

## CHAPTER I

*Sound Sense*

The expression ‘sound sense’, applied to poetry in my title, is a rallying cry or slogan that points to one thread of many arguments deep in the history of poetry – a thread this book aims to draw out, develop and sustain. The chapters that follow are a sequence of interlinked studies exploring how aspects of poetry, and its participants’ roles in construction and reception, may contribute to events of life and culture. This rallying cry and slogan has been adopted because it draws together in its various meanings and implications three key elements of poetry, elements in composed conjunction, each essential to its contributing to such events in life and culture – namely its shape of spoken sound, its articulation of meaning, and its capacity to perform acts of truth-accessing evocation, faithful commitment and appropriate expression of response. The sound sense of poetry proposes that all these are embodied as a single experience, built as one in composition and realised as such in reception. The aim of the book is, then, to show how the tiniest details of a poem’s verbal texture contribute to the work in culture and life it can help to perform.

Perhaps because of its punning and colloquial implications, the phrase ‘sound sense’ has rarely been applied to poetry with exactly the purpose pursued here, yet it is frequently touched on or grazed by in criticism. Introducing a selection of Louis Zukofsky’s work, Charles Bernstein writes that his poetry ‘leads with sound and you can never go wrong following the sound sense, for it is only after you hear the words that you are able to locate their meanings’.<sup>1</sup> Bernstein’s sentence acknowledges the existence of this singularity ‘sound sense’, but imagines this poetry leading ‘with sound’ so as to locate ‘meanings’, with the implication that these are separate and sequential experiences. But to hear the sounds as words implies that the mouth noises are already understood as meaning-bearing – for, as Emily Dickinson observed, ‘they will differ - if they do - /As syllable

<sup>1</sup> Charles Bernstein (ed.), Louis Zukofsky, *Selected Poems* (New York: Library of America, 2006), xvii.

from Sound'.<sup>2</sup> Zukofsky's friend Basil Bunting wrote of *Briggflatts* that the 'sound of the words spoken aloud is itself the meaning',<sup>3</sup> and Kenneth Cox, in a bravura description of the poet's own articulation of the poem's opening line, suggests it gives 'warning that the meaning announced is to be sound as well as sense'.<sup>4</sup> The phrase 'sound sense' promises, then, a simultaneous interdependence, suggesting that the hearing of language-sounds requires those noises to be recognised as words and as such already meaning-bearing.

Bernstein's suggestion about the priority of sound over meaning was also sometimes shared by Bunting, as when defensively remarking to Eric Mottram:

I've never said that poetry consists *only* of sound. Without the sound there isn't any poetry. But having established it and kept it clear that the sound is the essential, the main thing, you can add all sorts of stuff if you want to. You can, if you like, have as elaborate a system of meanings, sub-meanings, and so forth, as Dante had in the *Divina Commedia*.<sup>5</sup>

He, too, reiterates the view that you can 'lead with sound' or that you can 'add all sorts of stuff' once you've established the sound. Yet, this is a less felicitous version of such pronouncements because Bunting also wrote, as we saw, that the 'sound of the words spoken aloud is itself the meaning' – a version of 'sound sense' that characterizes, for instance, his 'Gin the Goodwife Stint' from 1930:

The ploughland has gone to bent  
 and the pasture to heather;  
 gin the goodwife stint,  
 she'll keep the house together.

Gin the goodwife stint  
 and the bairns hunger  
 the Duke can get his rent  
 one year longer.

<sup>2</sup> R. W. Franklin (ed.), *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Reading Edition (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1999), 269.

<sup>3</sup> Basil Bunting, *A Note on Briggflatts* (Durham: Basil Bunting Poetry Centre, 1989), 40. Don Share refers to the poet's 'sound-meaning' in his introduction to Basil Bunting, *The Poems* ed. Don Share (London: Faber & Faber, 2016), xxiv. See also Peter Robinson 'Basil Bunting's Emigrant Ballads', *Twentieth Century Poetry: Selves and Situations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 40–1.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Cox, *The Art of Language: Selected Essays* ed. Jenny Penberthy (Chicago: Flood Editions, 2016), 90.

