The author of this book died in 1975 at the age of twenty-seven. At the
time of her death, she had already published two volumes of poems
and a number of important essays on avant-garde poetry; she had also
completed the ambitious study under review here. To call Veronica
Forrest-Thomson a gifted young critic would be an understatement;
her ability to discern value and its absence in the work of her
contemporaries is, as I shall argue, often quite startling. Nevertheless,
*Poetic Artifice* is not quite a satisfactory book; it suffers from an
unnecessarily rigid theoretical frame, a frame, one suspects, that
Forrest-Thomson adopts, consciously or unconsciously, as a defense
of the neo-Dada enigma poetry she and such kindred spirits as John
Ashbery and J. H. Prynne were writing in the late sixties.

Let us begin with the theory. Here is Forrest-Thomson's opening
paragraph:

This book is an attempt to talk about the most distinctive yet elusive features
of poetry: all the rhythmic, phonetic, verbal, and logical devices which make
poetry different from prose and which we may group together under the
heading of poetic artifice. If prose often resembles the "natural" language of
ordinary speech, poetry is resolutely artificial, even when it tries to imitate
the diction and cadences of ordinary speech. The poem is always different
from the utterances it includes or imitates; if it were not different there
would be no point in setting down these utterances or writing these
sentences as a poem. Not only does poetry use techniques which would be
strange or out of place in prose; it depends on a host of conventions which we
apply only in reading and writing poems. (p. ix)

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Here Forrest-Thomson writes as if there had never been a controversy about "literary" versus "ordinary" language, as if no one had ever questioned what Stanley Fish has termed "deviation theories" of style. More important, even the formalist, who would agree with the author's distinction between poetic and ordinary language, would question the rigid bifurcation between poetry and prose: is it really true that "poetry depends on a host of conventions which we apply only in reading and writing poems"? Given the current state of the arts, the dissolution of boundaries between, say, a "prose narrative" by Guy Davenport and a "prose poem" by W. S. Merwin, Forrest-Thomson's insistence that poetry is always "unique" and "different" seems questionable.

Still, we should grant Forrest-Thomson her strict formalist/structuralist bias because it enables her to come to terms with what continues to be the central weakness of practical criticism vis-à-vis poetry: its focus on "a thematic synthesis stated in terms of the external world" (p. xi), or, as the Russian Formalists put it, its orientation toward the message. Forrest-Thomson argues, convincingly, I think, that British poetry of the fifties and sixties has itself suffered from this critical stance, for "Whatever technical innovation [the poets] display is swiftly taken up and smothered by a critical reading anxious to convert all verbal organization into extended meaning—to transform pattern into theme" (p. xi). The result of such thematically-oriented criticism is that poets like Anne Sexton and Ted Hughes have been foolishly overpraised "for opening up new depths of psychological insights" (p. xi), while the real innovators have been largely ignored or misunderstood.

So far, so good. Forrest-Thomson takes as her motto Wittgenstein's famous precept: "Do not forget that a poem, even though it is composed in the language of information is not used in the language-game of giving information" (p. x). But in making a case for the precedence of poetic structure over poetic content, Forrest-Thomson invents a fussy and cumbersome terminology that often confuses the issues. Her key terms are: Naturalisation—the "attempt to reduce the strangeness of poetic language and poetic organisation by making it intelligible, by translating it into a statement about the non-verbal external world, by making the Artifice appear natural" (p. xi). There are two kinds of Naturalisation: external (later defined as "bad") and internal (or "good"). External Naturalisation, in turn, involves two complementary processes: (a) External Expansion—the naturalisation of details "by expanding them into the external world, as a comment
upon it”; and (b) **External Limitation**—“the limitation imposed by external expansion on the formal features which we can take account of in our interpretation” (p. xii). Correspondingly, **Internal Naturalisation** involves (a) **Internal Expansion**—expansion that takes place “within the limits imposed by the poem’s style, as we try to take account of any formal features we can identify”; and (b) **Internal Limitation**—“the limitation of the external contexts that are brought on according to the needs of external expansion” (p. xii). There is also something called **Suspended Naturalisation**; it occurs when “we know that we cannot create a thematic synthesis in terms of the external world but we can still observe the interaction and mutual reinforcement of the various types of pattern in the poem” (p. xiii). The poetry of J. H. Prynne is a case in point.

