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THE SOUND SENSE OF POETRY

What real role can poetry have in the world? How are its truths created by the words and sounds chosen by the poet and by the way readers respond to them? Acclaimed poet Peter Robinson brings his knowledge of poetic art to the understanding of the reader's contribution in enabling poetry to play its part in life. Emphasising the value of individual writers' and readers' interactions, together with such key matters as meter and rhythm, voicing and form, rhyme and syntax, Robinson shows how poems engage in speech performances such as promising, justifying, excusing and explaining – including the telling of truths. Illustrated with detailed readings of poems by, among others, Jonson, Marvell, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Tennyson, Christina Rossetti, Dickinson, Kipling, Basil Bunting, Frank O'Hara, Tony Harrison and Denise Riley, this book shows how important poetry is as a means to do things with words and make things happen.

PETER ROBINSON is a poet, novelist and literary critic. Professor of English and American Literature at the University of Reading, and poetry editor for Two Rivers Press, he has won the Cheltenham Prize, the John Florio Prize and two Poetry Book Society Recommendations for his own work and his translations, mostly from the Italian.

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To the memory of Roy Fisher (1930–2017)

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Preface

The chapters that make up *The Sound Sense of Poetry* emerged out of related concerns expressed in earlier volumes of my literary criticism – where I have been engaged from the first with what you can do with poetry in the world. This came from ordinary aspirations and the desire to fulfill them in ways that included the practice of an art that had come to matter so much to me. I was first inspired by reading poems by Ben Jonson in which he addressed his patrons, friends and fellow poets. I wondered whether we could still do that, and whether in the work of Frank O'Hara, for instance, we did. The seeming transitiveness of love poetry in its engaging with real persons, even if through fictional substitutes and elaborations, was a similar spur to reflect on how and whether such dynamics could still exist for poetry written by a contemporary.

Life experiences of damage and distress contributed to a commitment, growing from a reading of Adrian Stokes' aesthetic criticism, to the idea of reparation in art. Thence came the underlying theme uniting the topics explored throughout *In the Circumstances: About Poetry and Poets* (1992). This emerged out of wounding to another and myself, prompting a need to see this art as contributing to acts that would either help to put things right, or stand as emblems for the desire to do so. The early inquiry into being able to address friends, relatives and loved ones in poems had been introduced to the many aesthetic and ethical problems in wishing to do such a seemingly simple thing, as well as some sufferings to which response might be required.

Later work focused on how, if such acts were to be performed in poetry, they could happen, and I grew especially aware of arguments that stood in their way, arguments regarding the assumed inapplicability of performative utterances to poetry, the theory of apostrophe as addressing absent entities, the projected fictive realm of poetry and its said-to-be consequence-free syntax – and similar ways poetry appeared cut off from transactions with life and others. Subsequent work attempted, then, by looking at performative

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utterances and speech act theory, to address such obstacles in the way of doing things with poems, most notably Auden's assertion that 'poetry makes nothing happen'. This became *Poetry, Poets, Readers: Making Things Happen* (2002).

In composing my third book, *Twentieth Century Poetry: Selves and Situations* (2005), I was aware that the discussion of reader and writer selves was little more than a sketched stage setting for the chapters that followed. Here and now, then, after a discussion of what sound sense is in poetry, the present book turns to the natures of poet and reader agency required for its creation and understanding – and how its enabling involves the performance of actions with poems in interdependent processes of mediated response taking place in the culturally situated lives of individuals. *The Sound Sense of Poetry* is then a study of interrelated issues that point towards and exemplify a preferred account of poetry's workings in life, an account that has evolved with its roles in my own.

J. H. Prynne's conversation and writings were essential to the development of these ideas – from his comments in 1976 on a notebook essay about Richard Wollheim's *Art and Its Objects*, through the examining of my PhD, to his support during a number of difficult years in 1980s Cambridge. Roy Fisher's example has also been present throughout, and I have dedicated this book to his memory. Grateful thanks go to all those others who have generously given advice and assistance. I owe a particular debt to attendees at Maximillian de Gaynesford's graduate class on J. L. Austin and Shakespeare's Sonnets at the University of Reading in autumn 2013, and especially to its leader. Peter Makin's understanding of meter, rhythm and pattern in art significantly clarified some of the ideas articulated here. Peter Middleton's conversations about poetry, pragmatism and art have been inspiring; and the graduate seminar on this book's main theme organized by Peter Nicholls at New York University was a great help in clarifying and strengthening some of its points. I also owe thanks to the two anonymous readers who commented on submitted drafts, and to Ray Ryan at Cambridge University Press for his continuing faith in this project.

The volume began life as 'The Sound Sense of Poetry: Reading Techniques', a short article published in the house journal of Kyoto Women's University English Department in 2006. A passage from Chapter 5 adapts ideas from 'Wittgenstein's Aesthetics and Revision', an essay in John Roe and Michele Stanco (ed.), *Inspiration and Technique: Ancient and Modern Views on Beauty and Art* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), 261–76. Chapter 6: *Burdens of Sound* revises 'Battles Long Ago': J. H. Prynne and 'The Solitary

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Reaper' in *Literary Imagination* vol. 17 no. 3 (Winter 2015), 293–308. Chapter 7: *Keeping Promises* is adapted from 'Christina Rossetti's Promises', *Essays in Criticism* vol. 60 no. 2 (2010), 148–67. Acknowledgements go to the various editors and publishers for permission to reprint. Thanks go to Bloodaxe Books Limited for permission to cite from Basil Bunting, *Complete Poems* ed. Richard Caddel (Tarset: Bloodaxe Books, 2000). Acknowledgement is made to the R. F. Langley estate and to Carcanet Press Limited for permission to cite from the 2015 edition of *Collected Poems* ed. Jeremy Noel-Todd. To Denise Riley for permission to cite from poems in *Selected Poems* published by Ken Edwards at Reality Street Editions, and to Macmillan and Co. Ltd. for permission to quote poems from *Say Something Back* published in their Picador imprint.

I am grateful to the University of Reading for granting some terms of research leave in 2015–2016 after my period as Head of Department, terms in which this book would be largely written, rewritten and further revised for publication. Thanks in this regard go to Alison Donnell, Steven Matthews, Andrew Nash and Peter Stoneley. The award of a research professorship at Kwansai Gakuin, Nishinomiya, Japan, enabled late-stage revision of the typescript – my thanks to Hiroshi Ozawa and Masanori Ito for their support. I would also like to recall and acknowledge the companionship and advice of Simon Dentith (1952–2014) and Christopher Duggan (1957–2015). To Ornella Trevisan, and to our daughters Matilde and Giulia, I offer my love and gratitude, as well as thanks for their patience, as ever.

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