<sup>5</sup> Eric Mottram, 'Conversation with Basil Bunting' in Basil Bunting, *Briggflatts* (Tarcet: Bloodaxe Books, 2009), 44.

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The Duke can get his rent  
 and we can get our ticket  
 twa pund emigrant  
 on a C.P.R. packet.<sup>6</sup>

The synthetic dialect vocabulary and altered spelling to indicate pronunciation occur amongst standard spelling and usage. The ballad stanza expectation meters the delivery of sense and it is shaped around alternating stressed and unstressed syllables. The ‘sound sense’ of ‘C.P.R.’ in the contexture of ‘emigrant’ and ‘packet’ (a kind of boat) indicates the Canadian Pacific Railway, and not, for instance, cardio-pulmonary resuscitation. The ‘sound’ could refer to either, but the sound sense here can only mean the former, not least because ‘C.P.R.’ is rhythmically located as in adjectival apposition to ‘packet’. The initials are appropriately sense bearing only in the rhythmical sequence of the other words that surround them, within the entire thematic context of the ballad – and why Bunting couldn’t have composed the sound and then added in the meaning. So, the primary claim is not only that understanding the simultaneousness of sound sense in composition and reception is a more accurate way of describing what ordinarily happens, but that it better accesses and enables an account of how the two interdependent activities purposefully engage with each other.

Yet, in his late poem from 1975 called ‘At Briggflatts Meetinghouse’, Bunting might be consciously illustrating his less convincing idea that without ‘the sound there isn’t any poetry’ and that ‘having established it and kept it clear that the sound is the essential, the main thing, you can add all sorts of stuff if you want to’:<sup>7</sup>

Boasts time mocks cumber Rome. Wren  
 set up his own monument.  
 Others watch fells dwindle, think  
 the sun’s fires sink.

Stones indeed sift to sand, oak  
 blends with saints’ bones.  
 Yet for a little longer here  
 stone and oak shelter

<sup>6</sup> Basil Bunting, *Complete Poems* ed. Richard Caddel (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2000), 110.

<sup>7</sup> Mottram, ‘Conversation with Basil Bunting’, 44.

silence while we ask nothing  
 but silence. Look how clouds dance  
 under the wind's wing, and leaves  
 delight in transience.<sup>8</sup>

'Boasts time mocks cumber Rome' is hard to construe because it is difficult to disambiguate the noun and verb forms in the sentence. Thus, the first line sets out the poet's stall – as it were – by presenting a sound formation whose sense would seem to come after its sound, so as then to move onto sentences in which sound and sense are gathered simultaneously on a structured and shaped pulse through the time of the poem's elapse. The first line is then explicated with a more simply propositional sentence about Sir Christopher Wren building St Paul's Cathedral in a neoclassical style, and then comparing and contrasting it with the small stone building that Bunting took as the symbol for his own monument, about which he then composes a lyric whose theme is, in effect, stated with its final word 'transience'.

Bernstein's reference to 'sound sense' and his helpful formulation announced the theme I pursue here and yet, immediately, indicates one difficulty – in the presupposition that the two can exist independently – to its identification and appreciation. The difficulty rests in the fact that 'sound' and 'sense' tend to be conceptualised as distinct entities and are then much discussed, argued over and closely collocated in expressions such as the 'sound of sense' or 'sound and sense'.<sup>9</sup> The propositions I present throughout are indebted to such debates, even when those contributions are characterised in what follows as supporting arguments that convince less – and I too am compelled at times when addressing such arguments on their own terms to write of 'sound sense' as if two separable entities. Offered here, then, is not a uniquely original theory of poetry, or a way of thinking about the art that renders others quite inadequate, but a bringing together and revaluing of strands in arguments that point toward sound sense as the singular entity Bunting, in his better formulations, identified. For meaningful speech is experienced thus, when not misfiring, and poetry is the verbal art that brings it most into truthful focus.

