

Instruction for an Ideal Australian: John Forbes's Poetry of Metaphysical Etiquette

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I want to approach the work of John Forbes as being exemplary of a process which combines mythography and mythopoesis, or the constant re-reading and re-writing of the myths one lives by. The articles of concern here are both the personal mythemes that are aggregated by the individual subject in the business of identity construction, and the mass of national mythic capital that continually circulates, wanting to displace difference and coax the subject into a kind of sentimental symbolic citizenship.

Forbes took very seriously the poststructuralist revolutions in epistemology and ontology, and his poetry is characterized by an intense scepticism about the capacity of language to represent the world properly, and an allied cynicism toward the products of self-mythologising, preferring the hedonism, and in a strange way the anxiety, of the de-centred subject licensed by postmodernism. I want to read here a few of Forbes's poems as a possible charter for a new metaphysics, and perhaps a new kind of old-fashioned etiquette.

As the title of this paper suggests, there is often some haranguing quality in this poet's work: one is always being upbraided, or at least addressed; it is immediately a social poetry that does not function as a model of Romantic self-calibration, or subscribe to the self as an economic or philosophical unit, except sarcastically. I argue that in Forbes's art there is an impulse to instruct, but not via a scriptural superstructure or proven ontological tendency. It wants to impart in some measure the virtue of doubt as an almost pathological vigilance for the running versions of the self one contemporarily lives with and operates by, a mode which presents as an Ideal of citizenship for Australians.

TECHNICS OF SELF: SURFACE TECHNICS

This is a slice of an early Forbes poem entitled 'Admonition':

I'm a migrating worker
I love a celestial fridge

Will apples happen?

Will glycerine flow like blood?

What's the typical daze?

Is this the average spelling?

Not if we
can help it,
stumblebum.

2

When you're raining in my heart it's gorillas.
 When pennies fall from heaven
 make sure you're not the village idiot
 Memories of Cocaine
 catch me in a clefted stick, for you'll never catch me
 rubbed bronzes of my poverty
 salting your mind with a paydirt ellipse
 'a tiny rock is a spiritual hit'
 is it?

.....

Let me disappear, let me go to the spontaneous bullfight! (*Collected* 42)

It is worth asking straight away, how is this poem admonitory? The line 'When you're raining in my heart' might be a barb for neo-romantics, but is certainly a signal of anti-gravity and a taunt to consumers of poetry that expect it to do metaphysical or revelatory or theological work.

The idea of striking 'rubbed bronzes of my poverty' mocks the idea of celebrating the artists' penury, or casting periods of one's life as a generic mythology to be admired in the salon of one's home. 'a tiny rock is a spiritual hit' is either a rock of Cocaine, or Blake's 'world in a grain of sand', or both, or neither. The poem is also a collage of tones, of mutant clichés that sound like advice or a clutch of nifty catch phrases that one might hold as dealt cards in a finite set of existential possibilities, except in each case the trope is bent or has been disfigured with some deliberate kink.

The admixing of pronouns (me, you, I, we) scatters the idea of a stable voice controlling the poem, and the lyrical 'I' is allowed to emerge only to be ridiculed as an exploited vagabond (migrant worker) or a machine of celestial preservation (the fridge). The 'controlling intelligence' of the poem might best be appreciated as acting in the manner of the *toreador*, where we make passes at the poem to gather 'meaning' but are given the rhetorical flick. There seems to be no 'person of the poet' to sink your horns into.

The poem seems to enjoy the vertiginous pull of the page; the coherence is in its flow or conductivity of energy. It demands a customized rhetoric of reading: to read across, to read backwards; to enter into a labyrinthine system of tracks connecting rich points. The voice switches its accent from moment to moment, from the thin lyrical, to the vulgar, to the snide, and just as frequently it changes its aesthetic production values (Mead 2). Tonally, the poem zig-zags through different registers; there are so many voices, inflections and distractions operating on the same plane that is part action, part diorama and part discount special effects, which is beginning to sound like a class of cubism. What the poem offers is not the myth of a transcendental perspective, but a hedonistic

engagement with the world of language. It is not an exercise in finding delicate correspondences or hierarchizing experience, but represents an aesthetic of speed and a love of plasticity, or the perverse honesty of consumerist culture.

