Poetic Artifice
Also by Veronica Forrest-Thomson

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Re-introducing Poetic Artifice: 
A Theory of Twentieth-Century Poetry

‘I got my PhD last year [...] and am now in the middle of writing a book centred on William Empson but very post-structuralist orientated[,] a sort of ars poetica[,] it will be called Poetic Artifice.’

Veronica Forrest-Thomson to Paul Buck, (1972)1

The opening quotation is from an intriguing letter written by Veronica Forrest-Thomson to Paul Buck, poet and co-editor (with Glenda George) of Curtains magazine (1971-8), and dated 4 July 1972. At the head of this long letter, Forrest-Thomson apologises to Buck for the fact that she was writing to him in her scratchy, black-ink calligraphic handwriting. ‘Hope you can read this scrawl’, she writes, ‘my typewriter is preoccupied with [the previously] mentioned book at the moment.’ In another hand-written letter later in this series of correspondence, dated 26 July, Forrest-Thomson apologises once more: ‘[sorry] for the handwriting again, but I have typewriter-phobia just now.’ These tantalising details take us back to the summer of 1972, as Forrest-Thomson’s typewriter sat on her desk in Flat 5, 17 West Road Cambridge (just around the corner from the Cambridge University Library), a page of what would become Poetic Artifice curled around the platen ready to join a slowly growing pile. From her little flat, this twenty-four-year-old PhD graduate – who would die tragically early three years later – was composing her own ambitious ars poetica of twentieth-century poetry. And this new theory – outlined in Poetic Artifice but also in several essays written between 1972-5 (see the bibliography for a full list) – was not only to extend audaciously and challenge the claims of another poetic and critical protégé from Cambridge, William Empson, but was also going to ride roughshod over prevailing critical orthodoxies by drawing on the deeply distrusted and little understood linguistic theory of the French structuralists and on a range of poetry from different periods. This 1972 letter affords us a window into a Cambridge literary world of the early 1970s, but also the beginnings of development of a potent and compelling book only now being republished.

For those of us who have read the original edition of Poetic Artifice, published posthumously in 1978 by Manchester University Press from the manuscript written during 1972, Empson’s centrality and importance to Forrest-Thomson’s own theory will be clear, particularly from her witty and
strategic use of his work in the introduction. Forrest-Thomson’s PhD thesis, ‘Poetry as Knowledge: the Use of Science by Twentieth-Century Poets’ (1971), as well as a number of her essays, not least, ‘Rational Artifice: Some Remarks on the Poetry of William Empson’ (1974), testify to her lively and insightful readings of his poetry and critical work. Indeed, Forrest-Thomson’s own, heavily annotated copies of Empson’s *Collected Poems* and his *The Structure of Complex Words* now housed in the Veronica Forrest-Thomson Archive at the Library of Girton College, Cambridge, provide more compelling evidence that her theories were developed, sometimes literally, in the margins of Empson’s own work.

However, if Empson is central to *Poetic Artifice*, as Forrest-Thomson contends to Buck, it is in the role of a critical sparring partner who is praised for his insights only to be repeatedly chastised for his ill-informed methodology and too-hasty pursuit of meaning. Hence in her introduction, Forrest-Thomson uses Empson’s interpretation of William Shakespeare’s sonnet 94 to illustrate a practice that she ridicules as ‘bad naturalisation’. Naturalisation is that ‘attempt’, as she puts it in her Preface, ‘to reduce the strangeness of poetic language and poetic organisation by making it intelligible, by translating it into a statement about the non-verbal world, by making Artifice appear natural’ (p. 36). Bad naturalisation reduces poetic complexity and ambiguity too quickly; good naturalisation accounts for as many formal and semantic complexities as possible before resorting to any reductive conclusions about the meaning of the poem. ‘Naturalisation’ was a term starting to gain currency at the time along with its sister term, ‘recuperation’. It was also a term and practice discussed by Forrest-Thomson’s then husband, Jonathan Culler, in his Oxford thesis which would be developed and published as the now famous *Structuralist Poetics* (1974). Of Empson’s reading of Shakespeare’s sonnet, Forrest-Thomson remarks, archly: ‘it is not simply a bad Naturalisation […]; it is a good reading which is reached by the wrong roads and supported by the wrong reasons’ (p. 42). Using Empson as a foil, Forrest-Thomson will, she contends, ‘show how a more appropriate reading may emerge from the distinctive features of poetic discourse’ (p. 42). Contra to the ‘Natural’, the everyday and everyday language, then, is Artifice, comprising a complex, artificial realm of formal intricacy resisting immediate recuperation on which it is a reader’s job to concentrate and to which they must diligently attend.

