

An Experiment in Methods: Speech Act Theory in the Poems of Wallace Stevens

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"Let be be finale of seems."

The Emperor of Ice Cream

One of the things we like about the line is its arrangement of sounds. It fits with other lines of the poem in a recognizably poetic sound sequence. We know we're reading real poetry. And poetry with a sense of humor, at that (how often does "seem" rhyme with "ice-cream," after all? The answer, "always" you should just keep to yourself.) But we also like what it says, if we have come to some agreement with whatever we understand the general thrust of the poem to be.

It is reasonably argued that a final sense of the line doesn't really come into play until it occurs to us retroactively, as we arrive at the end of the second and final verse. As "Let the lamp affix its beam" interacts with "Let be be finale of seem" for a variety of reasons, we choose a meaning for what would be otherwise a vexing line. If we had read the line as having the same illocutionary force as the first line of the poem "Call the roller of big cigars", we might well take the line to be a kind of imperative.

However, if a possible confusion exists, it is between two potential readings of the line, and it is a confusion that might not be resolved by appeal to Austin's speech act theory, unless we recall that Austin held, after all, a chair in moral philosophy.

As long as we don't try to explain everything in a poem, or even construct a complete reading of it from the perspectives of speech act theory, certain decisions taken by readers at particular moments of a poetic text reveal themselves more clearly as responses to the various forces (illocutionary or perlocutionary) that might be at work in the poem.

To begin immediately with an example, here is a line that almost all first-time readers of Wallace Stevens respond to positively. By which I mean, they decide what it means and then they like what it means.

Let me clarify the two readings of this line that I see as possible. The first, mentioned above, taking the line as having the illocutionary force of an imperative, following on the various other imperatives contained in the poem, is, perhaps, the preferred or first-choice reading for many readers of the poem. (Let's admit that first-choice readings are quite often intuitive, and the clash of ambiguities occurs to most of us only later, in many cases. The cases where the clash of ambiguities is fore-grounded is a matter for another conversation.) So – as an imperative, the line would require the reader, or the interlocutor, to perform the action of allowing or permitting “be” to function as “the finale of seems.”

The sense of “let” that raises the possible ambiguity is a kind of second degree meaning, less readily available, but still possible, as in “let it be the case that.” To the extent that this contains a notion of agency, the reader is required to take a more active role in the construction of the poem. He is, in fact, required **to see to it** that the lamp affixes its beam; he is required to cause the situation whereby “be” becomes the “finale of seems.”

The similarities in requirements laid on the reader in Stevens's poems begins to emerge as something many of them have in common when we compare “The Snowman” to “The Emperor of Ice Cream.” In “The Snowman” we are advised explicitly about what is needed, or required to read/construct the poem:

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

The illocutionary force of the line may seem something like an imperative, although the sentence consists only of description, or at most a truncated recipe, lacking complete instructions. But if a reader responds to the implied illocution (“regard the frost and the boughs with a mind of winter,” or “Adopt a mind of winter, in order to regard”) Then he is performing as an agent of the poem in a manner very similar to the performance of the reader in “The Emperor of Ice Cream.”

I would like to propose at this moment that Stevens requires, often through a careful use of the illocutionary force of imperatives, implied or explicit, a “staging” of his poems. I mean this rather literally. In “The Emperor of Ice Cream,” it has become a commonplace to imagine a home, with a kitchen, perhaps a living room, and a bedroom or backroom where the body might be found. Following, and obeying the illocutionary nature of the imperatives that make up most of the poem, I find it easier, more engaging, and finally more surprising to imagine that a reader gradually “puts

on" or "stages" a little play, bringing in actors (cigar-rollers, wenches, boys with flowers) as needed, creating a kitchen if one seems necessary, even staircases for wenches to dawdle on or near. A rear room, quite possibly, to keep the body separate from the celebratory nature of the bawdy and concupiscent (although I prefer to stage the body front and center, in the living-room area, the kitchen as a sort of off-stage set, or at least at extreme stage-right. The door through which the cigar fellow and the boys variously enter, is naturally stage-left.

The first stanza thus sets a stage, arranges actors in a kind of tableau, and the second stanza brings on the principle actor of the play. The first surprise offered by this kind of reading is to discover that this principle actor is none other than the reader himself. The reader is given a set of instructions that differ in their illocutionary force in the second stanza. No longer simply arranging the setting, but taking an active part, the reader is no required, instructed to

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.

The next lines are an odd combination of description and instruction. Again the instruction is implicit.

If her horny feet protrude, they come

To show how cold she is, and dumb.

