CHAPTER 1

Contemporary British Poetry and Enigmaticalness

As I outlined in the Introduction, the artistic 'remainder' ('*der Rest*') that lies beyond the slipperiness of hermeneutics may defeat the critic's faculties, yet it remains central to understanding 'the discipline of the work'.[1] In *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), Theodor Adorno argues that modernist works of art should not be treated merely as 'objects' to be interpreted: instead, it is their overall incomprehensibility that needs to be understood.[2] Rather than functioning as texts akin to Roland Barthes' 'tissue of quotations' that can be unpicked and explicated, modernist artworks are resistant, to an extent, to rational interpretation.[3] These artworks seem 'to say just this and only this, and at the same time whatever it is slips away'.[4] In this chapter, I expand on this account of the enigma in *Aesthetic Theory* in order to scrutinise further the friction between the critical impulse and contemporary British poetry that does not 'extinguish [its] engimaticalness' (p. 122). I consider the implications of this tension in relation to J. H. Prynne's *Acrylic Tips* (2002), and subsequently analyse enigmatical poetics in examples of mainstream and 'innovative' writing from Don Paterson's *Landing Light* (2003) and Geraldine Monk's *Ghost & Other Sonnets* (2008). However, my argument is not that Prynne, Paterson and Monk's poems are all comparable examples of metamodernist poetry. I emphasise that Monk's collection, unlike Paterson's, does not flinch when engaging with the linguistic 'clowning' that will appear to some readers as merely ridiculous verbiage, as Adorno laments in relation to modernist art more generally in *Aesthetic Theory* (p. 119). Whereas Paterson flirts with but then draws back from enigmatical poetics, Prynne and Monk's 'exasperating' writing sustains the possibility of the enigma in strikingly different formal ways.[5]

T. S. Eliot argued that readers who are not flummoxed by writing that they do not understand may not be able to pinpoint what they like about a poem, but may yet have a 'deeper and more discriminating sensibility than some others who can talk glibly about it'.[6] Whereas Paterson

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contends instead in *New British Poetry* (2004) that poets must assuage their readers' apprehensions rather than pursue the latter's 'discriminating sensibility', Adorno warns in *Aesthetic Theory* against such critical narcissism.[7] The philosopher decries a 'restricted functional capacity' that establishes an '*intolerance to ambiguity*', and an antipathy towards that which is 'not strictly definable' (pp. 115–16) in diction reminiscent of Geoffrey Hill's attack on 'public' writing in his fourth lecture as Oxford Professor of Poetry. Eliot describes readers who are open to and relaxed about these 'darkening' propensities of literature (p. 122); for critics, however, professional reputations may be at stake as they grapple with allusive and elusive writing. Nevertheless, rather than attempting to assimilate artworks into established interpretative narratives, critics should appreciate that 'however consciousness seeks to safeguard itself from losing its way is fateful' (p. 121).[8] In this context, Derek Attridge's theory of singularity adheres to *Aesthetic Theory*, as the critic returns to literary texts with different critical and creative performances of the literary text on separate occasions. As Attridge acknowledges in the appendix to his influential book, Adorno's thinking permeates *The Singularity of Literature* (2004): 'there can be no doubt that his *Aesthetic Theory* is among the most significant twentieth-century contributions to debates about artistic practice and response. I have found my struggles with it immensely rewarding'.[9] Attridge's emphasis on the performance of literature in order to discern its singularity partly has its roots in the passage on enigmaticalness in *Aesthetic Theory*: Adorno writes that understanding individual artworks requires an 'objective experiential reenactment from within in the same sense in which the interpretation of a musical work means its faithful performance' (p. 121). Literary texts are thus 'performed' in the act of reading in a comparable way to musicians interpreting and performing a musical score. However, as I noted in the Introduction, whereas Attridge focuses on subsequent interpretations in *The Singularity of Literature*, Adorno's concept of enigmaticalness necessarily remains beyond the reach of such readings. Modernist and metamodernist art has to 'contain something permanently enigmatic' in order to remain 'uncapturable', and resistant to 'ready-made categories'.[10]

As Hill intimates in his fourth lecture, he is not willing to accommodate the reader with an 'openly servile' art; instead, he adheres to exasperating and 'uncapturable' poetics.[11] In contrast, Paterson argues in *New British Poetry* that mainstream poems should, in Adorno's disparaging phrase, 'narrow [their] distance' from the recipient.[12] If the enigmaticalness of metamodernist works such as *Scenes from Comus* (2005) was entirely

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decoded, they would, of course, immediately cease to be enigmatic. Hence Adorno's discussion of the enigma is itself inevitably enigmatic; otherwise, it would be yet another 'ready-made' category of reading. At the same time, Adorno paradoxically argues that the critic's impossible task is still to unpuzzle the enigma: each artwork turns 'toward interpretative reason' through the 'neediness implicit in its enigmaticalness' (p. 128). Whereas consciousness tends to 'safeguard itself from losing its way' (p. 121), the critic must nevertheless be prepared to admit failure when writing about literature influenced by modernist antecedents. Despite the sublimity of the enigmatic, Adorno is not arguing that critics should desist entirely from interpretation: critics should instead remain open to literature's unassimilable 'remainder', and modestly admit that 'one understands something of art, not that one understands art' (p. 122). The enigma is '*neutral zum Verhüllten*'; in other words, 'cloaked', so critics that attempt to colonise the artwork with their own thinking and interpretative procedures 'make it into something straightforward, which is furthest from what it is'.[13] As with Attridge's theory of singularity, the reader must not project their own concerns onto the artwork in order to be 'satisfied in it', but must instead 'relinquish' them in order 'to fulfil the work in its own terms' (p. 275). In contrast, the politics of assimilation are inevitably ideological: hence – to use Adorno's example – the alacrity with which the Nazis denounced artistic '*Rätsel*' ('puzzles') as decadent. When challenged about the difficulty of his poetry, Hill similarly turned to an example of heteronomy. Asked to comment on his collection *The Orchards of Syon* (2002), he replied that 'Tyrants always want a language and literature that is easily understood'.[14]