Here, then, the adjectival meanings of 'sound' are compacted into this compound phrase with those for the noun 'sense' that produce a complex of meanings pointing to the good health, the soundness of mind and body,

<sup>8</sup> Bunting, *Complete Poems*, 145.

<sup>9</sup> D. W. Harding, for instance, writes that the 'relative salience of a syllable can be determined by one or more of the objective features of the sound, and some of these are influenced by the sense', *Words into Rhythm: English Speech Rhythm in Verse and Prose* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 8.

that can be felt as meaningfulness. The indefinite limits of this compounding of meanings in ‘sound sense’ comes from the multiplication together of at least five *OED* definitions. Among these are ‘sound, *n.* 2’, now obsolete, meaning ‘health or soundness, safety or security’, etymologically related, presumably, to the German ‘Gesundheit’. This sense survives in the adjective ‘sound’, where sense 1a means ‘free from disease’ or ‘healthy’, while meaning 1c offers ‘sound as a bell’ – in which two senses of ‘sound’ are combined by puns. ‘Sound, *n.* 3’, is the auditory sense, and has a different etymology and came into English through middle French.

So, the phrase ‘sound sense’ includes a colloquial usage that is close to ‘good sense’ or ‘wisdom’, supported by the adjective ‘sound’, especially in *OED* meanings 8 to 10. Because something is in good health, or undamaged, or is well made or well done, it is ‘sound’ and ‘rings true’. Multiplying implications by the combination of words is what phrases in poetry do, and they may do it because it is done elsewhere than in poetry, while the exact extent or end-point of such implications will often be hard to draw with certainty. What is being labelled by my title phrase, then, is the complex matter of how poetry can be felt as ‘sound’ (well-made, unflawed, good, true) in relation to its ‘sense’ (the feel of its textures, and the meanings it articulates). At the same time, its ‘sense’ (the feel of its textures) is indistinguishable from its auditory shape, its ‘sound’, for its sense is also the texture of its sound. In short, though the meaning and the auditory structure of a poem may be conceptually distinguishable for the purposes of discussion or analysis, in composition and performance they are projected and received as one and the same – and this attunement of sound and meaning is what makes poems ring true while they are being experienced.

A further implication of this word pairing, because its colloquial uses propose it as a positive value, is that poetry’s ringing true is not, by definition, a deception effected by the enchantment of its sound effects, but the articulation of verbal experiences that sound true and are sensed to be so: this implication is supported by overlapping meanings listed in *OED* ‘sense’ 11a: ‘practical soundness of judgment’. Thus, when Seymour Chatman writes of his metrical researches that throughout ‘the criterion of semantic reasonableness was used to judge whether a given scansion was possible or not’ he suggests how the terms ‘sound’ and ‘sense’ are interdependent, and notes that ‘the criterion of semantic reasonableness’ requires the ‘interpretation of the meaning of the poem’ – which will already have required a response to the rhythmic shape of its words. ‘At the same time’, he continues, ‘I have tried to keep my metrics from being

value-dependent'.<sup>10</sup> Yet, the identification of semantic reasonableness will have both required and presupposed evaluation.