This both implies that the sheet is not long enough to cover both her face and her feet, focuses our attention on her feet and what they show, and requires the reader to leave the sheet in such a position that it covers her face and not her feet. (Would a sensitive reader not be tempted to cover her feet, and let her face more decorously show how cold she is, and dumb? But at second thought, perhaps her feet are a blunter and more effective measure of her coldness.) So we follow the instructions of the poem, and arrive at a new use of the word "Let." We are asked to "Let the lamp affix its beam." In the same position in the second stanza as "Let be be finale of seems" in the first, this line allows (perhaps ambiguously) yet another action by the reader-actor in the poem. An adjustment of the lamp, so that its beam fixes itself upon her (on her covered face? her feet?)

Nevertheless, this is where the ambiguous reading of "Let be be finale of seems" takes its justification, and can be re-read or remembered as now having the same kind of illocutionary force as the imperatives of the second stanza. We become active agents in the poem, and cause, by our staging of it, "be" to take the place of "seems," in some grand triumph over the merely apparent. Or we arrive, through the celebration of seems, at its finale, its final manifestation in "be." I don't have to resolve this final ambiguity, it seems to be a perfect example of the kind of ambiguity characteristic of what we have learned to call poetry.

"The Snow Man" constrains our reading in different but nicely similar ways. I include the poem, for ease of reference.

One must have a mind of winter

To regard the frost and the boughs

Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time

To behold the junipers shagged with ice,

The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think

Of any misery in the sound of the wind,

In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land

Full of the same wind

That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

As I indicated at the beginning of this essay, the illocutionary force (imperative) is, in "The Snow Man" loosely an implicature, not exactly in Gricean terms. That is, "One must have a mind of winter / To regard the frost and the boughs / Of the pine trees crusted with snow" is grammatically a description of what is required for a particular way of seeing, under a certain set of particular conditions. But notice the presence of the requirement. This I understand as a very Stevensian invitation to his readers to participate in the staging of the poem in a certain way: in this case by means of obedience to the *implied illocutionary character* of the utterance. That is, less a set of orders (as in "The Emperor of Ice Cream") than a gentle, perhaps ironic invitation. If you would like to be able to regard the frost, if you would like to have a mind of winter (and who wouldn't?) then adopt the perspective, not only a reader's perspective but the perspective of someone who has "been cold a long time." and look, regard, behold, don't think, listen, and behold again. These are all the verbs that can be extracted as implied imperatives from the first line to the last of the poem.

While the illocutionary force (imperative) would not be present in a formulaic representation of the utterance's deep structure, as in some of Searle's early attempts, I think it is fair to consider that a reader will infer the illocution. Even the surface ambiguities of the word "one," used often instead of "you," strengthen the inference

The poem turns, in the last two stanzas, away from the inferred imperative, to a more strictly descriptive set of utterances. From "One must have a mind of winter / To regard the frost..." in the opening lines, to a "listener, who listens...and beholds," in the final stanza. The ability of the reader to take the position of the one who himself is able to regard the winter scene is challenged, I think, by the listener, explicitly a third person described by the poet in the last stanzas of the poem. This heightens the difficulty for the reader to share what it is the listener finally beholds: "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is."

We are faced with a choice, as readers. While we may have associated ourselves with the observer of the winter scene in the first stanzas, we may choose to simply regard from a distance the listener of the final stanzas. Or we may continue, following the direction established by our first inference of the imperative force of the early utterances of the poem, and position ourselves with

the listener of the later utterances, and thereby make the attempt to behold for ourselves "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is."

Stevens moves easily between kinds of invitation to his readers. Frequently he will ask us to consider, to observe, sometimes simply asking us to "look at this." At other times, his rhetoric is more forceful, asking us to perform some action. The inferences that readers take up are, very like the weak implicatures that Sperber and Wilson identify with poetic effects, invitations that can be considered, followed for a while and later abandoned, even argued with on occasion.

As the poem turns towards the listener, the final (perhaps weakly inferred) imperative that the poem deploys is the requirement "...not to think / Of any misery in the sound of the wind." This is intuitively more difficult a task than to regard or behold. Even more difficult that constructing a mind of winter, more challenging even than to "have been cold a long time." One can, after all, achieve the state of having been cold for a long time by simply staying outside for a while in January. Not to think, in and of itself, is actually quite difficult. And not to think of any misery is perhaps an ethically dubious achievement. But to eliminate the misery from the sound of the wind strikes us as a rather forceful counter against the easy romanticism of a Wordsworth, for instance. How this might affect our reading of the Emersonian whispers we hear in "Sunday Morning" will be a matter for another essay.

Bibliography

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