It seems that any attempt to reconstruct meaning here will likely make a fool of an earnest critic. The poem's effect, then, is through a kind of *chromaticity*, where the language is so vital and luminous, yet seems to promise nothing beneath it; one is left with a pure, ironic reflective surface which might show that one is loaded with all kinds of cultural baggage, or at least a set of intellectual keys which have no application here.

Angus Nichols writes of the early Forbes poem: 'The author attempts to communicate "something" which, far from representing an "essential self", can at best be a kind of artefact attesting to the interaction between different, discontinuous moments of consciousness and the aesthetic / cultural stimuli which surround them' (86). For Forbes, poems as artefacts ought to be signs of life, not the ruins of a civilisation or a sensibility or an ideology. There may be no escape from the theological and the eschatological, for we are living in a civilisation whose invisible architecture could be conceived of as a matrix of promises: a 'promised land', promised consumer ecstasies, or the promised social justice in the fleshing out of Marx and Engels' *das Gespenst des Kommunismus: the Spectre of Communism*. We inhabit the hiatus of the *already*, the parentheses of the promise, and the *not yet*, since we may consider, with Ernst Bloch, that 'Our Here and Now ... could be so superb, and isn't' (76). The action of Forbes's anti-narrative poetics is to disrupt the *telos*, the intentionality of a traditional narratology that reflexively sculpts experience into archetypal stories or postures. The idea is to produce a state of lively neurosis and a vigilance for the candied self-mythologies that make for a decorous psychic interior that is no longer renovated by the strangeness of the world.

Ivor Indyk points out that Forbes's poems contain confected products like 'frocks and frigidares, Alka Seltzer ... lollies, bin liners, suntan lotion, TV, venetian blinds, Spakfilla, toffee apples, the rumpus room, lamb and two veg—the stuff of suburban Australian life, though not, usually, of its poetry' (139). Brian Henry accounts for this by arguing that 'Forbes's self-appointed challenge is to employ these objects in an attempt to make them worthy of poetry' (120). This question of what is worthy of poetry is really a question of metaphysical value. Forbes's poetry is not trying to elevate the status of the mundane, he has I think a real ardour for the notion that these things—sunscreen, pills, goggles—are what we are, and an honest poetry will give itself over to bathing in the absurdity of these manufactured effects, that seem to offer by the magnitude and strange quality of their presence a profound critique of things human. I want then to describe Forbes's poetic as working toward a metaphysical etiquette of transductivism, which is the formal desire not for an ontology of substances but for an ontology of relations.

One of the principles of contingency is that 'things are thus, but could easily have been otherwise'; for instance what kind of building gets built on a certain piece of land, where a bullet might be delivered, who our prime minister is, and how as a marvellous hybrid of the gods and the animals, we have ended up with neck-ties, Canberra, Blondie and the H-Bomb. Forbes's poetry refuses to hierarchize between dull commercial phenomena,

magazines, cultural theory, physical effects, the wonder of the body, 'feelings', placing all possible human experience on a continuum or a plane of immanence. Poetry is still conceived of by some as a technology of *haute culture*, having for its territory the sublime, the eternal and the unique, and so by these qualities becoming a surrogate theology. It is precisely against this attitude that Forbes wants to practice his exquisite heresy, by courting the contingent and turning his poems over to the ephemeral.

Meaghan Morris writes of the anxiety over cultural studies in the early nineties of 'extending "high" *critical methods*—in particular, the luxuriant "close reading" of literary texts, to the study of popular cultural forms, and rapid-turnover image economies; to intensely political struggles over multiculturalism; to the practice of everyday life' (10). This is the fear that the paradigms of the study of literature aestheticize and depoliticize social conflict. There was a similar anxiety among Australian critics towards Forbes's application of a high formal art to the tidal wrack of popular culture, and his art was dismissed as trivial (Duwell 257).

Forbes's is a political poetry precisely because it flattens the distinction between high and low cultures, between worthy objects of Great Art and Morris's 'rapid turnover image economies'. It seems that for Forbes this is the proper role of poetry; not to mediate but to interrogate, not to be used as a frame for a privileged or normalising view of one's culture and oneself, but as a fierce specular technology that aligns cultural and self-critique. The poems are never far away from a consideration of their means of production. Nothing phenomenal is shut out of the poem to keep it beautiful, or to maintain a fidelity to a territory of 'the poetic', and the inconvenient processes or anaesthetic structures of human life are wilfully included. Forbes said in an interview:

we're massively deluded about ourselves most of the time and I don't just mean about things like nationalism, I mean about how we see ourselves. My poetry points out that there are no free spaces—there is no unoccupied territory. Les Murray talks about Australians living in one quarter of Australia and keeping the rest empty for poetry, which is an example of how people like to see things. Actually, what the three quarters is kept empty for is mineral exploration. My poetry doesn't pretend. It is demythologising rather than mythologising. (qtd in Redford 40)

Forbes is interested in the Self, or a model of the Subject, ideally as a transductive surface. There can be no interiority without an exteriority; as we observe the world, so we are made through a rhetoric of reading. If in a poem we have a joke about communism, or 'beetles that thump against my brother's kitchen window', or a half-full bottle of Tanqueray, or a 'cute ashtray packed with butts', they are not there to do allegorical or symbolic work necessarily, but the poet seems to be saying 'I am these things and you are too'. So for Forbes, language may not innocently represent the world, but it is *the* protean technology; something we either handle wilfully, or are handled by. Poetry is our dirty ontology: it is complicit with the materiality of the world, opening the territory of the poetic to the world as it presents itself to us in its contingency. In his unpublished Master's Thesis on Frank O'Hara, Forbes writes:

O'Hara wanted to get rid of the illusion of depth in the language of the self—to bring it all to the surface. ... He recognised that our cultural identity was a function of language, and that any freedom from this must begin with bringing all the 'meaning' to the surface—both the surface of our understanding and the surface of the poem. ... If one realises the emotions, the 'heart', are culturally structured responses, then there is no way of escaping from this situation that takes one 'inward', because there is nothing 'inside' the personality that is not a function of its external relationships. The only chance for change takes the heart to the surface, shedding the 'self' for the relationships and events the 'self' is meant to define. (113)

There is no transcendence, no redemption in this metaphysics; it preaches an immanentism, a kind of integrity of attention. The myths we live by ought not to be monumental figures or narratives that template our responses to experience, but we ought to recognize the action of mythopoesis in its ubiquity within 'ordinary' perceptual events. Like watching TV.

**Ode: inspired by 'The Last Outlaw'
a TV mini-series 'brought to you
by the Australian Mining Industry'**

I saw the Kelly brothers
riding across an untapped mineral bonanza
on their way to rob a small bank
it was raining and a small group
of Victorians, loyal to their
folk songs, were cheering.
&, a nice point, the rifles
were Sniders & not
Martini-Henrys; weapons matter in
Australian history / remember
how Peter Graves had the only
gun-fighter's holstered Colt
in *Cobb and Co?* Bushrangers
had flintlock horse pistols, & zero style,
in the early 1860's.
But this re-creation
doesn't focus on technology,
it's more a human, or costume drama: will
the warm hearted young
horse flesh enthusiasts
'face the decade of the 1880s
with enormous confidence'?

exhorts us not to behave as 'common readers' and suspend disbelief or merely absorb the spectacle, but to be acutely aware of its economic determination, of what underpins it or how we might appreciate its *invisible architecture* as a shadowplay of Capital. 'The bush' for Forbes is as natural as chewing gum, and there is always wilful persuasion or a rhetorical purpose in its representation.