For Adorno, this resistance to heteronomy is inextricable with 'cloaked' modernist literature, and, more specifically for this section of *Aesthetic Theory*, with the literature of the absurd (p. 122). Yet it is in this passage that the possibility arises of applying the concept to mainstream writing as well as modernist and 'innovative' poetry. Adorno first mentions modern art's difficulty in relation to the cliché of the '*absurd*' that 'absorbs' and nullifies incomprehensibility rather than thinking through its 'truth' (p. 118). The theatre of the Parisian Left Bank in the 1950s then extends to all modern, hermetic art: for Adorno, it is only in the 'committed' *and* autonomous writing of Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett and Paul Celan that the 'spirit of the epoch' (p. 180) can be confronted and resisted in the 'fracturedness' of their work (p. 126).[15] However, another dialectical turn then avoids establishing an opposition between modernist and pre-twentieth-century art. The derided 'incomprehensibility of hermetic artworks amounts to the

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admission', Adorno argues, 'of the enigmaticalness of all art' (p. 122). Modernism can hardly be opposed to the absolute simplicity of pre-twentieth-century literature: re-workings of Shakespeare's plays, for example, partly respond to the enigmaticalness of the original texts. Since antiquity, the 'enigmas' of artworks have been 'an irritation to the theory of art' (p. 120): for Adorno, all artworks are '*Rätsel*'; he describes them as having 'always irritated conceptual responses to art' with their challenging '*Rätselcharakter*'.[16] Critics may think that they have understood a specific work of art, but the most profound artworks are still nevertheless able to return an 'empty gaze' of 'constitutive enigmaticalness', a 'constitutive darkening' that overwhelms interpretation 'for the second time with the question "What is it?"' in a 'preestablished routing of its observer' (pp. 120–2).

It is clear that Adorno does not mean every artistic output in this passage: he refers to complex works that submit, in his phrase, to their own discipline (p. 275), and in which 'enigmaticalness outlives the interpretation' (p. 125). Metamodernist artworks should thus be 'question marks' rather than unambiguous and 'univocal' (p. 124): in contrast, the mainstream poetics that Paterson outlines in his introduction to *New British Poetry* seek to accommodate, rather than exasperate with the 'twisted' language of 'innovative' poetry.[17] Adorno's reading of modernist art in *Aesthetic Theory* also has a different emphasis to David James and Urmila Seshagiri's focus on revolution, dissent, defamiliarisation and experiment: metamodernist novels that draw on this 'myth' of modernism but 'unfold to contemplation' without the enigmatical 'remainder' are simply – according to *Aesthetic Theory* – 'not artworks' (p. 121).[18] The original German I am referring to here in *Ästhetische Theorie* is as follows: '*Kunstwerke, die der Betrachtung und dem Gedanken ohne Rest aufgeben, sind keine*' ('Artworks that give rise to contemplation and thought without any remainder are not artworks') (p. 184).[19] These failed works of literature are open to instrumental projections of various kinds, Adorno argues, but they do not function as '*Rätsel*', and avoid the complexities of modernist 'vexation'. In contrast, writers and critics, such as Paterson, who are irritated by 'the enigmaticalness of art' provide, via a 'defective attitude', 'a confirmation of art's truth' (p. 120). Many examples of mainstream poetry can be assessed in terms of Adorno's derision towards the 'reality principle', an 'obsession' that 'places a taboo on aesthetic comportment', and that has resulted in the 'contemporary deaestheticization of art' (p. 120).[20] Compared to mainstream poetics that do not challenge the reader's idioculture, enigmatical artworks of the 'highest dignity' 'await

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their interpretation' (p. 128).[21] The critic should be humbled in that 'the task of a rendering that will do justice to [such works] is in principle infinite' (p. 186).

