

Introduction

[A] great work of art [. . .] always has a secret that one can never quite grasp and which always reappears¹

When Geoffrey Hill began his fourth lecture as Oxford Professor of Poetry in 2011, the audience members clearly expected a mischievous performance. They were not disappointed: nervous laughter greeted the semi-comic irascibility of his declaration that, as someone ‘seven months short of eighty’, he had a ‘rule’ to exasperate.² In his first lecture a year earlier, Hill had promised a future evaluation of contemporary British poetry, and in the subsequent oration he did not hold back, appraising creative writing as a neoliberal efflorescence of a doomed literary culture, with its ‘plethora of literary prizes’ and false evaluation of its own salubriousness. Anti-élitist ‘accessibility’ was the buzz word *du jour*, Hill argued in 2010, but ‘accessible’ should be reserved as an adjective for supermarkets or public lavatories, he added dryly, not as a value judgement in a discussion of poetry and poetics.³ In contrast, Hill declared in 2011 that he was ‘marooned’ in the 1950s with the work of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. Subsequent comments in the fourth lecture incurred media coverage: he accused Carol Ann Duffy of publishing poetry of the same quality as a Mills and Boon novel or the work of a creative writing student. Lemn Sissay offered a riposte in *The Guardian*, decrying the ‘spat’ between two esteemed contemporary poets as akin to opposite corners of a boxing ring.⁴ Duffy’s response was a dignified silence, and the media interest soon dissipated. Yet Hill’s lecture posed a series of questions that have concerned me throughout the writing of this book. What would it mean if contemporary British poetry had a ‘rule’ to exasperate?⁵ How might the critic account for this creative recalcitrance? If readers can never ‘quite grasp’ such challenging writing, how might critics account conceptually for that which we cannot understand?⁶ It was also telling that Hill was silent in this lecture about ‘exasperating’ experimental writing. Would it be possible to conceptualise

the challenge of Hill's poems *and* 'innovative' writers in a way that would allow analysis of both kinds of poetry at the same time, despite their obvious formal differences? After all, Hill is clearly not the only twenty-first-century poet 'marooned' with the legacies of specific modernist writers.⁷ Should Hill and other authors 'stuck' with these poets be regarded as late modernists, out of step with the current trend, as Hill regarded it in 2011, for accessibility conceived as 'democratic' writing? Or could their poetry be analysed in the context of metamodernism, a term that was beginning to gain critical traction in the same year that Hill delivered his fourth lecture as Oxford Professor of Poetry?

Poetry and Metamodernism

Four years earlier, Andre Furlani argued that metamodernism encompassed a 'departure as well as a perpetuation' from modernist concerns in relation to the work of the American writer Guy Davenport.⁸ As well as deriving its impetus from modernist literature, metamodernism 'surpasses homage' for Furlani, and moves towards a 'reengagement with modernist methods to address subject matter beyond the range or interest of the modernists themselves' (p. 150). In this sense, the poetry I discuss in this book engages self-consciously with the formal innovations of early twentieth-century writing, valuing but also resisting tradition in order to produce transformations of the work of T. S. Eliot, H. D., Virginia Woolf, Antonin Artaud, Ezra Pound and Bertolt Brecht. Published in 2010, Tim Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker's 'Notes on Metamodernism' was the first manifesto to extend Furlani's concept to a new generation of artists and writers returning to issues of representation, reconstruction and myth, as theories of postmodernism appeared less able to engage with postmillennial developments in history and culture.⁹ In the same year as Hill's fourth lecture, Luke Turner published a 'Metamodernist Manifesto', an impassioned plea to reembrace concepts such as truth, progress and grand narratives, as opposed to the 'cynical insincerity' of postmodernism.¹⁰ In contrast, David James and Urmila Seshagiri emphasised the formal lessons of early twentieth-century literature in their 2014 article on metamodernism. These critics focussed on revolutionary narratives in contemporary fiction, and the latter's repudiation of rather than 'oscillation' with postmodernism.¹¹ They argued that their work was by no means 'the first investigation into the increasing breadth attributed to modernism', but what distinguished their approach was 'its defence of returning to the logic of periodisation' (p. 88). According to James and Seshagiri, contemporary novelists such as Will Self and Zadie Smith engage with

a 'mythos' of early twentieth-century literature that places 'a conception of modernism as revolution at the heart of their fictions' (p. 87). This version of metamodernism 'regards modernism as an era, an aesthetic, and an archive that originated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries' (p. 88), as opposed to 'new' modernism's geographical and transhistorical expansions across the globe, which results in modernism losing 'a degree of traction', and to critics dehistoricising it 'as a movement' (p. 90).¹²

There are various theoretical overlaps between these publications on metamodernism, but there have been two distinct approaches to the concept so far. Van den Akker, Vermeulen and Turner's critiques focus on the historicity of the present in relation to the arts more widely, whereas James and Seshagiri concentrate on the formal legacies of modernist writers in contemporary fiction. James, Seshagiri, Alison Gibbons, Nick Bentley, Dennis Kersten and Usha Wilbers have all engaged in wide-ranging critical debates about metamodernism in relation to the novel, yet critics of contemporary British poetry have not yet discussed the term extensively.¹³ This abstention is curious, since, in contrast to the myriad ways in which twenty-first-century poetry continues to work through the lessons of modernist poetics, the term arguably proves less efficacious in relation to contemporary British fiction due to 'resurgent modes of realism' in the novel.¹⁴ In one way, this refraining may simply be due to critical paucity: studies of fiction far outweigh equivalent accounts of poetry. Yet this is not, I propose, merely an argument about the extent of critical activity. The absence of an extended appraisal of contemporary poetry in the context of metamodernism needs to be understood in terms of the bifurcation I explore throughout this book between mainstream and 'innovative' poetry. Until recently, many 'innovative' poets from the London School embraced critical accounts that advocated an interweaving of poststructuralist and postmodernist theory with their poetics, particularly since the erudition of theory allowed for yet another divergence from mainstream poetry, that was content – in Peter Barry's characterisation of such writing – to scribble a few sonnets about Wimbledon common.¹⁵ James, Seshagiri, van den Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen would all agree, along with many poets from the London School, that postmodernism has lost its critical efficacy, and has been denuded of its radical connotations.¹⁶ The absence of a subsequent debate about metamodernism may partly be because it might spotlight previous disparities between 'innovative' poetry and conceptions of postmodernism. However, the more likely cause is that metamodernism proposes a challenge to the very term 'innovative' itself with the former's emphasis on the dialectics of

literary tradition. Conversely, mainstream poets have not discussed the emerging term due to a wider *a priori* suspicion towards theory that might disturb 'the weekend pleasures to which art has been consigned as the complement to bourgeois routine'.¹⁷ To continue Alfred Alvarez's understanding of twentieth-century poetry as a series of dialectical negations in *The New Poetry* (1961), the perceived iniquities of modernism such as élitism still provide mainstream poetry with a counter-revolutionary vision of literary democracy. It is this account of contemporary British poetry that so incenses Hill in his fourth lecture as Oxford Professor of Poetry, and which leads him to dismiss 'public' poetry that Duffy celebrates as '*the*' literary form of the twenty-first century.¹⁸

