, but this time as a signifier of Stevens' resistance to excessive aspects of the American public's moral-puritanical invasions of one's (liberal) sense of privacy. Thus, one critic notes the

poem's composition during the Prohibition Era, the legislated effort by latter-day puritans to "contain the forces of what they associated with 'black magic'," but could not do so "any more than kitchen cups" could contain or conceal Stevens' whipped up alcoholic "concupiscent curds" (Richardson, 499). Nor, one might claim, could he control the latent puns spreading throughout the poem's verbal innards. In fact, its very setting signals a transgression of the publicly endorsed moral environment. As not a few critics have surmised, the poem's implicit scene suggests a brothel, what with the invoked boys and dawdling "wenches" and perhaps even the "muscular" "roller" as a figure for a bouncer. And might this funereal setting indicate a wake for a dead former Madam? Or if not that, then the scene could easily enough depict an early 1920's apartment speakeasy, with those "concupiscent curds" again referring to alcohol disguised, as was common, in kitchen-cup containers (Lash).

Given this last surmise, is woman in the second stanza, then, someone synonymous with a Victorian moral America (Richardson, 499),[29] here critically framed as all but useless (like the dresser lacking three cheap-style gaudy knobs), also bankrupt of any value (like the now long past embroidered sheet), and which Stevens in effect wants dead so as to enjoy concupiscent pleasures? At the very least and his private linguistic jokes notwithstanding, this position would ally him with a secular, unofficial public culture in "carnivalesque" opposition to the major public one. But given the poem's child-like tone and possibly very motif, how can we avoid the unappealing "horny feet" of the dead woman, which hardly connotes innocence or some motivated youthful *esprit*? To elicit pleasure from this situation, one has to elide the woman's death altogether ("cover her face"), thus willfully fictionalizing its significance, which the poem arguably also represents doing. Indeed, contrary to what Ellmann argues, "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" just as allusively--or in another "private" register--traffics in a social "taboo" of the most fundamental kind. That is, it subliminally insinuates that the cigar-roller-undertaker should not only make the corpse palatable for public viewing, but also coldly convert it somehow into a "concupiscent" object perversely pleasant enough to consume with one's eyes--as if she were not dead at all. In this sense, the roller, boys and wenches are to participate, albeit unconsciously, in an archetypal sarco-cannibalistic ritual, the object of which is to consume the corpse by erasing its frightful appearance or, in other words, to make it disappear. Bronislaw Malinowski has pointed out, for example, that in some primitive societies, the reactions of relatives to a family corpse set in motion both an ambivalent respect for "the personality still lingering about the body" and yet also "a shattering fear of the gruesome thing that has been left over . . . ."[30] Moreover, this ambivalence finds its counterpart in modern societies where "we no longer know

how to 'kill the dead'" and that, absent "a ceremony to alleviate guilt[,] survivors continue in their fantasies to be obsessed by the deceased."[31]

Deliberately or not, does "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" evince a ceremonial event intended to certify--à la the "*muscular* one," here a synonym for a *decisive* coroner--the deadness of the dead? In that case, Stevens' speaker himself seems to act out the role of a latter-day shamanistic funeral director, which helps explain the incantatory tone of his "Let" directives. He would, so to speak, *finally* kill the dead person for his listeners by means of word-magic: "The *only* emperor is the emperor of ice-cream," i.e., of what totally occludes the woman's death, since otherwise the corpse will only *seem* dead. This reading lends anthropological weight to the poem's abstract, philosophical propositions. In order to dispel *any* possibility that her death *isn't* complete, "Let be *be* finale of seem"; for the same reason, "cover her face"; and "*If* her horny feet protrude," take them to signify the certainty of the woman's death as opposed to any still latent illusion of her potential motility a.k.a. life.

From this angle, then, the "I scream" pun could refer to the public's anxiety over the woman's *revenant* status, or how her past existence, like her leftover dresser and sheet, threatens to hang around, as if she were still affectively alive in the present. The goal of all the figures in the poem is thus to make the very *image* of death as *passé* as "last month's newspapers," and so no more than a pretext for present enjoyments. Hence the speaker calls for the boys to use otherwise useless remnants of a past the better to confirm their own hedonist nowness. Moreover, they're to bring fresh flowers to romance the wenches, who in turn are already dawdling, which is to say are actively prolonging scenes of seduction. Both young persons thus figure deferred time, the better to "cover" the very thought of the woman's "face" or death mask. For that matter, the poem's lurking puns postpone final interpretations by allowing for more than one. Instead of facilitating alcoholic pleasure, for instance, the poem's speaker in fact could very well be tracing a serious ritual or, like a puritan self intent on punishing all pleasure-seekers, even sadistically calling "the muscular one" to "whip . . . concupiscent curds" that otherwise proffer "sensual delights" (Neill, 90)?[32] Conversely and aside from the fact that sadism itself curries the pleasures of power over others, the poem's vulgar images, however much kept private, serve to underscore the "verbal lavishness and rejoicing which is central to [Stevens'] comic spirit. The more irreverent Stevens becomes the funnier" as well (Fuchs, 83).

All this points to how "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" emphasizes the present at the expense of the past, also fostered by its promoting indecisive options for interpretation, which arguably fits

into Stevens' poetics generally, at least during his Harmonium period. But he would also license this surmise about present over past time well after he wrote this poem: "To look at [nobility] at all makes us realize sharply that in our present, the presence of our reality, the past looks false and is, therefore, dead and is, therefore, ugly" ("Noble Rider," NA, 35). Such a remark perhaps provides us with a more plausible purchase on Stevens' own poetic position when writing "The Emperor of Ice-Cream." Does he, through his surrogate speaker, wish to kill off the "past," in the poem's sidelong reference to Victorian mores, as Richardson surmises, or rather to suppress or bypass the "nobility" publicly accorded to *his own* early Romantic and Victorian poetic influences?

The mock funeral for the dead, "ugly" woman with her horny feet could easily concern his former "romantic self, the youth who had hoped and dreamed" (Richardson, 506), which had now come to a head in and through his writing. "I scream," that is, could allude to Stevens' demand on himself to realize a poetic anti-self-consciousness. Most important, this would break the spell of the "to be or not to be" anxieties affecting influential Romantic and Victorian poets like Keats and the later, Darwin-haunted Tennyson. He wants instead to just let his imagination go, and thereby become a "muscular" poetic emperor of his own work (Piccioto-Richardson, 624, 625). Ellmann also takes this position in arguing that Stevens here wishes to jettison early poetic influences so as to allow "his imagination [to] get a fresh start" (Ellmann, 104).[33] This view actually seems to accord with how Stevens later referred to the writing of "The Emperor of Ice-Cream": "I do not remember the circumstances under which this poem was written, unless this means the state of mind from which it came. I dislike niggling, and like letting myself go. The poem is an instance of letting myself go" (Letters, #293; 1933).

So "I scream" could indeed define Stevens' own relation to this poem's very mode of composition. Yet as a perfectly accessible pun regarding the children's familiar ditty and that the poem's central image of ice-cream brings up to any reader's mind, this in effect declaration of his poetic stance remains public, no matter the private trajectory of his other--and always only possible--acts of punning. Are they only performed in a reducibly "comic spirit"? But what if the poem insinuates a private sexual joke in excess of any (then) acceptable public reading? Put another way, what if "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," toying with a bohemian or anti-bourgeois position *but only in a covert manner*, was engaged in excommunicating itself from any then extant public sphere?