'It is precisely critics interested in the meaning and idea-content of poetry that feel some kind of embarrassment toward the existence of sound organisation, and attempt to enlist it in the service of the total interpretation', writes Benjamin Hrushovski, adding that, by contrast, 'there are critics and theoreticians who deny all in all the very existence of specific meanings attributable to specific sounds'.<sup>11</sup> The benefit of this comment by a student of cognitive poetics is that it offers two possible lines of inquiry neither of which is followed here. I have already doubted the existence of sound organisation prior to or independent of meaning indication, which can then be 'enlisted' in the service of interpretation – with the sound appearing to support the sense, an idea Reuven Tsur mocks with an italic emphasis: 'One is, indeed, tempted to quote Pope outrageously out of context, that is, with an emphasis on *seem*': 'The sound must *seem* an echo to the sense'.<sup>12</sup> His implication is that the poet's technique tricks us into imagining a mimesis where, strictly, there is none. On the other hand, some critics and theoreticians have denied that sound has sense-significance at all. Meant by 'sound' here are the elements of linguistic analysis – phenomena such as vowels, plosives or sibilants, and the negating proposition is that each of these can't match, or be matched to, specific meanings ('s' and 'snake-like suspicious-ness', for instance). To escape from arbitrariness in allocation ('s'-sounds collaborate in innumerable differently-meaning words), Tsur sees language sounds as double-edged, noting the evident point that sounds cannot be one-directionally onomatopoeic, so that, for instance, the same initial consonant and concluding sibilant combined with different vowels can shape both 'hush' and 'harsh'.

In *The Sound Sense of Poetry*, I am not concerned with 'meaning and idea-content' except insofar as it is also a sound organisation. I do not think that sounds in themselves (as either entirely sense free, or paired schematically with senses) can be audibly significant in poems. This is also why I deploy the phrase 'sound sense' – pointing to the idea that the sounds arrive in sense units and contribute to poems because they do so,

<sup>10</sup> Seymour Chatman, *A Theory of Meter* (The Hague: Mouton, 1965), 15.

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin Hrushovski, 'Do Sounds Have Meaning? The Problem of Expressiveness of Sound Patterns in Poetry', *Hasifrut*, 1, 410, cited by Reuven Tsur, *What Makes Sound Patterns Expressive? The Poetic Mode of Speech Perception* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1992), 1.

<sup>12</sup> Tsur, *What Makes Sound Patterns Expressive?*, 5.

which suggests that the identifiable organisation of sound is already a sense structure too.<sup>13</sup> There are many cases where the performance of the poem's sound structure, in relation to its lineation, for instance, can imply a conceptualisation contrasted with the sound-shaped sense, and in such cases I take it that the sound sense of the line or lines will involve a combination of relevant conceptualisations.

This book takes into account the critical arguments and assertions that discourage the thought of their being any such composed singularity as 'sound sense'. Strong versions of these arguments take it that rhythmic, metrical and other formal aspects of a poetic construction are non-meaning-bearing and amoral features added to the words that compose the poem. They also tend to accompany the assumption, present in various theoretical tendencies, that in lyric poetry its 'I' is an inescapably fictional construct, and they may similarly suppose an autonomous aesthetic realm in which the language of poetry is necessarily denatured from its roles in events of life. These asserted conditions discourage the idea that poems can be appropriately used to partake directly in such life events. They may be supported by a relative and related marginalisation of both composing poet and enabling reader in what has been called 'the event of the poem'. *The Sound Sense of Poetry* argues throughout that the poem is necessarily part of, but cannot be sufficiently, such an event. For if there is no social process involving selfhoods and agencies of poets and readers, there can be no event.

One issue may be further brought forward now, not because it can be laid to rest, but rather because it cannot readily be settled. Its implications will be everywhere here and in subsequent chapters. This is the relationship in poetry, crucial to its cultural value, between two of those meanings combined in the word 'sound'. This word promises that, as already suggested, a poem can 'sound *sound*' – it can be felt as true because of its auditory shape.<sup>14</sup> But is such a response a form of primitive magic? Is it no more nor less than a mysterious and super-subtle case of rhetorical persuasiveness? I recognize the arguments and explanations implied in these questions, but am not inclined to accept either: because the first

<sup>13</sup> I have not forgotten the 'sound poetry' phenomenon, but admit it isn't my subject here. Even so, sound poetry tends to stage its performance, like an abstract painting, so as to attribute relevant meaning, as in Edwin Morgan's 'The Loch Ness Monster's Song', *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1990), 248.

