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Does function follow form? Openness and formal association in the early poetry of John Forbes

Abstract
This article aims to reconstruct features of John Forbes' compositional process in his first decade of serious practice, through analysing drafts and early versions of his poems. I compare early versions of 'Here', 'The Joyful Mysteries' and 'Stalin's Holidays' to their final incarnations to show how Forbes was resistant to a fixed, or single, idea when writing a poem. In the context of such openness, Forbes' poems often moved towards a sense of closure, through the pressure his use of form applied and through its more suggestive qualities. Following a comment Forbes made in an interview, I label this process 'formal association'. I contend that Forbes sought a balance between closure and openness, while arguing that the dynamic interplay of this openness with formal association, during the composition, was crucial to his achievement.
Keywords: John Forbes, form, openness, closure, composition

Umberto Eco's concept of openness is probably best understood as the unfinished quality of an artistic work, which is completed by an interpreter, performer, or addressee. Eco explains that such openness prevents 'a single sense from imposing itself at the very outset of the receptive process' (Eco 1989: 8). For the purposes of this article I define this 'sense' as interpretation. Open works deliberately invite multiple interpretations, without a single interpretation dominating. Closed works, by contrast, tend to point the interpreter in a particular direction, offering 'a range of rigidly preestablished and ordained interpretative solutions' (6). It is doubtful if any work can be accurately described as 'closed' in these terms, and the possibility of a truly 'open' work could, likewise, be contested. The vast majority of poems can be situated on a continuum between the extremes of 'closed' and 'open', so these labels are most usefully considered in terms of extent or degree, as are their variants 'openness' and 'closure'.

While John Forbes saw his poems as open, to some extent, he considered some interpretations of his work wrong-headed, or even ridiculous. This is clear in his criticism of a reviewer's remark on his poem 'Ode to Tropical Skiing':

> He said something very odd about it. He thought the image was supposed to convey real poignancy: The surfboard, orphaned, lost in Peru. I said to him, 'If I'd wanted to give that impression I would have said, "Like a Jew lost in Peru".' He responded with a baffled stare. (Forbes & Jenkins 2014: par 22)

It seems for Forbes the construction of meaning was a collaborative effort between reader and writer. Forbes said of a review of his work by Ken Bolton: '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' (Forbes & Jenkins 2014: par 26). Martin Duwell, who knew the poet personally, wrote of Forbes' 'preparedness to relinquish a dictatorial hold over the meanings of his poems' (Duwell 1999: 58) and the critic Peter Craven recalled that he was 'often gratified by people finding meanings in his poetry that he didn't know were there' (Craven 2016). Not only did Forbes' finished poems resist closure, or Eco's 'single sense from imposing itself', but such resistance was also vital to the compositional process itself. While his statements on the importance of such resistance are perspicuous, what is less obvious is how he moved from the near-total openness with which he began writing a poem to the greater level of closure that marks the majority of his published poems. My aim here is to demonstrate that this happened largely through a process he labelled 'formal association'. Although the comments Forbes made about his process were consistent throughout his career, I concur with those critics, such as Lawrence Bourke (1992: 106-107) and Martin Duwell (1999: 56-58), who see a significant shift in terms of tone and theme in Forbes' third book, *The Stunned Mullet* (1988). I think this new phase is accompanied by a shift in practice, and, for this reason, I will limit my discussion to Forbes' writing in the 1970s – his first decade of serious practice, during which he wrote the poems that appear in *Tropical Skiing* (1976) and *Stalin's Holidays* (1980).

Forbes' intentions, as he began writing, were almost totally open, as he explained in an interview with Cath Kenneally:

> It's like recognising something's there, that you didn't know was there, and putting it together: finding out something – because I don't really work from having something to say. I work from getting a line, or a couple of lines that suggest some more lines, and that's how [the poems] develop. (Forbes & Kenneally 1993: 88)

The process outlined here is one of exploration, rather than declaration or the merely illustrative. It is clear that the poem never begins from an idea, or message, but we can also infer from the phrase 'finding out something' that Forbes' process wasn't closed to ideas either. Such content would be realised during the compositional process, while the writer's attention was focused on 'the lines' themselves or the poem's other features. Forbes thought that beginning with an idea – 'know[ing] what you're going to say' – made poems 'boring', so they 'either turn into a sermon or a reflection' (Forbes & Kenneally 1993: 89). In contrast, he championed the virtue of 'surprising yourself' (89). Such openness was vital to Forbes' process. In a 1980 interview, he explained to John Jenkins, 'Just generally, if I know what a poem means when I'm halfway through it, it's rooted. The poems that work best are just verbal constructions' (Forbes & Jenkins 2014: par 86). Two things are pertinent here. Firstly, it was not only important that the poem began in openness but that it remained, to some extent, open through the entire process: the poem's success was dependent upon actively resisting the emergence of 'mean[ing]' or at least the emergence of 'meaning' that was too obvious or transparent. Secondly, it is important to note Forbes' emphasis on the language – the materials of the poem's 'construction' – over ideas or thematic content. These words, their music and shape, and other features, which could be considered formal in broad terms, were as likely – perhaps, more likely – to advance the compositional process as ideas.

Form is of crucial importance to Forbes' work. Ken Bolton describes Forbes as a 'formalist' (Bolton 2004: par 1), Alan Wearne writes of his 'formal balance' (Wearne 2001: 130), and Cassie Lewis, for whom Forbes was a poetry tutor, remembers that he 'emphasised the importance of form over content' (Lewis 2002: 157). In the absence of a controlling idea, it seems formal features guided the compositional process. The only occasion, however, on which Forbes used the term 'formal association' was in the interview with Kenneally:

> JF: …once you start writing you see what the *shape* of the thing's going to be, why it's going to be like it is, and … they don't write themselves but they do suggest the shape that they're going to take.
>
> CK: Are you saying there's a sort of free associating going on – that you start out with a line and then if you free associate you'll find out what you wanted to say?
>
> JF: It's not free association – it's *formal* association. The form of the poem suggests what's going to come next. Sometimes you have a poem and it's not working and you change it around and it [*snaps fingers*] 'comes out', like crystals coming out of a solution. (Forbes & Kenneally 1993: 110-111)

In these remarks we see Forbes' relative ambivalence to the poem's content and a contrasting attention to its formal features. I infer from the above statements that form guided Forbes' process in two ways. Firstly, the poem's concrete form shaped its language in ways difficult to define. Alan Wearne (2001: 130-131) recalls that Forbes often saw the poem's shape before he began writing, and the vast majority of Forbes' archived poems retain their concrete shape throughout the drafting process. Forbes' comparison to 'crystals coming out of a solution' seems to imply that something about the writing process is more fluent once the fixed concrete form is settled, and it is apparent from the drafts I analyse that this often happened very early. The second point we might infer about formal association is more speculative, but it seems that a preference for sound or cadence, and the suggestive qualities of language, as opposed to the purely semantic, drove Forbes' writing. Such a preference could often be disruptive of linear or straightforward meanings, and could be employed to keep the poem open, but more often this guiding by formal features moved the poem towards a sense of closure.