Is there a certain belatedness in Hill's resistance to this current lauding of 'accessible' poetry, in which 'what I experience is real and final, and whatever I say represents what I experience'?¹⁹ Or, put another way, if we discuss Hill's work in the context of debates about metamodernism, is this ostensibly the same thing as labelling him a 'late' modernist? James and Seshagiri critique the wider temporal expansions of modernism: transhistorical approaches have rightly taken modernism to different corners of the globe, but at the expense of a focus on what has made this period of early twentieth-century literature so challenging to contemporary writers.²⁰ They argue that we should avoid reference to 'early' and (implicitly) 'late' modernisms, and emphasise instead the 'logic of periodization': 'Without a temporally bounded and formally precise understanding of what modernism does and means in any cultural moment, the ability to make other aesthetic and historical claims about its contemporary reactivation suffers' (p. 88). Modernism must be, if not a 'mythos' (p. 87), then an early twentieth-century 'moment' (p. 88). This does not mean that contemporary literature should be regarded as an adjunct to this period, as the term 'late modernism' suggests. 'Late' is often a synonym for 'attenuated' in this phraseology, as Fredric Jameson implies when he contrasts 'classical' or 'proper' modernism with the 'modest [...] autonomies of the late modern'.²¹ Going a step further, Madelyn Detloff reimagines 'late' modernism in the form of cultural productions that merely 'recirculate "patched" forms'.²² Modernism for Detloff can only be a form of cultural melancholia, a tempered modernism that is 'recirculated' in reified patches of the original.²³ In contrast, James and Seshagiri attack what they consider to be the 'reductive, presentist conception of contemporary literature as a mere branch of modernist studies rather than a domain whose aesthetic, historical, and political particulars merit their own forms of intellectual inquiry' (p. 88). As I demonstrate later in this introduction, for example, Hill's antagonism towards and complex re-writing of

Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1943) in collections such as *Scenes from Comus* (2005) can hardly be read as the work of an epigone, and a belated 'patching' of the modernist antecedent. Quoting the sculptor Carl Andre in his seventh lecture as Oxford Professor of Poetry, Hill insists that poets should write work 'as strong as the art' they admire, but that they should not make it 'like the art' they esteem.²⁴ *Scenes from Comus* engages rigorously with the poetics and pitch of *Four Quartets*, but it does not 'remind' the work of Eliot in an act of belated artistic pageantry.²⁵ Late modernism suggests attenuated endurance, whereas metamodernism connotes a self-conscious return to a formidable but also ephemeral phase in literature and culture.²⁶

In contrast with Detloff's 'patching' of contemporary art, James's *The Legacies of Modernism* (2011) outlines his volume's effort to 'substantiate [this] basic speculation that the modernist project is unfinished' (p. 1).²⁷ The phrase 'modernist project' rather than 'modernism' allows for a modernist 'recrudescence' (p. 2) in 'models of continuity and adaptation (rather than demise)' in the post-war period (p. 3). For James, 'a more complex account of fiction's transitions from mid century to the present can only be achieved by an understanding not only of what modernism was but also what it might still become' (p. 3). Modernism here is paradoxically over, but not finished: the continuities expressed by the term 'metamodernism' suggest that 'fiction today partakes of an interaction between innovation and inheritance that is entirely consonant with what modernists themselves were doing more than a century ago' (p. 3). Yet this emphasis on fiction indicates the absence of a parallel critical debate about contemporary poetry that James and Seshagiri call attention to in the first footnote in their article: a discussion of the relationship between poetic innovation and the modernist tradition merits 'an account of its own' (p. 97). In *The Legacies of Modernism*, James emphasises that the novel proves to be an exemplar of metamodernism due to the voluminous script it can devote to working through the legacies of early twentieth-century literature and culture: 'it could be argued that narrative fiction (as distinct from poetry, drama, memoir or reportage) has in the postwar era offered the most capacious and dynamic medium for studying how writers have re-engaged with modernism's aesthetic and ideological challenges' (pp. 1–2). Yet many London School, Cambridge School, Language and mainstream poets too have engaged extensively with the formal propensities of modernist writers. Hill's statement in his fourth Oxford lecture that he is 'marooned' with Pound and Eliot in the 1950s forms merely one glaring instance of the importance of modernist authors to twentieth-first-century poetry.²⁸

Rather than comply with Raymond Williams's conception of modernism as a monument to the end of an era, 'distant, solid, cold', I argue in this book that the 'modernist project' is revitalised in a specific kind of mainstream and 'innovative' poetry.²⁹ '[E]xasperating' poems display a dialectical approach to modernism in which the former – to deploy Theodor Adorno's term from *Minima Moralia* (1951) – 'hate' tradition 'properly'.³⁰ Despite Hill's indebtedness to Eliot's *Four Quartets*, for example, he reacts against what he perceives as the latter's false harmonies by creating an 'off-key' eloquence, an 'unlovely | body of Aesthetics', in his collections published from *The Triumph of Love* (1998) onwards.³¹ This book outlines how contemporary British poets more widely have responded to the work of modernist writers as diverse as Pound, Eliot, H. D., Woolf and Artaud with such lyrical recalcitrance. I discuss how the legacies of modernism produce a specific variety of contemporary British poetry that thrives on 'a refractory relation between itself and dominant aesthetic values', and 'between itself and mass culture, between itself and society in general'.³² However, whilst drawing on James and Seshagiri's account of metamodernism, I argue in this book that the qualities of 'exasperating' art are more important than any established intertextual links with modernist writers. To put it simply, poets' and novelists' attention to modernist antecedents does not necessarily mean that the resulting writing is deeply inflected by modernism. All the poets whose work I discuss extensively in this book – Geoffrey Hill, J. H. Prynne, Geraldine Monk, Sandeep Parmar, Ahren Warner, James Byrne and Tony Harrison – could be described as metamodernist in James and Seshagiri's sense of the term, in that they engage at length with the legacies of early twentieth-century literature, and absorb revolutions in form into divergent instances of contemporary poetry. However, my focus will be on both mainstream and 'innovative' poems that draw on modernist literature to produce an allusive and elusive writing that induces the curious reader to return time and again to the poetry. How, however, might we account conceptually for this 'exasperating' writing in both mainstream and 'innovative' poetry? To answer this question, I now turn to Adorno's account in *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) of such obduracy in modernist writing.

Adorno's Enigma

Returning to Hill's lecture in 2011, one of the questions it posed was how to account for poetry influenced by modernist writers that encourages the reader to keep coming back to the work, but without being able to 'solve'

it. Adorno's account of 'enigmaticalness' allows for a conceptual understanding of such 'exasperating' poetry.³³ In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno argues that works of art should not be treated solely as vessels for interpretation. Their enigmas also need to be appreciated: the artistic 'remainder' (*der Rest*) in modernist literature lies beyond the slipperiness of interpretation; it may defeat the critic's faculties, yet it remains central to understanding 'the discipline of the work' (p. 121).³⁴ Whereas Don Paterson argues in *New British Poetry* (2004) that poets must indulge their readers to a certain extent in order to be understood, Adorno warns against an 'intolerance to ambiguity', and an antipathy towards that which is 'not strictly definable' (pp. 115–16).³⁵ If the poet ignores the complex process of creation, the 'consistency [. . .] of elaboration' that remains one of the lessons of modernist literature, then the danger is that the quality of the poetry is attenuated in its ensuing 'husk of self-contentment' (pp. 129, 130). This does not mean that Adorno eulogises a supine version of autonomous art that resists the quotidian: as I explore further in Chapter 3, he outlines a dialectical conception of committed and autonomous literature, in which 'Art holds true' to the diurnal, 'but not by regression to it. Rather, art is its legacy' (p. 118).

This 'legacy' consists of a complex synthesis of form and content – the 'in-itself' of art – that risks the uninitiated's laughter (p. 125). Unlike Paterson's withdrawal from the lyric form when it appears to risk its own sublimity, Adorno argues that 'the more reasonable the work becomes in terms of its formal constitution, the more ridiculous it becomes according to the standard of empirical reason' (p. 119). A deliberate linguistic 'clowning' pervades the work of poets such as Hill and Monk: as Hill notes in his fourth Oxford lecture, it is the 'clown's rule' in particular to 'exasperate'.³⁶ As I explore further in Chapter 1, the effective 'ridiculousness' of collections such as Monk's *Ghost & Other Sonnets* (2008) configures an intense 'condemnation of empirical rationality' (p. 119). Hence art partly seeks solace in its enigmaticalness when it 'negates the world of things': it is *a priori* 'helpless when it is called on to legitimate itself to this world'. Whereas, for some critics, this undecodable art may seem merely unintelligible, for others, the enigmatic 'something' that artworks convey and then 'in the same breath conceal' encapsulates one of its most gratifying qualities. In contrast, those who are outraged by artworks' abstractions, and the fact that they are 'purposeful in themselves, without having any positive purpose beyond their own arrangement', unwittingly confirm 'art's truth' (p. 124). For such readers, 'the reality principle is such an obsession that it places a taboo on aesthetic comportment as a whole' (p. 120). Art's

effacement of utility can be turned back on those who resist its allure: supposedly otiose artworks do not 'mean' something specific, just as the question 'What is the meaning of life?' has never been satisfactorily answered; the latter's immanent problem is usually 'forgotten as a result of its own overwhelming ossification' (p. 126). As Eleanor Cook emphasises in relation to Augustine's work, a rhetorical analysis of enigmaticalness can move from a conception of 'a small invented trope to enigma as the largest of tropes, a trope of the human condition'.³⁷

This enigmatic 'comportment' of art, that appears to encapsulate 'what is enigmatical in existence', cannot be wholly explained, since 'Understanding is itself a problematic category in the face of art's enigmaticalness' (pp. 126, 121). As a form of imaginative imitation, hermeneutics can be perspicacious in terms of the 'objective experiential reenactment' of the work of art (p. 121); every 'authentic work' also invites rumination on 'the solution' to its unsolvable enigma (pp. 121, 127). After all, to shun interpretation, and allow artworks to 'simply exist' would be to 'erase the demarcation line between art and nonart' (p. 128): following that logic, Adorno argues, one might as well try to understand a carpet. In contrast, the philosopher likens criticism to enacting and simultaneously interpreting a musical score, at the same time as the latter's 'secret' remains elusive: even musicians who follow the score's most 'minute impulses' in a certain sense do not know what they are playing (p. 125). The more sagacious critics 'unpuzzle' any work of art, 'the more obscure [art's] constitutive enigmaticalness becomes': the latter remains, by definition, a 'vexation', and the enigma 'outlives' its attempted interpretation (pp. 121, 125). Music forms a prototypical example because it is 'at once completely enigmatic and totally evident' – a 'noninterpretative performance [would be] meaningless' – and yet it 'cannot be solved', and 'only its form can be deciphered' (pp. 125, 122). Various analogies aside from music in this passage from *Aesthetic Theory* then attempt to provide exemplars for this resistance to decoding, including natural phenomena, the Sphinx and picture puzzles. Adorno likens the enigma to a rainbow: 'If one seeks to get a closer look at a rainbow, it disappears' (p. 122); the reflection, refraction and dispersion of light, like the 'in-itself' of *Hamlet* (1609), does not have a 'message' (pp. 123, 128).³⁸ Adorno subsequently likens the experience of the enigma in *Aesthetic Theory* to that of an actor, who, like the musician, is playing something that they do not entirely understand: 'in the praxis of artistic performance' and 'the imitation of the dynamic curves of what is performed' lies the 'quintessence of understanding this side of the enigma' (p. 125). The 'gaze' of the Great Sphinx recurs

throughout this passage in *Aesthetic Theory*: Egyptologists may have discovered that the mythical statue was constructed in approximately 2500 BC, and that it resembles the pharaoh Khafra, but they still do not understand its entire meaning: 'the enigma's gaze suddenly appears again; thus is preserved the artworks' seriousness, which stares out of archaic images' (p. 125). Every artwork is a 'picture puzzle', a conundrum to be 'solved', but art's enigmaticalness is constituted in such a fashion that it remains 'exasperating' (p. 121).

This book thus explores the ways in which the critical debates surrounding metamodernism might resonate in the context of this enigmatical poetry that challenges and enriches the reader's experience. Enigmatic poems are like the Sphinx: they are unsolvable puzzles, in which any infringements of critical understanding are tempered as the poetry's 'meaning' recedes into the distance.³⁹ Adorno's resistance towards hermeneutics in this context offers a methodological challenge not only to the study of contemporary poetry, but to the study of literature as a whole. Critical accounts of literature normally present the author as someone who can 'master' the literary text through close reading or the deft exposition of a theoretical response. Critics do not normally admit their failures to understand recalcitrant pockets of literary texts, and exorcise the 'remainder' that remains a threat to the certainty of their criticism (p. 121). In this context, Derek Attridge's *The Singularity of Literature* (2004) is openly in debt to Adorno's thinking: rather than seek to understand and thereby contain the work of art in an instrumentalist manner, the critic should be open to the methodological challenges of literature in subsequent readings of the text, which may involve subtly changing emphases.⁴⁰ Quoting from Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator', Attridge sums up a 'long history of critiques of the notion of literature as constative' with Benjamin's statement that 'the essential quality of the literary work "is not statement or the imparting of information"', and adds that 'surprisingly few of our readings acknowledge this in practice'.⁴¹ Critics still discuss 'meaning', and 'ask what a work is "about"', in a manner that suggests a static object, transcending time, permanently available for our inspection' (p. 59). Attridge's focus on the performances of literature, 'events that can be repeated over and over again and yet never seem exactly the same', offers redress to any sense of literature's invariability (p. 2). However, whereas Attridge focuses on subsequent interpretations of literary texts in *The Singularity of Literature*, Adorno's concept of the enigmatical 'remainder' remains beyond the breadth of such readings.

Literary criticism has responded to the concept of the enigma as akin to that of the sphinx's riddle in Greek mythology, rather than in relation to this concept of the 'remainder' (p. 121).⁴² Instead of exploring its methodological potential, critics have applied the term 'enigmatic' to a variety of individual texts whilst operating themselves as literary enigmatographers. In contrast, this book provides the first extended study of the enigma in relation to a variety of 'exasperating' contemporary poems. In a rare example of a book that focuses on the enigma as a trope for wider concerns as well as a specific puzzle, Cook's *Enigmas and Riddles in Literature* (2006) explores, for example, a range of conundrums in the work of Dante, and Italian literature from 400 to 1399. The majority of literary-critical work on enigmas clusters around the medieval period when these 'obscure metaphors' were an integral part of literary expression, as Jeffrey Turco explores in *Piers Plowman and the Poetics of Enigma: Riddles, Rhetoric and Theology* (2017), and Shawn Normandin considers in relation to puzzles in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Clerk's Tale* (1476).⁴³ In this version of enigmatology, these two critics adhere to the first definition of 'enigma' in English, dating from 1539, as 'a short composition in prose or verse, in which something is described by intentionally obscure metaphors, or in order to afford an exercise for the ingenuity of the reader or hearer in guessing what is meant; a riddle'.⁴⁴ As Cook argues, when the enigma is defined 'as a trope', such as in Aristotle's philosophy, it is often conceived rhetorically as a 'small conundrum, having nothing to do with broader concerns'.⁴⁵

Rather than referring in general to an 'obscure or allusive' form of writing or 'a parable' – usages that *The Oxford English Dictionary* now lists as 'obscure' – in this book I explore the enigma in the specific manner that Adorno outlines in *Aesthetic Theory*, as inextricable with the legacies of modernist literature and supposedly 'hermetic' art more widely (p. 122).⁴⁶ Whereas Cook provides copious examples of the rhetorical figure as 'a closed simile where the likeness is concealed until an answer is provided', in *Aesthetic Theory*, art's riddles are never entirely solved.⁴⁷ The 'rage' that the philosopher surmises against such 'hermetic works' forms a symptom of the fallible 'comprehensibility' of 'traditional' works of art, a fulmination that betrays the potential enigmas surrounding the latter that, having been praised for aeons, appear to have lost their allure. Nevertheless, there is a clear intensification of enigmatic art in the modernist period: Adorno indicates this purling with references to Franz Kafka's 'damaged [fractured] parables' (p. 126) and Georg Trakl's Expressionist poetry (pp. 122–3).⁴⁸ Wary of the limited power of hermeneutics in relation to literature influenced by modernist writers, the chapters that follow do not present the

critic as a masterful enigmatographer who can easily 'solve' recalcitrant poetry. Instead, this book engages with the intricate and elusive writing in collections such as Prynne's *Acrylic Tips* (2002) and Hill's *The Orchards of Syon* (2002) that offers potential elucidation, but my approach also registers aspects of the texts that 'await their interpretation' (p. 128).

My emphasis on enigmatical poetry thus draws on intertextual analyses in commentaries on metamodernism to focus on 'exasperating' rhetorical strategies: as Adorno outlines in *Aesthetic Theory*, the enigma of modern art is initiated through ambiguity, ambivalence and tricky *Rätsel* ('puzzles').⁴⁹ Hill, Prynne, Monk, Byrne, Warner and Parmar similarly 'revitalize perception' – a key consequence of modernist "poetic" language – by embracing challenging and often experimental forms.⁵⁰ Enigmatical poetry also complies with what Tony Pinkney, in his introduction to Raymond Williams's *The Politics of Modernism* (1989), terms the 'second modernist ideology' of a resistance to modernity in the guise of popular culture (p. 5). The latter ensures the 'greyly "standardizing" pressures of [the] contemporary environment'. Hill rails against such 'standardizing' in his fourth Oxford lecture, as in his irate response to Duffy comparing texting to poems in order to argue for poetry's continuing relevance.⁵¹ Instead, Hill argues that poets should concentrate on creating 'an intensely crafted and parallel world'.⁵² In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno maintains that critical responses that attempt to 'decode' this 'parallel world' are missing the point: critics who peruse art 'solely with comprehension make it into something straightforward, which is furthest from what it is' (p. 123). For Adorno, the 'remainder' that endures when the critic has temporarily exhausted their interpretative capabilities constitutes one of the defining aspects of modern art (p. 121). As in Irmin Schmidt's comment on 'great' art in the epigraph to this chapter, there is always something that eludes understanding in such music or writing, and which returns to delight, frustrate and engross the critic.

Such statements will be perceived by many champions of supposedly no-nonsense, 'straight from the heart' poetry as outdated and élitist nonsense. Yet, as Byrne argues through the satirical figure of the 'Chanel poet' in *Blood/Sugar* (2009), those who propose 'to market absolute clarity' usually inscribe 'nothing of minor importance'.⁵³ In *Aesthetic Theory*, outraged responses to enigmaticalness are symptomatic of an obsession with a 'reality principle' that actually despises 'aesthetic comportment', and has resulted in the 'contemporary deaestheticization of art' (p. 120). As I examine in Chapter 1, for example, an '*intolerance to ambiguity*' (p. 115) occurs in Paterson's poetry amidst a passage of arresting lyricism in

Landing Light (2003). In 'The Sea at Brighton', Paterson begins with an enigmatic stanza about memory and endurance, but the rest of the poem resists its lyrical profundity in a tactic that is symptomatic of a wider antipathy towards that which is 'not strictly definable' in modernist and metamodernist writing (pp. 115–16). In contrast, Prynne's work openly resists 'significative thinking' (p. 82), yet it is still the critic's paradoxical task to engage in 'interpretative reason' (p. 128) in order to try to understand collections such as *Acrylic Tips*. As I demonstrate in relation to Prynne's critique of market forces and consumerism in this collection, enigmatical poetry's resistance towards the 'reality principle' does not preclude an engagement with exigent political concerns (p. 120). Indeed, according to *Aesthetic Theory*, it is only in the autonomous and 'committed' art of writers such as Kafka, Samuel Beckett and Paul Celan that the barbarities of the twentieth century can be confronted and resisted in the 'fracturedness' of their work (p. 126). Hence in Chapter 3 I analyse how Hill's *The Orchards of Syon* draws on Celan's *Atemwende* (1967), but then – in Furlani's terms – 'surpasses' the antecedent with loquacious and sometimes irascible epiphanies.⁵⁴ In contrast, I illustrate the ways in which Harrison's deployment of Brechtian stagecraft in his verse plays is rooted in the limitations of 'committed' art, whereas Hill's deployment of 'off-key' eloquence to write about similarly appalling events in *The Orchards of Syon* has produced one of the most remarkable collections of poetry so far in the twenty-first century.⁵⁵

This book explores diverse manifestations of such enigmatic writing, beginning with passages from Geoffrey Hill's *Scenes from Comus* that struggle to express 'ephemera's durance'.⁵⁶ The ending of this collection – 'What did you say?' (p. 66) – forms a challenge to complex writing from the perspective of a reader bemused with its magisterial language, 'gauged by the lost occasions of the sun': Hill offers a parting riposte to his ambitious attempt to wrestle with the mysteries of existence that deploys coterminous, obdurate poetics. In addition, the epiphanic moments in *The Orchards of Syon*, such as when a fell slowly releases its 'banded spectrum', are described in a linguistically intricate and condensed way precisely because such striking but bemusing moments cannot be pinned down with the 'reality principle' of a decoding and 'deaestheticized' poetics.⁵⁷ Similarly, Warner grapples with Artaud's attempts to comprehend his own intransigent states of anguish in 'Nervometer', and is sensitive to Artaud's impassioned rejection of logical reasoning and a ratiocinative style that would not do justice to the 'nebulous' mental states he seeks to elucidate but not explain away in *Les Pèse-Nerfs* (1925).⁵⁸

In contrast, the enigma of Prynne's *Acrylic Tips* arises from a resistance to signification in every line, rather than Artaud's attempt to transform bewildering experiences into formal concretion. However, *Scenes from Comus*, *The Orchards of Syon*, *Acrylic Tips* and 'Nervometer' share a 'remainder' in the reader's confrontation with perplexing and stimulating language, conveying a sense that subsequent readings will uncover further meanings and appreciations of intricate form, even if the writing will never be 'solved'.⁵⁹ Monk's work thus revels in significant puzzles, such as the 'flambé | Shim' of the swift that might appear absurd to someone unfamiliar with poetry, or extravagant to a poet adhering to the 'reality principle', but actually courts the ridiculous in a way that is central to the formulation of modern art, as Adorno argues in *Aesthetic Theory*.⁶⁰ In contrast, I also analyse poetry that engages with modernist antecedents, but in which enigmatical poetics fail to arise, such as in Harrison's *Metamorpheus* (2000). This absence is due to the formal requirements, as Harrison perceives them, of the film-poem, and an incomplete reimagining of the raw material in the Orpheus workbook now held in the Brotherton Library. In addition, in Warner's 'Métro' a pastiche rather than transformation of Pound and Richard Aldington's work predominates in a neo-modernist diatribe against the supposedly vulgar.

These counterexamples of modernist-influenced writing that nevertheless reject modernism focalise the enigmatical poetics of the other authors discussed in this book. They also indicate a fault line between the theory and close readings: the summation above might suggest an unchallenged interweaving between *Aesthetic Theory* and my examples of elusive and allusive poetry, but the repercussions of Adorno expanding enigmatical poetics beyond modernist writing are fraught with potential contestation. 'All artworks', he argues, 'and art altogether—are enigmas' (p. 120). Adorno's initial examples – the works of Beckett and Kafka – obviously belong to 'high' modernism; the other listed instances of traditional enigmatic writing, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603) and Goethe's poetry, point to the 'classic' texts of western literature. Adorno is critical of what he terms 'moderate' (p. 35) or 'temperate' (p. 34) modernism: for this philosopher, such palliating of experimentation implies formal conservatism. '[R]enaissances of temperate modernism' (p. 35) are 'promoted by a restorative consciousness and its interested parties' (p. 34); the mere idea of 'moderate' modernism is 'self-contradictory' because it restrains the 'innovative' impulses of modernist art (p. 35). In Adorno's example, Pablo Picasso's cubist works are therefore far more 'expressive' than 'those works that were inspired by cubism but feared to lose expression

and became supplicant' (p. 44). These charges of losing formal potency through a belated appeal to tradition could be extended to enigmatical poetry such as Hill's that does not sit easily within either category of mainstream or 'innovative' writing. Pound's formal experimentation may be assimilated in Hill's work, but – following Adorno's argument – is also attenuated by Hill's frequent deployment of acatalectic metre. Similarly, Byrne's work may be rooted in the 'innovative' poetry of the London School, yet he is also attentive to rhythmical emphasis and metrical counterpointing in collections such as *The Caprices* (2019) that I discuss in Chapter 4. Yet, elsewhere in *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno critiques experimental writing that constantly hankers after the 'new' as the aesthetic gold at the end of the formal rainbow (pp. 270–1). Adorno could not have foreseen a moment over fifty years later in which the 'temperate' modernism of *Scenes from Comus* and *The Orchards of Syon* would appear so radically out of step with the predominant voices in contemporary British poetry (p. 34). Thus the conception of enigmatical poetry is even more exigent today than it was when *Aesthetic Theory* was published in 1970. The philosopher could not have predicted a moment in which one of the most lauded poets of the day would compare poetry to texting, crystallising a moment in which the 'deaestheticized' writing he encountered in the 1960s has reached its apotheosis (p. 120).⁶¹

In this book, I indicate contrasting moments in poetry that slip beyond the critic's grasp and 'darken' when a provisional understanding of a singular text does not 'extinguish the enigmaticalness' of an artwork (p. 122). In Chapter 2, for example, I discuss how Hill strives for a new language to pinpoint 'Love's grief' in *Scenes from Comus* (p. 41), yet the similes of charabanc parties and rhododendrons remain as enigmatic as this amorphous psychological state. Rather than provide the reader with a narcissistic echo of their own idioculture, such poetry allows our critical understanding to be challenged, and sometimes to be defeated. The following close reading of *Scenes from Comus* is thus intended to convey what Attridge terms the 'power' of such writing, but this approach cannot entirely 'explain' the poetry.⁶² This resistance to absolute semblance and the univocal also appertains to Prynne's collection *Acrylic Tips*, which I discuss further in Chapter 1. The elusive significations ultimately mean that the sequence remains difficult – but not impossible – to analyse. As Prynne wrote in a letter to the poet Steve McCaffery, to challenge the possibility of interpretation is in no way 'to extirpate it'.⁶³ Every line of *Acrylic Tips* resists signification, but does not negate it: the line 'soft sweet fury gums nodding milkwort in river-sway', for example, combines the

traditional lyricism of the last four words with a more enigmatic beginning.⁶⁴ '[G]ums' may be read as mossy rocks or gum wrappers in the river, but this would be to 'normalize' the poetry in Robert Sheppard's phrase, to attempt to decipher the puzzle without opening the line up to alternative signification.⁶⁵ The first four words in this quotation from *Acrylic Tips* may be distinct from the second cluster: it is only the expectation of complete line sense in a poem rather than literary collage that insists that 'gums' must somehow connect with milkwort.

Poetry as Enigma: Geoffrey Hill's *Scenes from Comus*

If texts such as *Acrylic Tips* could be understood alongside the novels that James and Seshagiri cite in their article on metamodernism, it would be possible to discuss the 'remainder' across a variety of contemporary literature (p. 121). They discuss Tom McCarthy as an archetypal metamodernist novelist, yet, unlike Prynne's work, the overall form and language of novels such as *Remainder* (2005) and *C* (2010) do not resist conventional 'grammar, process, shape, syntax', as in Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews' conception of 'innovative' poetry.⁶⁶ If we compare this lack of formal resistance with the work of Geoffrey Hill, who has repeatedly engaged with the legacies of modernist writers such as Eliot, Pound, Kafka, Wyndham Lewis and W. B. Yeats throughout his *oeuvre*, the difference in the attentiveness to specific modernist antecedents is striking. In addition, Adorno's 'remainder' informs the following analysis of Hill's *Scenes from Comus* (p. 121): this allusive and elusive collection ultimately defeats comprehensive interpretation. Hill's enigmatic, but not 'innovative', poetries are crystallised in the final passage from *Scenes from Comus*:

In shifting scapes eternity resumes.
I cannot fault its nature, act by act,
gauged by the lost occasions of the sun.

Ephemera's durance, vast particulars
and still momentum measures of the void.
What did you say?⁶⁷

Published in the same year as McCarthy's *Remainder*, these lines do not eschew conventional grammar, syntax or stanza shape. Yet they do form extensive evidence of what James terms modernism's capacity as 'a set of persisting resources, rather than as a collection of historical artefacts'.⁶⁸ In addition, they illustrate my argument that enigmatical poetics can be located in mainstream poetry as well as the London and Cambridge

Schools. In these stanzas, Hill's 'resource' consists of Eliot's *Four Quartets*, and the latter's Platonic vacillations between the particular and general. Past time is 'eternally present' in line four of Eliot's poem; in the first line of the passage above, shifting landscape in general is paradoxically proof of 'eternity' (p. 13). '[S]capes' contains its own ambiguity: it initially reads as a shortened version of 'landscapes', but can also refer to the particularly long stems of flowers that begin where the root ends.⁶⁹ Impermanent flowers and vast landscapes both evidence the stability of 'eternity', just as the 'transient beauty' of the 'Turning shadow' leads to Earth's 'slow rotation suggesting permanence' in part three of Eliot's 'Burnt Norton' (p. 17). This dialectical shuttling then crescendos in the final stanza of *Scenes from Comus* with the phrases 'Ephemerā's durance', 'vast particulars' and 'still momentum' (p. 66). As well as being a shortened version of 'endurance' (as with land/scapes), 'durance' contains the archaic meaning of imprisonment: Hill's first oxymoron indicates that the transient endures in the seascape, but also that the poem captures and imprisons such ephemera. Poets are the 'artificers' in the previous stanza who are able to 'withhold' (as in 'restrain' and 'hold back') an enigmatic force that has 'long been destined to the dark'. In contrast to the 'immeasurable' dawns earlier in *Scenes from Comus* (no. 47), the poet-narrator's rumination on the sea and landscape's 'momentum' allows him a 'measure' of the unknowable void, rather than Eliot's more redemptive vision at the end of 'The Dry Salvages' of the 'life of significant soil' not 'too far from the yew-tree' (p. 45). Lyrical 'measure' refers directly to the lines that Hill quotes from 'Little Gidding' in his fourth lecture as Oxford Professor of Poetry, celebrating the poet's ability to 'move in measure, like a dancer'.⁷⁰

In turn, the puzzling phrase '[S]till momentum' (p. 66) recalls the 'still point of the turning world' (p. 15) in 'Burnt Norton', and the Christian transition from the 'still and still moving' in 'East Coker' towards 'another intensity' and 'further union' (p. 32). However, Hill then attempts to 'surpass' Eliot in Furlani's terms by usurping what he refers to in his prose writing as the hectoring and complacent manner of the *Four Quartets*.⁷¹ In *True Friendship* (2010), Ricks notes that, whereas Hill's poems 'make manifest a debt to Eliot which constitutes one of the highest forms of gratitude', Hill's criticism of Eliot's poetry 'mostly sounds anything but grateful'.⁷² Hill declaims, for example, Eliot's decline 'over the years from acuity and the trenchant into a broad opinionatedness'; as a result, much of Eliot's later work is 'demonstrably bad', including the *Four Quartets*, that are 'half adequate [. . .] half articulate'.⁷³ For Hill, the poem encapsulates the 'ruminative, well-modulated voice of a man of

letters, a tone which so weakens *Four Quartets*' (p. 579). Whilst I concur with Ricks's criticism that Hill undervalues the later Eliot, Hill is right that lines in 'The Dry Salvages' such as 'Pray for all those who are in ships, and | Whose business is to do with fish' are a travesty of the singularity of *The Waste Land* (1922) (p. 42).⁷⁴ Hill's conception of 'pitch' perplexes Ricks: 'I am unable to fathom just what Hill means by "pitch" and I am unable to imagine the grounds for judging "tone" to be not only inferior to "pitch" but inherently contaminated' (p. 32). Whereas Hill separates the terms, I would regard tone and pitch to be part of the same continuum. Hill draws attention to the hectoring tone, at times, of *Four Quartets*, which is at odds with the lyrical 'pitch' of Eliot's earlier work. Hill's conception of 'pitch' does not exclude the playful: in section seven of the 'Courtly Masquing Dances', Hill remarks that his stance 'contra tyrannos' (p. 3) does not encompass the 'lawful | lordship' of the Lord President in Cymru; the subsequent (and untranslated) phrase in Welsh, '*Diolch – diolch yn fawr!*' means 'Thank you, but I think you're having a laugh!' (p. 18).

So far, I have discussed the intense and intricate engagement with and subversion of a specific modernist antecedent in this enigmatic passage from *Scenes from Comus*. However, at the closure, Hill stresses the enigma of his entire collection with the intervention 'What did you say?', undermining the certitude of any critical understanding of the previous lines (p. 66). One reading of the interjection would be that it also 'surpasses' *Four Quartets* by allowing space, unlike Eliot's poem, for the voice of the dissenting reader; a voice that became more common in Hill's work after the publication of his collections *The Triumph of Love* and *Speech! Speech!* (2000).⁷⁵ The fulminating interlocutor may be akin to the uninitiated sampler of art in *Aesthetic Theory* who responds to such unashamedly abstract utterances as the ending to *Scenes from Comus* by denouncing them as ridiculous or incomprehensible (p. 119). This line itself remains beyond definitive signification: bemused, the interlocutor might be referring to the collection as a whole as well as this passage; aptly, in this jarring intervention, the dimeter undercuts the pentameter of this stanza and 'A Description of the Antimasque' in its entirety. Alternatively, the voice may be that of the critic responding quizzically to the sublimity of phrases such as 'the lost occasions of the sun' (p. 66). Rather than denoting incomprehension at what Hill would term the lyrical 'pitch' of the final stanzas of *Scenes from Comus*, the final line might also compound the less mysterious references to ageing throughout the collection. In the manuscripts for *Scenes from Comus* held in the Brotherton Library, a mirror 'shames' Hill and 'stares [him] down': these deleted lines are condensed into the

melodrama in stanza forty-three in which he addresses a mirror and opines, ‘*spare me my own | rancour and ugliness*’ (p. 36).⁷⁶ As opposed to Eliot’s entrenchment in ‘vast particulars’ (p. 66), Hill’s poem subverts itself with a line reminiscent of the alleged incident in 1797 in which the arrival of a postman curtailed the writing of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s ‘Kubla Khan’. In *Scenes from Comus*, the poet may be drawn away from the ‘pitch’ of his stanza due to an outside voice; perhaps the expostulation arises from the poet’s (figured) partial deafness. The absences in Coleridge’s ‘Kubla Khan’ due to the infamous postman are then equivalent to the blank paper on page sixty-seven of *Scenes from Comus* that follows the closure. However, the difference is one of poetic intensity: compared to Coleridge’s fragments, Hill is only disturbed after sixty-six pages of *Scenes from Comus*.

‘What did you say?’ thus calls attention to the enigma of the final stanzas of *Scenes from Comus* that is rooted in Hill’s response to *Four Quartets*, and which cannot, despite my attempts above, be ‘decoded’ into definitive meanings. Impishly, the line also registers Hill’s sense of alienation from the mainstream of contemporary British poetry that he explores more absorbedly in his fourth lecture as Oxford Professor of Poetry. In this context, Hill figures his tussles with modernist literature in an epigraph to *Scenes from Comus* as a seemingly anachronistic toil, and quotes from Kafka’s *The Blue Octavo Notebooks* (1948): ‘The good walk in step. Without knowing anything of them, the others dance around them, dancing the dances of the age’.⁷⁷ This quotation comes from Kafka’s third notebook: ‘walking’ might appear to be an anachronism to the dancers, but ‘in step’ indicates a writer capable of Poundian ‘reticence and of restraint’ in the face of contemporaneous trivialities; Kafka’s distaste towards the latter is registered in the repetition of ‘*tanzen, tanzen, tanzen*’ and ‘*die Tänze*’ in the original German.⁷⁸ To ‘walk in step’ forms a version of Eliot’s appeal to poets to ‘move in measure’ in ‘Little Gidding’ (p. 55), in the sense of deploying artistic temperance as well as attentiveness towards the formal properties of poetry. Such stubbornness can be read as steadfastness and a resistance to accommodation, an invigorating legacy of modernist writers such as Kafka, rather than artistic conservatism. Indeed, Hill’s second epigraph in *Scenes from Comus* – ‘VERY WELL ACTED BY YOU AND ME’ – originates in Wyndham Lewis’s play *Enemy of the Stars* (1914), and presents walking (and acting) ‘in step’ as an enduring alternative to mainstream poetry. As Tyrus Miller argues, the ‘Advertisement’ for the Vorticist drama from which Hill excerpts his quotation ‘was intended to assert and seal [Lewis’s] leadership of the avant-garde circle around him’.⁷⁹

In contrast, Hill has never been the figurehead for any anti-mainstream 'circle': instead, through the epigraphs from Kafka and Lewis's work, he asserts his intention to continue walking 'in step' with modernism, resisting the dance of 'poetasters' decried by John Milton and in the first section of *Scenes from Comus*.⁸⁰ Hill's appeal to the 'covenants' of language in the ninth line of the poem (p. 3) links with Milton's refusal in *The Reason of Church Government Urged Against Prelatry* (1642) to experience shame when in covenant 'with any knowing ['walking'] reader'.⁸¹ For Milton and Hill, the paths of those who walk 'in step' are 'rugged and difficult' in contrast with the 'libidinous and ignorant poetasters': the former require 'industrious and select reading', and – in an early version of Poundian restraint – 'steady observation'. Pound's 'reticence' is evident in Hill's judicious editing of the manuscripts for *Scenes from Comus*: a stanza about a 'lovely Eurasian woman | on the Euston to Wolverhampton express' entertains a dullness of diction and awkward enjambment that can be found in many mainstream poems, but which he excises from the final version.⁸² By associating covenants with aversions to 'tyrannos' in the first stanza (p. 3), Hill also draws on an influential Huguenot tract first published in 1579, as well as Milton's resistance to prelatry. Hill evokes *Vindicias Contra Tyrannos* ('Defences Against Tyrants') as both a symbol of popular resistance against corrupt rulers, and a self-referential nod to his previous retort against mainstream accusations that his poetry is too difficult.⁸³ When asked to respond to his collection *The Orchards of Syon*, Hill retorted that 'Tyrants always want a language and literature that is easily understood'.⁸⁴ Whereas Paterson argues in *New British Poetry* that poets should provide the 'human courtesy' of providing a context in which they are to be interpreted (p. xxx), Hill and Milton prefer 'walking' readers who have 'insight into all seemly [...] arts and affairs', as the latter writes in *The Reason of Church Government Urged Against Prelatry*.⁸⁵ Rather than the 'dancing' reader that Paterson imagines in the introduction to *New British Poetry*, who remains in cahoots with the mainstream poet, the second poem in *Scenes from Comus* figures the ideal reader as momentarily waylaid: the writer's 'orbit' 'salutes' the attentive recipient, 'whenever we pass or cross' (p. 3).

Nevertheless, in a contemporaneous review of *Scenes from Comus*, Sean O'Brien dismisses the 'walking' reader, who may be attentive to the modernist allusions in the passage I analysed above, as seduced by 'interpreters' excited snobbery'.⁸⁶ In contrast, the reviewer Eric Ormsby is more open to conceiving the collection as an enigma, and questions the whole concept of 'interpreting' Hill's poem: 'I don't pretend to

“understand” it all, even after several [readings but] then, I don’t “understand” Beethoven’s Late Quartets or the paintings of Balthus; yet I love them more each time I encounter them, as I do Mr. Hill’s poetry’.⁸⁷ In a similar appeal to literary tradition as in the epigraphs and opening sections of *Scenes from Comus*, Hill’s *Collected Critical Writings* (2008) contains an epigraph from A. P. Rossiter’s *Angel with Horns and other Shakespeare Lectures* (1961): ‘what is the appeal to tradition, when the lords of the present never understand, but ideal self-commiseration in the glasses of dead eyes’ (n.p.n.). The Eliotian ‘appeal’ is couched with an intriguing oxymoron (‘ideal self-commiseration’), that suggests that, if the contemporary poet engages in the intertextuality that O’Brien decries, they will not be appreciated for the ensuing enrichment of their poetry, but at least allusion remains a consolation that responds to literary tradition. The ‘glasses of dead eyes’ in this quotation could be those of the uncomprehending reader of recalcitrant poetry or the dead poets themselves.⁸⁸

Mainstream and ‘Innovative’ Poetry

In *Scenes from Comus*, this intensity of Hill’s ‘self-commiseration’ in relation to the work of Eliot, Kafka and Lewis typifies the engagement of enigmatical poetry with the legacies of early twentieth-century literature, and its advocacy of refractory poems as recourse to merely ‘dancing’ entertainment. This discussion of such challenging writing also opens a specific breach in the poetry wars, as I demonstrate in the chapters that argue for Hill and Prynne’s poems as distinct examples of ‘exasperating’ literature.⁸⁹ The elusiveness of Hill and Prynne’s work contrasts with a kind of mainstream poetry that Paterson advocates in his introduction to *New British Poetry*, in which there is an over-anxious requirement to placate the reader. Hill argues in his fourth lecture as Oxford Professor of Poetry that it is not the poet’s duty to mollify their readers: instead, they must simply focus on being ‘inventive’.⁹⁰ This book thus contains analyses of poetry that sustain the enigmatic possibilities of contemporary writing, rather than that of ‘dancing’ poems that desperately attempt to appease the reader. Hill, Prynne, Monk, Parmar, Warner and Byrne offer an alternative vision of contemporary literature, in which art persists in its ‘rule’ to delight, challenge and exasperate.

By focussing on a form of writing that crosses the divide between mainstream and ‘innovative’ poetry, I am not calling for an abolition of these categories. Even if they are fallible, they nevertheless sketch the formal

differences that perpetuate in contemporary poetry. For Sheppard, attempts to disavow these classifications with 'persistent claims to consensual inclusiveness' began around the publication of *The New Poetry* anthology in 1993.⁹¹ For others, such as Barry, the dissolution began even earlier during the 1980s, after the mass resignation of 'innovative' poets from the Poetry Society after the 'Battle of Earls Court', and years of subsequent marginalisation that ultimately gave way to a 'new consensus'.⁹² J. T. Welsh proposes that generational anthologies have projected 'an image of consensus' into the future, 'beyond historical divisions that appear antithetical to a shared vision and sense of community', and he outlines a recent collapse of the 'new consensus'.⁹³ I would concur with Sheppard that this 'peace process' (p. 82) actually never gained much traction: despite the temporary ententes and détentés, the categories of mainstream and 'innovative' endure, as became apparent in the visceral responses to the publication of Paterson and Charles Simic's *New British Poetry* in 2004. For some critics, the intervening years have brought about a less bifurcated response to contemporary poetics, in which poets such as Warner, Byrne and Parmar happily operate on the 'cusp' of these categories.⁹⁴ Yet, despite the formal efforts of the poets discussed in this book, 'de-aestheticized' forms of writing still predominate in contemporary poetry that over-value the 'reality principle' in the clamour after a decreasing number of poetry readers.⁹⁵ As David Kennedy illustrates in his analysis of back-cover blurbs, mainstream poetry books today tend to be marketed through the author's personality rather than the 'truth content' of the writing.⁹⁶ In addition, as John Redmond, Marjorie Perloff and Hill have expressed, the augmentation of poetry awards and publications does not mean that twenty-first-century poetry luxuriates in an 'incredible renaissance' of formal salubriousness.⁹⁷ Hill's fourth Oxford lecture stresses the risks of comparing the supposed 'low vitality' of poetry in the 1950s to contemporary British poetry.⁹⁸ Redmond records a 'prize-giving culture, fuelled by favours and networking' in *Poetry and Privacy* (2013) (p. 10), and notes that, in reports on poetry competitions and public promotion, the emphasis is often on what poets do aside from being writers (p. 7). Such logic would be like assessing the quality of winemakers on their production of fetching hats. This bizarre demotion of the craft of writing relies 'too often on a thesis of public relevance' that 'arises out of a more general conviction: that the relationship between poetry and the public sphere is negatively woven' (p. 7). Redmond argues that universities have ended up in the odd position of 'nurturing a poetic class which is not merely anti-academic but, to an alarming degree, hostile to intelligent scrutiny' (p. 10).

This book thus attempts to recalibrate the overdetermined categories of the mainstream and ‘innovative’ not to pinpoint their absolute inefficacy, but to focalise on enigmatical poems that resist the ‘dominant culture of contemporary poetry’ that is ‘promotional in outlook and anti-intellectual in spirit’.⁹⁹ Authors from both camps will contest this recalibration. Many ‘innovative’ poets will retort that writers usually categorised as mainstream, such as Hill and Warner, or ‘cusp’ writers, such as Byrne and Parmar, are encroaching on their established formal territory. Another response will be that the Cambridge School has been engaging with the possibilities of enigmatical poetics since the 1960s. The influence of *Aesthetic Theory* and *Negative Dialectics* (1966) may indeed be implicit in the writing of many examples of such poetry – as in the work of Drew Milne and Simon Jarvis – but there has never been an extended account of enigmatical poetry in the London and Cambridge Schools *and* mainstream poems equivalent to the scope of this book. On the other hand, many mainstream poets will disavow the ‘exasperating’ writing of poets such as Hill, Warner, Byrne and Parmar as misplaced within their category, and contend that it is actually symptomatic of late modernist writing that displays all the hallmarks of currently distrusted formal concerns such as intricacy, allusion and complexity. As Kennedy recounts in *New Relations*, one reviewer of *The New Poetry* opined that “surely the myth of modernism, progressivism, and the perpetual avant-garde was laid to rest years ago?” (p. 250). In the wake of such appraisals of contemporary poetry, the theory of enigmatical poetics becomes even more pressing. Unless accounts of contemporary poetics are attentive to instances of refractory poetry, then there is no guarantee that future generations will be able to understand works of art in a way that Adorno believed to be vouchsafed in 1969. For future generations, the ‘secrets’ of art that Schmidt has been drawn to throughout his career may be interpreted as merely formal intransigence.¹⁰⁰

Compared to this focus on enigmatical poetry, critical discussion surrounding the metamodernist novel and artworks has centred around a perceived shift from postmodernism to a new historicity bound up with affect, the return of sentiment, post-irony and the impact of austerity. In ‘Metamodernism Manifesto’ and ‘Metamodernism: A Brief Introduction’, for example, Luke Turner registers the ‘desires’ of this new ‘structure of feeling’ in relation to ‘the resurgence of sincerity, hope, romanticism, affect, and the potential for grand narratives and universal truths’, rejecting the postmodernist irony and cynicism of the 1980s and 1990s, with its ‘diet of *The Simpsons* and *South Park*’.¹⁰¹ This narrative simply does not appertain in the context of contemporary British poetry:

there is no clear movement from the predominance of postmodernist poetry to the guarded sincerity of postmillennial poems. Indeed, any critic who claimed the prior existence of an uncontested postmodernist poetry that has now been superseded would be open to ridicule. Even though members of the London and Cambridge Schools have assimilated aspects of poststructuralism and theories of postmodernism, there has never been a definitive postmodernist poetry in an equivalent way to postmodernist metafiction. Moreover, mainstream poetry has marginalised 'innovative' poems since the 1960s, as critics such as Barry and Robert Hampson have tirelessly illustrated in books such as *New British Poetries* (1993) and *Poetry Wars* (2006), so the shift away from a predominant postmodernist form would be impossible to justify in the context of contemporary British poetry.¹⁰² In contrast, I afford considerable space in this book to writing that does not fit easily into the categories of postmodernist, mainstream or 'innovative' poetry. Hill's *Scenes from Comus*, Monk's *Ghost & Other Sonnets* (2008), Byrne's *White Coins* (2015) and Parmar's *Eidolon* (2015) share a formal recalcitrance that is out of kilter with much of mainstream British poetry, an 'off-key' eloquence that is not ashamed to present contemporary poetry as difficult and exasperating, yet – as I shall illustrate – these collections are not easily categorised as either mainstream or 'innovative'.¹⁰³ As Hill points out in relation to *The Orchards of Syon*, they are formally challenging precisely because the historicity that such poetry is intertwined with contains and resists its own wealth of obdurate complexities.¹⁰⁴ Anecdotal and positivist poetry may provide succour, but it does not create a parallel literary world capable of confronting and withstanding the vicissitudes of the present. The modernist critic R. P. Blackmur distinguished the 'art of poetry' from mere versifying through 'the animating presence of a fresh idiom': enigmatical poetry is similarly so 'twisted and posed' in its formal inclinations that it not only expresses 'the matter in hand', but 'adds to the stock of available reality'.¹⁰⁵