Prynne and Enigmaticalness

J. H. Prynne's work might seem to encapsulate the theory of enigmaticalness in *Aesthetic Theory*. If the enigma lies beyond hermeneutics, then Prynne's poetry confronts the reader with the 'empty gaze' of a literary Sphinx (p. 120). Yet this difficulty of interpretation is not coterminous with incomprehensibility: true to his dialectical thinking, Adorno argues that 'incomprehensible works that emphasize their enigmaticalness are potentially the most comprehensible' (p. 122). Eliot's readers would no doubt be surprised to learn that Prynne's *Acrylic Tips* is more 'comprehensible' than Paterson's *Landing Light*. Instead, it is the 'fracturedness' of Prynne's writing that reveals pockets of meaning, at the same time as these fragments point to the overall enigma of his *oeuvre* (p. 126).[22] To paraphrase Adorno on the 'remainder' in *Aesthetic Theory*, the critic can only admit that one understands something of Prynne's work, not that one understands his poetry (p. 122). As in Adorno's account of modernist literature, a poem such as *Acrylic Tips* resists 'significative thinking' (p. 82), at the same time as art – as Jacques Rancière argues in *The Politics of Literature* (2011) – cannot help but be 'significative'.[23] Adorno returns to this problem of mimesis throughout *Aesthetic Theory*, and concludes that art cannot avoid being a form of semblance in that, 'in the midst of meaninglessness, it is unable to escape the suggestion of meaning' (p. 154). As Prynne writes in the letter to Steve McCaffery, that I discuss further in Chapter 2, to challenge the possibility of interpretation is in no way 'to extirpate it' (p. 44).[24] Every line of *Acrylic Tips* resists signification, but does not negate it: for example, as I argued in the Introduction, 'soft sweet fury gums nodding milkwort in river-sway' intertwines the significations of individual words with enigmatical poetics.[25] As with the potentially distinct images of the crowd and petals in the two lines of Ezra Pound's 'In a Station of the Metro' (1913), the first four words in this quotation from *Acrylic Tips* may be distinct from the second cluster: it is only a critical supposition of complete line sense that coerces the reader into thinking that 'gums' must somehow interact with the milkwort. Similarly, 'Ever calling at cirrus credit flapjack' suggests that the final three words might be connected (p. 538), and yet the reader may be pursuing errant hermeneutics if they attempt to connect clouds' precipitating fall streaks with tray-baked oat bars. These words may

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function as three separate responses to 'Ever calling'; so, atmospheric clouds, money 'on tick' and oats combined with syrup may particularly enamour the poet-narrator. However, 'cirrus' is not so stable in its signification as might initially be imagined: it could refer to clouds commonly known as 'mares' tails', but also, in biological terms, thin, threadlike structures on the body of an animal, a tendril, or, in astronomy, filamentary structures seen in infrared light.[26] Even 'krook' in the first stanza forms a single-word puzzle (p. 537): it may indicate the dialect word 'crook' ('ill'); or it may denote a specific building, the Waalse Krook Public Library in Gent, that is 'stepped' like the rising pathways in the same line; or, less likely, it might appertain to a rotund pimp in urban slang.

Hence these lines and images from *Acrylic Tips* are enigmatic not because of any deduced meaning, but because, as Adorno writes of Beckett's plays, they put 'meaning on trial' (p. 153). Trying to understand a Prynne poem is not akin to participating in a conversation: as readers, we witness a lexical performance in which different discourses, registers and references jostle in complex euphony. Yet, even in modernist music hostile to repetition, Adorno argues, 'similarities are involved', and 'many parts correspond with others in terms of shared, distinguishing characteristics [. . .] without sameness of any sort, chaos would prevail as something ever-same' (p. 141). Reading Prynne's work is often akin to the performance of an enigmatic musical score that Adorno deploys as a metaphor for all art in *Aesthetic Theory*. Readers of lines such as 'Careen through what fortune | caps with a swollen wave, the deck is cluttered with snap' in *Acrylic Tips* may be attentive to its 'minute impulses', the combination and clash of [k], [u], [o] and [æ] sounds, but such readers still do 'not know what he plays'.[27] Colin Winborn argues that Prynne's work – as in these lines – 'insists on cacophony and discordance', but, at the same time, the sequences contain motifs that do not eschew rational interpretation.[28]

In *Aesthetic Theory*, '[H]ermetic and committed art converge' in such discordant refusals 'of the status quo' (p. 248). The satirical elements in *Acrylic Tips* begin with the epigraph 'The murderous head made from a motor car number-plate' (p. 535). This unsettling personification establishes the vision of the head through the image of a number-plate as a mouth and recalls Aldous Huxley's contrasting merriment in *The Doors of Perception* (1954), when, under the influence of mescalin, the novelist encounters an automobile: 'what an absurd self-satisfaction [. . .] Man had created the thing in his own image [. . .] I laughed til the tears ran down my cheeks'.[29] Unlike this hubris, and without J. G. Ballard's simultaneous fascination with destructive technology, Prynne's car joins the litany of

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sinister technologies throughout *Acrylic Tips*, as in this gothic depiction of workers:

> Split-screen seepage tills. Miracle cheap shots, entitled
> of the morning bulletin all savage and reckonable,
> raise a clamour to sober digits, true bone mounted
> like beasts sucking their fill of the cooler morning light (p. 537).

A necessarily provisional reading of this passage would suggest that the tone and diction appear to be satirical: rather than raising a toast to successful business, the raised clamour becomes a din as workers mount their 'sober digits' onto keyboards.[30] This uproar is akin to beasts sucking 'morning light': 'cooler' evokes perhaps both the office 'watering hole' and the 'cooling' of market trading after a frenetic night. Reversing an image of milking cows, the bovine workers may be 'sucking' the teats of the financial market. Prynne returns to similarly abject images of consumer dependence in a stanza where 'Profit', cash and rank (rather than risk) assessment result in the deathly image of 'milk | at a lip trickle' (p. 538). In contrast with the fluidity of capital registered on the computer screens, the motif of the clogged human body runs throughout *Acrylic Tips*: Prynne introduces 'infarct', a region of dead tissue caused by the lack of blood circulation, to contrast with 'heparin', a substance extracted from animal livers to prevent blood clotting.[31] These images of congestion contrast with the misguided vision of a glorious, unfettered capitalism in the two lines I quoted earlier, in which punters 'Careen' through fortune with 'a swollen wave' (p. 538).