<sup>14</sup> Henry James deploys the metaphor in 'The Author of *Beltraggio*' when Mark Ambient comments on his own prose: 'When I rap it with my knuckles it doesn't give the right sound'. *Complete Stories 1874–1884* (New York: The Library of America, 1999), 891.

can't account for the 'effects' it empowers, but only mystify them; while the second depends, as do similar critical assumptions already noted, on conferring priority on the sense to be conveyed, as when Pope proposed, without italic emphasis, that 'The sound must seem an Echo to the sense'.<sup>15</sup> Yet without its being not *in* sound but *as* sound, how can sense be known independently so that this same sound may be imagined as supporting by echo the separately conceived meaning? Nonetheless, there remains the question why an epigrammatic couplet rings true at the point where its rhymes join the two halves in an answering echo. Given that the poetry in some languages doesn't rhyme, this clinching must be both linguistically and culturally contingent as well.<sup>16</sup>

The sound sense of poetry is caught up thus with the ancient and long drawn out conflict between poets and philosophers. If the relationship between the sense of a poem and its sound is conceived as an irresolvable interference, with the sound overwhelming the sense, or produced by the addition of non-rational devices for a rhetorical persuasiveness, then philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche have a point when saying that the musical methods of poetry prevent it from being truthful.<sup>17</sup> Yet, if any speaking or writing is made up of sound and sense combined as one, then, being acts performed with words, poems too may have access to such truth telling as is possible in language use. Not only is this the proposal that the slogan of my title asserts and seeks to justify, it is one which has not abandoned the belief that, if there may be sound sense in any language use, then such amalgams can either be intensified by attunement, or accessed to increase meaningfulness, significance, and, in this, truth. Thus, poetry may be one of the places where such attunements and deployments can be experienced as learning how beneficially to think, feel, and experience life-relevant meaning in language. What's more, by means of its traditions for intense attunement, poems are particularly susceptible to false notes, to

<sup>15</sup> 'Tis not enough no harshness gives offence, / The sound must seem an Echo to the sense', Alexander Pope, 'An Essay on Criticism', ll. 364–5.

<sup>16</sup> For comments on the staging of rhyme, see Simon Jarvis's 2011 essay 'Why Rhyme Pleases', reprinted in Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins (ed.), *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 434–48. For an account of how and why the echo in rhyme can also serve to undo and render laughable the offered truth, see Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 159.

<sup>17</sup> Veronica Forrest-Thomson argues that poetic techniques are non-rational and non-semantic devices for producing unrealism in *Poetic Artifice: A Theory of Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978), 158–63.



not ringing true, and they can thus perform as test beds for reliable language in action.

Simon Jarvis has helpfully challenged ‘zealous attempts to strip poetry of its truth-content’, reporting another close shave with my title: ‘It’s tempting to cut the knot: “Sound *is* sense”’. This could mean, he notes, that ‘the first term is exhausted in the second’, but prefers to ask ‘if sound is sense, how have they come to be thought of as separate?’<sup>18</sup> To think that sound may be exhausted in sense is as curious a notion as that the sense is exhausted in the sound, for the verb ‘exhausted’ must be misleading in its meaning of consumption without residue. When experienced in poems, and elsewhere too, neither sound nor sense can exist without the other, so there is no separate thing to exhaust without the other disappearing too. For, however conceptually related, they are not used up in being read.

There are many things in life that, though they may be thought about separately, can only be experienced together. Alongside rhythm and meaning, the assumed contraries of thinking and feeling are similarly caught up in the processes of sound sense.<sup>19</sup> Among Jarvis’s requirements for reconnection with poetry’s truth-content is that truth-telling be understood as not only the issuing of verifiable, warrantable assertions, but that it involves embedded argument, requiring order of articulation, both rhythmical and syntactical – linking truth, too, with trustable performed acts in words which will be inescapably prosodic whether in speech or writing. Denise Riley has noted how anticipation, like a promise to be kept, ‘lives within prosody’ and ‘hovers as cadence – that overlooked yet omnipresent force to influence and to direct meaning’.<sup>20</sup> While *The Sound Sense of Poetry* aims to help the ‘omnipresent’ not be ‘overlooked’, but be as consciously experienced as possible, Riley here also prioritizes sense over sound with her verbs ‘influence’ and ‘direct’, seeming to imagine them shaping a pre-existent ‘meaning’. Nor is the ‘force’ in cadence an unmitigated power, for cadence is inextricable from gravity, the word deriving from the Latin ‘cadere’ *to fall*. The enabling of a poetic cadence in a spoken performance acknowledges the interdependence of agency in vocal skill and contingency in embodied worldly existence.