Mary Gilmore we might know as a writer for the *Bulletin*, a rampaging socialist, nationalist poet and arch mythologiser of literary Australia in the 1890s, and the first female member of the Australian Workers' Union, who later found it acceptable, within her own myth of herself, to ascend to the title of Dame of the Order of the British Empire. Gillian Armstrong stands in for a generation with shinier technologies and a genius for period and costume drama, literally inheriting the mythical space of the bush. Again, the idea of a more honest representation is to be found in the material and the contingent detail, suggesting that the aesthetic and the political, the moral and the ethical, can be isolated as abstracts only, and that the surface aesthetic is the real frontier of ideologies and philosophy.

Meaghan Morris says that Forbes's poems 'nag about class ... argue that aesthetic critics should engage more seriously with the *cultural* forms in which economic understandings of society have been disseminated ... explore the complex role of stereotypes and "portraiture" in mediated popular culture ... [and] consider what it means to speak and write as an Australian in a "globalizing" cultural economy' (8). All of these aspects of Forbes's works are evident here. The poem models the ironing out of the struggle between radical socialism or revolt in Australia, and the co-option of these forces by comfort, entertainment and enfranchisement. Human history is not other than its props and effects, especially in re-creations that are made on a budget, and rely on the lateral reach and chain reactions of the metonymic for their full connotative or mythic effect. Of course, Forbes is making his own corrective representation, and he engages in while critiquing the methods of the culture industries, for it is a humorous piece, and its efficacy is as a mode of entertainment, taking an ironic place in the tradition of bush 'ballades' or 'odes'.

In its original broadcast on Australian television, the show 'brought to you by the Australian Mining Industry' was punctuated by long propagandic pieces advertising mining in Australia as a patriotic duty and an essentially sentimental pursuit.¹ Mining as a mythical scene gives us our archetypal 'scallywag' socioeconomic revolt in the Eureka stockade, and the chandeliers and promenades of Melbourne. All of this historical intrigue was once more correctly held in the *tableau*, recorded in paint and archived in the National Gallery, but we have moved to the techno-tele-visual and the spectral modes of the cathode ray tube, now digitalia.

Just as much as the matter of the Kellys or social justice, the poem is about being a spectator and the sly pleasure in becoming involved in the production of corruption and the perverse consumption of ideology, which you might know is bad for you, like junk food. The poem is structured as an armchair for the common reader, laying out pop. cult. signals like cheese, crackers and cabanossi (bung), but the cushions are full of needles

and one quickly pricked into position as a cultural critic. Where the show pretends to be a kind of 'horse opera' with the sound of ringing bullets as an affirmation of 'action', Forbes's little aside becomes a moment of real assassination, the deadpan '...weapons matter in / Australian history' zeroes in on the brutality of a convict nation and years of internecine warfare with Indigenous peoples. The piece suggests a bleeding of the quality or guts of political commitment in Australia, implying perhaps that Dame Mary Gilmore was politically engaged with her mythopoetics, while Gillian Armstrong prefers the sentimental ambience suited to couch entertainment, or that Lawson was a bloodier type of insurrectionist than Bill Hayden, who would prefer a spot in the VIP tent.

Having Ned Kelly and Peter Graves in the same breath, or Gillian Armstrong and Dame Mary Gilmore, or Bill Hayden and Henry Lawson ('blood will stain the wattle'), or costume dramas and weapons of empire, dismantles the hierarchy between deep and ephemeral cultural studs, and puts them all in circulation on an even plane, brings them all to the surface, holding up the implicit connections for interrogation. It is topical and democratizing in its effects and cynicism, and charming in its insistency on a critical consciousness, saying 'this interests me and it should interest you too'. The art that Forbes is offering is that of being involved in the occasion of culture, of the chronic importance of being an accomplished reader as it constitutes a strategy of effective citizenship, which is an application of energy, a *charge*, not necessarily a state or a right.

