# Introduction

> [A] great work of art [. . .] always has a secret that one can never quite grasp and which always reappears[1]

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

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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 them-
selves' (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 revolution-
ary 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 return-
ing 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 'remint' 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 enimatographers. 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