ghosts of our human comedy of life? Do they, within the cold of death, believe that they wander around and around the sky, freed from death, looking for the kind of heaven they had expected? Or does their death ("That burial"), confirmed by our experience ("pillared up each day") as being no more than the door and passage of the spirit to mere nonexistence, foretell to us at night, when we are inclined to worry about the nature of death, our own death: "the one abysmal night," when, with the extinction of our consciousness, we will no longer see the stars in the night sky? Make an outcry among these "dark comedians," who mimic, in death, the human comedy of life, call them for an answer from their cold heaven (Élysée) of the night sky, of the tomb. That they will not answer is our answer.

"The Emperor of Ice-Cream" (*CP*, p. 64)[15]

The muscular figure with whom the poem opens is a kind of pleasure master: he produces "big cigars"; he makes tempting food (whipping "concupiscent curds"—this is close enough poetic approximation of ice-cream churning to lead us to conclude that this is the "Emperor" himself); he is powerful ("muscular"); even the verse here, especially in line three, is given over to the pleasure of sound, to the fun of the alliteration which is, then, not merely gratuitous word play. The poem, in other words, begins by summoning up the king of pleasure. Moreover, the description of the women to be present suggests that they are ladies of pleasure—"the wenches dawdle." Here, however, a new note is introduced, that of the impoverished commonplace, even common: the women are not to dress up as for any special occasion; flowers are to be brought, but, with insistent casualness, they are to be wrapped in "last month's newspapers." (Stevens says of the words "concupiscent curds" that "they express the concupiscence of life, but, by contrast with the things in relation to them in the poem, they express or accentuate life's destitution"—*LWS*, p. 500.) Let us not try to make a special occasion, let us not try to veil the ordinary quality of this event: let the seeming quality of things yield to the way they actually are ("Let be be finale of seem"). The only extraordinary thing in this occasion is to be pleasure, for pleasure is the only power we will recognize to govern us: "The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream." Pleasure is the only force that has dominion over the commonplace.

In the second stanza pleasure is again juxtaposed with the common. From the cheap dresser ("deal" is a cheap kind of wood), in depressingly ill repair, take the sheet embroidered with fantail pigeons (*LWS*, p. 340) and cover her with that which she had once enjoyed decorating. Here we recognize that the occasion is a kind of wake, at which death, too, is treated as something commonplace, and at which only pleasure can give relief from that fatal commonplace to which we are all reduced. Thus the corpse is covered with the decorative sheet. If the feet stick out they only serve to affirm the common fact of physical death. There is no more to death than this, no separation of the soul, no supernatural myth. The lamp, with its ordinary light, confirms as with the seal of the commonplace this common fact. Our only resort from it is to pleasure.

"Sunday Morning" (*CP*, p. 66)

In "Sunday Morning" the poet conducts a meditation through the woman whose mind is the scene, so to speak, of the meditation, resolving the questions that she raises. Unlike Stevens' later meditative poems, however, this one presents a cohesive argument rather than a series of reflections. The blank verse and the diction have little of the extravagant virtuosity of "The Comedian as the Letter C" and "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" and, as a result, the poem is itself less idiosyncratic. The occasion of the poem is the hour for church. But the setting is one of sensual comfort, "complacencies of the peignoir," which dispels the holiness of the hour that ordinarily reminds of Christ's sacrifice. From the outset, then, a conflict is presented between the secular and the religious which provides the subject of the poem. The woman, despite the secular setting and because of the religious hour, feels the encroachment of the religious sensibility. In revery she returns across the "wide water" of time and space to the crucifixion in ancient Palestine, and the memory of it gives rise to a nostalgia for the balm of religion. The rest of the poem is concerned with the catharsis of this nostalgia through reconciliation to existence in a secular world.

The poem has the movement of a dialogue, from idea to idea modified. Here the dialogue is between the author and his persona, the former resolving the questions that arise in the thought of the latter. Thus the train of thought returns (II) from the memory of the crucifixion to the initial sense of sensual well being: the oranges and the bright rug, or, possibly, a real cockatoo on the rug. Cannot such satisfactions replace the idea of heaven in a secular world? Divinity, with the power to mediate between man and heaven, can now lie only in her responses to the physical world, which is the only kind of heaven she will know. In support of this point a history of divinity is traced (III), from the nonhuman Jove, through the partly human Christ in whose divinity man partook, to the possibility of the idea of god being wholly humanized if the idea of heaven were merged in the reality of earth:

> Shall our blood fail? Or shall it come to be
> The blood of paradise? And shall the earth
> Seem all of paradise that we shall know?

The sky would not then seem a barrier between earth and heaven but part of the physical world which is the source of all evil as of all good. With such a recognition of the nature of the physical world, living in harmonious well being with that world would take its place as a kind of felicity second only to that possible in the relations among men, or "enduring love."