*Poetic Artifice* and Forrest-Thomson’s other writings from this time are useful historical documents registering shifts in literary-critical terminology, the type of questions being brought to bear on literary texts, as
well as the role and function of language. While *Poetic Artifice* is informed by this changing literary-critical and cultural milieu, and while Forrest-Thomson was peculiarly alive to new understandings of texts, parts of the book are also testament to the dogged and persistent ideas of practical and new criticism, as well as tenets of formalism. For example, Forrest-Thomson’s faith in the unity, wholeness and framework of the poetic text – the capitalised ‘Artifice’ – as well as her rejection of bad naturalisation, resemble I. A. Richards’s broad requirement to establish certain principles of literary criticism which attend to the particular and irreducible features of a poem and which avoid what Cleanth Brooks called the ‘heresy of paraphrase’. The unified or irreducible sense of the text is further entrenched in Forrest-Thomson’s introduction of spatial metaphors into the processes of naturalisation, namely what she outlines in her preface as ‘external expansion and limitation’ and ‘internal expansion and limitation’ (see pp. 37-38). These, as Culler puts it of linguistic metaphors, function as central ‘principle[s] of inclusion and exclusion’ demarcating the frameworks of literary texts. Nevertheless, readings of poetry under the old regimes weren’t specific enough about poetic form and the intricacies and complexities of the levels or layers in poems. As Forrest-Thomson argues in her Preface:

> The poetry of our century particularly requires a theory of the devices of artifice, such as apparently non-sensical imagery, logical discontinuity, referential opacity, and unusual metrical and spatial organisation, and an account of the relationships between various strata of artifice. The question always is: how do poems work? (p. 34)

Empson’s and others’ apparent inattention to the formal dynamics of poetry – their ‘inappropriate’ readings – motivated and consolidated Forrest-Thomson’s hyper-attention to such features. The particular poetic devices of the twentieth century required specific terminology and descriptions of formal and semantic processes. Forrest-Thomson’s *ars poetica* is borne, like many before her own, from the fusion of argument, polemic and realignment of prevailing orthodoxies, opinions and terminology. And such realignment was enabled by her accommodation of different and new angles on language and thought to conventional literary criticism. Empson’s own precocious *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, his *Some Versions of Pastoral*, his prolific essays as well as his poetry demonstrated for Forrest-Thomson the possibility of semantic complexity and offered representations of poetry as structures in which contradictory, complex and dialectical materials could

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co-exist as distillations of particular and peculiar thought and knowledge. To this complex representation of the poem, Forrest-Thomson appended formal complexity, a specific terminology, an exacting and excessive logic of interpretative methodology, as well as a greater faith in the irreducible or indissoluble nature of form and meaning, perspectives which were bolstered by post-structuralist theory and the linguistic philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein.

A description and model of the functions and operations of poetic Artifice required linguistic terminologies as well as a foregrounding of the mechanics of poetry. As such, Forrest-Thomson’s model of the poem draws on Formalism, although, whereas many of the Russian and Prague School Formalists tried to strategically avoid extending formal and pattern recognition into meaning, her formalism serves a delayed hermeneutics. Forrest-Thomson’s model of the poem, as well as her stress on the formal properties of language (the medium), is influenced, in particular, by the work of Roman Jakobson and Viktor Shklovsky. From the latter, Forrest-Thomson’s derived, at least in part, her argument that poetry is transformative of both language and the world; poetry, in other words, ‘makes strange’ or ‘defamiliarises’ ordinary language, with its expressed purpose to resist the what Shklovsky calls ‘algebrization’ of the perception of the viewer or reader. Jakobson’s influence is, I think, more subtle but more dominant. Evidence for such is provided by the shape, tenor and focus of her model of poetic form and language, the one reference to Jakobson in Poetic Artifice (and in her critical essays in general) as well as the existence of her own annotated copy of Jakobson’s 1973 Questions de Poétique which now resides in the Veronica Forrest-Thomson Archive. His model of the poetic function being that which foregrounds the materiality of language or the medium of language itself informs Forrest-Thomson’s concentration on formal processes and the relations between formal properties in the poem.