This clash of medical and financial discourses points to Prynne's lament for what, as Jacques Derrida commented, 'used to be now and then called humanity', undermining Paterson's charge against apolitical, postmodernist bogeymen in *New British Poetry*.[32] However, as Adorno outlines in relation to Bertolt Brecht's plays in *Aesthetic Theory*, such 'committed' anti-capitalist politics are neither 'dew-fresh' nor surprising (p. 123). As opposed to these writers' innovative uses of form, the authors' politics are the least challenging aspect of Brecht and Prynne's work. In such passages, Prynne's commitment has more in common with Brecht's didacticism than the 'committed' and autonomous art of Beckett and Celan, in which critiques of capitalism appear 'only distantly', yet 'more faithfully and powerfully than do any novels about corrupt industrial trusts' (p. 230). Moreover, the anti-capitalism in *Acrylic Tips* verges on self-parody when Prynne encompasses 'engrish' in the phrases 'Get plenty get quick' (p. 537).[33] Prynne's politics appear more 'distantly' elsewhere, as in the enigmatic ending to

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Acrylic Tips: 'pipes to ground glass to unslaked level fields' (p. 546). Initially, the 'ground glass' appears anti-pastoral, compounding the image of human activity in the flooded fields. This reading would equate with Adorno's sense in *Aesthetic Theory* that 'To survive reality at its most extreme and grim, artworks that do not want to sell themselves as consolation must equate themselves with that reality' (p. 39). This semblance results in the anti-pastoral images of a 'sundered' nature throughout *Acrylic Tips*: the motif of cavities recurs in the 'riven grove' (p. 537), 'Ruck flutter at the mouth' (p. 541), 'Cavity grill' (p. 544) and 'open breech' (p. 545).[34] Moreover, the anti-pastoral title of the collection connotes mountains of manufactured fibre, as well as maintaining the possibility that the term 'tips' refers to the ends of acrylic cloth or false nails. Yet 'ground glass' could also signify a more traditional image of a lake bathed in sunlight and a final flourish of lyricism in a poem that has paradoxically grated against a relapse into such unguarded signification. However, the danger of reading the line as redemptive is that it presents the poem as culminating in a lyrical epiphany that belies the scathing politics elsewhere in *Acrylic Tips.* Moreover, such a critical move might pander to Paterson's sense, that in Prynne's work, 'one halfway comprehensible line will stand out, and is often hailed as, an epiphany, a wisdom, or a great literary bravery'.[35] Moreover, the line's ambiguity, and its resistance to absolute semblance and the univocal, ultimately means that its politics and images remain enigmatic, unlike the bovine image in the passage quoted earlier that openly satirises economic machinations.

However, it would be an example of David Caplan's derided 'simple oppositions' to deduce from this reading of *Acrylic Tips* that 'innovative' poetry contains an inherent enigmaticalness at the expense of all other literary forms.[36] In the 'Paralipomena' section of *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno is suspicious of 'the concept of the new' (p. 270): as with his formulation of 'hating tradition properly' in *Minima Moralia* (1951), any advent of the 'new' must, for Adorno, be dialectical in spirit.[37] Innovation for innovation's sake risks aligning assumed subversion with the simplistic politics of constantly attempting to *épater les bourgeois* (p. 271). Pound's famous dictum to 'make it new', as with any such declaration, 'radiates the allure of freedom', yet also remains in peril of producing a literature of 'putative contingency and arbitrariness' (p. 271).[38] Adorno likens the 'new' to a child at a piano searching for a new chord: whatever new combinations are found, they were always implicit in the finite possibilities of the keyboard. Hence the 'new is the longing for the new, not the new itself' (p. 32). The 'innovative' must be embedded in tradition at the same time as it negates it,

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and must not mistake itself for pure innovation: as early as 1969, Adorno announced that 'the concept of the avant-garde, reserved for many decades for whatever movement declared itself the most advanced, now has some of the comic quality of aged youth' (p. 25).[39] Hence *Aesthetic Theory* might be seen to chime with, but also grate against, the poetics of *Acrylic Tips*.

However, as I pointed out in the Introduction, the term 'innovative' is necessarily problematic when it is applied to the differing poetics of the London and Cambridge Schools, and remnants of Language poetry. Prynne's work would be better described as metamodernist rather than 'innovative' or 'late modernist', and as forming an exigent resistance to heteronomy rather than a symptom of cultural ossification that the latter phrase implies. Yet, following on from this critique of the 'innovative', the possibility remains that Adorno's theory of enigmaticalness nevertheless accommodates Prynne's poetics too easily. The enigmatic may be a particular concern of literature influenced by modernism, but, as Adorno indicates in his application of the term to pre-twentieth-century literature, it cannot remain absolutely specific to such texts. In the following section, I aim to show that Paterson's theory of mainstream poetics in *New British Poetry* sits uneasily, at times, with his own practice, and the potential enigmaticalness of the more lyrical writing comes to the fore in poems such as 'The Sea at Brighton' from *Landing Light* when he eschews the intermittent tone of demotic chumminess.[40] This discussion indicates that mainstream poets as well as writers from the London and Cambridge Schools can potentially achieve the enigmatical 'remainder', at the same time as an adherence to the 'reality principle' reappears much more frequently in mainstream poetry.[41]

Paterson's Enigma

Unlike *Acrylic Tips*, 'The Sea at Brighton' opens with a stanza that does not resist the referential, but is nevertheless still enigmatic in its combination of abstraction and lyrical ambiguity:

> To move through your half-million furnished hours
> as that gull sails through the derelict tearooms
> of the West Pier; to know their shadowed realm
> as a blink, a second's darkening of the course . . .[42]