Last night, we sat beside a pool of pink,
Clippered with lilies scudding the bright chromes,
Keen to the point of starlight, while a frog
Boomed from his very belly odious chords.
~~Wallace Stevens, "Le Monocle De Mon Oncle"

". . . write in order to have no face."[34]
--Michel Foucault,
The Archaeology of Knowledge

Despite the poem's explicit reference to "wenches" and more implicit one to what many critics regard as a brothel-like scene; and despite its ritualistic traces that suggest one's treating the dead woman as an object outrageously analogous to a species of "ice-cream"; it would still seem too perverse to assert the "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" comprises a series of sexual and what today would amount to sexist jokes. Except incidentally, the poem hardly strikes one as concerned with sex or the issue of gender at all. For example, this is no traditional love poem in which a male persona or speaker addresses a lover and employs death as a trope for sexual death.[35] And while Stevens' poem does arguably vulgarize this thematic to instantiate the pleasures of life, the latter appear in no way limited to sexual ones. As I have argued, they also possibly include the excess of his own verbal play, "letting himself go," in writing the poem itself.[36]

To a certain extent, all such tropes work to privatize the poem's *mise en scène*, so why would he further displace this scene's already private, lower-class (or anti-middle-class) allusions and vulgar use of death by resorting to an even more private because "odious" referential code? If it exists at all, it surely remains concealed from public viewpoints except in the most casual or accidental verbal sense. Indeed Stevens' own public comments about sex and poetry argue against such a surmise. For example, writing to Harriet Monroe, editor of *Poetry*, about a line from "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" that she apparently questioned--"Shall I uncrumple this much crumpled thing?"--Stevens responded, "I don't think that the 'thing' was sex appeal. I am some hundreds of years behind other people, and it is going to be a long time before I let a commercialism like sex appeal get any farther than the front fence" (Letters, #279; 1928). Supporting that sentiment, he all but explicitly denies the Freudian "law" of sex in a well-known passage from that very same poem:

If sex were all, then every trembling hand
Could make us squeak, like dolls, the wished-for words.

But note the unconscionable treachery of fate,
That makes us weep, laugh, grunt and groan., and about
Doleful heroics . . . without regard
To that first, foremost law.

To be sure, as Richardson points out in her biography, it would have been difficult for Stevens to ignore the themes of sexuality in the work of contemporary artists whom he knew while writing his Harmonium poems. Those artists expressed a clear "interest in primitive art," and many "were also making the point about the importance of sexuality." But Richardson further notes Stevens' dislike of "the overt bestiality and violence . . . in pre-Columbian art . . ." (The Early Years, 464). Above all, it seems surely difficult to construe the dead woman in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" as part of any covert sexual scenario. For instance, can we finally identify her as some once revered Madam of the brothel many critics attribute to the poem's general milieu? Such becomes harder to entertain if one accepts Richardson's surmise that one likely source of the poem was Stevens' "combined" memory of his grandmother, mother and aunt's deaths (51). Echoing certain items in the later poem, he had written to his wife in 1912 about a visit to his dying mother, and where he speaks of her lying in her private room. He then takes note of how her old furniture seemed still in place throughout the house, and further mentions how "[s]he liked the flowers that had been brought," and how "the girls" came and spoke with the doctor. He also recalls her saying that "she had had her 'boys'" and had asked Stevens, "'Do you remember how you used to troop through the house'?" (SP, 253-55). In addition, it is well-known that he associated his poetic work with his mother, allowing one to guess at the "Emperor" speaker's own possibly once-affectionate attitude towards the dead woman.[37]

But if he identifies with his mother as figure for his imagination, why, then, does Stevens via his speaker treat the woman as at once finally dead and physically repulsive, especially in the image of her protruding "horny feet"? Is it because of what today we would term a "sexist" turn, or perhaps, if one still wants to regard the woman as akin to his once "mother" muse, even an almost masochistic view of his poetic work as now self-consciously "masculine"? After all, in social-historical terms, it is not at all certain that Stevens' economic and poetic pursuits refer to a securely defined and opposing masculine-feminine binary in the capitalist, early twentieth-century US workplace. Working in "white collar" jobs within "large companies," men like Stevens were forced to adopt roles analogous to women traditionally and still subservient to patriarchal authorities. That is, men in such companies--like Stevens' insurance one in Hartford--"remained dependent upon the corporation as [a] paternal authority," and therefore "in need of manly validation."[38]

But Stevens equally had recourse to an alternative view of his poetic activities, no matter the intricate rationalization that might have entailed. For one thing, for him and as if only as a kind of private fantasy in relation to public-economic anxieties, to write poetry could mean performing the other traditional American role of being a self-made or an *in*dependent man. Moreover, poetry was hardly a money-making enterprise, which could have afforded Stevens with another ironic because gender-reversed fantasy: being *free from* the fast-paced economic and new technological forces run by men but that were getting beyond any one male's or masculine group's ability to control.[39]

He also could have had other reasons to construe his poetry as a masculine activity. The US public workplace was perceived by many as becoming feminized, whether in the marketplace "with more women employed in increasingly feminine offices," or the culture at large as exemplified by "gender nonconformist" women "of the 1920s" (Kimmel, 197). Males of course continued to dominate who the "public" was and what it valued (and didn't) for most people; lower-class males no doubt did the same within their own families and among friends. Even so, all this was occurring in unpredictable and fast-changing ways, and it also affected how many male artists viewed their work. To take one example, some "[l]iterary critics like W. Churchill Williams and Bliss Carman" publicly "fumed against 'emasculated' literature" and standards; they also made "masculinity something that had to be constantly demonstrated" (Kimmel, 144,120)--or, in other words, a major public issue.

Do such reactionary males, then, define the quasi-private public group to whom Stevens also quasi-privately plays in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream"? At the time, calling for "big cigars" surely suggests participation in a conventionally male social activity. For the moment assuming they exist, the poem's sexual and sexist allusions might also constitute an in-group joke. Fraternal organizations in colleges and elsewhere often relied on "secret" rituals to support male bonding; it formed a common means for many American males to validate their manhood between the late nineteenth century and the mid-1920s (Kimmel, 171-75). More, the image of the "muscular one" possesses a similar but also an obvious gendered inflection. The period, after all, equated a certain "masculine physique" with "strength of character." Well publicized physical exercise regimens (cf. Eugene Sandow, Teddy Roosevelt, "Charles Atlas" and Bernarr Macfadden) became popular arguably to counter middle-class male anxieties about their increasing "weary desk-job" or "feminine" situations (Kimmel, 210; Green, 175).

The fact that a cigar-roller, however muscularly endowed, does not exactly fit the image of a middle-class male physical culturist poses only a minor obstacle to such an interpretation. No doubt comprised mainly of white, Northern European, middle-class and Protestant males in the US cultural scene, the male-oriented public of

which Stevens was a part nonetheless could identify in passing with lower-class male figures like a cigar-roller by means of their analogous feminized work-positions and the wish to resist them in demonstrable ways. The poem's very first scene plausibly resembles a miniature male public within which the only women permitted are belittled "wenches." The "boys," moreover, are drawn as emphatically heterosexual, i.e., not effete, and carry flowers only for purposes of seducing the young women. For that matter, the use of "last month's newspapers" to wrap the flowers in effect minimizes the news, i.e., the site of the official public sphere associated with one's inability to control it, not to mention its continued collusion with cultural modes of feminization.[40]

"The Emperor of Ice-Cream" also figures an aggressive riposte to this last evocation of a dominant US public sphere. Given Stevens' own pleasures in smoking "big cigars" along with the contemporary association of Prohibition and its threat of banning even *them*, his speaker's calling for a cigar-roller amounts to an assertion of male prerogatives.[41] That kind of aggression also helps explain the "grotesque humor" implicit in the speaker's focus on the dead woman's "horny feet" (Brogan, 5) and, worst of all, his in effect abuse of her death as a pretext for a lower-class celebration. The woman here doesn't stand for a figure showing Stevens' impulse to want Victorian morality dead.[42] Still less is she alluded to as a former Madam or agent herself for male sexual desires. Rather, like women once quarantined within nineteenth-century "private" a.k.a. domestic spheres--not unlike the woman here who "embroidered fantails once"--she represents a woman who formerly capitulated especially to wealthy and/or "white collar" husbands who would often seek their own "private" and mostly libertine (if not liberated) pleasures elsewhere--as in the present poem's scene--in public venues of their own making. From Stevens' point of view, this would almost make the ersatz Victorian woman's death something indeed to mourn rather than celebrate.

