The untimely death of Veronica Forrest-Thomson in 1975, at the age of 27, robbed us of both a poet of high promise and a provocative poetic theorist. The reissue of her theoretical book, *Poetic Artifice*, first published posthumously in 1978 by Manchester University Press, is very welcome; although redolent of theoretical discussions of the late 1960s and 1970s, it has much to offer to current critics and theorists of poetry.

Forrest-Thomson was resolutely opposed to a way of reading poetry that she saw embodied in reviews and academic studies all around her, and one that is still prevalent today. She called it «bad Naturalisation», which she describes as «an 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,» rather than taking full account of its formal features. If the reader moves too quickly to the language’s referents, she argues, what is distinctive about poetry is lost. (William Empson, who plays a central role in *Poetic Artifice*, is censured for doing this.) On the other hand, if the reader pays full attention to the poem’s formal features before bringing in the world to which it refers, a different, and this time positive, kind of limitation occurs: not as a result of the impingement of that which is outside the poem, but as a result of the poem’s own internal properties. She calls these two processes «external expansion and limitation» and «internal expansion and limitation». The former inevitably gets the poem wrong by overlooking important features while chasing after meaning; the latter does justice to it by fully appreciating the poem’s «image-complex»: a principle of coherence that allows the reader to «discover which of the multitude of thematic, semantic, rhythmic, and formal patterns is important and how it is to be related to the others». (Interestingly, Don Paterson’s account of the reading of poetry, fully developed in *The Poem*, a forthcoming book from Faber, appeals to a similar
notion under the label «thematic domain»). This second process Forrest-Thomson terms «good Naturalisation».

For Forrest-Thomson, this understanding of the working of poetry and of the proper way of reading it is not limited to particular types of verse; nevertheless, a clear set of preferences emerges from her discussion. Poems that offer immediate access to an imagined world, however skilful or subtle their handling of form, are dismissed; Philip Larkin’s «Mr Bleaney», for instance, is «almost embarrassingly lucid» in the way it encourages external expansion and limitation, «leav[ing] poetry stranded on the beach of the already-known world». Among the poets who are chastised on similar grounds (Forrest-Thomson is nothing if not forthright in her likes and dislike) are Ted Hughes, Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Thom Gun and Anne Sexton. Concrete poetry is also written off as an «extreme of irrational obscurity». On the other hand, poems that force the reader to engage with their linguistic and formal textures, every foray into the external world encouraging a return to the poem, are favoured, the prime exhibit here being the work of J. H. Prynne. This poetry is the poetry of «Artifice», resisting the reader’s desire to read off familiar meanings and enforcing close attention to poetic detail. The reader of Prynne, she asserts, «will have to recognise that he is stuck with the lines on the page, that these words have a meaning but not an extended reference to the world outside, and that his limitation/expansion will have to take place within the levels of the poem, internally and artificially». To exemplify her approach to Prynne, Forrest-Thomson makes a brave stab at analysing part of one of his poems, «Of Sanguine Fire», but, even though this is an unusually coherent poem for Prynne, featuring two characters named «Pie» and «Outwash» and a number of recurring motifs, she makes no more headway in convincing the sceptical reader of its coherence than other commentators on Prynne’s poetry have done. Also getting favourable notice are Algernon Swinburne, whose prominent rhythms appeal to Forrest-Thomson’s Artifice-loving ear; Dada, which exemplifies an extreme form of Artifice; John Ashbery and Sylvia Plath.

One result of this argument is a strong emphasis on the sounds of poems, and, given this emphasis, it is unfortunate that Forrest-Thomson has a weak grasp of phonetics. We hear of «trilled r», «slurred r», «hard k t», and «sibilant s», as if providing the sounds with adjectives proved their poetic power. We are told that in the phrase «blank verdure» (in one of her own poems) «the conjunction of k and v […] makes the latter almost hard» and that the blankness of the verdure is further enhanced by «the annulment by hard a of the e u softening vowel sounds», comments that I can’t make any sense of. When she thinks she is talking about sounds, Forrest-Thomson is often talking about letters: for instance, she is willing to give some credit to Hughes for his use of «the familiar key of o» in «Crow and the Birds», but her examples are soared, swallow, swooped, woman’s, song, and violet – six different phonemes represented by the same letter. There is a similar analysis of the «dominant key of o» in Donne’s «A Valediction: Of Weeping» (“reinforced by long ay and slurred r”), whatever that means.

Although much of the book is impressively sharp in its more theoretical articulations, I find a certain amount of equivocation in Forrest-Thomson’s handling of the question of meaning. Some of her statements might lead the superficial reader to think that Artifice is a matter of the purely material qualities of poetry, the sounds and rhythms, joins and
divisions. But it is clear from her comments on examples (and from her outright rejection of concrete poetry) that the operation of meaning is taken to be part of the formal arrangements she values. (I quoted earlier her description of the image-complex as including «thematic» and «semantic» patterns.) She insists that «anti-realism need not imply, as certain French theorists might claim, a rejection of meaning». I’m left wondering how to differentiate between «relating the poem to the external world» and responding to the meanings of the words. Doesn’t meaning imply a relation to the external world? And can a response to meaning be postponed «until the reader has determined by examining the non-meaningful levels just what amount of meaning is required by the poem’s structure»? Just how meaning operates in poetry needs to be analysed more carefully – though Forrest-Thomson is not the only poetic theorist of whom this could be said. The process of reading necessarily involves a response to meaning, but if it is thought of as something staged rather than used in a straightforward referential manner, it can be analysed as part of the working of the poem. «Meaning», that is to say, becomes a verb, not a noun, once the poem is conceptualised as an event, not an object. To think of it in this way does not at all diminish poetry’s power, celebrated by Forrest Thomson, to change «language and the world»; since such transformation can only occur through the experience of individual readers, it is this experience that needs to be attended to.

Over-hasty poetic judgements, a lack of the necessary linguistic tools, and uncertainty about the operation of meaning are flaws, but they don’t, in the end, diminish the importance of the book’s argument. Forrest-Thomson’s critique of bad naturalisation remains a pressing one: anyone who has taught poetry will recognise the tendency of many students to reach for significance (to them personally or to the world more generally) before paying proper attention to the poem as a formal construction. Decades of critical emphasis on historical, sociological, and political modes of reading literature have impoverished the discourses around poetic form, and Poetic Artifice is an excellent wake-up call for poetry critics and theorists.

Gareth Farmer provides a useful introduction to this reissue, tracing the influence on Forrest-Thomson of New Criticism, Russian Formalism and the Tel Quel school, and summarising the most important reviews of the book on its first publication. He has updated the references and amplified the notes, as well as providing a brief biography. When we were PhD students together, Veronica Forrest-Thomson was the most brilliant and the most complicated of my friends; this brilliant and complex book, along with her collected poems, will continue to keep something of her intrepid spirit alive, to our great benefit.