While Poetic Artifice is structuralist-lite as well as formalist-lite in terms of references, Forrest-Thomson’s attitudes towards texts, the types of critical questions she poses, as well as the preponderance of French writing and culture throughout the book, demonstrate a critical-literary view informed by contemporary French thought. Readers wishing to witness her more explicit engagement with or, to use a fashionable term, interventions in, such thought should consult her essays as well as her poems from 1972 onwards. (See, particularly, the essays, ‘Irrationality and Artifice: A Problem in Recent Poetics’ (1971), ‘The Ritual of Reading Salammbô’ (1972) and ‘Necessary Artifice: Form and Theory in the Poetry
of *Tel Quel* (1973), and the earlier poems in *On the Periphery*). Forrest-Thomson’s letter to Buck also provides valuable insight into her access to French theory and theorists during her lifetime, giving us broader context to the critical apparatus informing *Poetic Artifice*. The letters, written in June and July 1972, were exchanged as Buck was planning a double issue of *Curtains* called, *A Range of Curtains*, which would feature translations as well as original works by a numerous English and French poets. The magazine eventually published three of Forrest-Thomson’s poems inspired by her translations of the French poets, Marcelin Pleynet and Denis Roche, as well as by French literature and theory – ‘Selection Restrictions on “peanuts for dinner”’, ‘The Aquarium’ and ‘Drinks with a Metalogue’.6 During their correspondence, it transpires that Forrest-Thomson also wanted Buck to take her own translations of French poets as well as her essay, ‘Beyond Reality: Orders of Possibility in Modern English Poetry’, both of which she sent to him and both of which deal with central issues of language and meaning explored by her French counterparts.7 Indeed, Forrest-Thomson’s supply of materials was to a certain degree solicited as Buck seemingly quizzes Forrest-Thomson about her contacts with French theorists to which she responds with information, contacts and potential materials Buck should look up.