<sup>18</sup> Simon Jarvis, ‘Prosody as Cognition’, *Critical Quarterly* vol. 40 no. 4 (Dec. 1998), 3 and 11. ‘Sound *is* sense’ says a fictional character in Iain Sinclair, *Radon Daughters* (London: Vintage, 1995), 248.

<sup>19</sup> ‘We should stay alert therefore to a cognitive as well as an affective dimension inhering in such features of poems as rhythm and syntax’, Sarah Howe suggests in ‘The Feel of Thinking: Lyric Connections and Incisions’, *Poetry London* 82 (Autumn 2015), 27.

<sup>20</sup> Riley, *The Words of Selves*, 159.

Robert Frost all but uses the expression ‘sound sense’ in his 4 July 1913 letter to John T. Bartlett: ‘An ear and an appetite for the sound of sense is the first qualification of a writer, be it of prose or verse. But if one is to be a poet he must learn to get cadences by skilfully breaking the sounds of sense with their irregularity of accent across the regular beat of the metre’. Frost adds, getting closest to my title phrase, that poetry is not ‘the sound of sense alone’. Rather we ‘depend for variety on the infinite play of accents in the sound of sense. The high possibility of emotional expression all lies in this mingling of sense-sound and word-accent’.<sup>21</sup> Frost’s sentences sketch much of what is explored in my first four chapters, while the arguments in the subsequent six chapters about poetry’s truth claims, its expressivity regarding selves and others, and its reliance on the uptake of readers depends upon these key recognitions and their ramifications.

Citing instances in which Paul Valéry, Vladimir Mayakovsky and Ezra Pound report the emergence of rhythm in advance of words, and of rhythms as corresponding to exact emotions, Isobel Armstrong, rather than arguing that poetry is realised only when both are simultaneously present, has poets succumbing to ‘a dream of total union – of meter, semantics, and feeling fused as sense or meaning’.<sup>22</sup> But Frost doesn’t appear to have been dreaming when he wrote that the ‘possibilities for tune from the dramatic tones of meaning struck across the rigidity of a limited meter are endless’ and, deploying the pun on one of my title words, of poetry as ‘one more art of having something to say, sound or unsound’, the American poet adds that it is ‘better if sound, because from deeper and wider experience’. In the same essay, ‘The Figure a Poem Makes’, Frost famously announces that poetry is ‘a momentary stay against confusion’.<sup>23</sup> His implications throughout are that the sound sense of poetry is what stays.

The elements Armstrong lists as composing sound sense are, then, regularly isolated for interpretation or analysis, and I don’t denigrate the usefulness of such discussions either for poets or readers. Homophones, puns and types of ambiguity might immediately arise as seeming counter-examples of sound sense, for they appear instances of singular sounds

<sup>21</sup> Robert Frost, *Collected Poems, Prose & Plays* eds. Richard Poirier and Mark Richardson (New York: Library of America, 1995), 665. The ‘sound and sense’ collocation occurs once more when Derek Attridge discusses the theories of Don Paterson and J. H. Prynne in ‘Sound and Sense in Lyric Poetry’, *Moving Words: Forms of English Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 77–100.

<sup>22</sup> Isobel Armstrong, ‘Meter and Meaning’, *Meter Matters: Verse Cultures of the Long Nineteenth Century* ed. Jason David Hall (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011), 28.

<sup>23</sup> Frost, *Collected Poems, Prose & Plays*, 776 and 777.