We cannot ignore these things; representation is our very being, not a second order effect or an expressive trace of our essence. For Forbes the materialist, everything is at stake in the struggle for control of the symbolic economy. By applying ourselves rigorously to time bound representation—the tone and *techne* of our civilization—we approach a superior metaphysical etiquette, a greater stake in and quality of our presence. This is a poetic that prefers and practices a mode of self-regard whose banner is 'fait attention!', that isn't seduced by pleasing 'myths-of-the-self', but constantly interrogates this myth-making process while acknowledging that we cannot live outside of myth. The poems are exemplary occasions of a reader of culture reading themselves through both existential philosophies of the atomized subject, and the action of interpellation through national or religious mythologies.

A particularly pointed instance of this in Forbes's work is:

Anzac Day

A certain cast to their features marked
the English going into battle, & then, that

glint in the Frenchman's eye meant 'Folks
clear the room!' The Turks knew death

would take them to a paradise of sex
Islam reserves for its warrior dead

& the Scots had their music. The Germans
worshipped the State & Death, so for them

the Maximschlacht was almost a sacrament.
Recruiting posters made the Irish soldier

look like a saint on a holy card, soppy & pious,
the way the Yanks go on about their dead.

Not so the Australians, unamused, unimpressed
they went over the top like men clocking on,

in this first full-scale industrial war.
Which is why Anzac Day continues to move us,

& grow, despite attempts to make it
a media event (left to them we'd attend

'The Foxtel Dawn Service'). But The March is
proof we got at least one thing right, informal,

stragglers & more cheerful than not, it's
like a huge works or 8 Hour Day picnic—

if we still had works, or unions, that is. (*Collected* 201)

The poem is a neat demonstration of how we self-mythologise through mythologising the other, and here the process is treated as a tribal mechanism of negative ontology: we know who we are by knowing who we are not. Each figure is a caricature of such thrilling economy that an Australian reader might recognize the kind of laconic quip that is credited as a national stylistic. In the understated tone is the myth of an Australian kind of intelligence: self-deprecating and cynical.

The work of caricature is to appeal to perceptual salience and the mind's delight in pithy figuration and concision. It draws on nebulous impressions whose sudden deep correspondence to the Sign is almost erotic. Caricature is a specular technology that sutures the subject into position by fixing the profile of the other. It can have the effect of a psychic tattoo, with the glamour of its wit giving permanence to static perceptions (like the cartoon). The charm of a well-chosen epithet erases the self-determination of the other, and confers power on the speaker, is definitional for the speaker. There is something arch about encapsulating whole complex historical bodies of people in these witticisms. It is clearly absurd, yet the absurdity is extended to this process of mythologising itself.

As the overall rhetorical strategy leads to the strophic move which is calculated to give Australians goosebumps, 'not so the Australians...', we might see that the poem manages to indulge in both a critique of mythologising and a reiterating of Australian jingoistic mythologies. It presents the ritual of Anzac Day as a popular democratic and peculiar expression of an 'Australian Style' (informal, straggling and more cheerful than not) forged antithetically against an absurdist taxonomy of the 'others'. Yet the class concerns in the last line undercut the whole, and backlight the poem to appear to be a caricature in itself, an episode of nostalgia for a superior or somehow more honest orientation of the Australian perspective. This final undermining move is typical of Forbes with its *necessity* as the signature of some kind of ontological honesty—to leave the ending of a poem untied and open to the risk of thought.

Probing the mechanics of nationalist mythopoetics is one of Forbes's obsessions. We can think of 'territory' as what is mapped, known, marked, colonized, stylized and settled through all the topological tools we have to manufacture for ourselves the feeling of *das heimlich*, the homely. All psycho-symbolic production can be thought of as the action of poiesis, and Forbes's poetry gives us a model of this process as a self-reflexive practice of an Ideal mode of citizenship, for it looks at poetics as symbolic territorializing of the phenomenal world, creating (in a Deleuzian vocabulary) the intensities or complex folds in the world's surface that are human beings.

