

The Function of Knowledge and Contingent Difficulty in the Poetry of John Forbes

AIDAN COLEMAN
University of Adelaide

Or
you can read Mayakovsky / he's
a sort of Communist Bruce Dawe.

* * *

And don't
forget President Kennedy
travelling on the SS France

* * *

You
celebrate your indifference
with a packet of lollies
or a Ton-Ton Macoute
haircut.

These three quotations from John Forbes's 'Ars Poetica' (*Collected Poems* 82), decontextualised and out of sequence, require some knowledge on the part of a reader. Those approaching the first quotation might have to look up Bruce Dawe or Mayakovsky, and once they have established the identity of these figures, they are likely to be nonplussed about the connection between the dissolute Russian futurist and the popular poet who toured Australian schools. A reader might try to fit these differences into some coherent interpretation or they might search for a further clue. The second quotation seems more straightforward until we find that President Kennedy, whose time in office was as well documented as any president's, never boarded the SS France. How do we read this injunction? Can it be resolved through further research? The final quotation presents an equally unexpected problem of matching a signifier to a referent. The Tonton Macoute was the militia of the former Haitian president Papa Doc Duvalier, who terrorised Haiti from his rise to power in 1959 until his death in 1971 (Calvert and Calvert 184). But a reader is unlikely to find anything distinctive about the haircuts of this militia. In a poem that blurs the serious and comic, the word 'haircut' may suggest other possibilities, including the 1970 album 'Ton-Ton Macoute!' by blues guitarist Johnny Jenkins, or the seventies' UK progressive rock/jazz band of the same name.¹ Such references have attracted scant comment from Forbes's critics, but this article argues not only that familiarity with such knowledge enriches a reader's engagement with the work, but that it can be productive in readings of many of Forbes's poems, particularly those that present other kinds of seemingly impassable difficulties.

Forbes has often been praised for his erudition. The famously learned Peter Porter wrote: 'Those who knew John Forbes well are united in praising his extraordinarily wide knowledge of

literature, history, world systems of thought and so on' (21). His friend, the critic Peter Craven, who felt that he was 'probably the most intellectually formidable of the poets of 68,'² noted that he 'knew a good deal about a thousand subjects from military technology to the history of the church' (41). Forbes deployed his extensive learning in inventive and surprising ways, but his attitude to this knowledge, and how it might be interpreted, can be difficult to determine. Claims to knowledge in Forbes's poetry are often undermined by the poet as revered sources of erudition are routinely and comically debunked. Forbes's eclectic use of knowledge was the central theme of Carl Harrison-Ford's launch speech for the posthumously published volume *Damaged Glamour*. His speech maps the tension inherent in the poetry between Forbes's seeming ambivalence about knowledge's function in a poem's interpretation, and the cultural literacy or research required for a reader to fully engage with the work. Harrison-Ford recalled that Forbes disparaged one of his peers who presumed to elucidate a particular cultural reference in a poem, and that he was 'irked' at 'having to explain the NVA to younger audiences' (16). While it might be inferred that Forbes conceded explanation was necessary in certain circumstances, he also felt that it was inappropriate for the poet to provide exegesis. But Harrison-Ford's speech also argues for the 'benefits of knowledge' (17). He states of the poem 'lassu in cielo': 'you don't *have* to know who Martin Johnston and David Campbell were to appreciate it, but it's a half- or three-quarter arsed poem if you don't' (17). Similarly, he says of a line from 'Civilisation and Its Discontents' that the 'imagery gains those extra yards if you know something, however apocryphal, about Phil Spector and the girl groups he produced' (17).

In his essay 'On Difficulty' (1978), Steiner distinguishes four nonexclusive categories of difficulty: contingent, modal, tactical and ontological. The category of most relevance to the quotations above is contingent difficulty—the difficulty that finds its source in a reader's lack of knowledge (26).³ Contingent difficulty requires 'homework,' or research, on the part of the reader, which is theoretically infinite according to Steiner because the context of a 'language-act' is the world (26). Steiner likens contingent difficulties to 'burrs on the fabric of the text' (27). This metaphorical roughness can also be conceived as a 'grippyness,' which, to shift the metaphor to rock-climbing, can offer a reader a handhold—or *crimp*—on the poem's otherwise smooth, impenetrable surface. In this way, the burr enables a reader to establish a provisional understanding of a poem when other features are initially insurmountable.

The categories of modal and tactical difficulty are also pertinent to my readings. The former occurs when a poem 'articulates a stance towards human conditions which we find essentially inaccessible or alien' (28). Unlike contingent difficulties, modal difficulties cannot be looked up but lie in the reader's ability to empathise with a poem or get on its 'wavelength'—Steiner playfully invokes a now-dated American parlance to characterise this experience: 'we "get the text" but we don't "dig it"' (28). This is probably the main kind of difficulty first-time readers of Forbes encounter, expecting the assumptions informing the work, as regards the grand themes, such as love, death, and the role of poetry itself, to be more reverential than they are. Many likewise expect the poems to express a greater confidence in the representational power of language and in its ability to convey truth. Contingent and modal difficulty overlap when we consider the function of knowledge in a poem—as in the earlier example of the 'Ton-Ton Macoute haircut.' Decisions about which details or connotations to emphasise and which to suppress in a reading, or what limits to set on 'homework,' are modal questions requiring us to determine the attitude of the poet to the knowledge under consideration.

What Steiner calls 'tactical' difficulty finds its source 'in the writer's will or in the failure of adequacy between his intention and his performative means' (33). Tactical difficulty manifests

itself in Forbes's poetry through disjunction and syntactical complexity. In his most disjunctive poems, such as 'Stalin's Holidays,' we lack the connecting word or phrase that would indicate the relationship between the content of two consecutive sentences. More frequently the problem is that the relationships between nouns within sentences are overly complex and too many clauses are joined by conjunctions such as: 'like'; 'although'; 'but'; 'so now'; 'as if'; 'because.' Where ambiguous punctuation compounds these difficulties, it is hard for a reader to determine a clear meaning through conventional close reading, which involves an acute focus on the relationships between nouns.⁴ This is particularly the case with the second poem I consider, 'Ars Poetica.' Such tactical difficulty, which renders the relationships between nouns indiscernible, is a compelling reason to focus instead on the meaning of the nouns themselves.

The fluidity of conjunctions and pronouns in Forbes's compositional process, as opposed to the stability of nouns and noun phrases, also provides a cogent reason for emphasising erudition in readings of his work. In Forbes's compositional process an 'I' can change to 'we' or 'you,' and an 'and' can easily become a 'but' or 'when,' causing a sentence to change its semantic track. It is telling that such changes even occur in poems beyond their initial publication. 'Breakfast,' originally published in *Southerly* in 1976, demonstrates this malleability. This is the poem's opening, with the words that change underlined and emboldened:

to wake up & throw
two bowls of muesli
at the wall miss &
crack a louvre is no
way to start married
life in Coffs Harbour
but it makes you laugh
which is better than
not, **& helps** to clean
the marvellous organs
of the lungs & muscle
we are more than our
names / air & blood (296)

When the poem was republished in *New and Selected Poems* (1992), the nouns had not changed, but some of the prepositions, conjunctions and participles had:

to wake up & throw
two bowls of muesli
at the wall miss &
crack a louvre is no
way to start married
life in Coffs Harbour
which makes you laugh
& that's better than
not, **helping** to clean
the marvellous organs
of the lungs & muscle
which are more than our
names / air & blood (48)

In the case of the first three changes, the effect on meaning is negligible, but the final change is more profound. The ‘we are’ of the first version effectively begins a new sentence and hence a new thought (if a reader punctuates where the poet has not), suggesting those included in the pronoun ‘we’ are ‘more than our names’; or, alternatively, but less likely, indicating that those included in the pronoun *are* ‘the marvellous organs / of the lungs & muscle.’ When ‘we are’ is replaced with the subordinating conjunction ‘which are’ in the second version, a reader instead learns some qualifying information *about* ‘the marvellous organs / of the lungs & muscle.’ Despite their critical importance to meaning, conjunctions remain malleable late into Forbes’s drafting process and so, even after the noun content in general and the knowledge content in particular are fixed, the relationship of the different knowledge components to each other remains open. Similarly, in his more disjunctive work, Forbes moves lines within and between poems. In a 1980 interview with John Jenkins, Forbes discussed the effect he aimed for in moving ‘blocks of meaning’ around, explaining how they ‘work off each other’ to ‘create tension’ (101). As Forbes specifies, these blocks can be ‘whole sentences or lines or phrases’ (101). What could be called ‘units of sense,’ often noun phrases, are integral to Forbes’s process. That he moved these units of sense around is clear from dozens of extant drafts in the archives. Knowing this is likely to temper the role of conventional close reading in any analysis, particularly attempts to precisely determine the relationships between different nouns and noun phrases through their connectives. The knowledge content, and noun content in general, remain relatively fixed throughout Forbes’s compositional process. So, while the intentions of the author are ultimately inscrutable, foregrounding such content in our readings, nevertheless, mirrors the priorities of Forbes’s composition.

In his essay ‘The Open Work,’ Umberto Eco defines ‘openness’ as ‘the unfinished quality’ of an artistic work before it is engaged with by an interpreter, performer, or addressee. He explains that this openness prevents ‘a single sense from imposing itself at the very outset of the receptive process’ (8). Forbes was generous in the scope he allowed readers for interpretation. Martin Duwell, who knew the poet personally, thought that ‘[m]ore than most poets he needed an audience to share in the discovery of meaning’ (58). In the 1980 interview with Jenkins, he praised one review of his work by Ken Bolton, saying: ‘It was illuminating, because he talked about how the poems worked. He talked about them in their own terms and found patterns in them that I hadn’t seen before’ (98). Rather than singular meanings, or a single pattern, it is more fitting to discuss patterns of meaning in Forbes’s poetry, recognising the work’s openness. But it should also be acknowledged that the interpretative scope Forbes sanctioned for his work did have its limits. He suggested, for example, in the same interview with Jenkins, that the pathos one critic attributed to the image of the surfboard in ‘Rose Selavy’ was simply wrongheaded (97). In analysing most of Forbes’s poetry, our interpretative horizon should be set somewhere between the closed poem, in which meaning is singular, and the totally open poem that can in theory at least mean anything. Eco sees ‘suggestiveness’ as essential to the success of any open work of art (9). In the totally open work this suggestiveness tends to lack direction, but in the poems analysed here, and many others, the suggestiveness points in a particular direction.

Interpreting the knowledge content in Forbes’s poems is largely a matter of tone and so strays into the territory of modal difficulty. While a reader cannot approach the erudition in Forbes’s poetry as they would a high modernist like T. S. Eliot, or as they would the work of other erudite post-war poets such as Richard Wilbur or Peter Porter, they would be equally mistaken to read the work as they would the New York School poet, Frank O’Hara, with whom Forbes is commonly associated. O’Hara’s preference for surface over depth should not necessarily be ascribed to Forbes, nor need it limit our curiosity in—or further investigation of—the poems’

erudition. To read '[j]uniper berries' in 'Stalin's Holidays' the same way we might read hyacinths in T. S. Eliot's 'The Wasteland' seems as wrong as ascribing pathos to the surfboard in 'Rose Selavy,' but there are no absolutes to guide our interpretation and the rules by which we read subtly—and occasionally radically—recalibrate for every Forbes poem.⁵ We engage with such questions of modal difficulty through familiarity.

Forbes's aesthetic has been compared to cubism (Hart 482; Hose 2), and envisaging simultaneous viewpoints in a single plane is a useful way to approach the work's erudition, rather than linearly, as a conventional close reading of the work might. It is best read as a network of tensions which inform and enrich each other. The readings I present of 'Stalin's Holidays' and 'Ars Poetica' will not be exhaustive, but will rather outline how a reader might approach many of Forbes's poems through their knowledge content.

The title poem from the collection *Stalin's Holidays* will present contingent difficulties for a reader, some of which have grown more pronounced with the passage of time:

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.
 Juniper berries bloom in the heat. My heart!
 'Bottoms up, Comrade.' The nicotine-stained
 fingers of our latest defector shake as they
 reach for Sholokhov's Lenin—the verandah is
 littered with copies—no, commies, the ones
 in comics like 'Battle Action' or 'Sgt Fury
 & His Howling Commandos.' Does form follow
 function? Well, after lunch we hear a speech.
 It's Stephen Fitzgerald back from 'Red' China.
 Then, you hear a postie whistle. I hear without
 understanding, two members of Wolverhampton
 Wanderers pissed out of their brains, trying
 to talk Russian. Try reading your telegram—
 'mes vacances sont finies: Stalin.' But we don't
 speak French or play soccer in Australia, our
 vocabulary and games are lazier by far. Back
 in the USSR, we don't know how lucky we are. (CP 72)

From the title to the poem's final line, a reader is confronted by modal difficulty, as they attempt to reconcile the poet's flippant humour with the mass-murdering dictator. Tactical difficulties also abound. A reader can't be sure of the relationships between the first person pronoun of 'My heart,' the second person 'you' of the eleventh line, the first person inclusive 'we' of the final two sentences and the person who proposes the toast ("Bottoms up, Comrade"), or indeed of their relationship to Stalin. The dialogic quality of the work sees voices switch within and across sentences, as they speak from inside the Soviet Union, from Australia, or from a liminal zone somewhere in between. The conjunctions and phrases that could denote relationships are generally missing and because of this many of the sentences float in isolation. In this context, the contingent difficulties the poem presents, rather than compounding a reader's experience of difficulty, might—if we extend George Steiner's metaphor of the burr—provide a 'crimp' on an otherwise smooth, impenetrable surface.

Performing 'homework,' a reader can quickly resolve some of these contingent difficulties but the extent to which these difficulties are intertwined with modal difficulty also needs to be

acknowledged. Mikhail Sholokhov, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1965, wrote novels, short stories and articles that chronicled Lenin's time in power. A reader might be surprised to discover that Sholokhov did not write a biography of Lenin. They will find, however, that he was a friend of Stalin and sympathetic to his regime.⁶ A reader can quickly learn that Stephen Fitzgerald was Australia's first ambassador to Communist China in 1973 (Clark 32). But the depth of their research into this figure, and their subsequent interpretation, is likely to be guided by the poem's title. Could Stephen Fitzgerald's sympathetic approach to Communist China and his predictions of miraculous economic growth (Clark 32) also be of relevance? While the reference to Wolverhampton Wanderers might not be a source of contingent difficulty when considered in isolation, it becomes so when read in the context of the poem. If a reader is looking for a connection between the soccer club and Stalin, it might be the two famous games Wolves played against Moscow clubs Spartak and Dynamo, the latter patronised by Stalin's KGB Chief, Lavrentiy Pavlovich Beria (Williams). Still, this like much of the other content is anachronistic because both the Spartak and Dynamo matches were played shortly after Stalin's death at Wolves' home stadium of Molineux (Vonnard 7-8; Dunmore and Murray 211). A reader, as Steiner acknowledges, can never know when their research is complete (26), but the more obscure the knowledge, the more it will tend to strain convincing exegesis.

While the poem's title is important, I would contend that it should not set the boundaries for interpretation too rigidly. Titles *can* perform a thematic function but particularly since the advent of Modernism they can also be dissonant, ironic or even arbitrary. Like pronouns and conjunctions, titles have a malleable quality in Forbes's process.⁷ The title 'Stalin's Holidays' promises both high seriousness and bathos. 'Holidays' strikes a dissonant note, suggesting an elsewhere, the suspension of usual operations, or an absence, and though he is the recipient or, perhaps, the author of the telegram, Stalin does not actually appear in the poem. This means that the dictator does not have to be treated as an ultimate point of reference. Given the poem's Australian content, we might choose to view the Stalin of the poem not as the man himself, but as an image of the dictator from an Australian perspective. It would seem from the poem's content that a reader's interpretation should proceed by drawing connections between the two poles of Stalinist Russia and then-contemporary Australia, noting that the approach a reader takes will have implications for the nature of their research.

The constructed nature of culture is a central theme in Forbes's poetry. He told the journalist Jennifer Redford: '[W]e'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' (Redford 40). Reading the knowledge content of 'Stalin's Holidays' draws out these preoccupations, as cultural constructs and unexamined commonplaces are interrogated. The poem moves from examples of culture functioning in the service of ideology to those less conspicuous structures that shape society and the individual. A reader is presented with a series of subjects and events that constitute different forms of stage-managed fiction, misunderstanding and propaganda. A reader can assume Sholokhov's Lenin to be the official party version of the revolution's founder, and the 'commies,' as comic-book villains, are caricatures of real people. Even the sympathetic public talks on Communist China by Stephen Fitzgerald might be seen as a form of soft propaganda. The members of Wolverhampton Wanderers, in their drunken failure to speak Russian, remind us not only of cultural ignorance, but of the glamour sport can bestow on a political regime. The effort to read a telegram in French, a difficulty akin to that experience by the members of Wolverhampton Wanderers trying to talk Russian, also reminds us of the importance of French language and culture to Russian elites of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Offord 380)—

a courtly act of cultural cringe, potentially of more relevance to Australia than Stalinist Russia. The poem's resonances and crosscurrents might cause a reader to reflect on the elevated status of sport in Australian culture, where it tends to claim political neutrality. Does this part of democratic Australia's culture serve subtler ideologies than Stalinism? The Australian sense of casualness and ease, celebrated throughout Forbes's oeuvre, here implies a lack of cultural knowledge and a naïve assumption that Australia is free from ideology. This is underlined by the poem's final sentence that subtly alters the Beatles' lyric. 'Back in the USSR, you don't know how lucky you are' becomes '[b]ack in the USSR, we don't know how lucky we are,' refocusing the lyric on Australia, rather than the Soviet Union. The allusion to this song, which parodies the jingoistic sentiments of Chuck Berry's 'Back in the USA' (Turner 150), could be seen as a critique of Australian cultural assumptions and nationalist sentiment. The flippancy of the song as political commentary—reinforced by the knowledge that the Beatles never visited the USSR⁸—might be seen to further destabilise statements about 'how lucky we [Australians] are.' Given the first-person inclusive pronoun's proximity to the word 'lucky,' Australian readers might hear an allusion to Donald Horne's 1964 book *The Lucky Country*, or at least to the famous epithet Horne coined, which has become a pervasive cultural construct. Through such details, meaning remains relatively open but the language still points in a particular direction.

The poem's opening sentence seems initially alien to this interpretation but it can be reconciled. The sentence was, in fact, the first message sent on the Moscow–Washington hotline, installed in 1963,⁹ and so could be seen as a bridge between East and West, but it might be interpreted in broader terms also. A reader encounters the limits of language at every turn, from the difficulties of the two Wolverhampton Wanderers players and the implied (Russian-speaking) addressee of the Beatles' hit, to those Australians 'who don't speak French' reading: 'mes vacances sont finies.' 'The limits of my language mean the limits of my world,' Wittgenstein famously stated (149), and these limits, for those writing and speaking in English, are metaphorically represented by the pangram, a sentence which includes every letter in the alphabet, and therefore symbolises all the possibilities the language encompasses. However natural or organic social structures and relations seem, they are constructed from a language most take for granted—whether that language is Australian English, French or Russian.

A number of contingent difficulties are presented by 'Ars Poetica,' but, as with 'Stalin's Holidays,' these are entangled with tactical and modal difficulty.

Ars Poetica

'I wanna be sedated'

The Ramones

Raving against the space
 where the poem sounds
 like a revolving door that
 makes the noise a car makes
 bumping into the dole—
 that's the target. And don't
 forget President Kennedy
 travelling on the SS France
 things are more like
 they are now than they have
 ever been before,
 clear somehow, like

physical fitness. You
 celebrate your indifference
 with a packet of lollies
 or a Ton-Ton Macoute
 haircut. It's almost
 pure debauchery, as prayer
 is for example: your heart
 is full of hatreds more
 intricate than fractures
 in shatter-proof glass.
 Put a brick through
 a real-estate agent's window
 and it bounces back
 and cuts you. That's what
 I mean about targets. Or
 you can read Mayakovsky / he's
 a sort of Communist Bruce Dawe. (CP 82)

How the poem's knowledge content functions is difficult to determine because the poem's syntax, grammar and punctuation are ambiguous. Omissions of—and shifts in—pronouns are evident from the beginning, which is disorientating. The opening two sentences deliberately eschew a pronoun. The most plausible reading of the latter is that it is in second person directed at an addressee, as in: 'And don't [you] / forget President Kennedy.' However, a reader will most likely identify the use of second person in the third, fourth, and fifth sentences with the speaker, before the jarring surprise of the penultimate sentence with its first-person pronoun. The final sentence, which returns to the second person 'you,' seems to be directed towards the addressee. If there is a unified subject, it's a comic, bumbling protagonist: bumping into the dole—a phrase that in its blurring of the concrete and abstract underlines the hopelessness of the speaker's situation—and being cut by the brick he attempts to throw through a window—a sort of comic rewind, underscored by the double syntax. But it's impossible to be certain about the allocation of any of these pronouns. The ambiguous punctuation and free-floating quality of signifiers provide further difficulties. For example, the calculated and unconventional omission of all but an em dash—one of the more ambiguous punctuation marks—leaves the reader in some doubt as to what 'the target' is. What a reader determines will influence their approach to what follows. What parts of the sentence before its final line do we choose to isolate as independent? What parts do we choose to read as dependent? How the diverse knowledge components in 'Ars Poetica' relate to each other is also difficult to determine because of the text's conjunctive structure. The opening two sentences, which comprise half the poem, are connected by an 'and,' which has a flattening effect, withholding the relationship between the two sentences. Conversely, the 'or' at the beginning of the final sentence has an effect akin to a *volta* in a sonnet, suggesting an alternate path to what precedes it. If 'Stalin's Holidays' initially presents a reader with a smooth, impenetrable surface, they may experience the riddling syntax, sparse punctuation and the ambiguity of pronouns as a slipperiness. Again, in such circumstances, the burr-like quality of contingent difficulty provides something to grip.

The poem's Latin title 'Ars Poetica,' which itself will be a contingent difficulty for some readers, functions in a more conventional manner than the title of 'Stalin's Holidays.' An *ars poetica* is a treatise on poetics or the art of poetry, and the title invokes a venerable tradition, beginning with Horace's didactic verse-epistle in the first century BCE (Bach 6). A reader familiar with later poems in this tradition, such as Archibald MacLeish's wholly serious poem

of the same title (106), is likely to anticipate a loftier tone and, so, to experience temporary modal difficulty. In this context, the epigraph: ‘I wanna be sedated,’ taken from the punk-rock band The Ramones, functions as a warning of the comic content to follow. This epigraph and the title might set the parameters within which the poem can be read, to a greater extent than ‘Stalin’s Holidays.’ A reader will note the poem’s sardonic wit, and that it seems more personal in tone than ‘Stalin’s Holidays.’ ‘Ars Poetica’s non-Australian references also function more conventionally: as an adjective in the phrase ‘Ton-Ton Macoute haircut,’ as a choice in the case of reading Mayakovsky and as a conversational reminder regarding President Kennedy on the *SS France*. The noun ‘lollies’ and the poet Bruce Dawe suggest an Australian setting, or at least Australian concerns. We can further focus the parameters for interpretation through a public statement Forbes made about the poem. In a 2SER radio interview he stated:

That poem’s annoyed about poetry. I don’t know how predictable it is but a lot of poetry strikes me as predictable and boring and no matter what political posture it takes up, is actually an accommodation of things as they are and an accommodation that provides the writer with a rationale for what he does, and if he’s successful, and something of a hustler, an income too. (20.57–21.40)

While not wholly negating the poem’s personal themes, this statement focuses our exegesis on the wider Australian poetry community. But even knowing this, ‘Ars Poetica’ is still a difficult and largely open poem. The field in which meanings can play is narrower than ‘Stalin’s Holidays,’ but a reader is unlikely to get beyond these thematic impressions without first engaging with contingent difficulty.

It has to be acknowledged that the parameters outlined above bring a reader no closer to determining a referent for ‘Ton-Ton Macoute.’ Once they know the basic details elaborated at the beginning of this article, they might surmise that the difficulty the poem poses is no longer contingent but modal. While a reader might feel, given the poem’s comic tone, that a direct reference to the Haitian militia is too macabre, any reading cannot wholly escape these dark connotations because the two other (musical) referents find their origin in the Haitian militia. The important thing is that the reference is de-contextualised: consuming ‘a packet of lollies’ or getting a haircut with certain political connotations are one and the same. Both acts are ‘pure debauchery’ because of the self-satisfied comfort they represent. The contrast between the sort of poet the ‘Ton-Ton Macoute’ reference invokes and the tragic figure of Mayakovsky could not be more pronounced.

Interpreting the metaphor that yokes Mayakovsky with Dawe is likely to focus on differences. The poem presents two options: the riddling and slippery path of the first, which unfolds over six sentences and twenty-seven lines, is self-negating in its complexity. The second option—reading Mayakovsky—is easier to grasp, despite the ambiguous qualification of the final line. A reader’s ‘homework’ need not be extensive to establish the sharp contrast between the figures of Mayakovsky and Dawe. Mayakovsky, the uncompromising and revolutionary futurist poet, was imprisoned before the age of sixteen for the Bolshevik politics that he saw as fundamental to his art (Brown 33–34). In contrast, Bruce Dawe, the tenor of the simile, is an inoffensive establishment figure, endorsed by government and educational institutions. His impressive book sales and reach into Australian schools represents poetry as a career choice.¹⁰ Dawe himself is not Forbes’s target but the culture of Australian poetry. The disjuncture of the comparison between Mayakovsky and Dawe, reinforced by the qualifying—and deliberately awkward—adjectival phrase ‘sort of,’ articulates the shortcomings of Australian receptiveness to all that this revolutionary futurist poet represents. A figure like Mayakovsky, the poem

argues, is inconceivable to those shaped by the culture of Australian poetry because their response will function within predetermined categories. While the poem envisages no change to this situation, the poet aims to shake Australian poets out of their self-satisfied, 'sedated' torpor.¹¹ Peevish as such sentiments might seem, they are in keeping with Forbes's criticism of Australian poetry in interviews and reviews, and with the general tenor of his poetic oeuvre.

The poem's other noun content becomes easier to interpret in light of this reading. The potentially subversive act of throwing a brick through a window sees a character who might be associated with the poet attempting to effect a transformation, even a revolution. But the target of Australian Poetry, sardonically represented by the real estate market, continues as before, impervious to attack or criticism—it is too 'sedated,' in the sentiments of the poem's epigraph, to respond. This would cast the poet in the role of critical outsider who can only harm himself. The poem opens with much sound and fury—'raving,' 'noise,' 'bumping'—all of which is contained. The car is making noise but going nowhere. The door, rather than admitting entry or exit, is revolving. The stasis implied by these images is reinforced by the plain meaning of the statement 'things are more like / they are now than they have / ever been before.' The subject, who is implied but denied a pronoun, is, to all intents and purposes, a cipher. The ambiguity of the second-person pronoun implicates the speaker within the situation he describes, which, coupled with the poem's circularity, seems to support the determinist view the poem espouses. As more contingent difficulties are resolved—as a reader 'gets a grip'—such interpretation becomes easier to perform.

How the reference to President Kennedy on the *SS France* complements this interpretation is more obscure. A reader can easily discover that the *SS France* travelled the North Atlantic route between Le Havre and New York from the early sixties, but will find no record of President Kennedy travelling on the ship, or even stepping aboard. Steiner notes that tactical difficulty can be caused not just by the poet's skill but by their failure (33). Placing President Kennedy on the *SS France* might be the result of negligence on Forbes's part, but there are other possibilities. While 'Stalin's Holidays' blurs temporal and spatial relations, the difficulty created by this self-contained fiction is peculiar to 'Ars Poetica.' Pablo Picasso famously stated that 'Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realise truth' (270). In their 'homework,' a reader will soon establish that the reference cannot be taken at face-value, but that they could attempt to interpret it as a productive fiction. They might conclude that it reflects the state of mind of the delusional poet, who only sees 'things' as 'clear[ly]' as 'physical fitness'—a mixed metaphor which, in fact, suggests a lack of clarity or insight. But if they proceed further, this reference will probably involve more 'homework' than previously considered. A reader may reflect on the historical ties between France and the United States, particularly the nature of their constitutions. But President Kennedy's most obvious connection to the *SS France* is that it brought the *Mona Lisa* to the US, an act for which Jackie Kennedy was largely responsible.¹² In the context of the Cold War, the painting had a predetermined meaning that could be fitted to the uses of propaganda (Davis, 68–69). Similarly, in Forbes's estimation, poetry in Australia fulfils a predetermined role, independent of an individual poet's actions. From the political appropriation of art to the safeguarding of a static tradition, this Cold War story is replete with other possibilities that can enrich a reader's interpretation. Contingent difficulty, by its name, suggests a type of impermanence: we look up the reference and solve the problem. But so often a reader's experience is of 'homework' begetting only more 'homework.' Resolved or unresolved, a reader's research must end somewhere.

Steiner's essay, like the two Forbes poems I consider, was published in the late seventies but since this time the Internet has revolutionised the way in which readers obtain information.

Indeed, through mobile devices such information can be accessed anywhere, almost instantly. In his essay, Steiner comments that a reader's 'homework' is becoming more 'mountainous' as 'our twentieth-century brands of literacy recede from the vocabulary, from the grammars, from the grid of classical and biblical reference which have mapped the contours of Western poetry from Caxton and Chaucer to the archival gathering or museum-catalogue in *The Waste Land* and the *Cantos*' (26). It is likely, since the seventies, that the educated reader's cultural knowledge has further receded in the traditional sense that Steiner has in mind here. This phenomenon may have been accelerated by the advent of the Internet, and teaching philosophies that de-emphasise the importance of canonical knowledge. To some extent, the Internet's accessibility fills this gap in cultural literacy. But, as the context of a 'language-act' is the world (26), being able to look something up is not a direct substitute for possessing a thorough contextual knowledge of it.¹³ This latter type of knowledge, however it is acquired, is more likely to engender nuanced reading. Although technological developments have rendered the information that resolves contingent difficulties more accessible, this does not significantly alter the way a reader interprets a poem's erudition. Many of the references I have explicated here have become more obscure with the passing of time and more difficult to interpret, but twenty-first century readers, because of the Internet, have a greater opportunity—and are more likely—than Forbes's original audience to grapple with the contingent difficulties his work presents. This change in reader experience, while beyond the scope of this paper, is worthy of further consideration.

The approaches I have modelled here show that considered engagement with the poem's knowledge content enables a reader to make exegetical progress, while enriching the reading experience by widening the field of interpretative possibilities. Research, or 'homework,' can on the one hand, resolve difficulties, but will, more often, complicate the act of interpretation. Despite the great variety exhibited in Forbes's small oeuvre, his poems display a number of common features and because of this, the strategies I adopt in my readings of these two markedly different poems can be applied to a significant proportion of his work. A poem's erudition, which is often experienced as contingent difficulty, can never be cleanly extracted from the context of other difficulties, but it does not necessarily compound a reader's confusion. In fact, reading the knowledge content of particular Forbes poems—sometimes synthesising new information and at other times disregarding the findings of 'homework'—allows for a greater level of engagement with some of Forbes's most difficult work. As a reader performs 'homework,' they gain a better handhold on the otherwise smooth, opaque surface of the poem. Thus they are able to make exegetical headway, when other difficulties would seem to impede further progress. As Wallace Stevens posits in 'Man Carrying Thing,' a poem 'should resist / the intelligence almost successfully' (350). This 'almost' maps the territory of provisional comprehension, which can be gained through reading the knowledge content of a poem. Where a reader's fingers find a crimp to grip, they can make progress with a difficult poem, not to solve it as a puzzle, but to negotiate its other difficulties with a more complete understanding.

NOTES

¹ The abundance of jazz and blues references in the work of Frank O'Hara, who was the subject of Forbes's uncompleted MA thesis (Ryan 104), and the music's popularity with Forbes's poet-friends, such as Ken Bolton might support this reading.

² The Generation of '68 is a label given to a loose grouping of poets, mainly based in Sydney, who were largely defined by John Tranter's 1979 anthology *The New Australian Poetry*.

³ Steiner's focus on contingent difficulty, the category of difficulty he considers most common (27), makes his work particularly relevant to the subject of erudition and its function. Other major treatments of difficulty, before and after Steiner's, place far less emphasis on the poet's deployment of knowledge as a source of difficulty. For

example, James Longenbach's book-length treatment of the subject *The Resistance to Poetry* (2004) does not include the deployment of knowledge among the seven 'techniques of poetic self-resistance' he discusses.

⁴ David Greenham, who presents I. A. Richards as 'the founder of close reading,' believes Richards's most important insight was that 'meaning is not inherent in individual words but is rather derived from the relationships between words' (vi) and the approach Greenham develops in his book-length treatment of the subject of close reading is built on this basic insight.

⁵ Martin Duwell cautions against reading the poems as 'a solid block identically interpretable at all synchronic slices' (56).

⁶ The writer's relationship to the dictator is chronicled in *Stalin's Scribe—Literature, Ambition, and Survival: The Life of Mikhail Sholokhov* by Brian J. Boech. The accusation that Sholokov committed plagiarism in writing his most famous work, *The Quiet Don*, received widespread publicity through an article Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote in 1974 for *The Times Literary Supplement*, and Forbes was undoubtedly aware of this. While this line of interpretation seems rich in possibilities, especially given the proximity of 'Sholokhov's Lenin' to the word 'copies,' I do not pursue it further here for reasons of space.

⁷ The title for this poem changes from 'Stalin's Speaks' to 'Stalin: a portrait,' before settling on the final title in the ten extant drafts of the poem at the Fryer Library (UQFL148/A/S/12). Extant drafts of many other poems see titles undergo more radical changes.

⁸ The song was actually written in India, while the Beatles were studying transcendental meditation under the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi with Mike Love from the Beach Boys (Turner 150).

⁹ The actual test phrase was 'THE QUICK BROWN FOX JUMPED OVER THE LAZY DOG'S BACK.' The Russian translators sent a reply message asking their American counterparts why the fox was jumping over the dog (Dizard 102).

¹⁰ The poet's friend Alan Wearne recalls: 'The last thing we talked about [two days before Forbes's death] was Bruce Dawe's success: how he wrote about "issues," how schools studied "issues," how, therefore Dawe sold lots of books in schools (how, as likely, if he hadn't made a fortune from his art he must have made more than us!)' (142).

¹¹ The cubo-futurist manifesto 'A Slap at Public Taste,' which Mayakovsky probably wrote (Brown 54), and his suicide, which has been related to the hostile public reception he received at a reading five days earlier (Brown 26), provide sharp points of contrast to the type of comfortable, self-satisfied careerist Forbes's poem attacks. Such details, and others pertinent to readings of 'Ars Poetica,' cannot be fully explored here due to the limitations of space.

¹² The story of Jackie Kennedy negotiating the loan of the Mona Lisa for the National Gallery in Washington, the painting's transatlantic crossing and its successful exhibition is told by Margaret Leslie Davis in *Mona Lisa in Camelot: How Jacqueline Kennedy and Da Vinci's Masterpiece Charmed and Captivated a Nation* (2008).

¹³ It should be noted that this includes knowledge of popular culture, which is particularly important for reading Forbes.

WORKS CITED

- Bach, Greg. 'Ars Poetica.' *The Manifesto in Literature (Vol. 1: Origins of the Form: Pre-1900)*. Ed. Thomas Riggs. Farmington Hills: Gale, 2013: 6–9.
- Boech, Brian J. *Stalin's Scribe—Literature, Ambition, and Survival: The Life of Mikhail Sholokhov*. New York: Pegasus Books, 2019.
- Brown, Edward J. *Mayakovsky: A Poet in the Revolution*. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1973.
- Calvert, Peter and Susan Calvert. *Latin America in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990.
- Clark, Andrew. 'Chinese Whispers.' *Australian Financial Review*. 29 Dec. 2015: 34.
- Craven, Peter. 'Luminous Poet Blessed with the Touch of Humour.' *Australian* 28 January 1998: 41.
- Davis, Margaret Leslie. *Mona Lisa in Camelot: How Jacqueline Kennedy and Da Vinci's Masterpiece Charmed and Captivated a Nation*. New York: Da Capo Press, 2008.
- Dizard, Wilson, P. *Digital Diplomacy: US Foreign Policy in the Information Age*. Westport: Greenwood, 2001.
- Dunmore, Tom and Scott Murray. *Soccer for Dummies*. 2nd Ed. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.
- Duwell, Martin. "'The Truth That Doesn't Set Us Free": Reading John Forbes.' *Overland* 154, (1999): 55–58.
- Eco, Umberto. *The Open Work*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989.
- Forbes, John. 'Breakfast.' *Southerly* 36.3 (1976): 296.
- _____. *Collected Poems, 1969–1999*. Rose Bay: Brandl & Schlesinger, 2010.
- _____. Interview by John Jenkins. *Helix* 5 & 6 (1980): 96-104.
- _____. 'Interview with John Forbes.' Interviewers and program title unknown, NSWIT 2ser Radio, c1980.
- _____. *New and Selected Poems*. Pymble: Angus & Robertson, 1992.
- _____. 'Stalin's Holidays' (drafts). Box 1A. UQFL148/A/S/12. nd. TS. The John Forbes Collection, Fryer Library, University of Queensland, St Lucia.
- Greenham, David. *Close Reading: The Basics*, Routledge, 2018. ProQuest Ebook Central. 16 Jan. 2020 <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/adelaide/detail.action?docID=5481407>
- Harrison-Ford, Carl. 'Speech to Launch *Damaged Glamour*.' *Homage to John Forbes*. Ed. Ken Bolton. Rose Bay: Brandl & Schlesinger, 1998: 13–19.
- Hart, Kevin. 'Open, Mixed, and Moving: Recent Australian Poetry.' *World Literature Today* 67.3 (1993): 482.
- Hose, Duncan. 'Instruction for an Ideal Australian: John Forbes's Poetry of Metaphysical Etiquette.' *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* [Supplement] (2010). 12 Jan. 2020 <https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/index.php/JASAL/article/view/9617>.
- Longenbach, James. *The Resistance to Poetry*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004.
- MacLeish, Archibald. 'Ars Poetica.' *Collected Poems 1917–1982*. Ed. Richard B. McAdoo. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985. 106.
- Offord, D. 'Francophonie in Imperial Russia.' *European Francophonie: The Social, Political and Cultural History of an International Prestige Language*. Eds. Vladislav Rjéoutski, Gesine Argent and Derek Offord. Bern: Peter Lang, 2014: 371–404. 23 Jan 2020 <https://doi.org/10.3726/978-3-0353-0630-9/8>.
- Picasso, Pablo. 'Statement to Marius De Zayas.' *Picasso: Fifty Years of His Art*. Ed. Alfred H. Barr. New York: Museum of Modern Art / Arno, 1966.
- Porter, Peter. 'John Forbes in Europe.' *Homage to John Forbes*. Ed. Ken Bolton. Rose Bay: Brandl & Schlesinger, 1998: 21–34.

- Redford, Jennifer. 'The Poet As His Own Worst Enemy.' *Sydney Morning Herald* 25 Mar. (1989): 40.
- Ryan, Gig. 'more successful than America.' *Homage to John Forbes*. Ed. Ken Bolton. Rose Bay: Brandl & Schlesinger, 1998. 13–19.
- Solzhenitsyn, Alexander. 'Sholokhov and the Riddle of "The Quiet Don."' *Times Literary Supplement* 4 Oct. 1974: 1056. 18 Jan. 2020 <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/sholokhov-and-the-riddle-of-the-quiet-don/>.
- Steiner, George. 'On Difficulty.' *On Difficulty: And Other Essays*. New York: Oxford UP, 1978: 18–47.
- Stevens, Wallace. 'Man Carrying Thing.' *Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*. New York: Knopff, 1954. 350.
- Turner, Steve. *A Hard Day's Write: The Stories Behind Every Beatles Song*. Dubai: Carlton Books, 2010.
- Vonnard, Philippe. 'A Competition that Shook European Football: The Origins of the European Champion Clubs Cup, 1954–1955.' *Sport in History* 34.4 (2014): 595–619.
- Wearne, Alan. 'Spirit and Action.' *Homage to John Forbes*. Ed. Ken Bolton. Rose Bay: Brandl & Schlesinger, 1998. 141–53.
- Williams, Sean. 'The Downfall of Russian Soccer Team.' *New Yorker* 11 Feb. 2016 <https://www.newyorker.com/sports/sporting-scene/the-downfall-of-a-russian-soccer-team>.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Ed. Bertrand Russell. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1922.