The letters are an intriguing source of information about her relationship with French writers. In the 4 July letter, for example, Forrest-Thomson informs Buck about those whom she knew and had met – Marcelin Pleynet, Philippe Sollers and Julia Kristeva: ‘don’t refer to her as Sollers’ wife; it makes me cringe’; she tells him what she had been reading – ‘Max Jacob, early Breton, early Tzara, Mallarmé (comme toujours)’, and she informs him of those of whom she approved and disapproved – ‘Pleynet comes pretty low and I think that Sollers is a charlatan and fool’; Roland Barthes ‘is v. important and brilliant’ but, she writes, Derrida ‘I don’t admire’. Later, and similarly grumpily, in an undated letter which is one of the last in the sequence, Forrest-Thomson informs Buck of her French translations: ‘[i]f you suppose the inaccuracies of exact word and equivalence arose from inadequacy in my knowledge of French you couldn’t be more mistaken.’ In another letter, Forrest-Thomson outlines for Buck how she positioned herself in relation to French theorists. On the 27 June, 1972, for example, she claims to be ‘exclusively Tel Quel orientated’, referring to the journal *Tel Quel* which ran from 1960 to 1982 and was a forum for the publications of a group of highly active left-wing political and literary commentators, including Kristeva, Barthes and Derrida.8
Such identity politics and poetics are crucial to our understanding of the context of *Poetic Artifice* and to Forrest-Thomson’s attempts to refine her own and her readers’ understanding of the operations of poetic form. But her discussions of poetic form are often somewhat contradictory due to her twin commitment to a vision of distanced and stilled aesthetic Form as well as poetic processes. One the one hand, her engagement with structuralism and formalism seems to have consolidated an idealised model of poetic form which lurks persistently in New Critical discussions of poetry. But, Forrest-Thomson’s use of pluralised ‘artifice’ (without capitalisation) also implies an operation or process of meaning production which may elude idealisation. As I, and other critics, have suggested, Forrest-Thomson’s capitalisation of her key term, Artifice, throughout *Poetic Artifice*, affords it a special, status in her theory; John London and James Keery refer to it as ‘quasi-sacrosanct’ and ‘apical’ respectively.9 The metaphysical or Platonic status of the term highlights Forrest-Thomson’s enduring conception of form or, more properly, Form as something which gives the poem a distinct status, function or activity which is somehow distanced from other linguistic acts or worlds. This version of an idealised, quasi-solid and objectified Form has an object status in her theory and acts as an idealised spectre in her poetry. In the broadest possible sense, her subscription to a Saussurean model of the sign, with its dualistic *signifié* and *signifiant*, gave her a model of language and thereby the poem which was at once structured, organisable and controllable and which was also resistant and framed away, as it were, from other language systems. But, at the same time, theorisations of slippery signification in post-structuralist writing presented a model of contingent language, form and meaning which wrestled with the idealised structures presented by structuralist thinking. The model of language and poetic Artifice presented in *Poetic Artifice* is born, exists or breeds somewhere between these two positions. Her theoretical model of poetic practice can thereby present the poem as engaged in a battle of signification, with individual details of the poems formal and semantic complexity holding off absorption and reduction to a crudely universalising Sign. *Poetic Artifice*, as the title of my impending book suggests, represents Forrest-Thomson’s aesthetic of struggle – her ‘struggle with forms’ – and this struggle is created by the internal battles and dialectics of signification, by idealised notions of Form (Artifice) wrestling with formal processes (artifice(s)). The model is complicated further by her attempt to reconcile a range of literary-critical models and perspectives of form and language into one coherent theory.
Reviews of *Poetic Artifice* in the few years following its publication praised its theoretical ambition and prodigious insight but also routinely quibbled at its ambiguous terminology, its strategic avoidance of meaning as well as its excessive, if exhilarating and engaging, formal interpretations. Most critics agree that the struggles I have identified lead to dynamic discussions of poetry but contradictory visions of poetic form. In a 1980 review in *Contemporary Literature*, for example, Marjorie Perloff praised Forrest-Thomson’s ‘often quite startling’ insights, but bemoaned the ‘not quite satisfactory book’ as exhibiting an ‘unnecessarily rigid theoretical frame’ and as operating primarily as a covert ‘defence of the neo-Dada enigma poetry she and such kindred spirits as John Ashbery and J. H. Prynne were writing in the late nineteen sixties.’ To Perloff, Forrest-Thomson’s book was only valuable as a historical document of ‘an eloquent defence of what we might call the New Anglo-American Poetry’ (p. 296). But Perloff had her own axes to grind (‘she overrates Plath’, she writes (p. 295)) and simply conflates Forrest-Thomson’s terminology such as ‘naturalisation’, the ‘image-complex’ and ‘internal expansion and limitation’ with other, apparently more useful and cogent formalist tropes of process and descriptions of form.

Perloff also criticises Forrest-Thomson for writing ‘as if there had never been a controversy about “literary” versus “ordinary” language’ (p. 292). She should have been more sensible in her readings, Perloff contends, like Donald Davie (p. 294). But Forrest-Thomson was very aware of the conceptual and formal risks she took in her readings and many of her observations in *Poetic Artifice* enfold and anticipate Perloff’s concerns. She deals with ‘ordinary language’ in relation to the poem in the opening of her first chapter, for example (p. 60). It is clear from her remarks in this chapter that she is not proposing that the language in the poem is different, but rather that formal devices and frameworks transform the function and operations of language as it is used elsewhere. An intricate, formal context alters both form and meaning of words. Similarly, Forrest-Thomson proves herself always-already aware of her overstatement, as her caveat remarks in the Preface make clear:

If I seem to speak with confidence in the pages that follow it is because I am convinced that nothing is to be gained in this enterprise by modest disclaimers, expressions of doubt which would weigh down each paragraph. The tentative character of my proposals will be sufficiently obvious to any reader who reflects upon them and discovers their limitations and inadequacies. (p. 33)
Perloff’s slightly bad-tempered review usefully registers the awkward and uncategorisable nature of *Poetic Artifice*; its radical slipping between theoretical and critical perspectives in the dogged search for a demonstration of poetry’s most elusive features which were, for Forrest-Thomson, contained within the catch-all term, Artifice.

A far more detailed and useful appraisal of *Poetic Artifice* came in 1982 with Brian McHale’s review essay, ‘Against Interpretation: Iconic Grammar, Anxiety of Influence and *Poetic Artifice*’. For readers having difficulty pinning down the meaning of particular terminology in Forrest-Thomson’s model of poetic Artifice, McHale’s essay is refreshing and lucid. Her terms such as the ‘image-complex’, the ‘disconnected image-complex’ and her discussion of the literary practices or modes of ‘pastoral’ and ‘parody’ are usefully elucidated in McHale’s piece, but he also argues, quite rightly, that she is occasionally opaque and inconsistent in her use of her terminology. Like Perloff, McHale acknowledges the exuberant value and contribution Forrest-Thomson’s work makes towards the interpretation of certain twentieth-century poetries. Importantly, McHale locates Forrest-Thomson’s criticism as halfway between, on the one hand, highly formalist readings which retreat from meaning altogether, and, on the other hand, what he calls ‘iconic grammarian’ literary critics such as Donald Davie, E. L. Epstein and Donald Freeman. Paraphrasing Epstein’s argument about the relationship between syntax and content in Davie’s work, McHale argues that these latter critics interpret the poetic syntax as mimetic of ‘external, objective reality or subjective psychological reality’ (p. 145). Forrest-Thomson, on the other hand, abjures such mimetic theories. Where she differs from formalists, McHale suggests, is in her reasoning that ‘if syntactic continuity [between language and the world] is destroyed, other forms of continuity – parody, conventionalisation of content (“pastoral”), form, Artifice – must be introduced in order to keep poetry intelligible’ (p. 145). In other words, while Forrest-Thomson concentrates on form, she is keen to eventually relate such form to intelligible or semantically coherent readings.

McHale also broadens Forrest-Thomson’s appeal and significance as a neo-formalist critic by contrasting her close readings with another, vastly different theory of literature expounded around the same time, namely: Harold Bloom’s ideas of the anxiety of influence and literary misprision outlined in his *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973). In short, McHale praises Forrest-Thomson for her concentration on the specifics of poetic form where, with Bloom’s work, by contrast,
one wonders whether [his] critical practice would change at all – or rather, whether it ought to change, if it remained true to its explicit theory – if confronted not with the actual poetry of, say, Tennyson, but with the sort of Artifice-killing paraphrases which Forrest-Thomson occasionally produces for ‘experimental’ purposes. (p. 150)

The distinction McHale describes is between a critical practice which reads poetry exclusively for subject or content and one which concentrates, primarily at least, on formal processes to inform a reading. Forrest-Thomson’s critical practice makes her a much better reader of the subtleties of poetic form as well as of the work of John Ashbery, particularly his work from the 1960s which Bloom infamously dismissed. Forrest-Thomson’s theory was, in short, necessary to account for the complexity and particularity of a good deal of poetry which conventional criticism could not serve. McHale clearly shares with James Keery the conviction that, as he [Keery] writes in a 1991 review of her Collected Poems and Translations, ‘[a] critic who focused, in the early seventies, on Prynne and Ashbery as the finest living English and American poets deserves to be read in the nineties.’ Indeed. And she deserves to be read today and tomorrow.