A person's heart is still part of the earth's surface, it is simply one of the innermost layers of tissue, but the heart as a trope of abstraction, or the idolization of certain states of feeling, seems in Forbes not only in to be in bad taste (cliché) but in bad faith, since one's actual (baffling) emotional states are ventriloquised through language as a given function of a culture, and this is a lesson Forbes takes from O'Hara: without being a poet to some degree, one is cheated of the experience of one's experiences.

The (modernist) technique of combining high and low registers is co-opted by Forbes, having allusions in the same poem to Richard Rorty and Rod Marsh, or Dante and the Ramones. Where Eliot and Pound meant to exasperate their readers to learning, or simply exclude them altogether, in Forbes this hybridising of cultural effects is meant to produce a self-spurring mode in the common reader to want to think further, to relish doubt and be sceptical of the easily achieved *aperçu*. For the poems give a certain amount in the way of homely trinkets or gags, and if these hooks work, one is then yanked along into much more difficult territory. These are hand-made machines for thinking, but they don't function as static objects, they are more models of deliria or seismographic records of the comic efforts of the west to build ontologies on shifting sands—of which Forbes might say we should move right in and don't forget your cannon.

Forbes's poems are heady with glee in what he sees as the absurdity of the amorous techniques of anthropomorphism, which want to translate the cosmos onto the human scale of inch / foot / pound terrestrial logic, but instead of satirising the epistemology of the west in its own terms, and merely trying to isolate exhibits of irony or hypocrisy, we are involved, through the torsional syntactic moves of the poems, in the bemusing process of the symbolically motivated intellect at work on itself. It can be difficult to tell at any

moment whether the tone is one of prayer or the burlesque, and the poems are like a battery test; you have to put your tongue on both terminals to get the shock of the current.

The poet preaches a kind of radical engagement with the world with the slogan 'look out not in'; that we are the things in the world, that we are not subjected to mythologies from our culture but we create them dialectically, and that the hinge of 'interiority' and 'exteriority' is a false dichotomy (Lewis 159). It is a strategy for behaviour. Rather than staying home, or looking in, and perfecting a set of reliable responses which the poet suggests is an improper attitude to life, one must struggle to maintain oneself as a surface among surfaces, as a constantly enlivened threshold, where acts of mythopoesis are not sacred events, but are as regular and consequential as breathing.

For Forbes the poem is this ideal transductive surface, a living tissue, a plane of immanence. Keeping your myths at the surface positions them to be oxidized and changed—highly mutable. So it is with the surface of the poem as *techne*. Following a concept of depth, or meaning, or content means to turn away from this kind of vitalist attention and be seduced by the logic of tropes, of preconceived figures that follow necessarily from each other in the routines of rhetoric, which Barthes declared in the *Pleasure of the Text* to be the 'enemy of jouissance' (43).

As Juan Davila has reminded us recently, Australian culture is a superb example of what pastiche might be (3). The idea of Surfaces is a metaphysical abstract in itself, but in a land whose original inhabitants have experienced chronic cultural disruption and which was then peopled by successive waves of millions of immigrants, the admonition to pay attention to surfaces is an important one, since it means paying attention to each other, paying attention to a fragile country where the topsoil that would sustain us does not really have a lot of depth either. The surface is the liminal zone, the nervous frontier of sensation, and this is where attention should be concentrated—constantly re-synthesizing differentiated signals, rather than occupying the throne of the Self, Forbes's Metaphysical etiquette instructs us to keep our myths close to the surface where they can be interrogated and repeatedly altered through the providence of experience, and that Metaphysics is after all a textual, textural affair.

NOTES

¹ Episodes 2, 3 and 4 of this series, as it was originally aired on Australian television by the Seven Network in 1980, including the advertisements for 'the Australian Mining Industry', are available on VHS video at the University of Melbourne's Eastern Resource Centre library.

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