



# Sincerity's Shadow

*Deborah FORBES*

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In a work of surprising range and authority, Deborah Forbes refocuses critical discussion of both Romantic and modern poetry. *Sincerity's Shadow* is a versatile conceptual toolkit for reading poetry.

Ever since Wordsworth redefined poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," poets in English have sought to represent a "sincere" self-consciousness through their work. Forbes's generative insight is that this project can only succeed by staging its own failures. Self-representation never achieves final sincerity, but rather produces an array of "sincerity effects" that give form to poetry's exploration of self. In essays comparing poets as seemingly different in context and temperament as Wordsworth and Adrienne Rich, Lord Byron and Anne Sexton, John Keats and Elizabeth Bishop, Forbes reveals unexpected convergences of poetic strategy. A lively and convincing dialectic is sustained through detailed readings of individual poems. By preserving the possible claims of sincerity longer than postmodern criticism has tended to, while understanding sincerity in the strictest sense possible, Forbes establishes a new vantage on the purposes of poetry.

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## **From the Conclusion**

"In spite of modern experiments in communal authorship, writing poetry remains one of the most individual of acts, and yet, because it provides the ground upon which the paradoxes of self-consciousness can move most freely, one of the acts most skeptical about the authority of any individual claim to self-understanding. .

. . In undertaking its experiments, poetry may separate itself from certain contexts (economic, political, historical), but is itself as local and concrete as these contexts, an experience as well as a meditation on our experiences. In its particularity, its flexibility, its sensual and sonic complexity, its consideration of the extra-rational experiences of pleasure and desire, and above all in the ways in which it speaks with both more and less authority, more and less presence than an actual human voice, poetry offers us the experience of the unknown at the core of proposed self-knowledge. This is lyric poetry's enduring -- though not sole -- claim on us."

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