In 'A Talking Book' from *Landing Light*, Paterson harangues critics who enjoy 'that sudden quickening of the pulse | when something looks a bit like something else' (p. 26), but the main literary antecedent is clear in the

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opening lines of 'The Sea at Brighton'. Paterson reimagines Saint Bede's famous metaphor for life as the flight of a sparrow through a mead-hall into darkness: a gull replaces Bede's passerine as it sails through the derelict tearooms of Brighton's West Pier.[43] Closed in 1975, the pier now embodies transience rather than pleasure: the 'million-petalled flower' of being in Philip Larkin's 'The Old Fools' becomes the 'half-million furnished hours' that the bird glides through.[44] Even though the rooms' 'shadowed realm' has something of what Hill terms the 'poetry kit' in his fourth Oxford lecture, the precursors of Bede and Larkin are subsumed into the striking lyricism of the darkness as a 'blink' in life's hours, a 'second's darkening of the course'.[45] Paterson reverses Bede's image, so that the light and life in the hall transform into the dark tearooms, that partly signify the 'death' of decaying memory. Whose memory remains ambiguous: the opening infinitive results in an ambiguous addressee; does the subsequent 'your' refer to the poet, reader or an unnamed other (p. 70)? If addressed to someone else, the poem declares an impossible desire to experience the interlocutor's opaque memory in a mere instant. Aside from the difficulty of rationalising memory as a 'blink', the lines contain further ambiguities that add to their elusiveness. For example, the gull and poet encounter the 'furnished' hours in the contrasting image of the unfurnished ('derelict') tearooms. '[T]heir shadowed realm' is deliberately ambiguous in that it could refer to the tearooms, or memory (the half-million hours), or both simultaneously.

However, these enigmatic subtleties then cease with the ellipsis at the end of the stanza, that signals the incurrence of the 'reality principle'.[46] The subsequent shift in tone constitutes a self-confessed decision not to sustain the lyrical, as if the latter can only persist parenthetically in twenty-first-century British poetry. Rather than a switch between the lyrical and what Peter Robinson refers to as Paterson's demotic 'bloke-speaking-to-you-guys strategy', a parallel adjustment occurs here between lyricism and the empirical that is signalled by the ellipsis.[47] A more prosaic description follows as the bird aims for the Palace (the Royal Pavilions): this image forms an example of Paterson 'giving' the reader a more accessible passage after an enigmatic, and – following his defence of mainstream readers in *New British Poetry* – potentially alienating first quatrain.[48] The only potential lyrical moment in stanza two lies in the movement between the banal personification of the gull 'heading' towards the Pavilions, and the self-consciously poetic verb 'skites':

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> The bird heads for the Palace, then skites over
> its blank flags, whitewashed domes and campaniles,
> vanishes. Today, the shies and stalls
> are locked, the gypsies off to bank the silver (p. 70)

The simplicity of 'The bird heads [. . .]' is subverted when the gull 'skites' over flags: akin to the precision that Hill discusses in his fourth Oxford lecture in relation to 'treasured' in Carol Ann Duffy's *The Christmas Truce* (2011), the word indicates that the bird glides as if it were slipping on ice, and changes direction as if smitten with an oblique blow.[49] In contrast, 'heads', 'vanishes' and 'bank' are relatively unsurprising verbs, as Paterson moves away from the enigmatic abstractions of the first stanza (p. 70). These lines do not remain – to deploy Peter Howarth's phrase – 'uncapturable', and implicitly comply with an '*intolerance to ambiguity*' that is resisted in the first stanza.[50] It is as if the potential embarrassment of the lyricism in the previous lines is eschewed in order to 'narrow [the poem's] distance' from the reader, as when Paterson interjects with '*I can't keep this bullshit up*' in the last part of 'Phantom', his extraordinary elegy for Michael Donaghy in *Rain* (2009).[51] As Adorno remarks in *Aesthetic Theory* in relation to the cultural critic, Paterson's poetics are safeguarding from 'losing [their] way' after the enigmaticalness of stanza one (p. 121). The mainstream 'obsession' with the 'reality principle' here 'places a taboo' on Paterson's own 'aesthetic comportment' (p. 120).

Despite this momentary turn from its opening enigma, the lyricism returns in the final stanza:

> *back home from the country of no songs,*
> *between the blue swell and the stony silence*
> *right down where the one thing meets the millions*
> *at the line of speech, the white assuaging tongues.* (p. 70)

These pentameters with conventional metrical leeway might not adhere to the 'fracturedness' of modernist art, but there is no '*intolerance to ambiguity*' at the end of the poem.[52] 'The Sea at Brighton' may appear to be a mainstream poem in terms of its conventional deployment of metre, but this is not conciliatory poetry in that it explains away its evocative images in the first and last stanzas: the narcissistic and 'standardized echo' of the demanding reader cannot solve the *Rätsel* in these final lines (p. 17). Paterson's subversive persona is initially evident in the cheeky redress to a Hindu god when the poet-narrator offers the day to old 'sky-face, pachyderm' in the penultimate stanza, but this is followed by the elusive image of the poet walking along deserted roads above Ganesha's listening. The poet then reminisces about his earlier ruminations over memory: he