That any of these surmises bespeak Stevens' own view risks the usual problem with biographical modes of criticism: the effort to make the only approximate understanding of an other's private life wholly certain and open to public record. But other kinds of evidence exist to support them. For instance, does Stevens even include his wife in his poetic scenario, for according to Richardson, after they were married, Elsie "lived by the most puritanical laws, banned alcohol" and "periodically [] frowned at smoking" (The Early Years, 264)? In a different but no less psycho-sexual context, Stevens might also have felt a version of Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence," namely that he lacked "the majestic organ of a phenomenal man" like Shakespeare (Lentricchia, Ariel, 170). His gendered aggression towards women, then, which at least early on included viewing his very writing of poems as a "lady-like" activity,[43] thus

evinces possible sources of anxiety against which he imagines a scene of male camaraderie supported only by certain kinds of women others would derogatorily term "wenches."

His goal, in short, is to imagine trumping any competitive masculine ethos--not letting it get in his way. In "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," he thus projects as dead not Victoria but a personification of versions of femininity--including his own. Instead of effeminate male drum-majors throwing batons in the air, as he later writes in a 1934 poem withheld from publication, "They ought to be *muscular men/* Naked and stamping the earth/ *Whipping* the air" (OP, 70; my emphasis)--images that clearly echo his "Emperor" poem's as well as section VII of the earlier "Sunday Morning." And if "concupiscent curds" in fact connote speakeasy argot for alcohol banned from a feminized public sphere, they also conjure a masculine counter-public based on anti-feminine behavior: "Drinking was a form of masculine resistance to feminization" (Kimmel, 124).

Since the 1980s, some critics have tried to mitigate Stevens and his work's canonical status on the basis of such "incorrect" attitudes. Jacqueline Brogan remarks that they especially affect his early poetry: "This conflict--the liberation of women politically and the increased resentment toward, if not repression of her personally--accounts for the overwhelming number of poems written during Stevens' early period that expose women's status (or lack of status) in the early part of [the twentieth century]" (5). Mark Halliday argues that, as the reference to "wenches" shows in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," Stevens' women figures [in his poetry] possess no otherness; rather, he "mainly proposed a way of seeing [in his poetry] . . . not conducive to, nor concerned with, seeing into another person--into her mind, into her heart" (Halliday, 62).[44] Halliday goes on to claim that Stevens feared "female sexuality," which explains his depiction of the dead woman in his 1922 poem: to "cover her face."

Yet writing per se makes it difficult to equate Stevens' views of women with the speaker's in this poem. And even if one insisted the two as one, that would only point to how the poem then locks itself out from a feminine public. Indeed, the subterranean puns in many of Stevens' early poems go so far as to refer to a gendered democratic matrix. That is, they equally allude to male and female "private parts." In an eponymously titled poem, for instance, the name "Peter Quince" refers "in veiled slang to both male and female parts"; or the poem "'Cy Est Pourtraicte . . .'" mentions a "bunch of roughened radishes dug from the soil, surrounded by wildflowers with curling tendrils . . . an image strongly evocative of genitalia, ambiguously suggestive of both male and female parts . . ." (Richardson, 283, 433). And despite Stevens' denial of any sexual allusion attached to that "much crumpled thing" in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," the last four lines of this poem's first stanza could easily sketch a male masturbatory moment:

> The sea of spuming thought foists up again
> The radiant bubble that she was. And then
> A deep up-pouring from some saltier well
> Within me, bursts its watery syllable.

Again, one can't finally determine whether this passage belongs to a staged persona or confesses Stevens' own sexual fantasy. Except for the male speaker's private sexual act--all the more so for its linguistic ambiguity and, especially if there, single-sex experience--any public gender-judgments perforce remain on hold. The one abiding target seems to be Stevens' here imaginary scandalizing any US puritan setting.

If the woman personifies that setting in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream, she and its violation get signified by her death. But this is so not as a representative of a *passé* "Victorian" mores but rather of an overwhelming, well-publicized "public" still in force as Stevens writes this poem. *That* significance, the *exposé* of a *public's* ersatz infiltration of self and its "anti" relation to sexual pleasure, is possibly what defines this image. It appears in another Stevens poem also apparently critical of Victoriana: the targeted "you" addressed in the last stanza of "Exposition of the Contents of a Cab" (1919), the title itself rife with sexual connotation. Perhaps for that reason and for the way he depicts the female protagonist there, Stevens left it out of *Harmonium*. Victoria Clementina, a black woman and a quite clear parody of Victorian womanhood, might have worn "a breech-cloth"--another allusion to genitalia--"Netted of topaz and ruby/ And savage blooms" (OP, 41). The speaker then questions his presumably white female companion: "What breech-cloth might you wear/ Except linen, embroidered/ By elderly women?"

In our time of racial self-consciousness and a public politically complicit with "left" or "right" moral surveillance, one could regard the poem as containing (sic) Stevens' egregious cultural fantasy, especially since he doesn't places his surrogate speaker *in* the "cab." Richardson suggests this fantasy concerns "immigrant and black" sexuality with its "sinful attraction to WASPish Americans" like Stevens (498).[45] But the poem stages this "white" cultural fantasy as just that: "Victoria . . . / Took seven white dogs/ To ride in a cab." The poem's exposition takes in and belittles white male fantasies; it thus undermines the very cultural perspective that an ideological criticism of Stevens' poetry would accuse it of representing. Moreover, in directing attention to the essential "contents of the cab"--female genitalia thinly covered by the "breech-cloth," perhaps the poem's own self-referring metonym--the Stevens speaker effectively disarms the no less racist and sexist romanticization of the black woman as a cultural other: "She too is flesh . . . ." In fact, white or black, culturally identi-

fied as the same or different, both women are at bottom identified as equal by their anonymous or color-blind "private parts."

In this way, Stevens sidesteps Richardson's contention about what his own "embroidered sheet" or text suppresses: that he seeks "to hide beneath" its "Peter Quince"-like "'piano-polished' surface . . . thoughts and feelings that would have been considered indecorous or . . . inappropriate as a 'good Puritan'" (66). But poems like "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" do more than construe sex as pockets of held-back private "thoughts and feelings"; instead they inch us towards a vulgar focus on "private parts" or, so one could argue, simultaneously edge their composer towards a vision of an individuated yet anonymous biologistic event.

Of course, hunting for and finding sexual allusions in any poem but especially in Stevens' risks, as I have stated before, the charge of egregious overreading. Still, more than one critic has noticed such allusions in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream": "Much of the sexual symbolism is direct: the big cigar, the kitchen cups, the concupiscent curds" along with the "wenches. But it is also marginal" (Thackaberry). The poem's "diffuse sexual atmosphere" seems obvious (Sampson, 32). Or the kind of pleasure that the poem's figures "provide is implicitly sexual. The roller of big cigars calls to mind both carnival strongman and [a] peepshow barker" (Coyle). Other critics, of course, try to deny such connections altogether, but in the process acknowledge by omission the temptation to make them so. For instance, McDermott claims that the line "'the only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream'" means that "there is no true joy in man's preoccupation with sex" (88). But Stevens had already shown himself capable of "peepshow" poetic allusions, as when, this time in an omitted stanza from again "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," he depicts certain kinds of poets as "unlucky pimps/ of pomp . . ." (OP, 39). In one journal entry (1909), he had even noted burlesque wenches and the gaudy "dress" they could wear in public--a seminal scene perhaps of the "Exposition" poem: "In one smart Victoria there were four fat chorus girls with their lips carmine--and fur and feathers and everything else" (SP, 203).

Such examples, however, at best provide what Thackaberry terms "marginal" evidence for the "Emperor" poem's *primary* concern with sexual issues. Nonetheless, Stevens could focus on sex's centrality in other Harmonium poems like "O Florida, Venereal [sic] Soil" where he as if states that his poems should "Conceal yourself or disclose/ Fewest things to the lover," i.e., in this case to the reader attracted by the poem's elliptical narrative. Speaking of "Venereal" allusions, is the "Indian" in "The Cuban Doctor" an all but disguised figure for the Freudian Id causing the "I" or Ego figure pangs of sexually originated, i.e., venereal, pain, which the Ego futilely tries in vain to escape even when it temporarily subsides?