McHale’s return to Forrest-Thomson’s work in several articles demonstrates her appeal to a certain type of literary critic, namely those who have a strong emphasis on linguistics, stylistics and form as integral aspects of their understanding of poetry. It would be tempting to call these critics ‘new formalists’ if such a term had not already been co-opted by reactionary and conservative poetic movements in North America. Those critics for whom formal considerations are subordinate to the semantic, psychological or philosophical aspects of poetry and literature may not see much to offer in Forrest-Thomson’s theory. However, subsequent reviews, citations and engagements with Forrest-Thomson’s ideas by linguistically- and analytically-inclined academics and writers such as Isobel Armstrong, Robert Sheppard, Denise Riley, Charles Bernstein, Jerome McGann and Drew Milne (to name only a few), demonstrate the enduring and broad appeal of Forrest-Thomson’s work in particular, but also to theorisations of poetic artifice or Artifice more generally.

One the joys of having this work back in print is that readers will now have easier access to Forrest-Thomson’s sometimes eccentric but always entertaining writing. Some of the engaging or irritating aspects of her approach worth noting are her humorous and bad-tempered attacks on her critical and poetic contemporaries. Such snipes, snips and asides
might in small part contribute to still dominant and entrenched narratives of twentieth-century poetry, namely a ‘mainstream’ / experimental stand-off, or, more properly, a distinction between what Robert Sheppard has dubbed ‘Movement orthodoxy’ and the more radical or experimental wings of poetry. There are numerous accounts of these poetry wars, but such arguments about divisions are often reductive and too narrowly political. Forrest-Thomson’s theory has a broad appeal, straddling across the no-man’s land of poetic practice which an armoury of well-honed terminology and an obsessive eye for formal complexity.

If Forrest-Thomson’s arguments do feel entrenched in the mid-century warfare between rival poetic belligerents, this is in no small part due to her frequently acerbic style. This can be unattractive and betrays a youthful naivety as well as lack of grace in the face of critical rivals. Nevertheless, these issues were clearly important to her, personally, and her ruthless pursuit of a proper means by which to get at poetic Artifice is tinged with a feeling of marginalisation and isolation. In her 4 July letter to Buck, for example, Forrest-Thomson reveals her sentiments about her own critical as well as creative work:

I try to juggle academic and literary worlds since I feel very out of place with the current latter and don’t want to waste time fighting Ted Hughes, Anthony Thwaite, Philip Larkin (not that he fights), Ian Hamilton etc. They’re all second – if not tenth – rate as English poetry has been largely since the Eliot/Pound era.

At the same time as trying to establish a poetic community to exemplify her theory of poetic Artifice, Forrest-Thomson felt no community at all, in mainstream academia and poetry at least. Her true Penelopes were Eliot and Pound and the latter had recently entered the arms of gloomy Dis (Pound died in 1972). Like Pound, one of Forrest-Thomson’s frustrations was that her contemporary or near contemporary poets and critics, according to her, just didn’t understand the power and function of poetic artifice. For example, as she writes in Poetic Artifice:

Messrs. Lowell, Berryman, Gunn, Davie, Larkin, Alvarez, Hobsbaum and Mrs Sexton – again, to mention only the obvious – are implicated in [a] dangerous ignorance of the true function of poetry: that it must create a middle area where Artifice can open up imaginative possibilities in both the forms and contents of other languages, and thus transcend the world these impose. (p. 211-12)
Poets and critics are berated for their ignorance of poetry’s function to exploit Artifice to open up new orders of language and form, new worlds. And this manoeuvre would increasingly take Forrest-Thomson back to a reassessment of poetic conventions and those poets who work hardest at their craft.