Whatever the naturalisation process in which we are engaged, Forrest-Thomson posits, “we are bringing together levels of poetic organisation and moving toward some new kind of organisation.” In so doing, we are guided by the **Image Complex**, “a level of coherence which helps us to assimilate features of various kinds, to distinguish the relevant from the irrelevant, and to control the importation of external contexts” (p. xii). What Forrest-Thomson means by the term **image complex** is never made clearer than this; one gathers that “image complex” is something like Reuben Brower’s “key design,” or Roman Jakobson’s “dominant,” the focusing component of the poem that guarantees the integrity of structure. But it is an unfortunate term for it implies that “structure” has to do with “imagery”—an equation Forrest-Thomson, who talks of the phonetic image complexes in Shakespeare’s sonnets, does not really intend to make. Our perplexity is further compounded when we learn in chapter 3 that Pound and Eliot were masters of the “disconnected image complex.”

Ironically, all this terminology could be scrapped, for what Forrest-Thomson is really after is a way of reading poems that will take into account the interrelationship of the various levels of poetic discourse: the phonological and the syntactic as well as the semantic; like the formalists, she regards meaning as an internalized component of poetic structure. Consider her treatment of Ezra Pound’s “Homage to Sextus Propertius,” a poem, so Forrest-Thomson believes, that is almost always subjected to “bad Naturalisation.” Here is the author’s pastiche of what such Naturalisation yields:

*We know that Ezra Pound was an expatriate American poet and that the*
poem is dated 1917, at which time he was living in London; we know that Sextus Propertius was a Latin poet living in Rome and writing in the first century A.D. These facts make an external context. . . . Official and respected poets are mocked along with their patrons . . . the reason for this is plain when one recalls the fact that both Pound and Propertius were relatively unknown and unpatronised. Both were better poets than those who were so belauded, and they felt this was the fault of society for wanting “a worn-out poetical fashion”. . . . What of the style of the lines? They are obviously rather loose free verse and that is explained by the fact that Pound/Propertius’ grievance was caused partly by their attempt to write in new and experimental ways. That is all we need to know about the style, and we can move straight on to our external thematic interpretation. Pound expresses his bitterness toward his society by an “imitation” of an earlier author who also wrote obscurely and expressed bitterness at his society. Pound was quite right, because pre-war England was very like Rome in the last days of the Republic and the beginnings of the Empire. (p. 33)

No doubt, Forrest-Thomson is right to assume that this is the sort of reading given to the “Homage” in standard undergraduate courses. How, then, does she avoid “external Naturalisation”? First, she argues that it is not important whether anything in pre-war Britain corresponds to Propertius’ Rome. Rather, the “Homage” asserts both at the conventional and the stylistic levels “a poetic ancestry with a technical forbear” (p. 31). Pound’s artifice is itself an homage to a poetic predecessor; his “crabbed style” alludes to the Alexandrianism of the Roman poet. Again, the pronouns shift categories, creating “a whole class of ‘poetic voices’” (p. 35). The “I” thus becomes “any poetic voice which ranges itself against the other forms of verse displayed and parodied here.” The effect of the poem’s various tensions—between an authoritative end-stopped line and the slangy language that line contains, between unofficial “asides” and official statement—is to distance and fictionalize the situation: “Pound/Propertius” becomes a “mythical figure” who “can only exist within the realm of artifice” (p. 36), that is to say, in the words on the page.