. . . the Indian struck
Out of the cloud and from his sky . . . .

***

I knew my enemy was near--I
Drowsing in summer's sleepiest horn.

The image of horn here could point to a covering like the foreskin of the penis just as does the red-turbaned boatman in "The Load of Sugar-Cane." And in another poem left unpublished, the Stevens speaker addresses a woman "lying in the grass" and then impatiently disclaims the use of romantic verbal pretenses--"the monotony of monotonies"--in getting her to make physical love: "Why should I savor love/ With tragedy or comedy,/ Delicatest machine" ("Romance for a Demoiselle Lying in the Grass," OP, 44). This is no common or traditional "seduction" poem. Not only does it eschew the "romantic" or any attitude that could be considered publicly vulgar, but its setting also evokes only to differentiate itself from that of a poem specifically notable for its similar grassy love-scene. In Whitman's Song of Myself, sections three and four, the "I" immediately transforms sex with the lover lying in the grass into a spiritual experience:

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge that pass all the argument of the earth
And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own . . . .

Stevens' speaker in "Romance," in contrast, vetoes any such transformation; he regards the other as, first and last, nothing more than a sexual "machine."

Again, one could plausibly argue that such examples are exceptions to the Stevens rule--were it not that "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" continues this all but concealed "sex" inflection to an extreme. It does so not as Thackaberry avers, because this wake-like scenario exhibits a final "celebration, an orgy without pretences," and because its "sole ruling force" is that "of a crude hedonism," notably to skirt thoughts of death that indicate a purposeless finality of the human. As previously noted, many of the poem's images undoubtedly incline us to this type of--if any--sexual reading. But the poem also intimates a scenario in which these images head towards a vulgarity that rejects both romanticization and rationalization via some *carpe diem* escape clause. In principle, then, they therefore reject all kinds of publicly grounded explanations.

The image of "big cigars" may only refer to big cigars, regardless of its phallic connotations, but Stevens goes the Freudian translation one better by what I earlier referred to as the cigar qua corona proximate pun: the more idiomatically vulgar allusion to the head of a penis. The speaker's calling "the roller of big ci-

gars," then, invokes the biologistic force that results in erections, which, as also "the muscular one," the roller equally personifies or is reduced to. Given the kitchen's function for preparing goods to satisfy human appetites, his whipping up "concupiscent curds" in kitchen cups" outlines an image of filling the male testicles with sperm, the effect of which is sheer pleasurable discharge.

This subliminally reductive allegory helps account for other references in the first stanza. The "wenches" and "boys" at once evoke the prime of sexual urges and their own reduction of persons to anonymous human types, here underlined by the poem's own pluralized references to them. Moreover, the Stevens speaker intends that they should play out a sexually de-humanized scenario where "The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream," i.e., of "cream," a reference to gism, and "ice," since seminal discharge is an impersonal or, from human perspectives, simply a "cold" biological occurrence.[46] The listener and/or the poem's reader likely will resist these slippery slope references towards an embrace of outright vulgarity--which is why the speaker allows ("Let") the "boys" dabble in obvious or trite games of seduction by bringing flowers, whether for the wenches or even the supposed dead woman in the next room. But like "last month's newspapers," the boys's actions are self-evidently irrelevant, as are tired seduction-images in a poem like the present one. The most anyone can do to avoid the anonymity curried by raw sexuality, the brute facticity of sex as the "only emperor" of human be/ing, is to "dawdle" or temporarily defer it by the use of superficially acceptable or dressed-up conventions.

The poem's dabbling in vulgarity verges on the repellent--is it the "odious" sound of the low-level frog in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle"? As in the case of the "death"--also excremental?--interpretation of "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," this vulgar gloss would surely advance an argument for an "ironic" speaker and/or author. Such would show the speaker's words or even the poem itself as delaying the even baser vision of the finality of "being" for as long as anyone possibly can. What else are words for if not, in the end, to mitigate the "real"? But this "out" would only underestimate the effect of the poem's pun-ridden vulgarity that relentlessly points us to how speaker and poet actively participate in a radical reduction both of males and females (already here abstracted) to sexual objects without even the Freudian consolation of sublimation. Letting "the wenches dawdle in such dress as they are used to wear" has an inevitably double meaning: the wenches should dress what will be "used" to seduce males for the purpose of heightening their sexual excitement; in turn, these women will themselves get "used" in their relations with the "boys."

A similar reading underpins the second stanza's depiction of the assumed dead woman. She once occupied the old "private" domestic sphere, as when "she embroidered fantails once." *That* world,

i.e., of a faux privacy and not Victoriana in general, is now to be made dead and past, totally effaced, and about which the figures in the poem, the speaker too, are to celebrate. The stanza's first word "Take" has connotations of rape once we consider her "dresser of deal" as an image for the physical repertoire of a woman. The dead woman, that is, becomes a pretext for entertaining another male fantasy of a woman who, consciously or not, deals with men--in other words profits by--her sexual wares, as in the case of the poem's brothel-like suggestion. In missing its "three glass knobs," this cheap dresser doubles for female genitalia from a vulgar male viewpoint: unlike Victoria Clementina's own be-jeweled breech-cloth, the woman in the present fantasy lacks the triune male genitalia or what, in traditional male-sexist parlance, are often referenced as the "family jewels."

But note too: if these puns would degrade the woman's otherness as a person, conversely these would-be precious male jewels themselves are also debased into mere "glass knobs"--males comprised of nothing more now than blunted genitals--and so not even "pricks." Conversely, the conspicuous "embroidered sheet" taken from *this* kind of "dresser of deal" reminds us of the dead woman's "once" or former romantic illusions as figured by the "embroidered fantails"--that is, they once perhaps signified her linkage of sex and love. But the image of fantails could of course go in an entirely different direction. In arch contrast to its eliciting a serious reference--for one, "the peacock as a symbol of Christ"--they in fact constitute yet another explicit "sexual reference" (Kravec, 10). As itself a pun-ridden image, "fantails" conjures up can-can burlesque shows and worse: a scatological reference to a woman's "fanny"-cum-"tale."

Not surprisingly, this line of reading brings us close to regarding the phrase "If her horny feet protrude" as doing more than blocking any lingering romantic illusions that one might have about the woman's loss of a false private world. Instead, "horny" simply gives way to "an alley word for libidinous" (Thackaberry). And "If her horny feet protrude"--if this entire vulgar reduction seems too much to accept even for the Stevens speaker--he insists on everyone focusing all the more and precisely on that reductive sexual fact. It turns out that sex "Could" indeed "make us squeak, like dolls." One has to cover up with a "sheet" other interpretations any manifestation of her impotent private world so that it could never again offer an alternative to the public world beyond the confines of this enclosed *mise en scène*. In short, she and we exist only to become akin to mere sexual objects. A further old back-alley joke--we are in a male setting with "cigars" at the ready--reads that "a woman is only a woman, but a good cigar is a smoke."[47]

And then there's the reductive phrase that applies to this itself sexist reading. The directive to "cover her face" reminds one

of another vulgar male put-down of women: put a bag over her face in order to fuck her without regard to her physical appearance. Here again, male anxiety about female sexuality comes to the fore, for the woman's beauty or lack of it, especially associated with her "face," potentially opens up the issue of her person as such--her subjective otherness and what a relation to that might entail. In order to suppress that possibility, he must forcibly interpret all indications of *her own* past or present sexual desires--her own "horny feet" with their potential to change into a living other--as signs of her being just "cold . . . and dumb." The latter term of course also demands that she is to signify no otherness whatsoever, but only a "dumb," i.e., thought-less and anonymous, sexual object.