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has returned to the 'blue swell' (the sea) and the 'stony silence'; the latter may represent the truculence of a class since the setting is explicated as '*the first morning of term*' (p. 70).[53] More exactly, the poet-narrator is '*between*' these entities, as if held at a liminal point akin to the 'hinge' of the November forenoon and its shadows earlier in the poem. This 'hinge' is superbly poised with a line break: the 'long | instant' elongates the final word of the twelfth line; the rhythm of the thirteenth then immediately quickens with the word 'instant'. In the final stanza, these liminal points are compounded when the poet announces that they are '*right down where the one thing meets the millions | at the line of speech, the white assuaging tongues*' (p. 70). In a more positive version of the classroom, the lines may mean that instances of thinking, speech or writing conjoin with a multitude of previous thoughts, vocalisations and texts, and also potential future connections. Whereas the first stanza worries about the vicissitudes of memory – fifty-eight years (half a million hours) as merely a 'blink' – the last stanza focuses more positively on connectivity, and the inscription of memories. '*[W]hite assuaging tongues*' refers back to the waves, so that the 'blue swell' transforms into an image of creativity; aptly, since the sea and pier inspired the Brighton lines at the beginning of the poem. Hence the '*millions*' here hearkens back to the 'half-million furnished hours' in the first stanza. The interrupted lyricism of the initial stanza connects with and leads to the allusive and elusive images in the final stanza's italics.[54]

Geraldine Monk's 'Clowning'

Eschewing ellipsis, the closure of 'The Sea at Brighton' nevertheless registers a self-conscious unease with its lyricism through the deployment of italics.[55] However, even if the first and last stanzas of Paterson's poem are – in Adorno's terms – enigmatic, 'The Sea at Brighton' does not, overall, return the 'empty gaze' of 'constitutive enigmaticalness', and is therefore not a metamodernist poem in the sense I explore throughout this book. For a 'constitutive darkening' unhampered by suspicion towards the lyrical (p. 122), we need to turn to a poet such as Geraldine Monk, whose work forms a bridge between Prynne's resistance to signification and Paterson's awkward response to his own lyricism.[56] Monk's collection *Ghost &* Other *Sonnets* opens with a poem that grates against the 'reality principle' (p. 120), at the same time as the sonnet forefronts an ambiguous response to adolescence:

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It started with a tryst and twist of
Lupine lovely arms along a rural railroad
Bank. Winter rose up summer's rise.
Throes of profound bafflement.
Vague was the impression of fossil
Teeth across the false breast
Yearning for a straight line in
Nature digging the *what* that lies
Oblong and lewd in the tube of
Afterlife lingerings.
Unsourced scent so strong it
Overpowered sense and narrative.

Disturbed earth grew stripes.
A stalk broke too far.[57]

Starting with 'It started', the first four lines register the more accommodating diction that the reader experiences elsewhere in the sequence. As in Basil Bunting's *Briggflatts* (1966), Monk's deployment of alliteration in the first two lines – with its emphasis on voiceless stops and resonants – cannot distinguish the poetry at this point from mainstream writing.[58] At the same time, the 'ghost' of a sonnet introduces the conventional metaphor of the adolescent as a werewolf with the image of the 'Lupine lovely arms': these two lines would not be out of place in a Carol Ann Duffy poem.[59] However, they are brought to an abrupt halt with the awkward caesura at the beginning of the third line, as adolescent bafflement begins to screen out adult nostalgia. Longing for a 'straight line in' to adulthood (and sex), this depicted confusion results in a series of enigmatic images that resist the 'poetry kit': the Eliotian image of winter encroaching on 'summer's rise' gives way to a sense of disgust in the 'impression of fossil | Teeth across the false breast'.[60] As indicated with the diction of 'Petrifaction' and the 'megalithic' in the sixth sonnet in the sequence (p. 8), desire here encompasses ancient, mysterious scripts that are nevertheless bound up with the abject in the 'fossil' teeth that scrape across the 'false', underdeveloped or male breast (p. 3). Throughout this gothic sequence, Monk associates abjection with orifices in particular, as with the 'Shady plankton mouth' that drags with a 'Leery-long' and 'slow green | Face' in the next sonnet (p. 4). The unsettling and elusive images then continue with the metaphorical switch to sexual desire as akin to nuclear contamination or a time capsule: the 'megalithic' script of desire (p. 8) should lead to the obscure '*what*' of fulfilment, but stubbornly remains instead in the 'Oblong and lewd [. . .] tube of | Afterlife lingerings' (p. 3). An unidentified (but clearly

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sexual) 'scent' overpowers 'sense and narrative' both in the depicted adolescent scene and the poetry itself: the 'remainder' here is inextricable from the powerful but elusive experiences of the young couple.[61] Finally, the pastiche of the Shakespearian couplet results in enigmatic personification that avoids the 'poetry kit': the lovers' confusion and frustration opens out into 'Disturbed earth' that 'grew stripes', and a stalk that 'broke too far'.[62] In relation to sonnet 39 that ends with the surreal and disturbing evocation of 'Neglected screams in a field of unwashed forks' (p. 43), Robert Sheppard argues correctly that the poem is 'more powerful for not revealing its content in a narrative unfolding, but through an excess of compressed and detailed violent imagery'.[63] With simple diction, the closure of the first sonnet similarly ensures a 'remainder' with its 'uncapturable' images that respond powerfully to adolescence, but do not accommodate the reader with the 'reality principle' of an ending that could be easily paraphrased or understood.[64]

In relation to Monk's collection *Interregnum* (1994), Christine Kennedy and David Kennedy argue that this elusive 'textual [. . .] exuberance' is inextricable from the perceived difficulty of Monk's poetry; not, as one might imagine, due to its 'mixing of voices, registers and poetic forms', but as a result of 'its emotional pitch'.[65] This 'pitch' is explicated as inextricable with the 'emotional content of the testimonies of the captured, interrogated and tortured characters of *Interregnum*' that is 'difficult for the reader' to comprehend (p. 24). The Kennedys expand this close reading to comment on 'innovative' poetry as a whole: if the latter is 'difficult this is to do with the type of experience it explores and the intensity with which it does so' (p. 11). Their close analysis of *Interregnum* is cogent throughout their chapter, but I demur from this assumption that the subject matter and reader-response defines the difficulty of 'innovative' poetry, as opposed to its formal elements. For Adorno in *Aesthetic Theory*, the enigma lies beyond mimesis and semblance as the product of formal synthesis – the 'truth content' that I discussed in the Introduction – rather than readerly imbrication in the text (p. 129). In relation to sonnet 29 in *Ghost &* Other *Sonnets*, for example, what is 'difficult' in writing about a swift and a hot drink? Instead, the original, sinuous and powerful deployment of language – particularly collocation – marks out Monk's enigmatical work as challenging for readers, but not inexplicable:

> A second glance and then another
> Swift. Was it me or? Were my
> Eyes in the back of my beyond-head
> Reeling a bird-riff? I can't rightly
> Remember never having called

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Quits with beak. It did a flambé
Shim. Joy within the saucer flipped its
Own volition over. A rare day. So
This was spirit. Dunk away! Tasty
Dregs leave me wanting.
Tell me it's true what I saw in the
Doodle behind the drab.

Burnt toast. Spectaculars undreamt at
Breakfast. Blinds I drew. Ruffle-down riot. (p. 33)

Sonnet 29 reverses the structure of Paterson's 'The Sea at Brighton', as it moves from the more clearly significative beginning to the enigmatic language surrounding the beverage, rather than initiating an unrestricted lyricism that is then self-consciously resisted. Yet the beginning of Monk's poem cannot be extricated from the 'reality principle' that governs mainstream poetry: even the stream-of-consciousness fragment 'Was it me or?' clearly refers back to the opening line's potential glimpse of the elusive swift.[66] However, the sonnet has already triggered its formal resistance. Catalexis avoids the potential iambic pentameter of the first line, which would have been completed with the stressed 'Swift' that – as with the caesura on 'Bank' in the first sonnet – jars at the beginning of the next line: 'A **se**cond **glance** and **then** a**no**ther | **Swift**'. By the third line, the 'reality principle' is complicated when lexical association rather than referentiality takes over the poem's narrative: 'back' might logically be followed with 'of the beyond' or 'of my head'; Monk simultaneously subverts and confirms these expectations with the coinage of 'beyond-head', that encapsulates the potential reality of the bird at the same time as its imaginative rendering.[67]

After the relatively unsurprising [r] alliteration in the fourth and fifth line, the joy of original collocation signals the enigmatic centre of the poem as the real swift or imagined 'bird-riff' 'did a flambé | Shim' (p. 33). The 'reality principle' would insist that the combination of these words – that emphasises their nasal bilabial resonants – somehow reflects the movements of the actual swift as it suddenly changes direction.[68] Yet this 'interpretative reason' is foxed by the conventional meanings of the words: 'flambé' is a cooking procedure in which alcohol is added to a pan in order to create a burst of flames; 'shim' usually means a wedged or tapered piece of material or object that plugs gaps in order to provide a level surface.[69] 'Shim' connotes 'shimmy', which might seem to be the more accurate word, as it denotes the graceful movement of a dance or an effortless and swaying motion. Yet 'shimmy' would still not 'normalize' (in

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Sheppard's phrase) the meaning of the 'flambé' swift, to connote, perhaps, its accelerated and yet elegant movements; nor would it provide a linguistic 'shim' for the ambiguity of 'It', which could refer to the 'beak' as well as the swift or 'bird-riff'.[70] However, amongst this sustained enigmaticalness, it would also be wrong to argue that all these words are emptied out of reference, becoming the 'material otherness' that Ron Silliman refers to in his cover blurb for *Ghost &* Other *Sonnets.* Silliman's comment draws on Archibald MacLeish's comment that poetry 'should not mean | But be'; whilst this may be true of sonnet 29, there is also a 'neediness' in this enigmatic passage that draws the critic back towards interpretative reason.[71] 'Joy' here is partly the joy of language in the previous two lines, with the memorable combination of [k], [ɛi], [m] and [ʃ] sounds, but the subsequent referential linkages of 'tasty', 'dunk' and 'saucer' anchor the sonnet in a significative arena that is mostly absent from Prynne's *Acrylic Tips*. Then again, it would be a critical banality to conclude that the poem is clearly 'about' the Platonic 'spirit' revealed in the vision of a swift, or the transience denoted in an encounter with an empty drink. As soon as the referential 'Dregs' enter the poem, the puzzling language recurs with the lines: 'Tell me it's true what I saw in the | Doodle behind the drab.' The latter word might refer to the 'Dregs', as 'drab' normally refers to fabric of a light-brown colour. Or it might signify the colour of the swifts, in which case the 'Doodle' could be the imagined design behind the birds' seemingly erratic flight.[72] However, given that Monk is attuned in her work to the silencing of women – most memorably, in the accounts of the 'witches' in *Interregnum* – it is unlikely that she is unaware that 'drab' can also archaically mean a 'slattern' or 'prostitute'.[73] There may be a link established here between the female fortune teller who interprets the 'Dregs', the linguistic violence of the 'drab' and the 'Smocked-ones throwing turnips at a witch' in sonnet 48 (p. 54).

However, such interpretative gestures cannot contain the enigmatical writing in the middle of the sonnet that is 'not strictly definable'.[74] As Adorno writes primarily of modernist literature in *Aesthetic Theory*, 'enigmaticalness outlives the interpretation' (p. 125), and this is true even of a poem such as sonnet 29 that lies between the 'deaestheticized' middle section of Paterson's 'The Sea at Brighton' and the anti-significative poetics of *Acrylic Tips* (p. 120). As in Prynne's work, there is an inherent 'clowning' to Monk's poetry that distinguishes it from the 'reality principle' of Paterson's middle stanzas (p. 120). In the 'divergence of the constructive and the mimetic' there is – according to Adorno – an 'element of the ridiculous and clownish that even the most significant works bear and that,

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unconcealed, is inextricable from their significance' (p. 119). '[F]lambé | Shim' has something of this 'clownishness' about it, and the collocation stands as a synecdoche for the deployment of 'clownish' language in enigmatical poetry as a whole. As Hill illustrates in his fourth lecture as Oxford Professor of Poetry, artistic clowning, as opposed to mere buffoonery, is a serious as well as comic matter, as when he introduces himself as a 'sinister old harlequin bellowing for pittance some gibberish about the shirt of Nessus', who does not share the mainstream's 'generous and egalitarian literary-missionary zeal'.[75] Adorno notes that the 'inadequacy of classicism of any persuasion originates in the repression' of this clowning, 'a repression that art must mistrust' (p. 119): hence the enigma is bound up with Hill's refusal to 'repress' language. Paterson attempts instead to separate the lyrical and empirical in 'The Sea at Brighton', which illustrates perfectly this lexical 'repression' alongside Paterson's adherence to the harmony and restraint of metrical form. In contrast to 'The Sea at Brighton', 'Flambé | Shim' risks a 'ridiculousness' that is 'part of a condemnation of empirical rationality' (p. 119). This ridiculous aspect of art is one that 'philistines recognize better than do those who are naïvely at home in art' (p. 119).

For Adorno, this absurdity must be 'shaped' in order to attain the level of enigmaticalness: in contrast, any clowning that 'remains on the level of the childish [. . .] merges with the calculated *fun* of the culture industry' (p. 119). Serious clowning, the 'constellation of animal/fool/clown', is 'a fundamental layer of art', and is central to the formation of metamodernist poetry in the twenty-first century.[76] However, as with Adorno's account of pre-modernist literature, 'innovative' poetry does not solely engage with elements of the ridiculous and enigmatic at the expense of all other kinds of writing, as my analysis of 'The Sea at Brighton' indicates. Yet, despite the evidence of *Rätsel* in such mainstream writing, the *intensity* of the 'remainder' is clearly more evident in the poetry of Prynne, Monk and Hill, even if – as Ken Edwards illustrates – the first two poets draw on different aesthetic traditions to Hill.[77] Whereas Hill's emphasis on what Edwards terms the lyric voice nevertheless engages with the juxtaposition of registers and usurpation of metre in a way familiar to readers of *The Waste Land* (1922) and Pound's Cantos, Prynne's work is far more interested in further resistances to – but not eschewals of – signification. Indeed, Paterson's blurring of postmodernist and 'innovative' writing in *New British Poetry* that I discuss in the next chapter indicates something distinctive about the development of twenty-first-century British poetry as opposed to other art forms (p. xxiii). Whereas Daniel Libeskind's 'Building with no Exit' forms

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a specific postmodernist response to the utilitarian forms of modernist architecture, the chimera of postmodernist poetry does not demarcate itself from modernist poems with the convenience of a historical epoch or movement.[78] The legacies of modernism are still relevant to complex forms of art that, as in Prynne, Monk and Hill's poems, oppose 'the standardized life'.[79]

Peter Howarth amply demonstrates that claims such as Paterson's for postmodernist characteristics in contemporary poetry can usually be traced back to modernism. Charles Olson, for example, avowed that open field, Projective poetry went beyond modernism in its resistance to individualistic poetics, yet, as Howarth argues, 'getting rid of the controlling "ego" was a basic move within modernism – not just in Eliot's "impersonal" poetry, but in Yeatsian séances and Objectivist procedures'.[80] As I discuss in the next chapter, the 'poetry wars' since the 1970s have produced writing that engages with the enigma in ways that have retained and reimagined the vitality of modernism, rather than angling for its mere reprisal. Paterson's attack on supposed postmodernists in *New British Poetry* and Hill's critique of poetic 'democracy' in his fourth Oxford lecture are just two instances of very different responses to the legacies of modernism in twenty-first-century British poetry. Nevertheless, Ian Gregson wonders if 'there could be a *rapprochement*' between the mainstream and 'parallel tradition', arguing that it could 'produce poetry of immense interest and power'.[81] In Chapter 4, I examine how a younger generation of what Roddy Lumsden terms 'cusp' poets has attempted to engage with this possibility.[82] Due to the divergent traditions informing 'innovative' and mainstream writing, Gregson's vision is distinctly utopian, but it does link with the overlap I have analysed in this chapter between these opposed camps in relation to the enigmatical poetics of Prynne, Paterson and Monk. To put it another way, metamodernist writing is not the preserve of Prynne and other poets in the Cambridge School. At least Gregson's idealist sense of a potential rapprochement between mainstream and 'innovative' literature offers the possibility of sustaining the enigmaticalness of poetry in forms that reject these different traditions as absolute, and as perpetuating a 'knife fight in a phone booth'.[83]

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