Indeed, given that this manuscript was written in 1972, a reader may wonder how Forrest-Thomson occupied her critical mind in the few years prior to her death. As McHale laments in his review:

*Poetic Artifice* is, sadly, a posthumous book: Veronica Forrest-Thomson died in 1975 […] Our loss includes the loss of other books as provocative and useful as this one. I, for one, will miss the study she promised on ‘Pound, the Nineties, and the great fictionaliser, Tennyson, Swinburne, Rossetti, who lie behind them’. (p. 155)

McHale quotes from Forrest-Thomson’s outline of her future projects in *Poetic Artifice* (p. 117). And it is to such projects that Forrest-Thomson alludes in her 4 July letter to Buck: ‘I’m planning (when this book is finished) a resuscitation of the Nineties. Read any Swinburne (early of course) lately?’ By the time of her death, Forrest-Thomson had written a number of essays on nineteenth-century poetry as well as half a book on Pound and the 1890s. Some of these have subsequently been published, or will be published soon. Readers are invited to consult the bibliography for more information. These essays are characterised by very detailed close readings which trace the layers of artifice in Tennyson’s, Swinburne’s and Rossetti’s poetry. A reader may also wish to consult Forrest-Thomson’s thesis in the Cambridge University Library where her interpretations of poems such as those by Empson are given full force. In this thesis, and in her other, as yet unpublished materials, Forrest-Thomson had the space and the pre-publication licence to pursue her obsessive, witty and complex close readings of poems to their extreme. Indeed, recent scholarship on late-modernist poetry and poetics has started to elevate the importance of the close ‘gloss’ rather than triumphant and un-close interpretation. Such ambivalent, dialectical and contradictory glosses were both practiced by Forrest-Thomson as well as advocated in *Poetic Artifice* as a ‘good’ type of naturalisation (or interpretation).

Motivating *Poetic Artifice* and Forrest-Thomson’s highly detailed formal readings in her subsequent critical writing was her mission to get to
the bottom of Pound’s famous conviction about ‘technique as the test of a man’s sincerity’. For her, poetic craft, technique and formal cultivation, and a concomitant critical focus on these, were not just better means of approaching poetry but were a way to more sincerely produce as well as engage with poetry. As she makes clear in relation to the differences between Empson and Donne, (pp. 142-154) she wants to return poetry to a time when artifice was necessary and where ‘non-semantic’ features are expected and which link a poem to a reader; she wants to read and to produce poetry which ‘transcends’ the imposing force of other linguistic contexts. Like Pound, her poetic project – both in theory and practice – is in great part pedagogical or didactic: her theory is designed to educate the poets and readers of the twentieth-century to appreciate and understand the complex communicative dynamics of poetic forms and conventions and how these can enhance contemporary poetic practice as well as the expressivity and impact of literature. As she writes of Empson:

In his and our time the only way to restore this awareness of the importance of poetic devices and to make a creative poetry possible is by a radical innovation which starts from those features of the conventional level which can still be assumed as shared (line endings, rhyme, stanza form, etc.) (p. 147)

In a poetic context in which conservative and reactionary ‘new formalists’ and neo-postmodern Martianistas and Movementites still dominate discussions of ‘traditional’ poetic devices, Forrest-Thomson’s fusion of the radically innovative with conventional poetic techniques are still required, if only to show us another way out the constraining fly bottles of contemporary practice. Forrest-Thomson’s theory is a poetico-political call for a poetry which both inherits and develops poetic conventions. As she puts it in typically high-falutin’ terms:

Passed through the alembic of the disconnected image-complex, poetry is restored as Artifice, as a repertoire of techniques both inherited and created, whose value and continuity lie in their ability to undermine facile syntheses. (p. 147)

Such conviction resembles Eliot’s conception of the poet in relation to the Tradition. But there is more of a critical urgency to Forrest-Thomson’s remarks, particularly in her discussion of restoration and the need to ‘undermine facile syntheses’. Poets, to Forrest-Thomson, can exploit a range...
of formal tools in order to work on language in ways which transform it and which might outflank or out-think conventional thought processes and modes of expression. But this is not just play with craft but, to Forrest-Thomson at least, a way of transforming perception and being. Hence, ‘craft changes lives’, could be the glib way of describing Forrest-Thomson’s conviction. Even if we are cynical about such possibility and if we are unsure about the connection between formal craft and a form of expressive sincerity, her drive towards detailing and finding such is perhaps enough to transform our own engagement with poetry into something imperative and necessary. She was convinced of this and, after reading Poetic Artifice, perhaps we will also be persuaded.