

Collana Rewind 13

Studi culturali britannici e angloamericani

British and Anglo-American Cultural Studies

Curatori della collana: Alessandra Calanchi,
Jan Marten Ivo Klaver, Federica Savini

Giuliana Gardellini

Silence and Silences

A Pragmatic Approach
to Alice Thompson Meynell's Poetic Language



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*To my family, my colleagues and friends,
who greatly supported me in this enterprise.*

INDICE

1. INTRODUCTION: SILENCE AND SILENCES IN MEYNELL'S POETRY	9
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PART ONE A "REDISCOVERED" POET

2. ALICE THOMPSON MEYNELL IN HER LIFETIME	15
2.1. Her Life and Works	15
2.2. The Poetic Tradition	25
2.3. Contemporary Appreciations	41
3. COMING TO TERMS WITH ONE'S IMAGE: MEYNELL'S CRITICAL REPUTATION	51
3.1. From Meynell's Death to the Centenary of Her Birth	51
3.2. From the Late Nineteen-Sixties to the End of the Twentieth- Century	69
3.3. From the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century to the Present	95

PART TWO
PRAGMATICS AND MEYNELL'S SILENCE

4. STYLISTICS, PRAGMATICS AND POLITENESS THEORY: HOW TO APPLY THEORY TO POETRY	111
4.1. Stylistics and "Mind-Style"	111
4.2. Pragmatics and Politeness Theory	118
4.3. Pragmatics and Silence	121
4.4. Pragmatics, Silence and Poetry	133
5. A TAXONOMY OF SILENCE	143
5.1. The "Law of the Father" and Meynell's Public Image	144
5.2. Silence Matters	156
5.3. Pragmatic Approaches to Silence	158
5.4. A Mind-Style of Restraint	183
CONCLUSION	187
BIBLIOGRAPHY	191

1. INTRODUCTION: SILENCE AND SILENCES IN MEYNELL'S POETRY

The study of silence in pragmatics is a relatively recent phenomenon. It started to gain scholarly attention in the 1970s, but only in the 1990s the contributions on this topic began to multiply. In 1993 Adam Jaworski¹ published an innovative, book-length study, where silence is addressed in its functional nature, as a communicative-interactional category. He insists on the “nondiscrete nature” of speech and silence, which are characterised by a functional overlap. Moreover, he applies Sperber and Wilson’s Relevance Theory (RT) to the analysis of meaningful silence: just as it happens with speech, silent communication involves two modes: code-decoding and ostensive-inferential, which

1 A. Jaworski, *The Power of Silence. Social and Pragmatic Perspectives*, CA, Sage, Newbury Park 1993.

represent, respectively, the informative and the communicative intentions. In addition to this, Jaworski devotes an entire chapter to silence in the artistic forms, with particular attention to visual arts. Michal Ephratt, before her recently published, comprehensive study², gave a remarkable contribution to the scholarly debate on silence by means of her 2008³ and 2011⁴ essays. In the former, she applied Roman Jakobson's communicative model to silence while, in the latter, she addressed the linguistic, paralinguistic and extralinguistic dimensions both of speech and silence. In *How to Do Things with Silence*⁵, Haig Khatchadourian introduces the concept of "psychic doing", thus underlining the deeply silent character of our mental life and that most of our "mental activities", such as thinking, dreaming, imagining, occur in silence. He applies the five primitive illocutionary points theorised by Searle to the study of silence and proposes five standard logically related stages in silent communication. He stresses the dialogic nature of the pragmatics of silence: communication might be considered successful if the speaker manages to obtain the desired response in an audience.

Alice Thompson Meynell (1847-1922), though very well-known in the London cultural and literary world of her lifetime, went through a long period of oblivion,

2 M. Ephratt, *Silence as Language. Verbal Silence as a Means of Expression*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2022.

3 M. Ephratt, "The Functions of Silence", «Journal of Pragmatics», vol. 40, 2008, pp. 1909-38.

4 M. Ephratt, "Linguistic, Paralinguistic and Extralinguistic Speech and Silence", «Journal of Pragmatics», vol. 43, 2011, pp. 2286-307.

5 H. Khatchadourian, *How to Do Things with Silence*, Walter de Gruyter, Boston/Berlin 2015.

which was interrupted by the operation of re-discovery of Victorian women poets initiated by Women's Studies in the 1970s. Poet and essayist, deep connoisseur of the English literary tradition, she kept on writing from the age of twenty-seven up to her death. Too often considered as a "minor" Victorian poet or catalogued within a female literary lineage, her poetry eschews pigeonholing and stands out for the sharp contrast it enacts between the modernity of its contents and the traditionality of its form. Despite the abundance of her poetic inspiration, Meynell chose to write in a concise and restrained mode, aiming at a stylistic perfection to be reached through the consistent recurrence to silence.

Silence is not only avoidance of expression. In Meynell's poetics, the recurrence to silence is foregrounded in writing itself, taking on a multiplicity of possible valencies, from the near impossibility to express exceedingly complex and intimate emotions to the difficulty to find an appropriate style "after the event" of Great Literature, and the consequent fear not to be able to compete with the great poets of the past. Also, silence is an act through which the poet hints at the origin of any literary and linguistic expression and reflects a meta-poetic concern by openly discussing the process implied in writing poetry.

The purpose of this study is to analyse the use of language in Meynell's poetry by applying the tools offered primarily by pragmatics, in order to achieve a hypothesis of interpretation of her use of silence. Part One is focused on Meynell as a public and literary figure, her relationship with the poetic tradition, and on how her literary production was received both in her lifetime and after her death. To this aim, all the most relevant con-

tributions are taken into account, from those written by friends and acquaintances to the most recent ones. Part Two is devoted to theory and analysis. Chapter 4 synthesises the foundations of pragmatics and offers an overview of the main contributions to the study of silence, with particular attention to silence and the poetic text. Chapter 5 is an attempt to create a taxonomy of the use of silence in Meynell's poetic production, by analysing a choice of her poems. The analysis is carried out by making use principally of Jaworski's interpretation of RT as applied to silence and of Khatchadourian's concept of "silent doing" – and of the five related stages in silent communication.

These analytical tools are supported and integrated by the instruments supplied by politeness theory and stylistics. Meynell, due to her position as a journalist, essayist and member of the intellectual society of her time, was particularly concerned about her image, how she would be judged both as an intellectual and a poet, especially with respect to the poetic tradition. For this reason, the sociological concept of "face" could provide a key for an understanding of her relationship to her poetic voice. Finally, the concept of "mind style" gives an opportunity to synthesise the stylistic features of her poetic language with the findings deriving from the pragmatic appraisal of the functions of silence.