Neither an inverted "seduction" poem or a "carpe diem" one nor a celebration of "crude hedonism" in general, "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" from beginning to end has one focus ("Let the lamp" of imagination "affix its beam"): to face the utter impersonality of sex and so the "finale of seem"--the end to what she once seemed, if only worked out from a crude male perspective. Like the women in the "Cab" poem, she was or is no more than her physical body. Conversely, this way of thinking redounds to the speaker and his representation of a masculine viewpoint regarding women: as merely anonymous "wenches." One can thus also say that the poem's refrain of "ice-cream" acts as a slang, vocative verb. The accompanying pun underscoring that refrain, "The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream," includes the desideratum of "I scream," which, as noted earlier, Stevens' hyphenation of "ice-cream" underscores all the more. This time, however, its reference includes how sex makes indelicate machines of us all, and how that experience remains an entirely private, orgasmic experience--more private than the dead woman's once domestic sphere.

A perverse revision of the children's well-known rhyme, "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" indeed seems to justify Stevens' later depiction of writing it as an example of "letting myself go." In another letter to Harriet Monroe written around the time of composing this poem, Stevens admitted that "Often I have to let go, in the most insignificant poem. And often when I have a real fury for indulgence I must stint myself" (Letters, #254; 1922).

5

". . . he remembered the time when he stood alone,
When to be and delight to be seemed to be one . . . ."
--Wallace Stevens, "Anglais Mort À Florence"

"Ezra Pound's modernist shibboleth 'Make it new' becomes in Wallace Stevens 'Make it private'."
--Frank Lentricchia, Ariel and the Police

The preceding reading of "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" clearly goes too far. It meets all the requirements of an overreading. No doubt for many, it makes too much of too little. And even if hermeneutically possible, the argument for the poem's vulgar sexual allegory could lead to other explanations. As noted, it could point to Stevens' sexist fears of female sexuality, or else his inverted puritanism that, as also noted previously, shows his guilt-ridden desires in the very way it conceals itself in the poem. One could further add that in focusing on the woman *whether* as corpse or pretext for sexist ruminations (its or mine), Stevens' poem reflects a common, Western-ideological attitude.

Underwritten by Cartesian epistemology, i.e., the self as isolated ego, this attitude, according to Francis Barker, is complicit with bourgeois economic and discursive practices as well as patriarchal prejudices. Together, they have produced what he terms "the tremulous private body" of the modernist period dating back to Shakespeare. Like the woman's "dead" body in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" (not cited by Barker), this 'modern" body gets socially constructed as "a hypostatized object . . . a simple biological mechanism of given desires and needs acted on externally by controls and enticements"; that's to say that she does not exist as a "relation in a system of liaisons which are material, discursive, psychic, sexual, but without stop or centre."[48] As in the case of Andrew Marvell's "Coy Mistress," it seems more probable that the woman in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" is also "an objectified body at which speech is aimed . . . but whose being is . . . subdiscursive: dumb, reduced, corporeal matter." But since the poet's speaker only *wishes* for this final objectification ("*Let* be be finale of seem"), so, too, such "gendered reduction[s] cannot be total" (Barker, 84).

With this kind of depiction, we a.k.a. Stevens a.k.a. his persona-speaker are back in the world of "Ariel and the Police," to use Lentricchia's words, though perhaps with a different twist. But to make Barker's essentially moral charge stick, one has to assume that the poem/poet's intention is solely to purvey a sexual and sexist joke, one laced with likely masculine predation. Or at the very least, we could take the poem as promoting life's pleasures at the expense of due consideration for the dead. But as I have argued, these sexual and sexist intimations appear alongside an entirely different ideological pressure: Stevens pursuit of a kind of privacy that would remain distinct from what his bourgeois-cum-patriarchal world also continually disallows, and which requires him to resort to imaginary strategies to imagine a radical kind of "privacy" at all.

Put another way, exploiting the gendered and psycho-sexual tropes readily available within his public world, Stevens' poem aims to disclose, as I suggested at the beginning of this essay, a vision of privacy that ceaselessly sublates all public definitions of it. The attempt to focus exclusively ("only") on impersonal sex-

ual desire via submerged puns and kinds of jokes (notably ones that also reduce males to their own nothing-more-than "private parts") effectively violates such definitions. Consider, for example, the counter masculine public previously noted. That is, one could hold that the poem's *de facto* ambiguous vulgarities *contra* women could at least evince a desire for male camaraderie, namely a "private" lower-class haven resisting any perceived feminine intrusions. As also already noted, the latter were occurring with special *public* notoriety during the 1920s, given the success of women's suffrage and their much advertised support (if not practice by "wenches") of Prohibition. But this very ambiguity, not to mention the males' still public-writ-small, finally fail to invite a convincing model or analogue for what Stevens, I am arguing, down deep desires: one able to evince a radically private scene of writing.[49]

A like failure appears if one takes the sexual "in" joke as accessible to his contemporary modernist cohorts fed either an expansive or a straight Freudian diet. On one hand, they adopted an anti-bourgeois, anti-public-taste stance: *épater les bourgeois*, for instance. On the other, the avant-garde American poets of the period in question quickly formed groups, public affiliations with similar-thinking poets and writers.[50] Moreover, unlike theirs, Stevens' point was not the elevation of sexual pleasure at all or its psycho-surrealist misreading or revisions of Freud's dictum. For example, in bohemian argot, one might very well reverse Freud's well-known statement, "where id was there ego shall be" to "where ego was there id shall be again." Even less can we impose an expected Freudian reading of the dead woman as Stevens' surrogate mother, the death of whom he here finally mourns. Art's upset of bourgeois reality doesn't elicit privacy so much as revised visions of utopian alternatives to modern life.[51] Many of them anti-bourgeois, to be sure, such modernist credos thus remain also constrained by their dedication to imagining any alternative public life beyond the one(s) they perceived in force.

These limitations of alternative social modes of privacy in turn merely serve to press the Stevens composing his poem to imagine and desire a different sense of privacy. As with the dead woman with her once domestic past, he can always regard any such social haven as but a misguided avatar interfering with his desire to "let myself go" during his act of writing. In other words, each time he comes upon an image for a private retreat, he concedes its reducibility to social constructions emanating from one or another regnant public sphere. Nor can he ever occlude such constructions ahead of time and therefore signify his sense of privacy by silence or literal solitude or, least of all, by refraining from publication itself. Public pressures, after all, continually ignite his notion of new visions of a possible nether privacy. So neither, of course, can he therefore accept publicly secured versions of privacy, or take for granted its status as a commodity like the ever evanescent "ice-cream"; or depend on law to sanction "the right to

be let alone"; or trust in the liberal sense of self and other, given such a trust's ideologically exposeable ties with the essentially public desire for "private property."

For these reasons, the vulgar allegorization of vulgar masculinist sexual reductions first of all occurs within a more private scene of writing "The Emperor of Ice-Cream"--moving away from what I have termed the more accessible "death" reading, which the move from the first to second stanza doubles. Second, such moves remain publicly pointless when and if ever discerned by readers--and that *is* the point. Stevens' poem even exceeds the simple thematic of the indisputable pleasures of sex. Rather, through his poem his wish, as it were, is to arrive at an image of a bodily individuated yet anonymous self, expressible only as a personally experienced possibility where, to revise the children's rhyme, "I alone scream for I scream." Here, how one regards that act before and after doesn't count.

As I read it, then, Stevens poem constitutes an experiment in being able to evade the publicization of self as if *ad infinitum*. But how can I as critic know any of this except by invasive interpretations of this Stevens poem, and those, finally, on the basis of thinly allusive puns--if indeed they are that? My depiction of its inward turnings surely appears no less vulnerable to public determinations, such as why would I read them the way I have? Similarly, one can always attribute public reasons, especially ideological ones, to how and why Stevens pursues privacy at so many levels in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream." Today, flooded by academically endorsed speculations, our instinctive suspicions, like Francis Barker's, would be to apprehend Stevens' embedded puns or jokes as moves towards a privative or questionable state of privacy, thus to claim--or wish--that it is *de facto* public after all. Does that diminish what one could regard as his "firecat" poetics?[52] One answer is that "privacy" in Stevens means a becoming-private, or his never arriving at his desired end-point but nevertheless holding to that goal, as when "the firecat closed his bright eyes/ And slept" (CP 3)--no doubt with another day ahead requiring the same acts of blocking public "bucks."

