This book discusses contemporary British poetry in the context of metamodernism. It argues that the concept of enigmatical poetics helps to recalibrate the opposition between mainstream and innovative poetry, and investigates whether a new generation of British poets can be accurately defined as metamodernist. Antony Rowland analyses the ways in which contemporary British poets such as Geoffrey Hill, J. H. Prynne, Geraldine Monk and Sandeep Parmar have responded to the work of modernist poets as diverse as Ezra Pound, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, H. D. and Antonin Artaud since the 1950s. He shows how enigmatical poetry offers an alternative vision to that of the contemporary British novel.

Professor Antony Rowland is Chair in Modern and Contemporary Poetry at Manchester Metropolitan University. He is the author of seven books, including Poetry as Testimony (2014) and Holocaust Poetry (2005). He received an Eric Gregory award in 2000 from the Society of Authors, and the Manchester Poetry Prize in 2012. He is a member of the Higher Education Committee for the English Association.
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METAMODERNISM AND CONTEMPORARY BRITISH POETRY

ANTONY ROWLAND

Manchester Metropolitan University
In memory of Richard Jones (1972–2018)
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Acknowledgements

When I first discussed the outline of this book with Dr Richard Jones in summer 2014, we were enjoying a bumper season of Red Admirals and outsized artichokes. Richard worked in the Geography department at the University of Exeter, and we had plans to create an app for Dartmoor that would explain physical aspects of the landscape, matched with excerpts of literature. I would like to think that we had an indefinite but important sense of the poetics of each other’s subject. Mud was not just mud for Richard, but the beginnings of narratives of memory, adventure and trauma, from stories of caked showers when attempting to corral his samples to the uncovering of skulls when coring in China. My memories of learning physical geography at school included the savouring of new language (‘cwm’, ‘arête’, ‘col’) and the imaginative acts of trying to square the diagrams of glaciers with recollections of family hikes on Coniston Old Man and Helvellyn. Both of us were responding to the poetics of place in different but connected ways: bloom lines on Ordnance maps react to the landscape of Dartmoor in an imaginative way just as literature might respond expansively to its tors. I can see Richard smiling: ‘Yes, but when you get lost in the fog near Ponsworthy, try getting home with a poem’.

Our children grew, and then there was COVID. I would like to thank all those colleagues and friends who have been so generous with their time in reading draft chapters during this difficult period, including James Byrne, Nikolai Duffy, Ben Harker, Marius Hentea, Peter Howarth, Tim Kendall, Angelica Michelis, David Miller and Sandeep Parmar. Especial thanks must go, as ever, to Emma Liggins, who had a major influence on the final shape of the book. A clumsy or overly complicated sentence is (Quorn) mincemeat in her eyes. An Arts and Humanities Research Council award in 2017 allowed me to explore the ideas surrounding metamodernism with a wonderfully diffuse and enthusiastic set of academics, students, writers and non-academics, including Jeroen Boon,
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Brotherton Library. Tony Harrison himself agreed that I could use material from his own archives in the Brotherton. In his characteristically direct way, Tony commented that ‘I wouldn’t have put the stuff in there if I didn’t want people to use it’. If I have missed any copyright permissions, we would be happy to correct this in future editions of this book.

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* 

In 2016, Richard was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Despite increasing debility, he still walked with us to those tors and around the Devon and Cornwall coast: Cotehele, Bere Alston, Fowey. Just before he lost his eyesight, we wandered into an old railway cutting above Tavistock, exploring the tea-coloured water and sharp edges of dynamited stone. Chatting about mutual friends, he laughed in his characteristic way: ‘There’s been too many funerals this year!’ Typical of Richard’s humour, it is still the most astonishing thing I have ever heard anybody say. In April 2019, we visited his memorial stone at Urswick tarn in Cumbria. The village was peaceful and unseasonably warm, and our families milled around the stone’s position at a jetty’s edge. A plaque explains that ‘Dr Jones was a physical geographer whose research at this tarn and elsewhere around the world added greatly to knowledge of the Holocene’. Given that this book completes the project that I had first discussed with Richard six years earlier, it would be suitable to end these acknowledgements with a poem:

Marl

Heron stumbles the fetch: Urswick
holds its flash, setting the tarn
with our wake, appropriate
as our grief through laughter, where grass
spikes the meniscus and sun-motes blur
our digital snap. Hug
Acknowledgements

the embarrassment of this plaque: mourning as clear as fish that roll air and under the boardwalk. We taste the edge of marram, faces in all-shore directions; eyes string the reed buntings jittering their pad. Marl adds to our knowledge of the Holocene: your core sampler hods to pollen where forests mould to a crick and insects peat our memory. Grain fires the cap to a dating spree. Photos out-tilt the jetty’s pitch, as we walk out in our guilty retrieval.