Of the poems that make up Forbes' first two collections, fewer than a dozen show evidence of substantial drafting: in many cases there are only changes to a single word or a few punctuation marks. The archival record is incomplete, and there is good reason to believe that the four archives hold only a fraction of the drafts Forbes produced, because he claimed he often wrote 'thirty or forty drafts' (Forbes & Duwell 1982: 84), andbecause of the radical nature of the changes between drafts in some sequences. I consider two of these poems, 'Here' (Forbes 1980: 40-44 SH) and 'Stalin's Holidays' (Forbes 1980: 35 SH), for which early extant drafts are considerably different to the poems' final versions, and a 1974 version of 'The Joyful Mysteries', published in *Ear in a Wheatfield*, against the markedly different version that appeared in book form six years later (Forbes 1980: 45 SH) [1]. Due to the archives' fragmentary nature, my reflections are more speculative than they would be with a complete record, and I assume many intermediate drafts are missing. I underline the words common to both the early and final versions when I first introduce the poems, making allowances for variants of number (singular or plural), tense, and misspellings for those cases in which the author's intention is clear.

'Here', which was to become the longest published poem of Forbes' oeuvre, seems wholly open. This is the entirety of one of the two very similar early drafts in the Fryer Library archives, initially entitled 'The Everest Attempt':

The Everest Attempt

rims
peripheries
edges . . . the brink (!)
hey gang it's
like something out
of _____ (fill in
your favourite author) the way
things end
/
this cigarette is a typical example;
its ends are
like negroes were,
separate but equal

and dangerous ,[2]
one gives
you lung cancer the
other, pollution
AND EVERYONE'S A SECRET SMOKER !

like poems
& small and also
major disasters
the world explodes like quick as steelwool rusting
with solutions

& some said if your [sic] not part of the formula
you won't fit the solution & its true,
blood runs sticks like
saliva & but
doesn't help you chew

(and like a man refusing to be cut to death with
the most exquisite snow crustals [sic] you feel well boorish
when you squeak, "My synapses twinkle with an asymmetry
of chance! I don't like your traffic lights, or [?you!" / cream?")

love as a ½ smoked
cigarette –
freely given the bums love this gesture –

under microscope
a ½ smoked cigarette
or rusty razor blade
have no precise "end!"
only the bums know better & the cops, they
even, don't "take offense" at what
is & appears to be a safety measure, or an act of non-symbolic

charity . . .
(this fools everyone, its [sic]
called "natural" facetiously,
or by its few detractors.
"The Vietnam War"
"leprosy" (or)
"The Paradox of Desire") (Forbes 1970-1971: UQFL 148/A/H/5)

This early version of 'The Everest Attempt' is markedly different from 'Here' (included as Appendix 1), in which about two thirds of these words and phrases are retained, but dispersed among the first three parts of a five-part poem. We can see, however, that the poem retains its scattershot appearance: in general terms it is still what Duwell classifies as the 'all-over-the-page poem' (1999: 56). The concrete shape of the poem's opening remains remarkably similar. Forbes retains, for example, the concrete effect of the five-word exclamation in capitals, replacing 'AND EVERYONE'S A SECRET SMOKER!' with an exclamation of similar length: 'OPERATOR, GET ME THE POLICE!' (Forbes 1980: 40-44 SH). This exclamation is indented in both cases, although the clause appears further down the page in the final version. The only significant change in concrete shape is in the first part of 'Here', in which nine lines are set out in two columns, but this doesn't significantly alter the poem's appearance.

In an interview with John Jenkins, Forbes discussed the effect he aimed for in moving 'blocks of meaning' around, explaining how these blocks 'work off each other' to 'create tension' (Forbes & Jenkins 2014: pars 56-61). Jenkins compared this method to collage (par 57), a label Forbes didn't dispute. These blocks of text, or 'units of sense' as I will term them, can vary greatly in length: as Forbes specified, they can be 'whole sentences or lines or phrases' (par 56). That he moved these blocks or units of sense around is evident from dozens of extant drafts in the archives. The openness of Forbes' process is apparent also in the strikingly different contexts in which such units of sense are set down. As new units of sense are added to 'The Everest Attempt', the original lines retain their order in reference to each other, and occasionally their original meaning. More often, however, their meaning changes radically as they introduce, conclude or are incorporated into sentences containing new material.

Of the first twenty words, eighteen do not change between this draft and the final version, in which 'hey gang' is deleted. These preserved lines set the poem's fitful music and tone very early. We can see, after this, how units of sense are moved about in such a way as to keep meaning open. Some clauses survive intact, such as 'if your [sic] not part of the formula / you won't fit the solution' and 'it's / like something out / of _____(fill in / your favourite author)'. Plenty of shorter phrases, such as: 'my synapses twinkle', '½ smoked cigarette', 'by its few detractors', and '"The Paradox of Desire"', are retained intact. But, because multiple discrete units of meaning were added in the process of filling out the poem, these remaining units are often placed in radically different contexts, creating striking effects and different meanings. Take, for example, the '½ smoked / cigarette', as it occurs for the first time in both versions. In this version of 'The Everest Attempt' a '½ smoked / cigarette' appears first in the following context:

love as a ½ smoked
cigarette –

freely given the bums love this gesture –
(Forbes 1970-1971: UQFL 148/A/H/5)

The first line of this section suggests a simile with 'love' operating as the tenor, and a '½ smoked cigarette' as the vehicle, but a reader might ask what bearing the giving of such a cigarette to a bum has on the vehicle. In the final version of the poem, the '½ smoked cigarette' first appears in the plural and is introduced as the problem:

but also
the problem
of ½ smoked cigarettes that sicken &
you want to end like a smile in 'Gone with the Wind'
but can't (Forbes 1980: 42 SH)

Here, the '½ smoked cigarettes' are no longer the vehicle of a metaphor, but signify the actual concrete noun. They 'sicken', but the poem's speaker wants them to 'end like a smile in 'Gone with the Wind'', a starkly different set of meanings. In this version, 'love', introduced as all 'you' are left with, is detached from the '½ smoked cigarettes', and the bums who appear before the '½ smoked cigarette[s]' are only related by a bracketed aside:

leaving
you
only love (Only
bums have more—the charity they circle
a warm, greasy sun) (Forbes 1980: 41 SH)

In such an adaptive process, phrases saved for their epigrammatic music, if nothing else, can function in radically different ways and achieve markedly different effects.

We see in such a drafting process that a single sense or a coherent meaning is resisted, but we might ask if the formal elements move the poem any closer to closure? We might note, for example, the recurring motif of the 'cigarette', which appears three times, once in the poem's first section and twice more in the third. There are other repetitions, resonances and answering allusions, which straddle the line between form and content – more, perhaps, a product of 'free', than 'formal', association – but, even through these the poem barely seems to move closer to a sense of closure.

Two features that could unify such disparate materials are the framing devices of the title 'Here', and the epigraph. While perhaps lending the content a certain justification, I think neither the change of title, nor the addition of the epigraph, move the poem towards sufficient closure. The 'attempt' of the poem's original title has a tentative quality while 'Everest' speaks of Forbes' ambition, casting the poem as an exercise in style. 'Here' is an even more generic title, suggesting the poem could be about anything. The epigraph from Gertrude Stein – 'How do you like what you have. / This is a question that anybody can ask anybody. Ask it.' (Forbes 1980: 40 SH) – amplifies a reader's sense that the poem's subject is too broad to be defined. It justifies the poem's diverse and generous content, perhaps, but provides no greater level of closure.

Duncan Hose commented of the poem 'Admonitions', which Forbes co-wrote with Mark O'Connor, that it is likely 'to make a fool of any earnest critic' (Hose 2010: 3). Although, unlike 'Admonitions', 'Here' has a single guiding intelligence, it seems devoid of an apparent 'key' or unifying principle, and the reason is that the poem doesn't progress beyond a near-total openness. Forbes' resistance to a controlling idea

is evident in such a poem, but the adherence to this principle, so important to his process, is not offset to a great enough extent by formal association. The 'all-over-the-page' poem was a form Forbes did not revisit after the early seventies – the last poem of this kind, 'Admonitions', is only the ninth poem in the collected work section of his chronologically arranged *Collected Poems* (Forbes 2010: 259). I would suggest this was largely due to the paucity of formal elements the form generates. Such a radical openness – with little pressure from formal constraints – offers an infinite variety of combinations. A reader might suspect 'Here' could go through twenty more drafts but still move no closer to closure.

In contrast, the next two works I consider, while neither could be described as closed nor perspicuous, move towards a sense of closure through formal association. The lyric that became 'The Joyful Mysteries' first appeared in *Ear in a Wheatfield* in 1974 as the second part of 'The Sorrowful Mysteries'. The changes between this version and the poem's final incarnation in the collection *Stalin's Holidays* (1980) are arguably more significant than those that occur across any sequence of drafts in the archives. I have included the two versions of the poem below as they appeared, in journal, then in book form:

(*from*) The Sorrowful Mysteries

2.
Life in the city stokes my cough this care
The lungs invent, buoyed against collapse by
syrup and a mind that can no fantasy bear
'Phew it's hot in here' but the hat sleeps on
The chair – the things of this world relax
Much better than I can breathe. Why is this?
Inane prophets wax fat on the answer
But boredom strips their vehemence to its
Simple lust. I want to be smarter, quicker.
Frames blur in their cartoon air. We discover
Expressive facial tics but not the answers
– Is prevention better than cure? Is worry?
Tho' heat rash attracts with curious allure
Who escapes the curse of a bung slot machine,
The tiny pains? What's that goo on my shoulder?
Pills dissolving turn a glass of water
Blue. I put on my hat and so do you. (Forbes 1974: 62)

The Joyful Mysteries

Life in the city stokes my cough this care
the lungs invent, buoyed against collapse by
codeine & a mind that can no fant'sy bear.
'Phew it's hot in here' where boredom strips
down vehemence to its simple lust. Ego asks 'Know
a short cut, boss?' Then suddenly, half-man
half-telephone the body shot to bits the mind
cooks all that's left: he thinks 'I can' & gives
the dog a bone. Frames snap in the cartoon air.
Is prevention better than cure? Is Canberra?
Who escapes the allure of tiny, nasty fights?

> ‘I’ll pin his jaw back’, stake out the blue as
> yet uncluttered air & put my name in lights. (Forbes 1980: 45 SH)

It is possible to see here how formal features guide Forbes’ process and shape his meaning. While most of the content changes between the journal version and the final published version, the concrete shape of the poem remains fairly fixed: the lines, of between ten and twelve syllables, retain their length and the poem stays roughly sonnet-like in appearance, although seventeen lines are reduced to thirteen. In both cases the concrete forms, which solidify early, play a guiding role or that of an active constraint. More units of sense are added than deleted between the two published versions, but Forbes takes care to preserve the metre in many places. The phrase ‘is worry?’, for example, is replaced by ‘is Canberra?’ – the same number of syllables in colloquial pronunciation, with the only stress falling again on the second syllable. The single unstressed syllable ‘their’ is replaced by another single unstressed syllable, ‘down’, to preserve the music of the eighth line of the original, and a similar principle can be observed when ‘Frames blur in their cartoon air’ is replaced by ‘Frames snap in the cartoon air’. Such formal constraints guide what the later work becomes, and its range of potential meanings.

The single words Forbes retains between the two versions are particularly interesting to consider. ‘[T]iny’, for example, becomes the second adjective for ‘fights’, rather than ‘pains’, and the abstract noun ‘allure’ also attaches to these ‘fights’ instead of being the object of the sentence. In this way, formal devices – the cadence or diction – play a guiding role in the selection of new content and the creation of new meanings, in a spirit of ‘formal association’. The poet’s conscious intentions emerge through the interplay of sound and content. Again, a substantial part of the opening is preserved, allowing for the replacement of ‘and’ by the customary Forbesean ampersand and the change in spelling for ‘fantasy’. These lines not only set the tone but lay down the track for the rhythm: both early and later versions vary between iambic pentameter and iambic hexameter with a number of reversed feet and the occasional added stress. Forbes often seemed to work from a few opening lines that may have asserted a kind of formal pressure through features like tone, diction and concrete form, while not necessarily narrowing the poem’s potential for meaning. Against such openings, new lines might be composed or existing lines from other contexts tested. The archives in the Fryer, Mitchell and ADFA libraries contain many examples of lines or sections of poems being recycled in strikingly different contexts. Such material could lead the poem in any number of profoundly different directions.

A feature of Forbes’ process that enables this radical flexibility is the malleability of conjunctions. After the first three-and-a-half lines of the final version, ‘but’ is replaced by ‘where’, causing the (different) content that follows to be read as subordinate rather than oppositional. It is telling that the phrase ‘boredom strips [down] vehemence to its / Simple lust’ is introduced by a ‘but’, not a ‘where’, in the journal version. The potential for units of sense to be moved around is multiplied by the malleability of such conjunctions. While any conclusion drawn from this must be tentative because the connecting units of sense are different in each version, it is clear that the cumulative meaning of these units of sense is in flux.

The drafting process here, as elsewhere, involves writing towards rhetorical clarity. At times, Forbes’ stylistic choices would lead away from semantic clarity or coherence, but more often he worked towards it. Whichever was the case, every stylistic choice was attuned to making the work rhetorically crisp. In the earlier, journal version of ‘The Joyful Mysteries’, the poem loses a sense of direction – and this rhetorical

crispness – in the fourth line. The 'sleeping hat' is complicated by Forbes' attitude to techniques like personification, which I suspect are only ever used ironically: consider, for example, '& / the food wishes / you were here' from Forbes' contemporaneous poem 'Up, Up, Home & Away' (Forbes 2010: 58). Various forms of the word 'breath' occur throughout Forbes' work, but if the lines reflect concerns about the speaker's health, the hat seems a distraction. Despite this, the poem coheres in other ways. '[R]elax' and 'breathe' echo the concerns of the opening sentence, and the hat, while distracting, at least anticipates the circular motion of the poem's closing couplet. Not only do such images lack the appeal and crispness of the best Forbesean imagery, but other sections of the poem also seem banal, especially the question 'Why is this?' The ambition to become 'quicker' and 'smarter' is the stuff of fiction more than life, and especially of cartoons, providing one of the poem's emerging motifs. What follows involves a list of comic health concerns, personal issues and limitations. The 'heat rash', 'goo on my shoulder', 'expressive facial tics', 'the bung slot machine' and even 'the pills' share a cartoon quality. The same argument may stretch to the hat. But the introduction of a second person in the final sentence jars because the poem is consistently first person up to this point, with only a brief hint of ambiguity caused by the speech marks in the fourth line. The difficulty such material presents could be described as tactical, in terms of George Steiner's taxonomy of difficulty, emanating either from the writer's will or 'in the failure of adequacy between his intention and his performative means' (Steiner 1978: 33). Details such as the late switch in person and the earlier 'hat' could lead the reader to suspect the latter. The poem lacks rhetorical clarity, and the qualities of disjunction and surprise that characterise this period of Forbes' writing are also absent. The difficulties the final version presents, in contrast, find their source in the author's artfulness rather than his failure, and this version of the poem holds out the possibility of meaning in a way that invites subsequent readings.

To understand how meaning emerges in Forbes' process it is useful to consider the final version of 'The Joyful Mysteries' (Forbes 1980: 45 SH) alongside its twin 'The Sorrowful Mysteries' published in *Tropical Skiing* (1976):

> A dazed disc jockey fingers an epaulette
> But the future is the colour of the air
> The air corrodes the frigidaire
> Or money relaxing in a distant bet.
> Emotions boom in the vowels, as my cheque
> Turns to beer then disappears and if she
> Was apples they'd rot. This mess I'm in
> Wastes muscle baffles love but works—
> I don't know much about bolts from the blue
> But a house in the country spells death
> And we are as far away as ever from
> The Perfect Carburettor. Drugs disappear
> In the slipstream of a bright car, the
> Windows are stuffed with menus but
> They don't keep out the cold. (Forbes 1976: 91 TS)

These two lyrics were originally published as one poem in *Ear in a Wheatfield*, but even after their separation they still clearly resonate in other ways. The titles allude to the Catholic Rosary and the poems' concrete shapes are similar too, one a line over sonnet length, the other a line under. WB Yeats wrote in his short poem, 'The Choice':

> The intellect of man is forced to choose
> Perfection of the life, or of the work… (Yeats 1994: 209)

'The Sorrowful Mysteries' holds this Yeatsian tension between life and art in balance and so does 'The Joyful Mysteries'. But while it is possible to read coherence into 'The Sorrowful Mysteries', and something approaching a consistent lyric voice, 'The Joyful Mysteries', with its fluctuation between first and third person and its quotation marks, presents a polyphony of voices. The exchanges of the opening eight-and-a-half lines might be between soul and self ('a mind no fant'sy can bear' sounds metaphysical), mind and body ('Phew it's hot in here') or two or more people. Forbes' resistance to the idea of a transcendent self is probably best exemplified in the poem's cartoon imagery. After much comic vacillation, the speaker's resolve is ambiguous and any self-mythologising is undercut by bathos. 'Then suddenly, half-man / half-telephone' sounds like the bold tag line of a superhero, but one who can't achieve anything practical, or even – as indicated by the body being 'shot to bits' and the mind 'cook[ing] all that's left' – save himself. Such comic book imagery is consonant with the earlier version of the poem. Against this are set the joys of self-creation through poetry – something Forbes drew attention to throughout his article on Frank O'Hara's poem of multiple self-hood, 'In Memory of My Feelings' (Forbes 1983). The poet-speaker's new resolve, which will not solve his problems but will prevent him from dwelling on them, segues to a cartoon with the frames snapping at twenty-four per second. The line: 'Is prevention better than cure? Is Canberra?' comes late in the process. From this trigger other details follow. Crisp, focused lines replace a mass of too many images, the confusion of a second person, and the recurrence of the hat. The poem ends:

> Who escapes the allure of tiny, nasty fights?
> 'I'll pin his jaw back', stake out the blue as
> yet uncluttered air & put my name in lights. (Forbes 1980: 45 SH)

The 'tiny, nasty fights' that occur in the nation's capital, Canberra – and their less-than-glamorous 'allure' – are probably the first thought that will occur to a reader but the politics of poetry are of greater concern. Forbes' group of Sydney poets, associated with the Generation of '68, set themselves in opposition to a group of poets they labelled the 'Canberra School', who included Les Murray, Robert Gray, Geoffrey Lehmann, Mark O'Connor, Kevin Hart and Alan Gould, whose aesthetics and politics they considered reactionary. The speaker in this moment of optimism is sure of success, of achieving fame or putting his 'name in lights'. Such an ambition, which is latent in the earlier version, has a certain comic quality in the context of poetry, where such celebrity can never be achieved. While the poet does not allow the speaker the indulgence of self-mythologising, the poem is concerned with the tension between life and art. For all its absurdities, the art – or maybe poetic ambition – is triumphant, but the victory is not without irony. The change to a single word – the replacing of 'worry' with 'Canberra' – can set the poem on a different track, towards different meanings. We can also see the guiding work of formal features, particularly the cadence of certain words, the concrete form, and the work of thematic and conceptual association. The process is one of openness well beyond the first published version of the poem and it is in this context that form suggests radically new, and more aesthetically satisfying, possibilities.

The sequence of drafts (UQFL148/A/S/12) for 'Stalin's Holidays' provides the opportunity to consider how openness and formal association might have proceeded from the outset of the creative process. 'Stalin's Holidays' probably underwent between fifteen and twenty drafts (Forbes & de Berg 2015), but only ten are extant, all

in the Fryer library. The first, entitled ‘Stalin Speaks’ (Draft 1), and the second, titled ‘Stalin: a portrait’ (Draft 2), appear on the same sheet of paper (see Appendix 2). Of the other eight, titled ‘Stalin’s Holidays’, seven occur later in the sequence, exhibiting only changes to individual words and punctuation, and are possibly the final seven drafts composed. The other earlier draft, which I label Draft 3 (Appendix 3), is far more polished and complete than the first two drafts, while still lacking many lines included in the final version.

We can be fairly certain that Draft 1 (Appendix 2) is the original draft because this version has the alphabet typed in lowercase and uppercase across the top of the page, before the title and the pangram sentence, which corresponds with Forbes’ recollection of writing the poem after buying a typewriter and testing the keys (Forbes & de Berg 2015). Draft 1 begins:

> The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog
> juniper berries wasted quickly, left to their own devices.
> Bottoms up! Comrade. The nicotine stained fingers
> of the aging child star, shook as he reached for
> Solokovh’s Life of Lenin. The verandah was littered with copies
> & out in the garden to [sic] members of Wolverhampton Wanderers
> were reeling around, pissed out of their brains (Forbes 1970-1980: UQFL148/A/S/12)

The final published version of the poem, appearing in the book *Stalin’s Holidays*, reads as follows:

> 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. (Forbes 1980: 35 SH)

Comparing Draft 1 with the final version, we see again that the poem’s opening is set in place early and that a number of units of sense are preserved through the drafting process. The pangram operates as a unit of sense, as do: ‘Bottoms up! Comrade’ and ‘pissed out of their brains’. In the drafting process ‘the aging child star’ is replaced by ‘our latest defector’, adding an unstressed syllable that subtly modifies the rhythm of the line. This seventh line marks the place where the similarities between Draft 1 and the final version end. Lines that are preserved retain their original order as new lines are inserted. The line ‘& out in the garden’ is deleted and almost six lines are added

instead, between ‘littered with copies’ and ‘two members of Wolverhampton Wanderers’.

It can be seen again that Forbes has an early idea of the poem’s shape. The long lines are already present in Draft 1, though they are more consistent in length in the final version. It seems Forbes has a rough idea as well of the poem’s approximate length, as the draft includes some jottings about Australian states, indented as if provisional, before it ends on a triplet of longer lines about Russian literature (see Appendix 2), at almost the exact point at which the final version of the poem ends. The lines of the final version vary between ten and twelve syllables: three pentameters are followed by two tetrameters, with more unstressed syllables than stressed, which, with the prevalence of trochees, give the rhythm a springy quality. The metre fluctuates between trochaic and iambic, with a few anapests and dactyls. We can already see the pattern of trochees in the second line of Draft 1 and in the third and fifth line. Other elements of the final version’s rhythm are present but obscured by the inchoate lineation. Just as in ‘The Joyful Mysteries’, form plays the role of an active constraint, giving shape to the material.

Sonic devices also guide the poem, through formal association, but their role is more suggestive. The final version of ‘Stalin’s Holidays’ proceeds by sound association: ‘jump’ in the opening sentence is echoed in ‘[j]uniper’ in the second, ‘heat’ in the second sentence is echoed by ‘heart’ in the third. Puns follow on the words ‘comrade’, ‘copies’, ‘commies’, ‘comics’ and ‘command’; ‘red’ is echoed three sentences later in ‘reading’. ‘[H]ear’ is repeated in consecutive sentences, ‘trying’ is echoed in ‘try’, and the ‘lazier’ of the penultimate line recalls the ‘lazy’ of the opening sentence. They are complemented by half and quarter rhymes: ‘Commandos’ / ‘follow’, and ‘function’ / ‘Russian’ / ‘Stalin’, and a quartet of rhymes – ‘our’ / ‘far’ / ‘USSR’ / ‘are’. The first of these examples – ‘jumps’ / juniper’ – is present in Draft 1, as are ‘copies’, answered later by ‘commies’, and ‘trying’, echoed in ‘try’. Martin Duwell notes that Forbes often seems to choose opening lines ‘because of an odd aural quality’ (Duwell 1992: 259). It is not difficult to imagine that, in an open process, the selection of content is determined by sound as much as sense. The appeal of ‘Wolverhampton Wanderers’ might simply have been its alliterative quality. Likewise, Forbes might have replaced the word ‘wasted’ with the word ‘bloom’ for its alliterative effect; in terms of ideas, the two verbs suggest the opposite of one another. In Draft 3 ‘the ageing child star’, becomes ‘our best child star’, and this too changes in subsequent drafts to ‘our latest defector’, a phrase that has a compelling music of its own but also contributes to the partial rhyme ‘veranda’ / ‘defector’. But Forbes’ process didn’t simply entail filling the poem out with sonic devices. It is noteworthy that the alliterative title ‘Life of Lenin’ is shortened to ‘Lenin’ in Draft 3 and the ‘star’ / ‘shake’ alliteration is replaced by a non-alliterative phrase after this draft. Perhaps most importantly, the sound of the second and third parts of the poem’s first draft, on the states of Australia and reading Russian writers, can be seen to influence what the poem becomes. Both sections are a highly musical doggerel, rich in puns, and the spirit in which these lines were written can be detected in the final version. More specifically, the cramped quality of the rhymes of the original ending have a ghostly presence in the subtler rhymes that chime through the resolution of the final version. The early lines set down the music for what follows, and probably would have suggested content for ‘Stalin’s Holidays’, as they did for ‘The Joyful Mysteries’.

Though the process is very open at the beginning, we can also see a sense of meaning emerging early. A number of phrases are tested and dropped in the process of composition. Two of them, ‘built for comfort, not for speed’ and ‘I heard a screen door slam’, added in Draft 2, appear in a very different context in ‘Political Poem’

(Forbes 2010: 84 CP), suggesting that the principle of openness is in operation across a number of poems. But we also see from the outset that tracks are being set down for what we might refer to as the logic of the poem, which will be disjunctive and ironic in broad terms, but which, already, is distinct from other Forbes poems. Australia and its differences from the USSR are a prominent motif in the final version of 'Stalin's Holidays', but although Australia is only faintly present in the first draft's opening seven lines, it is central to the lines that follow:

> NSW is the money state
> Victoria houses emporia
> Queensland is built on sand… (Forbes 1970-1980: UQFL148/A/S/12)

After completing the survey of Australian states, Forbes returns to the USSR, and the long lines of his opening:

> Tolstoy was built for comfort, not for speed.
> Turgenev should be read in bed. The mind gogols!
> If you're no good at names beg off Chekov (Forbes 1970-1980: UQFL148/A/S/12)

Forbes' thoughts, provisional as they seem, drift from Russia to the states of Australia and back to Russia, or at least its writers, though it's a cruder, more mechanical movement than the deft synergy between Russia – or rather the Soviet Union – and modern Australia in the poem's final version. As in 'The Joyful Mysteries', it is noteworthy that the poem's content, and even an ironic attitude or tone, begins to emerge from the earliest draft, but we could not say that anything approaching a coherent or unified idea is yet present.

One of the poem's most disjunctive features is the absence of a consistent lyric voice, and this quality is present from the outset. A first-time reader of the poem is likely to be nonplussed about 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, or their relationship to the person who proposes the toast. Or, indeed, of their relationship to Stalin. But these qualities are present early. The opening stanza of the first draft is in the third person, the second-person voice intrudes in the Australian content – 'Tasmania won't detain ya' – and occurs again later in the Russian content – 'If you're no good at names'. Draft 2 adds a first-person voice: 'I heard a screen door slam'. Draft 3 experiments with first-person plural, as in 'our best child star', and the line is deleted in the next extant draft but the first-person plural is retained towards the end of the final version in 'our sports are lazier by far'. Many of the pronouns switch throughout the drafting process to achieve the judicious balance of the final version. Formal association doesn't necessarily determine whether a first person or a second person is performing a particular action, for example, but rather determines the logic, or rules, by which such switches take place. Though later in the process, formal concerns might decide even these pronouns: if they are selected for their sound – to avoid the repetition of 'you', for example – rather than their sense. The polyphony of competing voices, which are present early, are amplified in the final version, in which they speak from inside the Soviet Union or from Australia, or from a liminal zone between.

The poem doesn't become less disjunctive, but ideas emerge and are sharpened during the drafting process. The final version is concerned with questions of language and its limits and how culture can function in the service of ideology, be it Stalinism or the subtler ideologies of democratic Australia. But, as with every durable poem, the ideas

resist paraphrase. Even in the final version, the poet's control of these ideas does not mirror his technical control, and this is deliberately so. Forbes once told a class at the University of Sydney that he didn't know the meaning of 'Stalin's Holidays' (Forbes & Kinsella nd) and yet he knew when it was finished, in a formal sense, and he came to regard the poem more highly than any he had written during the 1970s. Indeed, it was one of only six poems – and the sole work he selected from this period – to represent his oeuvre in the anthology *Landbridge: Contemporary Australian Poetry* (Forbes 1999), shortly before his death. In 'Stalin's Holidays' he may have brought his disjunctive lyric to perfection, but it was through formal association rather than a focus on ideas. His instincts as a poet, his feel for form and ear for cadence, and his knowledge of politics, culture and philosophy, made the poem what it was, not his absolute control over what the poem might mean.

According to James Longenbach we read poetry 'for the resistance, not in spite of it' (Longenbach 2004: xii) and such resistance is essential to a sustained engagement with any poem (10-11). In *The Resistance to Poetry*, Longenbach invokes what the psychoanalyst DW Winnicott sees as the 'inherent dilemma' of the artist: 'the urgent need to communicate and the still more urgent need not to be found' (Longenbach 2004: 7). This is a conflict deep within the poet's psyche, pertinent, not only to their anxiety about the reception of their work, but to the process of composition itself. There are many poems Forbes withheld from publication, often, it seems, because they communicated a single sense too transparently. These were probably the 'rooted' poems, and he worried that his reader, not experiencing enough resistance, might tire of them as he had. We can see, at least, that some of the poems Forbes regarded most highly, such as 'Stalin's Holidays', continued to resist his comprehension. Forbes' ideal poem would, to quote Wallace Stevens, 'resist the intelligence', of both poet and reader, 'almost successfully' (Stevens 1954: 350). Although Forbes thought such resistance crucial to the success of a poem, those poems that didn't move some way towards closure would be, likewise, rejected. He was attracted to the openness of the all-over-the-page poem, but it failed to generate the formal features necessary to move the poem toward closure. This is why he abandoned the form early in his career, working instead with those forms better suited to formal association.

While the three poems examined begin in a process that is free from a controlling idea, and arguably continue to eschew 'a single sense', only 'The Joyful Mysteries' and 'Stalin's Holidays' move towards closure. This happens by a process of formal association, as formal features apply pressure and suggest possibilities. Some formal features settle early: the poems' concrete shape, for example, and the tone and music set by the opening lines. Other features remain in play, and it is the dynamic interplay of fixed and fluid formal features with openness, or a resistance to easily won meaning, by which the poems succeed. But formal association was, in large part, governed by the wiles of contingency; composition progressed towards closure, by turns, gradually and rapidly, smoothly and haphazardly. Such a process sees the poet – to paraphrase Les Murray – working beyond his own intelligence (Murray 2002: 458), moving towards a fuller comprehension during composition, as a reader returning to a difficult poem gathers fresh insights with every reading. But for the poem to succeed, both in Forbes' and Longenbach's terms, closure should never be reached: the poem's meaning should not be perspicuous but still slightly beyond the reader's grasp. Formal association was for Forbes essential in this process and the principle by which his poems moved towards closure, without ever reaching it. Only by foregrounding form over ideas did poems like 'The Joyful Mysteries' and 'Stalin's Holidays' arrive at such glorious resolutions.

Appendix 1

Full text of the poem 'Here':

Here

'How do you like what you have.
This is a question that anybody can ask anybody. Ask it.'
Gertrude Stein

1

rims
peripheries
edges. . . the brink (!)
it's like
something out
of _____(fill in
your favourite author) the way
things (sox neon
visions of
postcards have an end / this cigarette
for instance ending
like
the negroes were—
separate but equally
dangerous—

where it burns
there's the chain
tacky with blood
hair skin dimples
a type of grease. on
the end of the chain
is a link shaped
smoke ring,
autographed & it
yells
OPERATOR, GET ME THE POLICE!

at the mouth lungs
join meeting the
faded nicotine
tingle that's really
a phone some fat man
is dialling / your
nervous system will
save him like a
rabbit's foot: he

who are there already
taking fingerprints,
a dead match
& what you're
stroking

2

like poems &
small & also
major disasters, the world's (in turn)
like steel wool exploding
—with solutions
that is

as
some one
tells,
'If you're not part of
the formula you won't
fit the solution' as

in France for example
it's guilt till proven
otherwise and if blood

does stick, like saliva
it also helps you chew.
Otherwise
as a man refusing to be sliced up by an exquisitely
patterned snow crystal, you feel boorish, at best a
hypocrite squeaking 'My synapses twinkle I'm a racehorse!
My line is stuttering cccollection plates!
Brbrbrillcreem!

Anyway, your brain is like a pellet!'

3

leaving
you
only love (Only
bums have more—the charity they circle
a warm, greasy sun)
but also
the problem
of ½ smoked cigarettes that sicken &
you want to end like a smile in 'Gone with the Wind'
but can't
for here behind the lens, the
½ smoked cigarettes have
no exact ending but a coloured fuzz
as nostalgia is lined with the furs
of our favourite animal
who signs
his name here ( )
for the same reason bums
think they're holy & the above
giving, shaped like an afternoon
is called 'Natural' *(It keeps*
you warm
inside!)

& by its few detractors,
'The Paradox of Desire'—
So you get cancer
instead.

4

e.g.
in his
critical
& other theories—
‘no definition
in terms
of a
relationship
is stable’
(that’s Maidment’s cheery
compass, the ship is a
passenger liner / we think of
some favourite shipwreck pictures
& thrill: ‘Goodbye molecules
& pop music!
our love,
ephemeral as BHP!’
While laughing in the galleries
impotent & colourful fireworks
decorate our mouths; they taste like feathers, the
biro moustache
Mark scribbled
on Dobell’s *Professor Anderson* last year.

5

he failed
the illusion of
a moustache restored
shows through cartoons
with facts—
1) Ice cream melts & runs down the beard, attracting flies.
2) The beard is made of concrete, so are the flies.
&
Look!
there in the rented mixer
the sand,
the lime
& the silica rotate, a
solution ‘in’ the water
reacting
slowly.
Only sometimes there are explosions, a series of tiny cracks
when it hardens in the moulds,
or if neglected, in
the mixer (the words are
TURNING BLUE
with abstraction)
afterwards,
concrete flaunts its 3 dimensions / remember the taste

dissolves the butts
are collected & still
your fingers stain everything you touch—
it's jazzy tho'
this circus at
the edges of the line
escaping from its tamer
(it's a smoke ring circus)
it's like a stage direction when someone yells
CHUCK PIES!
for us to fall down playing dead
on our alert
indifferent faces,
together,
impossible
& when there's nothing else to recommend it,
'here'. (Forbes 1980: 40-44 SH)

Appendix 2

Drafts 1 and 2 of 'Stalin's Holidays':

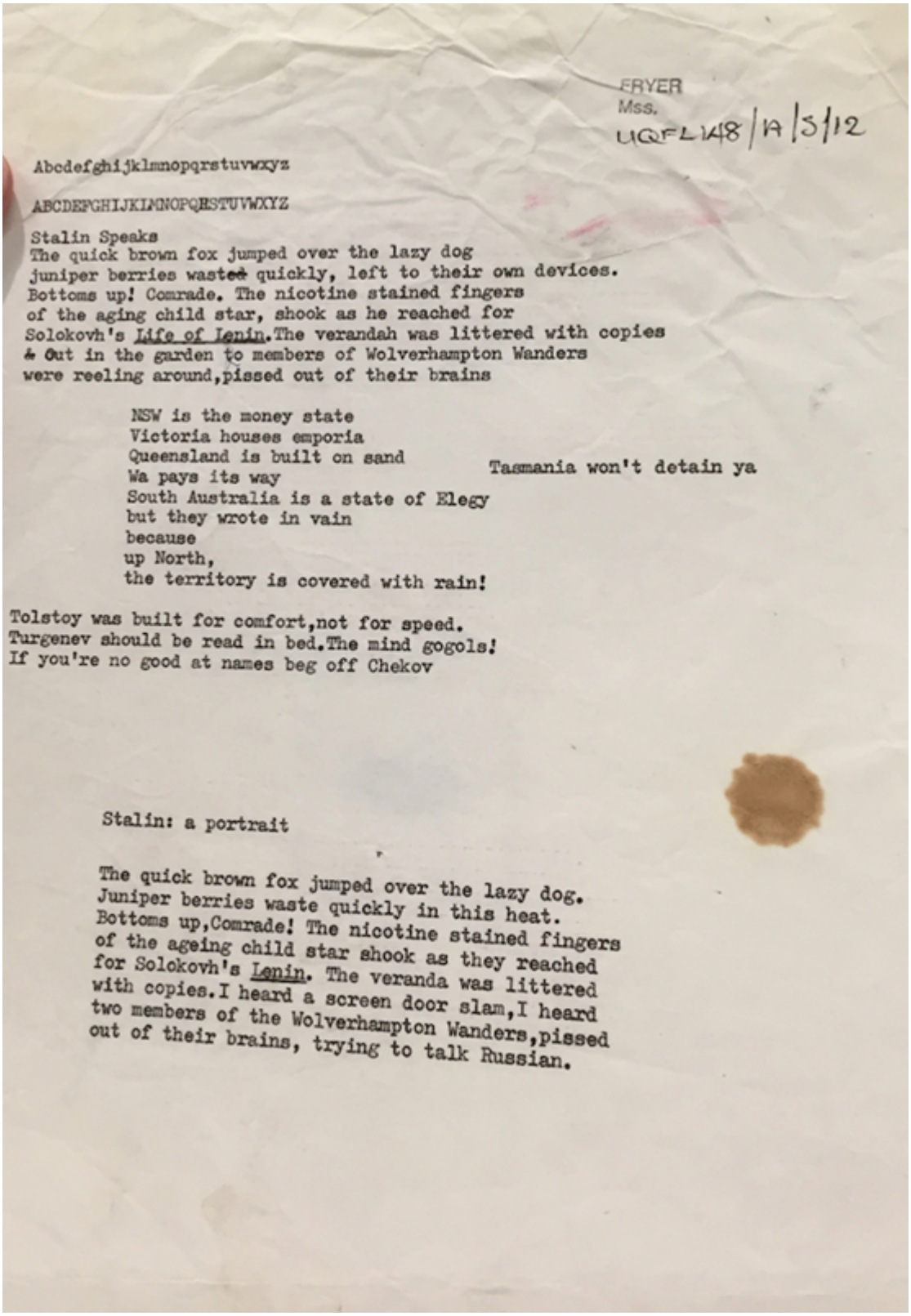

Fig 1. Photograph of the earliest draft of ‘Stalin’s Holidays’ held in the Fryer Library (UQFL148/A/S/12). Photographed by the author, used with permission.

Appendix 3

Draft 3 of ‘Stalin’s Holidays’:

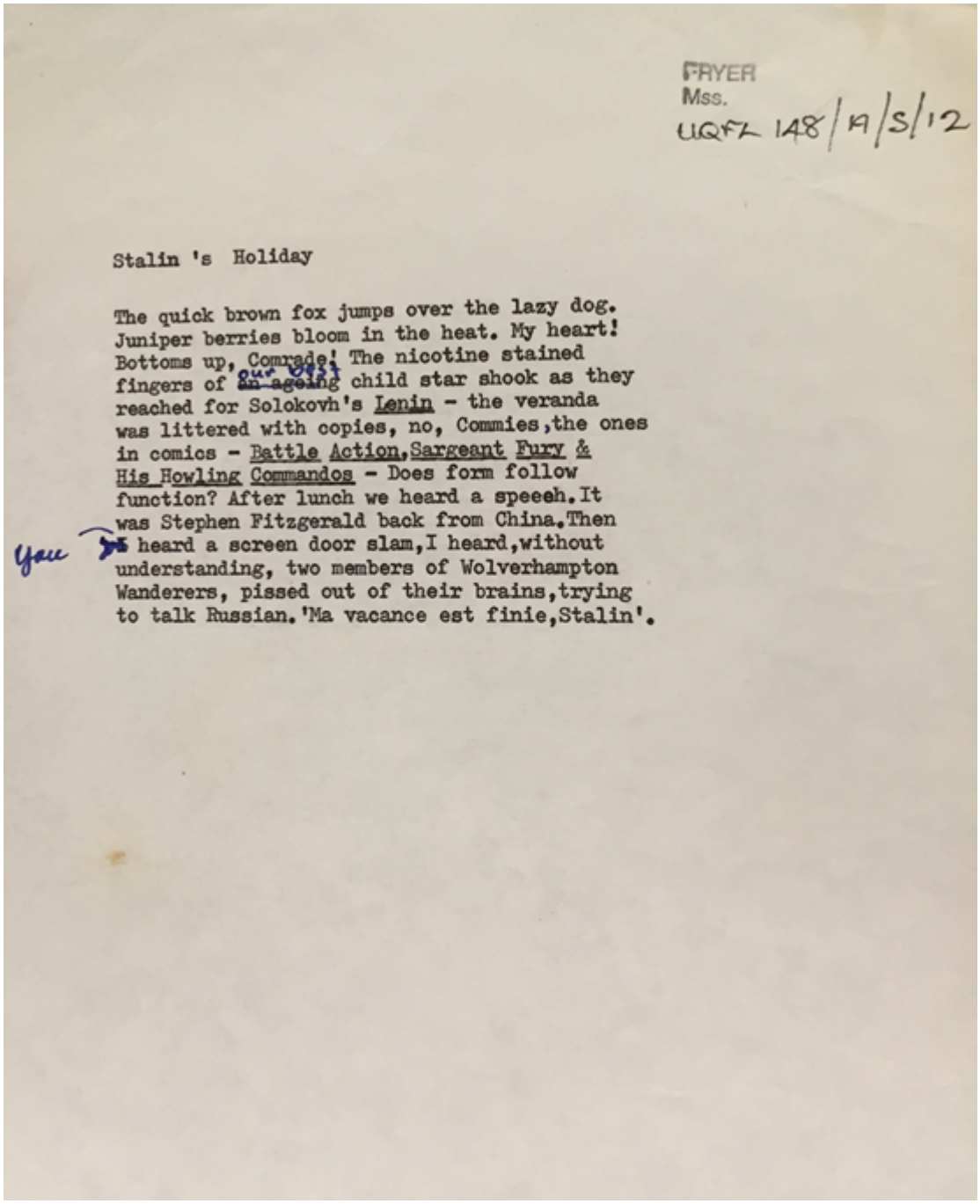

Fig 2. Photograph of the intermediate draft (Draft 3) of 'Stalin's Holiday' held in the Fryer Library (UQFL148/A/S/12). Photographed by the author, used with permission.

Notes

[1] Where a poem appears in one of Forbes' published books, the in-text citation includes an abbreviated title (eg SH = *Stalin's Holidays*, TS = *Tropical Skiing*) after his name. This is to distinguish between the poems as published in collections from earlier versions. return to text

[2] I acknowledge that the lines 'its ends are / like negroes were / separate but equal / and dangerous', and what they become in the final draft, will cause offense to some readers. Their reproduction here is not intended to uphold the racism that may be inherent in this section of the poem. Meaning here is of course complicated by the

context of the open poem. While I do not hear the author's voice in the lines quoted, I understand that others could. The question of how the voices in this sort of polyphonic poem relate to the voice in more conventional poems, or to the author – and the ethics of the multi-voiced poem – is a matter beyond the reach of this article. While I'm not convinced that Forbes was in any way racist, I do find his flippancy here and a few other places in his oeuvre to be problematic and this is a matter that I am still pondering as I write a biography of the author. return to text

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