More, because it places the burden of interpretive proof on each particular reader, the excessively vulgar reading of "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" in effect would make it all the more private for Stevens in the process of composing his poem. Sooner or later, that reader, even the most accepting, must make an unexpected and unpopular, i.e., non-public, critical leap out of his or her "interpretive community." But Stevens' poem would still remain private vis-à-vis his positional relation to it, since such a reader's only option would be either to keep to his or her own simultaneous move toward the private, or else misread the poem's "private" aim by making it a publicly explicable state or goal.

Consider the multiple modes of interpretive detection required to arrive at that explication--and then to claim that it pertains to Wallace Stevens, of all poets? My readings of course could easily enough redound to my "vulgar" sensibility, reminding me of the line from Bob Dylan's "Every Grain of Sand": "Sometimes I turn, there's someone there, other times it's only me." But wouldn't that itself allow for a Stevens able to reflect doubly on how private he has become in the process of writing "The Emperor of Ice-Cream"? By definition, then, my readings of the poem happily miss the mark, the better to leave Stevens alone. *Quod erat demonstrandum.*

An Addendum

Most Stevens followers know that he was a private person. In his later years, he lived in one side of his and Elsie's house in West Hartford, while she and Holly occupied the other side. But even earlier, the privacy issue came between them, and it was related to his writing poems per se. After his marriage to her, who we can imagine was the closest person to him but who disliked his habit and enjoyment of "big cigars," he wrote the following remark when they were temporarily apart: "Somehow, I do not feel like reading. It isn't in the air in June. But I *do* like to sit with a big cigar and think of pleasant things--chiefly of things I'd like to have and do" (Letters, #174; 1910; his emphasis).[53]

Stevens' reversion to his premarital pleasures of smoking and thinking "of pleasant things" perhaps finds an inscribed analogue in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream." This letter directly addresses a woman herself a notoriously private and even a reclusive person. According to their daughter, Stevens' wife "seemed to dislike the fact that [Stevens'] books were published. Questioning her about this after my father's death, she told me that he had published 'her poems'; that he had made public what was, in her mind, very private" (SP, 227). After his death, she destroyed his remaining papers, except for those she found permissible according to her socially acceptable lights. Early on and still wanting to be his utterly private source of poetic inspiration, she had once accused him, to quote a 1924 unpublished Stevens poem "Red Loves Kit," "of adulteries/ That sack the sun, though metaphysical" (OP, 63). In other words, he felt she resented his private poetic ruminations as well as their communication to unknown public readers.

On such grounds, publishing his poems thus constituted a doubly private act for Stevens. In them, he wrote privately--indirectly--about things she may have inspired. But paradoxically because he *did* publish them, for him they remained private even from her, otherwise the most private audience he could possibly imagine for his poems as he wrote them. In the same year of writing "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," Stevens in another poem, "The Comedian As the Letter C," perhaps indirectly acknowledged his private "adulteries"

with his poetic muse or "duenna," even as he returned to a "congenial" or non-poetic life with his wife:

> And so it came, his cabin shuffled up,
> His trees were planted, his duenna brought
> Her prismy blonde and clapped her in his hands,
> The curtain flittered and the door was closed.
> Crispin, magister of a single room,
> Latched up the night. So deep a sound fell down
> It was as if the solitude concealed
> And covered him and his congenial sleep.

Stevens quit publishing poems for a good while after the publication of Harmonium, partly due to his determination to succeed with his insurance work, but perhaps for another reason as well: practicing--for he no doubt kept writing during this hiatus--what he had privately sought in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream." He shut "the door" on any possible public inquisition into his relation to writing his poetry.

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ENDNOTES

1. I use the following texts of Stevens' works throughout this essay: The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York: 1961), hereafter cited as *CP*; Letters of Wallace Stevens, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: 1966), hereafter cited by letter number and date; The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and Imagination (New York: 1951), hereafter cited by essay title and *NA*; Opus Posthumous: Poems/Plays/Prose, ed. Milton J. Bates (New York: 1989), hereafter cited by title of work and *OP*; and Holly Stevens, Souvenirs and Prophecies: The Young Wallace Stevens (New York: 1977), hereafter cited as *SP* and date of journal or letter. Note: this essay preceded my published work Edgar Allan Poe, Wallace Stevens, and the Poetics of American Privacy (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), and constitutes a fuller explication of "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" than the one found there.

2. Note: I wrote this essay twenty or so years ago, and have only updated certain aspects of its argument as well as certain references here and there. I don't entertain works on "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" subsequent to that initial period. A condensed version of this essay appeared in my book Edgar Allan Poe, Wallace Stevens and The Poetics of American Privacy (Baton Rouge, 2002).

3. James R. Beniger documents these twentieth-centure innovation as they appeared around Stevens' time in The Control Revolution: Technological and Economic Origins of the Information Society (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), See especially pp. 291-495. [Note: This essay was originally written before the millenium, and so I occasionally add *obvious* contemporary additions to the references that I originally made, but which I think accord with the latter. And here I must also acknowledge that my subsequent references to critical readings of "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" elide twenty-plus years of critical articles and works on Stevens' poetry that I perforce have not considered.

4. Social critics have come to regard the concept of a single public sphere, such the 18th century bourgeois public sphere espoused by Jürgen Habrmas in Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), as marked by many subterranean publics, most of them categorized in terms of race, gender, class, and ethnicity. See, for example, Nancy Fraser's view that "virtually contemporaneous with the [eighteenth-century] bourgeois public there arose a host of competing counterpublics, including nationalist publics, popular peasant publics, elite woman's publics, and working-class publics." "Rethinking the Public Sphere," Habermas and the Public Sphere, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, Mass, 1993, p. 116.

5. One has only to point to the ubiquitous cell-phone, for example, to see how the project of "keeping in touch" with others, and no matter how innocuous most such communications are--the point most often is just *to* communicate--has become a *sine quo non* of existence, and not just in Western countries. Quite clearly, the accelerated, electronic reproduction of events, visual and phonic has, now constitutes an expected public "norm," albeit If it isn't (yet) the same as a pathological "addiction."

6. Habermas in Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere and Richard Sennett in The Fall of Public Man (New York, 1974) both take note of this breakdown, but to emphasize the loss it has wreaked on the public sphere.

7. Samuel Warren and Louis Brandeis, "The Right to Privacy," Killing the Messenger: 100 Years of Media Criticism, ed. Tom Goldstein (New York, 1989), pp. 8, 13: 5-21. This article was originally published in the Harvard Law Review (December 15, 1890)--seven years before Stevens attended Harvard.

8. Julie C. Inness, Privacy, Intimacy, and Isolation (New York, 1992), p. 110.

9. I should state here that by the term "privacy" *re* the medium of writing, I am not speaking of, as we term them, a writer's "private" letters, diaries, unpublished autobiographies, and the like. These doubtless purport to be private in conventional understandings of the term. But these different "private" genres mostly exploit the illusion of verbalizable private events, that is, when they do not play outright into the pressures of a public's prurient interests. Like many "confessional" works in our time, usually abounding in traumatized personal experiences that of course deserve our attention and sympathy, such works equally traffick in the illusion of or else acquiesce to the writer's *sub rosa* desire for self-publicization of one kind or another. I would argue that such "private" generic occasions differ from a Stevens-like writer's efforts in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream." As I read it below, this poem turns out acknowledging and trying to neutralize all such desires, and which ends up thus becoming an undecidable "literary" event, which is to say leaves us undecided about its self-negated "literary" value.

10. For a discussion of the philosophical value one can accord to loafing, see "Kierkegaard's Dagdriver: Loafing as a Means of Resistance to the Technological, Media, and Consumer System," Kierkegaard and Political Theology, ed. Roberto Stirvent and Silas Morgan (Eugene, 2018), 307-326.

11. I cite a number of critical articles and books on Stevens' works especially concerning "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" throughout this essay: Mary B. Arensberg, "A Curable Separation: Stevens and the Mythology of Gender," Wallace Stevens and the Feminine, ed. Melita Schaum (Tuscaloosa, 1993); James Baird, The Dome and the Rock: Structure in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens (Baltimore, 1968); Lucy Beckett, Wallace Stevens (London, 1974); Gabriella Bedetti, "Prosody and 'The Emperor of Ice Cream': The Elegiac in the Lyric," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 8 (Fall 1984); R. P. Blackmur, "Examples of Wallace Stevens," Selected Essays of R. P. Blackmur, ed. Denis Donoghue (New York: 1986); Jacqueline Vaughan Brogan, "'Sister of the Minotaur': Sexism and Stevens," Wallace Stevens and the Feminine, ed. Melita Schaum (Tuscaloosa, 1993); William Burney, Wallace Stevens (New York: 1968); Alan Chavkin, "'The Vaguest Emotion' of Wallace Stevens' 'The Emperor of Ice-Cream," *West Virgina Philological Papers* 28 (1982); Berverly Coyle, "Defining the Role of Aphorism in Wallace Stevens's Poetry," *PMLA* 91 (March, 1976); Richard Ellmann, "Wallace Stevens' Ice-Cream," *The Kenyon Review* 19 (Winter 1957); Barbara M. Fisher, "A Woman with the Hair of a Pythoness," Wallace Stevens and the Feminine, ed. Melita Schaum (Tuscaloosa, 1993); Daniel Fuchs, The Comic Spirit of Wallace Stevens (Durham, 1963); Celeste Goodridge, "Aesthetics and Politics: Marianne Moore's Reading of Stevens," Wallace Stevens and the Feminine, ed. Melita Schaum (Tuscaloosa, 1993); Mark Halliday, Stevens and the Interpersonal (Princeton, 1991); Robert Hass, "Wallace Stevens," Hiding in Plain Sight: Essays in Criticism and Autobiography, ed. Wendy Lesser (San Francisco, 1993); Edward Kessler, Images of Wallace Stevens (New Brunswick, 1072); Maureen Kravec, "Let Arcade Be Finale of Arcadia: Stevens' 'The Emperor of Ice-Cream," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 3 (Spring 1970); Kenneth Lash, *The Explicator* [sic] 6 (April, 1948); Frank Lentricchia, Ariel and the Police: Michel Foucault, William James, Wallace Stevens (Madison: 1988); James Longenbach, Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things (New York, 1991); John McDermott, "Stevens' 'The Emperor of Ice-Cream'," *Explicator* 50 (Winter 1992); Edward Neill, "The Melting Moment: Stevens' Rehabilitation of Ice Cream" (sic), *Ariel* 4 (January 1973); Joan Richardson, Wallace Stevens, A Biography: The Early Years, 1879-1923 (New York, 1986); Joan Piccioto-Richardson, By Their Fruits: Wallace Stevens, His Poetry, His Critics, Dissertation (CUNY, 1977); Theodore Sampson, A Cure of the Mind: The Poetics of Wallace Stevens (Montreal, 2000); Stuart Silverman, "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," *Western Humanities Review* 26 (Spring 1972); William Bysshe Stein, "Stevens' 'The Emperor of Ice-Cream': The Requiem of the Romantic Muse," *NMAL* 1 (Spring 1977); Shirley H. Strobel, "Stevens' 'The Emperor of Ice Cream'" (sic), *Explicator* (Summer 1983); Robert Thackaberry, *The Explicator* [sic] (1948); Helen Vendler, Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen Out of Desire (Cambridge, Mass., 1986); R. Viswanathan, "Stevens' 'The Emperor of Ice-Cream'," *Explicator* 50 (Winter 1992).

12. While many critics assume that the scene refers to a wake in a brothel, with the "wenches" being prostitutes, others think it refers to "the simple funeral of a poor woman in a destitute part of the city" (Chavkin, 114), or even "a carnival or circus," with the "wenches" acting as "performers, wives, ticket sellers" at an informal wake, and the lamp in the dead woman's room serving as a "spotlight" for the "last act of life, death . . ." (Silverman, 168).

13. Without necessarily equating Stevens with the speaker at this point, I assume with the poem's many critics that he is a "he." This gender assumption, however, has an important bearing on my interpretation of the poem, which I discuss in a subsequent discussion of the present essay.

14. Richardson suggests another possible source supporting this stoical interpretation behind the "emperor" image, citing a passage from Matthew Arnold that Stevens copied in his Journal: "'The happiness of your life depends on the quality of your thoughts, therefore guard accordingly. Marcus Aurelius.' Good Emperor, I thank you" (Richardson, 557, n.24).

15. Cf. Richardson's view that along with "Sunday Morning" and other poems published in Harmonium, "'The Emperor of Ice-Cream' . . . appeared explicitly to attack the Christian tradition in their questioning and their presentation of the flaccid underside of any dogmatic position" (438).

16. Harvey Green calls our attention to this fact in The Uncertainty of Everyday Life 1915-1945 (New York, 1993), 140.

17. Phillippe Ariês, The Hour of Our Death, tr. Helen Weaver (New York, 1981), makes a similar point about the private-tization of death customs in the twentieth century, although not specifically referring to their US version: "The beginning of the twentieth century saw the completion of the psychological mechanism that removed death from society, eliminated its character of public ceremony, and made it a private act. At first this act was reserved for intimates, but eventually even the family was excluded as the hospitalization of the terminally ill became widespread" (575; also see 569).

18. Kessler also notes the thematic shift between the two stanzas along these lines: "The second half of the poem shows the futility of dress (artifice) in concealing the cold nakedness that lies at the center of life" (41).

19. R. Viswanathan analogously argues that "Stevens' emperor is not the worm in the grave [as in the Hamlet reference noted above]. But ice cram, which embodies an evanescent paradise, or more precisely, the principle that the unreal is composed from the ingredients of the real" (85).

20. Theodore Sampson (A Cure of the Mind) points out that the very "title of the poem could be easily said to allude to either life or death, or both" (32).

21. Cf. Bedetti: The let [in the second stanza] becomes less an imperative in the ears of the listening poet than a synonym for 'allow' or 'permit'" (100).

22. Harry F. Frankfort, On Bullshit (Princeton, 2005). A former Dartmouth College colleague first made this "death" connection to a corpse years ago. In retyping this essay for my own satisfaction, I found this remark by Frankfurt, whose book was recommended to me by Frank Lentricchia. Frankfurt also makes the cogent point that "Perhaps it is for making death so intimate that we find excrement so repulsive." (43, 44)

23. This interpretive "leap" yet has some back-up. Rex Stout states something similar in his 1937 novel The Red Box (New York) when he has Archie Goodwin, the narrator for the "Nero Wolf" novels, say, "I focused my lamps on [the man] with renewed interest" (69).

24. A further, possibly "cigar" with a corpse is how it once was as slang term. J. E. Lighter, Historical Dictionary of American Slang (New York, 1994), cites a 1918 reference to "cig" or "cigar" as a "coffin nail" (422).

25. Stevens collapses the functions of undertaker and coroner in an uncollected, i.e., kept private, poem that was written around the time of "The Emperor of Ice-Cream": "The Shape of the Coroner" (1923). In that poem, he depicts the coroner as "the beau of illusions," someone who dresses up a male corpse only for "the ground/ And a shabby man/ An eye too sleek,/ And a biscuit cheek" (OP, 62), images clearly related to the dead woman and her "biscuit" or "ice-cream" appearance. Also cf. Stevens' later reference to an "undertaker" in stanza XXIII of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (1937; CP, 177).

26. But cf, Silverman who argues that the poem's *mise en scène* seems "tawdry" (perhaps more than Silverman suspects), and for this reason fails to express "unqualified approval of the emperor of ice-cream" (167) or total pleasure. On the other hand, the poem allows us to understand the speaker's "Let" directives as subjunctive in tone. Instead of imperative commands to others or himself to face death squarely, they would then indicate his wish to "transform[] all these tawdry appearances into an image of the momentary frozen stream of reality . . . the image of ice-cream" or of pleasure (Burney, 58) as the only emperor.

27. Hannah Arendt The Human Condition (Chicago, 1958), 215, 255.

28. Anne Martin-Fugier, "Bourgeois Rituals," A History of Private Life: From the Fires of Revolution to the Great War, IV, ed. Michelle Perrot, tr. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), 333.

29. Richardson further maintains that the "harmonium" image in the title of his first poetry collection (and in which "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" appears) refers to "the instrument on which he played the dirge for the death of the old order. Its homely, honky-tonk sound set the proper tone for this funeral--as specifically in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream' . . . " (Wallace Stevens: The Later Years, 1923-1955, New York, 1988 [32]). Also see her comment in the same volme that "[i]t was the age that was dying as he left Harvard, the age of Victoria, whose funeral he had poetically celebrated in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream'" (254).

30. Malinowski, Magic, Science and Religion (New York, 1948), 48.

31. Gerard Vincent, "A History of Secrets?" A History of Private Life: Riddles of Identity in Times, V, ed. Antoine Prost and Gerard Vincent, tr. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), 264.

32. Thackaberry also guesses at "the sadism implicit in the 'muscular one' and 'whip'." Other critics have all but suggested the poem's perverse aspects such as Stevens' connecting "[t]he coldness of ice-cream" with "the corpse" in favor of "life's concupiscence" (Ellmann, 94) or else equating the dead woman at "an unmelted moment" like ice-cream and so, although "unappetizing," allowing that "disgust can be as exquisite as appetite" (Burney, 58).

33. This view of Stevens' literary scene of writing of course derives from Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence" theory. Bloom, however, not only regards Stevens as a "wry celebrant of a diminished version of Romantic or Trans-cendental selfhood," he also places Stevens squarely in the Romantic tradition: ". . . the actual burden of his major poetry is the movement both towards a possible wisdom and towards a possible ecstasy, between which [he] refuses to choose" (Poetry and Repression, New Haven,1976; 282). In Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate (Ithaca, 1976) and elsewhere, Bloom argues that Stevens assumes a position of poetic solipsism. My argument has it that he can make no such assumption, at least in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream,' since any version of poetic privacy for him at this stage in his career constantly entails a project "devoutly to be wished."

34. Cited in Frank Lentricchia, Ariel and the Police (Madison, 1988), 26

35. Cleanth Brooks made this equation most famously in discussing John Donne's poetry, which in turn became a *locus classicus* of the now old New Criticism. See The Well-Wrought Urn (New York, 1947), 16.

36. Of course, in Freudian terms, this of necessity falls into the brack of sexual sublimation. But my focus here is on explicit sexual allusions.

37. In a later letter to Elsie closer to the time of composing "The Emperor of Ice-Cream, he writes about the unexpected death of his sister Catherine and says that she "was extremely like my mother; so that the loss of her, ends that aspect of life. I am more like my mother than my father" (Letters, #231; 1919). Richardson notes that Stevens's father "himself wrote poetry, though he was of too 'practical' a nature--as his son described--to allow himself to regard it as more than 'afflatus' . . . since writing poetry was not the kind of work that was in keeping with the Puritan ethic." Stevens, it should be noted, could also take his father's viewpoint early on, as when he depicted poetry as a "'lady-like and 'absurd' habit . . ." (Richardson, 48, 385). Frank Lentricchia accepts this "double" feature or division of labor of Stevens by the time of Harmonium: "Assiduously 'masculine' in his pursuit of economic fulfillment . . . in his aesthetic life he cultivated the self-abnegating virtues that his society relegated to the 'feminine' sphere . . ." (Ariel and the Police, 147). Lentricchia also discusses how Pound also felt American cuture and poetry's having become feminized during this period. See Lentricchia, Modernist Quartet (Cambridge, New York, 1994), esp. 183-185. Pound also regarded his strong version of poetics being thwarted by a capitalist culture devoted to commodification, (Quartet, 199-200).

38. Michael Kimmel, Manhood in America: A Cultural History (New York, 1996), 103. I am placing Stevens in this context; Kimmel makes no mention of him. The debilitating feature of capitalist culture discussed here was one noted by Pound as well. See preceding n.37.

39. Cf, Harvey Green on this conundrum facing US businessmen at this time virtually for the first time: "Salesmen and managers had telephones and automobiles at their disposal in order to pursue clients more vigorously"--Stevens himself was constantly taking extended trips for his "surety claims" insurance work, and almost exclusively by train. But they "also faced pressure to expand the geographic area in which they competed. New technology, moreover, could do nothing to prevent economic collapse" (Uncertainty of Everyday Life, 69).

40. The poem's scene, in other words, resembles one much like Frenchmen experienced in cafés during this same period, and in which males communicated with each other about their private lives "in conventionally masculine terms" and primarily "about women," usualy in a ribald if "formalized exchange governed by the rules of propriety," but also in "a kind of code." Antoine Prost, "Public and Private Spheres in France," A Hisory of Private Life: Riddles of Identity in Times, V, ed. Antoite Prost and Gérard Vincent, tr. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), 107.

41. Around 1920, newspaper articles appeared linking the WCTU's efforts to make Prohibition include not only alcohol but also cigar and pipe tobacco as well. See, for example, "Plan Amendment to Outlaw Tobacco," The New York Times (August 8, 1919), 5.

42. See n. 29 above.

43. See n. 37 above.

44. This is also the position taken by some of the contributors to Melita Schaum's collection, Wallace Stevens and the Faminine. Celeste Goodridge and Mary B. Arensberg, for instance, take the view that in a poem like "Peter Quince at the Clavier," Stevens tends to treat women figures voyeuristically, dehumanized, as his mirrored self-image, or else as engaged in a wholly separate "primal scene of creation" that he "can only gaze at but never participate in . . ." (Goodridge, 157; Arensberg, 32). Stevens himself lends support to some of these judgments, such in an uncollected poem entitled "Dolls" written sometime between 1913 and 1914: "The thought of Eve, within me, is a doll/ That does what I desire . . ." (OP, 4). Or in a very early journal entry, he concedes to the stereotypical gender-division of males and females: "Moral qualities are masculine; whimsicalities are feminine. That seems hardly just but I think it is exact" (SP, 114; 1903).

45. Halliday is quick to cite the many "racist and sexist jokes" discernible through Stevens poetry (126).

46. Stein also notes this Stevens pun "on the polarizing etymological and semantic meaning of 'cream,' from chrism to semen . . . ."

47. In his "Perry Mason" novel The Case of the Rolling Bones (New York, 1939), Erle Stanley Gardner has a character emply this particular sexist reduction: "The officer was grinning. 'Well now,' he said, 'that's better. Who was it said, 'A woman is only a woman, but a good cigar is a smoke?'" (40).

48. Francis Barker, The Tremulous Private Body: Essays on Subjection (Ann Arbor, 1995), 10.

49. Nor can Stevens' joke, assuming its symbolic movement towards privacy, play the same way to lower-class males. Would they even read a poem like "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," or, if they did, care to excavate such a reading--what are the odds, which Stevens assumes occurs at the level of reading "last month's newspapers" at best? The point is that Stevens can thus envisage a privacy separate from the kind the represent.

50. Melita Schaum discusses Stevens' ambivalent relations with the various modernist movements in the period at the time of writing the Harmonium poems. She also notes the many modernist protests and literature written to antagonize "public taste" in particular. Wallace Stevens and the Critical Schools, (Tuscaloosa, 1988); see Ch. 1 on "The Emergence of a Poet."

51. See the Richardson reference on p. 19 above.

52. I read the "firecat" as synonymous with Stevens wishing to block all public readings a.k.a. "the bucks" in the poem that opens Harmonium, "Earthy Anecdote" (CP, 3).

53. In response to her distaste for his smoking, Stevens continually made efforts to stop or at least curb this pleasure, even before they were married: "I wonder if you know that I always stop smoking a few days before I come to see you. I will not smoke tomorrow, nor at all until after our holiday--I wanted to break myself of the habit entirely, but it is a terribly insidious and seductive thing and, if one could indulge it mildly, quite harmless" (Letters #169, 1910).