The woman then raises the question of the transitory character of such an earthly paradise (IV). The answer is returned that there is no eternal realm of the supernatural ever imagined that has endured as transitory nature endures in its seasonal repetitions. More permanent than the nostalgia for the supernatural is the remembrance of the satisfactions of nature and the desire that may be consummated in nature itself:

> . . . her remembrance of awakened birds,
> Or her desire for June and evening, tipped
> By the consummation of the swallow's wings.

She grants that nature offers such fulfillment to mortality, but insists on the need of a fulfillment that will not pass away, that is immortal; in contentment with life she is troubled by the obliteration of death (V). The reply, that carries through section VI, is a description of the conditions of mortality that is the crisis of the poem. "Death is the mother of beauty" because implicit in it is the principle of change, and in change alone can come fulfillment of desire. Thus fulfillment, here expressed in terms of the fulfillment of beauty, is dependent on its transitory nature, and "imperishable bliss," the deathless fulfillment of paradise, is therefore impossible. Although death means the certain obliteration of experience, it also ensures continuation of the transitory process of desire and satisfaction of desire. Death as the principle of change, and therefore as mother of the processes of life, ensures their continuation which is mortality's only memorial. Thus death "makes the willow shiver in the sun" in living memorial of dead maidens who used to sit gazing on the grass which they used to tread, and which is now withdrawn from their feet. Death causes the repetition of desire after desire has been satisfied and the salvers on which the feast was served have been cast away; a new generation of boys will inherit the plate of the old and make use of it to tempt a new generation of maidens (compare Stevens, *LWS*, p. 183):

She causes boys to pile new plums and pears
On disregarded plate. The maidens taste
And stray impassioned in the littering leaves.

The living maidens in their turn taste the fruit and, touched by desire, "stray impassioned in the littering leaves" which are the "leaves of sure obliteration" and in which they, nevertheless, go seeking satisfaction of desire.

By way of illustrating change as the condition of fulfillment, transitory mortality is compared with hypothetical paradise (VI). If there were a state of existence like that of earth, but without the change that death brings, there could be no cycle of desire and fulfillment, no consummation, and such an existence would be one of eternal ennui. Its characteristic would be stasis rather than change. Death is the mother of beauty then, because in the fire of her bosom which consumes, is contained the principle of change which creates, as earthly mothers create life. In death, therefore, we may figure ("devise") a return to the creative principle in life ("earthly mothers").

The argument, having established that earth is "all of paradise that we shall know," returns to the supposition raised in section III (ll. 12–15) as to the consequence if this were true. Granted that earth is the only possible equivalent of paradise, the source of happiness for men would be the sense of sharing a common fate of "men that perish," but who live in that fellowship in harmony with the physical world as a substitute for heaven. Section VII is a celebration of that condition, in which a ring of men chant to the sun of the particulars of the physical world, in an expression of their harmony with it. Again in answer to section III, "Shall our blood fail? Or shall it come to be/ The blood of paradise?" their chant is a "chant of paradise,/ Out of their blood, returning to the sky," signifying harmonious union with the physical world as if it were divine, just as "our blood, commingling, virginal,/ With heaven," once united with divinity in Christ. In the same way they chant to the sun, "Not as a god, but as a god might be," the idea of divinity merged in the reality of the physical world as a source of creation. The men celebrate a transitory world, and know their kinship with the "summer morn" that will pass away; and their destiny is signified by the ephemeral dew on their feet: "Men do not either come from any direction or disappear in any direction. Life is as meaningless as dew" (Stevens, *LWS*, p. 250).

The woman hears, in that revery or suspension of time and space which began with the pacification and stillness of the "wide water" in section I, the cry that Christ did not rise as god, but was mortal and is dead (VIII). The poem concludes therefore with a description of a secular world, a "chaos" beyond rational order, "unsponsored, free" of the supernatural dominion of Jesus, an island inescapably separated by the "wide water" of time and space from the crucifixion. As in section II, the only possible felicity lies in response to the physical world. The poem ends with a notation of the sensuous detail of that physical world which must take the place of paradise. The last of these notations, the pigeons, suggests a state of existence which, like that described in the poem, is isolated from the supernatural ("isolation of the sky"), and ambiguous in the meaning of its destiny as are the undulations in the course of the pigeons as they sink to darkness, but with wings extended, as if in knowing acquiescence to that destiny.

"Bantams in Pine-Woods" (*CP*, p. 75)

This poem concerns a challenge flung from the personal imagination to the world of reality. The imaginative world of the individual is placed in opposition to the overbearing reality of the universe. The universal reality is metaphorically described as a "ten-foot poet," a universal imagination as against the imagination of individuals ("inchlings"). Stevens sometimes figures nature as a cosmic imagination within which the individual imagination operates (for example, "The World as Meditation," *CP*, p. 521, ll. 10–11). In this particular case the individual imagination triumphs in imposing