

*Iconoclasm and Enigmatical Commitment*

In the previous chapter, I outlined the commitments of autonomous art when Geoffrey Hill engages with historical atrocities and ‘enigma as the largest of tropes, a trope of the human condition’.<sup>1</sup> I now proceed to explore how the concept of enigmaticalness might be relevant to a younger generation of writers who, unlike Hill and Tony Harrison, draw on the formal predilections of both mainstream and ‘innovative’ poets. In response to a question about the supposed obduracy of his poetry, Ahren Warner asserted that ‘a reader for whom a certain level of erudition is a problem is not a potential reader for my work’.<sup>2</sup> Warner demands the ‘walking’ readership that I discussed in the Introduction to this book: Hill admires patient, curious and attentive readers who are open to autonomous art, and who avoid writing that attempts simply to ‘give’ them something.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Warner’s engagement with the poetry of T. S. Eliot, Antonin Artaud and Ezra Pound suggests that his work might thrive on a ‘recrudescence’ of a ‘refractory relation’ between contemporary literature and ‘dominant aesthetic values’, ‘mass culture’ and ‘society in general’.<sup>4</sup> For example, the ‘Nervometer’ sequence from *Pretty* (2013) is a ‘collage and liberal translation’ of Artaud’s combative *Le Pèse-Nerfs* (1925), ‘Métro’ rewrites Pound’s ‘In a Station of the Metro’ (1913) as a diatribe against human ‘types’, and ‘Near St Mary Woolnoth’ resituates *The Waste Land* (1922) amongst satirised ‘Windsor-knotted ties’ carousing near to the eponymous church.<sup>5</sup> David James’s understanding of metamodernism as ‘continuity and adaptation’ in relation to early twentieth-century texts also chimes with Warner’s interlacing of various languages, registers and discourses in the long sequence ‘*Lutèce, Te Amo*’ from *Pretty*, in which twenty sections creatively ‘map’ the respective Parisian arrondissements against the city of Guillaume Apollinaire, Ernest Hemingway and Pablo Picasso.<sup>6</sup> As with Pound’s *Cantos*, many of Warner’s lines remain untranslated, including an entire section from ‘*Lutèce, Te Amo*’ (XVI): Warner’s uncompromising engagement with European languages

has irked many poets and critics, who accuse him of an anachronistic and (implicitly) modernist élitism. Tony Williams berates the Lincolnshire poet for including ‘untransliterated Greek in a poem’ as a form of ‘bad manners’; ‘Ahren Warner’s poems’, Michael Woods laments, will be ‘considered obscure by some readers’.<sup>7</sup> For a reader unfamiliar with Warner’s poems, these criticisms might indicate an author rooted firmly in the ‘innovative’ tradition, or a poet aspiring to the enigmatical poetry that I have discussed throughout this book. