

*Continuing 'Poetry Wars' in Twenty-First-Century  
British Poetry*

Having analysed the links and tensions in the last chapter between mainstream and 'innovative' poems that wrestle with the concept of enigmatical writing, I now turn to explore the repercussions of the 'poetry wars'. Any engagement with contemporary poetry in relation to David James's sense of a 'recrudescence' of modernism needs to confront the legacies of these arguments over form and literary tradition.<sup>1</sup> In an attempt to consign these conflicts between mainstream and 'innovative' poets to history, David Caplan and Peter Barry argue that we need to 'move discussion beyond the simple oppositions' that impede expositions of contemporary poetry.<sup>2</sup> My account in Chapter 4 of the vacillations between the enigmatic and insouciant in Ahren Warner's poetry indicate this book's wariness towards these 'simple oppositions'. At the same time, I register the latter's endurance, and their critical efficacy in distinguishing – as I illustrated in Chapter 1 – between the elusive 'clowning' in Geraldine Monk's poetry, and Don Paterson's refutation of what he apprehends as lyrical indulgence. For Caplan, the split between mainstream poets and the London and Cambridge Schools cannot adequately differentiate between 'Establishment' poems and the 'innovative', 'experimental' or 'avant-garde'. Similarly, Derek Attridge contends that these critical labels are more distracting than incisive, and that only 'good' and 'bad' poetry is worth noting in each camp.<sup>3</sup> These categories can indeed obscure stylistic differences contained within each binary, but, rather than vying to register the obsolescence of these terms, I argue that the persistence of enigmatical poetics in mainstream and 'innovative' writing signals that the poetry wars are still continuing today in a modulated form. As I argued in the Introduction, metamodernist poetry by vastly different writers such as Geoffrey Hill and J. H. Prynne is contained within these opposed camps. Nevertheless, when a reader commented that the poetry scene in the UK was 'like

a knife fight in a phone booth', this fantasy scenario of violent containment emphasised the tenacity of these 'simple oppositions'.<sup>4</sup>

As one of the few 'Establishment' poets to affirm the existence of the mainstream, Paterson's introduction to *New British Poetry* (2004) ironically proved that the London and Cambridge Schools had not been struggling against a poetic chimera since the early 1970s, at the same time as his embittered writing provided a convenient focus for embattled redress.<sup>5</sup> In a modulated version of these categories, the distinctions between mainstream and metamodernist writing were evident when, seven years after Paterson's polemic, Hill challenged Carol Ann Duffy's conception of democratic art in his fourth lecture as Oxford Professor of Poetry.<sup>6</sup> Yet the gleeful portrayal in 2011 of a 'spat' between two high-profile poets in *The Guardian* omitted the elements in Hill's speech in which he professed to be uncomfortable with his critique of mainstream writing. *The Guardian* also failed to elucidate Hill's ambivalent position in relation to the poetry wars: he has avoided reference to the Cambridge School, at the same time as his modernist antecedents have more in common with the precursors of Prynne's *Acrylic Tips* (2002) than those of Duffy's collections. In Chapter 1, I demonstrated how Theodor Adorno's theory of enigmatical literature and the 'remainder' helps to account for Prynne's resistance to signification.<sup>7</sup> Subsequently, I illustrated through a reading of Paterson's 'The Sea at Brighton' that the possibility of enigmatical poetics in mainstream poetry cannot be accounted for with the absolute purity of Paterson's 'simple oppositions'.<sup>8</sup> In this chapter, I discuss Paterson's controversial anthology in more detail to contextualise these formal 'battles' in relation to Hill's invective against Duffy's account of poetry as equivalent to texting, and to critique the poets' work in relation to their contested ideas of democratic poetry. For Hill, the term 'democratic' is not coterminous with 'accessible': his 'exasperating' poetry encompasses the enigmatical remainder that I consider further in relation to passages from *Scenes from Comus* (2005).<sup>9</sup> In contrast, Paterson's defence of 'accessible' writing is by proxy an attack on the version of metamodernist writing that I outline throughout this book.

### ***New British Poetry and Paterson's Mainstream***

Natalie Pollard deploys understatement when she refers to Paterson's 'rather incendiary commentaries on the so-called contemporary divide between mainstream and postmodern poetics' (p. 7).<sup>10</sup> The qualifier 'so-called' indicates a wariness towards this supposed rift, whereas for Paterson

the definitive schism of the poetry wars endures: in his introduction to the *New British Poetry*, “Mainstream” practise [*sic*] requires defending against the contradiction of a ‘general ubiquity’ of “Postmoderns”.<sup>11</sup> In his poem ‘A Talking Book’, Paterson warns readers against cursory engagements with texts, yet he himself is guilty of a ‘one-day travel pass’ into literary and cultural theory when he attempts to tar the London and Cambridge Schools with the erroneous slight of postmodernism.<sup>12</sup> During his T. S. Eliot lecture in 2004, Paterson dismissed postmodernist poetry in a way that actually shaped an unintended attack on metamodernist writing, and, ironically, the modernist poet giving his name to the lecture series.<sup>13</sup> Rather than a specific attack on the playfulness, irony, pastiche and preponderance of non-referentiality in the work of a postmodernist poet such as John Ashbery, Paterson condemns the ‘Postmodern’ foregrounding of form, the juxtaposition of archaic and contemporary registers and self-conscious artifice, yet the first two aspects are more characteristic of ‘high’ modernist texts such as *The Waste Land* (1922) and Ezra Pound’s *Cantos* (1925) than Ashbery’s *oeuvre*. Paterson’s more specific complaint that readers may as well pore over the ‘Norwich phone book or a set of log tables’ as consider Prynne’s work indicates that, for Paterson, Prynne – or, more accurately, Paterson’s caricature of Prynne – represents archetypal postmodernist poetry, rather than, for example, the pastiche poems of Kenneth Goldsmith.<sup>14</sup> In *New British Poetry*, Paterson awkwardly fuses Language poets with the London and Cambridge Schools into a distinct tribe of postmodernists: there is no critical reflection on the formal (or personal) rifts between the writers within each group, as with Prynne’s diatribe against the ‘innovative’ approach to readership and consumerism in ‘A Letter to Steve McCaffery’.<sup>15</sup> Instead, homogenous ‘Postmodernists’ are accused of a ‘joyless wordplay that somehow passes, in their country, for wit’.<sup>16</sup> Paterson laments that the herculean efforts of readers engaging with postmodernist writing should be an embarrassment to the guilty poets, who refuse to provide the ‘human courtesy’ of providing the context in which they are to be understood (p. xxx).

This description of internecine ‘warfare’ is hard to countenance in the context of the contemporary novel: it is difficult to imagine a recent novelist berating the postmodernist novels of, say, Thomas Pynchon or John Fowles as ‘joyless wordplay’.<sup>17</sup> In contrast with Paterson’s diatribe, Adorno writes of those critics who (like Paterson) ignore the enigmatical possibilities of art, and ‘embarrass themselves by blathering that art must not forget humanity’, and demand meaning ‘in the face of bewildering works’.<sup>18</sup> As Tristan Tzara argued in his Dada manifesto of 1918, an entirely

comprehensible work 'is the product of a journalist'.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, Paterson disavows the perceived incomprehensibility of postmodernist poetry with his contention in the T. S. Eliot lecture that he seeks only simplicity and precision in his own writing. The latter could equally apply to early modernist writing such as that of the Imagists, but it cannot help but feature in the context of this lecture as a retort not only to his chimera of postmodernist poets, but also to Eliot himself, who argued that modern poetry must be 'difficult' if it is to respond to the complexities of modern life.<sup>20</sup> Contradicting his more positive reference to modernism as 'invigorating' in *New British Poetry*, Paterson argues that the introduction of further complexity beyond his own striving for clarity would be deceitful and inept. In fact, Paterson lauds what Adorno terms 'conciliatory forms', and capitulates to 'the philistine demand that the artwork give [the reader] something'.<sup>21</sup> In contradistinction to the self-interest that Paterson applies to the supposed 'postmoderns', Adorno argues that this 'something' is usually the narcissistic and 'standardized echo' of the demanding reader (p. 17).

Deploying the same terms with which Hill dismissed Philip Larkin's infamous attack on Charlie Parker, Pound and Picasso, the introduction to *New British Poetry* could be said to contain the erudition of the postprandial.<sup>22</sup> In an article that reads akin to a review of Paterson's introduction sixteen years before it was published, Alan Golding argues that such attacks on the avant-garde are symptomatic of a 'scapegoat-hungry literary culture' in which the 'Language group' is 'superficially dismissed with "a few cracks about tedium, fragmentation, a desiccated esthetic [*sic*], and dehumanisation".<sup>23</sup> Attridge advises that Paterson's 'bad-tempered' piece of writing is best left ignored: it would be tempting simply to follow this advice, were it not for the fact that, as Natalie Pollard points out, Paterson has 'many important allies and supporters' in the contemporary poetry world, and is soliciting 'a steadily increasing academic readership'.<sup>24</sup> Paterson's cultural influence in the field of contemporary poetry can also be measured through his status as chief editor of one of the most extensive poetry lists in the UK; as he has admitted in interview, the poetry that appears on the Picador list owes more to an informal network of mainstream contacts – a 'jungle' vine of connections, as he puts it – than the overall quality of submitted manuscripts.<sup>25</sup> John Redmond, alongside 'innovative' writers and critics such as Robert Hampson, argues that such machinations are symptomatic of a nepotistic 'prize-giving culture, fuelled by favours and networking' rather than intrinsic value.<sup>26</sup> Pollard also notes that Paterson's position could be

considered to exemplify an insidious aggression 'common in commercial literary poetics: the corporate publisher's promotion of work that possesses recognisable and accessible formal and linguistic features goes hand in hand with a rejection of alternative formal strategies, and vigorous dismissal of their literary value' (p. 10).<sup>27</sup> In response to Andrea Brady's accusation in the *Chicago Review* that he was acting like a neo-conservative general protecting the establishment, Paterson replied that he regretted his comments in *New British Poetry*, continuing: 'I don't regard them [the 'Postmoderns'] as *they* any more [. . .] the division we created between us [was] entirely false'.<sup>28</sup> After sifting through the invective that the anthology inspired, one can only puzzle over that adverb 'entirely'. In another interview in 2013, Paterson opined that he has 'Far more time for JHP these days, as his language actually honours his project'.<sup>29</sup> He contrasts Prynne's poems with Hill's work: Paterson regards the latter as unethical in that it presents a moral point in language 'likely to confound the reader'. The propositions that Hill has a simple proposal to make in his work – or that Prynne might have an overall 'project' – are unsubstantiated. Despite his disavowal, ten years later, of his introduction to *New British Poetry*, Paterson's more recent attack on Hill's work fuels a sense that he still revels in 'negotiating and perpetuating factions in the contemporary poetry industry' rather than 'entirely' dispelling false distinctions between mainstream and 'innovative' poetry.<sup>30</sup>

In the ensuing furore over Paterson's diatribe, it was easy to forget that an 'innovative' critic had written a comparable essay only four years earlier. Ken Edwards' 'The Two Poetries' examines the similarities and differences between mainstream and 'innovative' writers in an avowal of different aesthetic traditions that might still invigorate twenty-first-century poetry. Edwards describes the 'energetic complexity' of Allen Fisher's antagonistic response to mainstream writing through what he labels as the 'parallel tradition': his article thus forms the equivalent of Paterson's introduction, but from the opposite perspective.<sup>31</sup> Subsequent descriptions of 'The Two Poetries' do not form a prescriptive taxonomy, but Edwards notes that mainstream writing is generally interested in clarity of expression, coherent narratives and a single point of view, whereas the 'parallel tradition' tends to foreground non-normative language use, multiple voices and open form (p. 34). Of course, it is not surprising that an essay published in *Angelaki* – an academic journal focussing on philosophy and literary theory – did not achieve the notoriety of a 'bad-tempered' piece of journalism by a Faber poet. Yet Edwards' article is more measured in its laudable attempt to distinguish between two types of writing; even if alternatives could be

provided to his version of mainstream writing in terms of its supposed emphasis on the single viewpoint and lyric voice – Hill's later poetry forms an obvious counterexample – and its disavowal of the politics of form. Edwards' shuttling between mainstream and 'innovative' poetry ultimately indicates that these different kinds of writing may overlap, as in the conception of enigmatical writing I outline throughout this book, but they are not interchangeable. Unlike Paterson, he is also careful not to homogenise 'modernist-derived' poetry (p. 28). Edwards is critical, for example, of Fisher's defence of open signification, arguing – akin to Paterson – that 'the strategy runs the risk of failing entirely to engage the uncommitted reader' (p. 28). On the other hand, he is also critical of Peter Riley's suggestion that 'innovative' poets conspired to marginalise their own work during the 1970s and 80s by resigning *en masse* from The Poetry Society, an event that Barry recounts so compellingly in *Poetry Wars* (pp. 26–7). Instead, Edwards defends Eric Mottram's conception of the 'establishment' as 'a consortium of public funding bodies [and] mainstream commercial publishers' (p. 26), who are 'inhospitable' to art that might derive its impetus from an enigmatical 'remainder' (p. 27).<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, even if he remains committed to 'modernist-derived' poetry, Edwards does not dismiss the poets on the opposite side to the 'parallel tradition', unlike Paterson in 2004: he praises, for example, a mainstream poem by Matthew Sweeney for its 'economy of means', and its rejection of 'flash' intellectualism (p. 30). However, 'parallel' poetry for Edwards consists purely of 'innovative' writers such as Fisher, Riley and Mottram: Hill's grappling with the legacies of Pound and Eliot in his 'exasperating' and autonomous art is, for example, ignored.<sup>33</sup>

Despite the critical rigour of 'The Two Poetries', then, Edwards' article complies overall with Paterson's construction of a division between 'post-modernist' poetry (the 'parallel tradition') and the mainstream, a rigid opposition that this book challenges with its discussion, for example, of Hill's work, and a new generation of 'cusp' poets such as Warner, Sandeep Parmar and James Byrne.<sup>34</sup> Where can Hill's work be located within this binary? The following passage from Hill's *Scenes from Comus* is not, in Adorno's terms, 'conciliatory', but neither is it bewildering, or excessively playful:

While the height-challenged sun fades, clouds become  
as black-barren as lava, wholly motionless,  
not an ashen wisp out of place, while the sun fades.  
While the sun fades its fields glow with dark poppies.  
Some plenary hand spreads out, to flaunt an end,

old gold imperial colours. Look back a shade –  
*Gubriþur Þorbjarnardóttir* – over your  
 left shoulder or mine | absolute night comes  
 high-stalking after us.<sup>35</sup>

This passage both resists and embraces empirical reality: the clouds, sun, poppies and night are comprehensible, yet we also encounter the enigmas of the 'plenary hand' and 'high-stalking' night, and the puzzling Icelandic interjection. Nevertheless, the latter are not conveyed with the mannerist techniques that Paterson associates with 'postmodernist' poets: indeed, metrical dexterity – usually associated with mainstream rather than 'innovative' writing – is more evident in this passage. When Hill writes that there is not 'an ashen wisp out of place', the metre is ironically 'out of place': the metrical break on 'out' allows him to stress, delicately, the imagined perfection of the clouds.<sup>36</sup> Yet the passage is also self-consciously resistant to its own form: after six lines of the epiphanic lyricism that Edwards associates with mainstream writing, awkward poetics enter the poem with the reference to Gudrid Thorbjarnardóttir, the 'true central character of the [Icelandic] sagas'.<sup>37</sup> Gudrid does not feature in the early manuscript versions of this poem held in the Brotherton Library, yet the 'off-key' intervention here in the lyrical passage is perfectly apt: the intervention introduces a different linguistic, historical and literary context into a passage about Iceland in order to avoid the lyrical thrust settling into a self-centred rumination on death.<sup>38</sup>

As Edwards puts it in relation to 'innovative' poetry, there is a concern here with non-normative language use, extended vocabulary and a foregrounding of register. As throughout Hill's work, the manipulation of form, and intrusion of awkward poetics, indicates that the lyrical must be hard earned if it is to become anything more than a 'brief gasp between one cliché and another'.<sup>39</sup> This struggle is enacted in the metrical tension throughout the passage: the metrical regularity of the second line (an Alexandrine) contrasts, for example, with the bunches stresses of 'the height-challenged sun fades' in line one. Rather than vying to coerce the reader, the enigmatic passage seems – as Hill remarks of the Duffy poem that I discuss later in this chapter – to 'hover over itself', indicating a concern with precision rather than, as Paterson puts it, the 'human courtesy' of creating a context in which the poem might be understood.<sup>40</sup> A reference that sends the reader to *The Sagas of Icelanders* (1997) in order to discover more about Thorbjarnardóttir is hardly 'conciliatory', nor is the evocation of Eurydice and Lot in the final two lines.<sup>41</sup> Yet Paterson would find it impossible to argue, as he does with Prynne's work in 2004, that signifieds and referents are entirely arbitrary in this passage. The



extract has more in common with mainstream poetry in its classical engagement with death, and what Robert Sheppard disparagingly terms the 'normalization' of a scene: 'high-stalking' and 'absolute night' echo the 'height-challenged sun', and 'high-stepping' ruin earlier in the sequence (p. 29), but unlike Orpheus and Lot's wife, the poet has no control over his fate.<sup>42</sup> Even if he resists looking over his shoulder at death – as he does not, metaphorically, in this passage – the 'night' remains, like the Furies, implacably persistent.

### Carol Ann Duffy's Texting

At the same time, this hermeneutical approach to elusive writing cannot account for the entire meaning of the passage. Whose is the 'plenary hand', for example, that 'flaunts an end': God's, the poet's or both? How can the poppies be dark when the fields are glowing in the disappearing sun? Is it because the flowers are located in the shadows of the sunset? These enigmatic lines eschew such questions that rely on a straightforward relationship between the text and empirical reality, as the stanza engages in lyrical brooding on future death. This passage from *Scenes from Comus* exemplifies Hill's 'twisted' language that 'not only expresses the matter in hand but adds to the stock of available reality'.<sup>43</sup> His work thus offers resistance alongside 'innovative' writing to Paterson's opposition between mainstream and 'postmodernist' poetry. However, Hill's silence on the London and Cambridge Schools does not result in an immunity to the continuing poetry wars.<sup>44</sup> Characterising himself as 'marooned' with his readings of Eliot and Pound in the 1950s, Hill has refrained from commenting on the 'innovative' poets that Paterson dismisses.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, in 2011 Hill became more openly antagonistic towards the 'conciliatory forms' that Paterson endorses.<sup>46</sup> The continuing poetry wars emerged in unfamiliar territory when, during his fourth lecture as Oxford Professor of Poetry, Hill criticised Duffy's poetry as simplistic, and proposed an alternative and distinctly metamodernist conception of democratic writing.

Initially, Hill directs his ire at the (then) Poet Laureate's attempt to equate texting with poetic language. Duffy's comments first appeared two months earlier in an interview published in *The Guardian*:

The poem is a form of texting . . . it's the original text [. . .] it's a way of saying more with less, just as texting is [. . .] it allows feelings and ideas to travel big distances in a very condensed form [. . .] The poem is *the* literary form of the 21st century. It's able to connect young people in a deep way to language . . . it's language as play.<sup>47</sup>



Duffy's vindication of 'text-speak' is analogous to some linguists' attempts to resist the clamour around texting's supposed debasement of language, such as David Crystal's monograph entitled *Txtng: The Gr8 Db8* (2009).<sup>48</sup> Hill's counterargument is that texting forms truncated instances of language that, unlike poetry, are not condensed into an 'intensely crafted and parallel world'.<sup>49</sup> Jeffrey T. Nealon takes a different stance to Duffy and Hill on such compressed language: if advertising and the greeting card industry 'have completely territorialised short, pithy expressions of "authentic" sentiment', he opines, 'showing us how to reenchant even the most mundane corners of everyday life [. . .] then what's left for poetry to do in a post-postmodern world?'<sup>50</sup> Hill's response would be that this textual brevity does not 'reenchant'; only the intensely imagined, parallel world of enigmatical poetry can succeed in this process. For Duffy, 'pithy expressions of "authentic" sentiment' allow contemporary poetry to operate alongside such commodified language. Duffy, he argues, is 'policing' her remit as the Poet Laureate with over-statements such as poetry is the most efficacious literary form of the twenty-first century in a laudable attempt to make poetry more attractive to schoolchildren.<sup>51</sup> In contrast, Hill depicts himself in the fourth Oxford lecture as a 'sinister old harlequin bellowing for pittance some gibberish about the shirt of Nessus', who does not share Duffy's 'generous and egalitarian literary-missionary zeal'.<sup>52</sup>

Despite such 'generous' comments, Hill argues that Duffy's anti-élitist vision of democratic poetry hinders the quality of her own writing. He quotes the middle section of Duffy's poem 'Death of a Teacher' from the article in *The Guardian*:

You sat on your desk  
 swinging your legs, reading a poem by Yeats  
 [. . .] and I [. . .] heard the bird  
 in the oak outside scribble itself on the air.<sup>53</sup>

Hill then asserts that these are 'cast-off bits of oligarchical commodity English, such as is employed by writers for Mills and Boon and celebrity critics appearing on *A Good Read* or *The Andrew Marr Show*'.<sup>54</sup> For Charles Bernstein, lines such as 'You sat on your desk | swinging your legs, reading a poem by Yeats' would be symptomatic of mainstream 'craft', that eschews the enigma, and 'denotes not the modernist aesthetic of difficulty and technical complexity, but the apparent simplicity and seemingly straightforward use of the direct personal voice'.<sup>55</sup> Those poets, such as Lemn Sissay, who crowded to defend the Laureate's 'voice' in the aftermath of the lecture were particularly incensed at Hill's further accusation that the poem

'could easily be mistaken for a first effort by one of the young people she wishes to encourage'.<sup>56</sup> Sissay was certainly right in that many teachers of creative writing would be delighted if a first-year student composed a line equivalent to one in which a bird 'scribble[s] itself on the air', but for Hill such an image is symptomatic of poetry that is lazily composed, and then celebrated as inclusive.<sup>57</sup>

Hill's criticisms share 'innovative' writers and critics' distrust towards the unreflective championing of supposedly democratic poetry.<sup>58</sup> For Hill, these reservations extend to a simplistic lauding of democracy itself. Often attacked as a conservative writer, it may come as a surprise to his detractors that in this Oxford lecture Hill displays a suspicion towards democracy similar to that of Che Guevara, who thought that the concept must mean more than elections that are 'managed by rich landowners and professional politicians'.<sup>59</sup> Rather than 'a system of government in which *all* people [. . .] are involved in making decisions about its affairs', Hill depicts western democracy as a disguised plutocracy; in other words, a state in which we are ruled by a small and extremely wealthy group of people.<sup>60</sup> Democracy constitutes a paradox in that it can never satisfy 'all people': the political scientists Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page point out, for example, that the majority of American voters have little influence over policies adopted by the US government.<sup>61</sup> Rather than endorsing John Carey's attack on modernism as an élitist attempt to stem the 'triumph of "hyperdemocracy"', Hill would have agreed with Herbert Read that any ideal of democracy – such as sortition – had been replaced by the mid-twentieth-century with 'the ascendant oligarchy of monopoly capitalism'.<sup>62</sup> Published just two months before Hill's lecture, Jeffrey A. Winters' article on oligarchy and democracy suggests that the two terms are, as Hill proposes, not mutually exclusive in the contemporary, unlike the example of the Athenians attempting to reduce the power of a professional ruling class via elections in the fourth century BC.<sup>63</sup> For Winters, the terms now operate 'within a single system, and American politics is a daily display of their interplay'. Composing his lecture at the start of the Eurozone crisis, Hill argues that we participate not in European democracies, but in 'finance oligarchies with aristocratic and democratic trimmings'.<sup>64</sup> His response to Greek debt resonates with that of the radical finance minister Yanis Varoufakis when Hill complains that elected European governments have been dissolved 'by fiat of an international finance rating agency'. Alison Gibbons, Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen argue that such concerns are key to the historicity surrounding their version of metamodernism. They point out that the

International Monetary Fund conceded that the austerity measures imposed on Greece were 'an unnecessarily cruel and highly unproductive act [. . .] as the plight of the many unemployed young people in, especially, Greece and Spain underlines'.<sup>65</sup>

It is not clear how seriously Hill took these views on oligarchy, and he may well be guilty of accepting a 'one-day travel pass' into the field of political theory.<sup>66</sup> Nevertheless, it is important to consider how this Radian thinking interweaves his account of supposedly democratic poetry. Like Christopher Beach in *Poetic Culture* (1999), Hill attacks the mainstream's 'complicity in reified systems of discourse' (p. 80), not from the perspective of the 'avant-garde', but from the viewpoint of a writer of enigmatical poetry who has ignored the 'parallel tradition'. For Hill, Duffy's accessible 'Death of a Teacher' is actually symptomatic of a culture in which complexity is denigrated in order to perpetuate literature that is 'familiar' and 're-assuring' for Hampson and Barry's 'general poetry reader'.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, Tim Kendall argues that the analogy between the popular and democratic is 'entirely false', and bemoans proponents of what he terms 'pop poetry', who are 'fixated with [the] market, with giving the people what they think they want'.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, the popular does not necessarily equate with copious sales: as Paterson admits, many of the poets included in *New British Poetry* enjoy only a limited readership, whereas, as Kendall points out, Hill, the 'bugbear of those who advocate a people's poetry, manages to sell far more books, worldwide, than [. . .] the so-called popular poets' (p. 26).<sup>69</sup> Indeed, Hill's 'bellowing' – as he himself terms it in his Oxford lecture – is encapsulated in Kendall's contention that 'serious poetry, being élitist, is the greater servant of democracy than its pop cousin' (p. 26).

In contrast, Paterson's vision of mainstream writing pretends, falsely, to be democratic: for Hill, this 'oligarchical creative style' actually represents a debased English that is as 'frenetic and passive' as excited participants at a winter sale.<sup>70</sup> Hill thus aligns himself – without comment – with 'innovative' writers who also believe that popular tirades against 'difficult' poetry are a form of cultural tyranny. As Mottram bemoans in *New British Poetries* (1993), 'if Eliot, Pound, David Jones, MacDiarmid, Bunting or Dylan Thomas turned up today with their unknown works', the chances of publication with a large UK publisher 'would be nil' (p. 49). A quarter of a century after the publication of Mottram's chapter, his admonition can still be applied to contemporary poetry, despite the tokenistic efforts of publishers such as Picador and Carcanet to feature the work of 'innovative' writers such as Tom Raworth and Denise Riley; after, of course, their

reputations have been established by the labour and risks of smaller presses.<sup>71</sup> In accord with Hill's attack on simplistic reviews of poetry in what 'used to be broadsheets but are now tabloids', Hampson also argues that reviews of mainstream poetry are always reassuring, and eulogise poems that 'contain some kind of utilitarian reference' that has 'an easily paraphrasable meaning'.<sup>72</sup> For Hampson and Hill, 'accessible' poems, like propaganda – and unlike enigmatical poetry – are easily understood: Hill underlines this connection with a reference to Joseph Goebbels who 'managed [. . .] the tricks' of oligarchical culture in the form of the media perpetuation of Nazi myths, and his rejection of modernist art as decadent.<sup>73</sup> In his defence of modernist literature, Peter Howarth argues that 'Plain speaking or "easy" poetry [. . .] will not be real communication, but a complicated culture's fantasy of plain speaking, which actually reinforces sentimental ideas about being in touch with the real or the democratic'.<sup>74</sup> Against the 'oligarchical strut' of career politicians who pretend to be 'in touch' with the people, Hill recommends in his fourth Oxford lecture that writers engage instead in constructive, Swiftian obscenity.

Whereas some 'innovative' poets dismiss the 'bargain basement offerings of the Centre's noisy trash', however, Hill demurs from such attacks on the mainstream with his coterminous if uneasy defence of Duffy's version of democratic writing.<sup>75</sup> In the interest of 'simple oppositions', these comments were elided in the report on his controversial lecture in *The Guardian*.<sup>76</sup> Hill's additional, and, he admits, 'incompatible' reaction to 'Death of a Teacher' is that this is actually democratic language 'pared to the barest bean', and he would not have the 'moral courage' to write in such a manner.<sup>77</sup> It is unlikely that many 'innovative' poets would ever engage with Duffy's poetry written for children, yet Hill goes on to praise the word 'treasured' in *The Christmas Truce* (2011):

But it was Christmas Eve; *believe*; belief  
thrilled the night air,  
where glittering rime on unburied sons  
treasured their stiff hair.<sup>78</sup>

Whereas 'thrilled' and 'glittering' are part of a 'standard poetry kit', Hill argues – despite the latter's fleeting appearance, in a modulated form, in Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1943) – 'treasured' is 'magically' placed, so that the poem seems to 'hover over itself' in metapoetics that utilitarian texting would find impossible to achieve.<sup>79</sup> The same phenomenon occurs in Michael Symmons Roberts's poem 'My Father's Death' from *Mancunia*

(2017). At the beginning of the poem, a wedding bowl is smashed, predictably, into 'smithereens', but four stanzas later the 'poetry kit' is certainly not in evidence when an apple is 'pursed with mould' in a 'magical' moment of poetic condensation.<sup>80</sup> Hill's extolling of Duffy's 'treasured' as a 'well-struck thing resonating' – without a subsequent explanation of exactly why the word is 'beautifully chosen and placed' – links to my discussion in the last chapter of the enigmatical poetics in Paterson's 'The Sea at Brighton'.<sup>81</sup> '[T]reasured' works 'magically' partly because it connects back to the precious medal, moon and soldiers' aspirations introduced nineteen lines earlier: the bereaved mothers become the 'rime' that then 'treasures' the corpses. (It may be significant that Hill also deploys a pun on rime/rhyme in *Scenes from Comus* [p. 29], and is remembering this line seven years after the publication of that collection.<sup>82</sup>) However, this rational explanation of echoing diction and repeated imagery in Duffy's poetry still does not quite account for the 'magical' and resonant singularity of 'treasured'.<sup>83</sup> The enigmatical precision of the 'treasured' hair is central to Hill's sense of 'well-struck' poems: even though the concept of the enigma arises out of Adorno's account of modernist art, it provides an opportunity to create poetic resonance in both mainstream and 'innovative' poetry.

Nevertheless, Hill's account of one word in Duffy's poem as resonating beautifully should not occlude the glaring differences between this meta-modernist poet 'marooned' with Eliot and Pound, and Duffy's 'democratic' writing, in which language is pared to its 'barest bean'. Duffy's 2012 collection *The Bees* commences, for example, with the 'poetry kit' of repetitive alliteration: in the first poem, 'Bees', the bilabials afford both a pun on the subject matter, and establish connections between the insects, diction and poetry with 'my bees, | brazen, blurs on paper, | besotted; buzzwords'.<sup>84</sup> The 'accommodated' reader is carried along with the alliteration, that then changes to 'golden', 'glide', 'gilded', 'glad' and (again) the 'poetry kit' of 'golden' (p. 3).<sup>85</sup> Duffy's poet-bees have 'Been deep' in flowers, searching for pollen, but this does not result in enigmatical poetry that, following Hill's description of 'treasured' in *The Christmas Truce*, 'hovers' above itself. The opening line ('Here are my bees') introduces the subject matter and medium of the collection in a way that becomes self-confident (the bees are 'flawless' and 'wise'), but which the quality of the poem itself undercuts (p. 3). A predictable ending that consummates the overriding metaphor ('honey is art') takes place within an unpredictable form that consists of iambic trimeter, but with eight regular lines and seven diversions. Within the collection's dominating metaphor and subject

matter there is a sense of 'democratic' language and poetry that belongs, like the bees, to everyone: from this (and Paterson's) perspective, to alienate the reader in the first poem through intricate form and language would be an artistic betrayal. However, according to Hill's Oxford lecture, such writing becomes indistinguishable from that of a first-year creative writing student in its eagerness to accommodate the reader.<sup>86</sup>

Such barbed criticisms in Hill's 2011 lecture are also implicit critiques of the role of Poet Laureate. The 'gilded' and 'golden' cover of *The Bees* announces that Duffy was the 'Winner of the Costa Prize for Poetry 2011', and that the collection is the property of the Poet Laureate. However, the latter role encompasses an ambiguous heritage, one that includes William Wordsworth as well as Thomas Shadwell; John Dryden in addition to Colley Cibber. In 1671, the tradition of lampooning the Laureate was initiated when the Duke of Buckingham ridiculed Dryden's work: the Duke also caricatured him as 'Bayes', a name that was subsequently applied 'to several future Laureates'.<sup>87</sup> Colley Cibber has become the apotheosis of 'Bayes': after his first 'New Year Ode' was performed in 1730, the 'wits were at once in full cry and parodies, lampoons, epigrams and the like crowded all the papers'.<sup>88</sup> Even the more recent example of Ted Hughes, who was the Poet Laureate between 1984 and 1998, forms a problematic antecedent: the relative success of his first Laureate piece 'Rain-charm for the Duchy' – with 'Cranmere's cracked heath-tinder', and the 'ulcer craters [...] of river pools' – gives way to the formal failures of 'Two Poems for Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother' and 'A Birthday Masque', with their ponderous mythic accounts, respectively, of the 'Land of the Lion' and the 'Angel of Water'.<sup>89</sup> As Kenneth Hopkins bluntly puts it in *The Poets Laureate* (1973), the role has 'led to the composition of a huge body of the worst poetry in the world': he adds that 'to this appointment we owe the greatest political satires in English poetry, satires which are perennially fresh long after the dust of their occasion has settled'.<sup>90</sup> Thomas Shadwell introduced the custom of writing poems for specific occasions, for the delectation of the monarchy and hoi polloi, such as the start of a new year, and the monarch's birthday: a tacit accommodation to a wide readership who would not be familiar with the latest trends in contemporary poetry is contained within the Laureate's expected public duties, alongside the undeniable perk (revived by John Betjeman) of a barrel of sherry.<sup>91</sup> Duffy – to the chagrin of the *Daily Mail* – refused to write poems to mark royal occasions during her laureateship, apart from odd pieces such as 'Rings', that was penned for Prince William and Kate

Middleton's royal wedding in 2011. However, she has turned to occasional poems in a different sense, to mark, for example, the decline of the analogue gas meter, an injured David Beckham and the bric-a-brac sold in Oxfam. In 2009, Duffy became 'one of 12 famous Britons' helping to launch a charity campaign, Oxfam's 'Give a Helping Hand'.<sup>92</sup> Following Hill's assessment of the laureateship in his Oxford lecture, perhaps he would have condoned such generous community work as beyond his 'moral courage', but he certainly would not have approved of the ensuing poem in *The Bees*, 'Oxfam', that lists items sold in the shop, including a tie, bowl and boots, along with their prices, such as '50p' for the tie and '£9000' for 'Rare 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone' (p. 19).<sup>93</sup>

### Democratic Poetry and *Scenes from Comus*

Whereas Paterson argues that democratic poetry should not embrace complexity, and prefers 'conciliatory forms' – such as this list of items – that 'give [the reader] something', Hill's poems evince a different form of literary democracy, in which enigmatical writing encourages the reader to engage intensively with the work, as meaning is only gradually and never totally revealed over multiple performances.<sup>94</sup> As I argued in the Introduction, a critical appraisal of such writing often approaches poems as if the critic were a 'plenary' figure who hovers over the language, understanding perfectly every denotation and nuance. Yet I would argue that this hardly reflects the process and challenge of reading metamodernist poetry. Sometimes, Hill's language does not 'give' the reader much poetic information in Paterson's terms, yet the 'event' of subsequent readings can lead to further interpretations, as with the following passage from *Scenes from Comus*:

Heady September heat with shadows thrown  
 across white walls. Sun – fetching us this instant!  
 Where are we sans our lovers, you name the place?  
 The place itself is common; I have been here  
 many times and enough.  
 Love's grief is full, always popular,  
 like ghosted memories or the old  
 fashioned chara-tours,  
 like the Welsh hills covered in rhododendrons (p. 41)

Hill concedes in relation to *Speech! Speech!* (2000) that some readers may find his work just difficult – rather than enigmatic – but retorts that he



merely aims to fulfil Milton's description of poetry as 'more simple, sensuous, and passionate' than other arts.<sup>95</sup> Section 53 begins with what Paterson could not dispute as the 'simple' and 'sensuous' clarity of an epiphanic image in which the sun, rather than being dismissed by the amorous couple at the start of John Donne's 'The Sunne Rising', immediately obeys the implied lovers by 'fetching' them 'this instant' (p. 41). Hill then undercuts the sun's metaphysical duress with an elegiac lament for an unnamed place, 'sans' lovers. '[S]ans' may appear affected on a first reading, but subsequently it can be recognised as deliberately echoing D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913). Reasons for this intertextual link remain unclear, however: a comparison between the Welsh landscape and the Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire vistas of the novel remain possible but indeterminate; an echo of Paul Morel's angst towards his lovers Miriam and Clara (and mother Gertrude) in the novel is also a potential but unspecified connection. The place 'sans our lovers' is unidentifiable, yet is paradoxically 'full' and 'common [. . .] enough': the latter phrase certainly puns on 'common' as in collectively owned land.

*Scenes from Comus* ruminates on love, ageing and sex throughout, from the 'Titagrams' that still 'work' as 'balls-ache at the threshold' of death in section 3 of 'The Argument of the Masque' (p. 4), to the mask 'not of perversion' in 'Courtly Masquing Dances', but of 'contrived' sleep (p. 36).<sup>96</sup> Rather than dwell on enduring desire (as in section 3 of 'The Argument of the Masque'), 'enough' here functions as a call for the cessation of 'Love's grief'. Evoking a sense of the democratic by describing the latter as 'common' and 'popular' – but with the possible connotation of 'vulgar' too – Hill then eludes the conciliatory with an enigmatic succession of four similes to encapsulate this popularity. 'Love's grief' is 'like a ghosted memoir', as if mourning were somehow scripted by a third party, with unsatisfactory results; the comparison retains the sense in the previous line of this psychological state as akin to a sensationalist confession. By deploying a line break to separate 'old' from 'fashioned', Hill is then able to pun momentarily on this grief as being 'like' the elderly, but also akin to the elusive efficacy of the image of 'old | fashioned chara-tours'. Mourning for love may be akin to a charabanc tour in the sense that it appears almost comically distant, but its meaning remains far from clear and conciliatory. Finally, this enigmatic image is compounded with the simile of grief 'like the Welsh hills covered in rhododendrons'. Rather than a straightforward lyrical moment of personification, the image may be returning to and transforming the idea of 'Love's grief' as 'common'. After all, *Rhododendron ponticum* is threatening to overwhelm the natural habitat

in the United Kingdom and Ireland with its hardy roots. Alternatively, the 'like' in the stanza's final line may switch to indicate a specific instance of 'Love's grief' that is briefly referred to, but then withheld.

Yet again, clearer understandings of this enigmatic passage must be left for future readings of *Scenes from Comus*, at the same time as the reader can still appreciate fragmented meanings and intertexts, and the sonority of the 'simple, sensuous, and passionate' lines of section 53.<sup>97</sup> It may be retorted that I began my analysis of Hill's stanza with an appeal against a pretended critical 'mastery' of the passage, but subsequently attempt to perform just that kind of reading. In reply, I would return to Adorno's paradox in *Aesthetic Theory* that enigmatical works of art withhold their meaning, at the same time as the critic's task is precisely to understand them. In the close reading above, I have also indicated the moments that slip beyond the critic's grasp and – to deploy Adorno's term – 'darken' when a provisional understanding of a singular passage does not 'extinguish the enigmaticalness' of an artwork.<sup>98</sup> Beyond the potential fatuousness of the ghosted memoir, Hill is maybe striving for a new language to pinpoint 'Love's grief', yet the final similes remain as elusive as this 'common' yet amorphous psychological state.<sup>99</sup> As I argued in the Introduction, Hill's reading of Eliot's *Four Quartets* in particular is central to the allusive and enigmatic ending of *Scenes from Comus*, when the book concludes with 'Ephemera's durance, vast particulars | and still momentum measures of the void' (p. 66). Eliot's oscillations between the general and particular are replicated in this closure, but with the additional impishness of an interjecting voice in Hill's work ('What did you say?') that challenges his potentially grandiose evocation of a sublime landscape (p. 66). In contrast, Duffy's later poetry is full of such impishness, as in *The Bees* when she anticipates the full rhyme for 'My beautiful daughter' with 'Orta St Giulio' (p. 69). However, *The Bees* does not entertain the counterpoint of poetry that responds to the concept of democratic writing as a formal challenge. Whether in the guise of Hill's *Scenes from Comus* or the 'innovative' poetics of Geraldine Monk that I analysed in Chapter 1, metamodernist poems' resistance to accommodation cannot help but perpetuate the poetry wars in a modulated fashion. Rather than adhere to Paterson's default position of aesthetic conciliation, and provide the reader with the narcissistic and 'standardized echo' of their own idioculture, such poetry allows our critical acumen to be challenged, and, sometimes, to be defeated.<sup>100</sup>