The analysis of Pound’s parodic style is excellent, but I wonder if Forrest-Thomson’s rigid refusal to say anything about Pound’s actual view of Propertius and his milieu is not as extreme a position as the one she attacks. Indeed, what she calls a “bad Naturalisation” would, in this case, support her own “internal expansion” and “limitation,” for it is, after all, Pound’s choice of Propertius that generates the very stylistic features she talks of. For a sensible combination of the two approaches, one may consult Donald Davie’s two books on Pound.
Veronica Forrest-Thomson is at her best when she turns to contemporary poetry. She is able to show that a poem like Philip Larkin's "Mr. Bleaney" can only be read by means of external naturalisation: the fate of the ordinary man who dwells in his pathetic little bed-sitting room has no meaning unless we can compare his way of life to others that we know of. Indeed, we feel that Mr. Bleaney's life has been pathetic and tawdry only because we presumably know better. Thus the hard-boiled but sensitive narrator who tells Mr. Bleaney's story obviously uses the world beyond the poem as his norm, even though he characteristically abjures his own insight into the case in his final "I don't know." The poem, Forrest-Thomson argues, "fulfills the reader's expectations, leading him out towards the world and inviting him to think of it once more. But it does no more than that" (p. 58).

Such poems are, of course, instantly popular. A related case is that of Ted Hughes, about whom Forrest-Thomson writes both bravely and harshly. In a volume like Crow, she argues, Hughes takes a perfectly predictable symbol and makes what seem at first reading "daring" metaphysical statements about the universe. At the same time, "there is not sufficient use of the non-semantic levels to allow the reader to perceive a formal pattern" (p. 149). The dislocation of the universe, which is Hughes's theme, is nowhere associated with dislocation on the syntactic or prosodic level. Rather, the simple declarative sentences are spun out in flat and repetitive free verse lines, one rather like the next. What is the function of repetition in this context? There is none, no relationship between form and theme; the imagery, not grounded in a formal complex, becomes merely stagy. Hughes "wants to be mysterious thematically without letting it affect his technique" (p. 153).

Forrest-Thomson quite rightly distinguishes between Hughes's frequent poetic posturing and the more integral visionary poetry of Sylvia Plath, although I think she overrates Plath in the process. More interesting is her distinction between Ted Hughes and John Ashbery. Her analysis of "'They Dream Only in America,'" written before Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror (1975) finally brought Ashbery fame, is very acute. She understands as have few commentators, including Harold Bloom who found The Tennis Court Oath (in which "The Dream" appeared) a "fearful disaster," that Ashbery's poem must be regarded as a "dream landscape" (p. 155). This is not to say that it is merely impenetrable. Whereas the neo-surrealist poems of David Gascoyne and Andrew Crozier are characterized by total unintelligi-
bility (reading them, says Forrest-Thomson, is like finding the telephone off the hook), Ashbery’s syntax always provides some kind of opening even though the opening leads to no formulation of meaning. “‘They Dream Only of America’” disrupts the chain of cause and effect; it is impossible to know who “‘They’” are and what it means “‘To be lost among the thirteen million pillars of grass.” But the promise of meaning hovers in the air. The key “image complex,” in this case, is the word “America”: “The poem works on the assumption that, at first, the reader will take ‘America’ for granted. Whatever other external references are suspended, we know about America; it is the continent across the Atlantic which has properties in our minds, of affluence, materialism, success—Whitman’s American dream and also Norman Mailer’s” (p. 156). But, and this is the special artifice of the poem, after the eighth line, we cannot take even these attitudes to America for granted. The phonetic solidarity of this line [“The lake a lilac cube”] “asserts the dominance of a formal order, its block-like resistance to empirical contexts.” And from this point on, the conventions of the detective story are parodied just as the poem parodies the reader’s presuppositions about America. Each line seems to promise a connection that is subsequently eroded. Disclosure of meaning is always imminent but it never comes. The triumph of Ashbery’s artifice is to keep us on our toes, waiting to learn what it was that happened “behind barns,” or what door the mysterious “key” will open.

Within the context of postmodernism, Forrest-Thomson’s stress on “artifice” thus makes good sense. When, on the other hand, she discusses the phonological and metaphorical image complex found in the words “as stone” in line 4 of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 94, or when she contrasts Eliot’s “suspended naturalisation” to that of Stevens, her stress on stylistic device often seems excessive. Poetic Artifice is subtitled “A Theory of Twentieth-Century Poetry,” but its value is less theoretical than historical. It is an eloquent defense of what we might call the New Anglo-American Poetry.

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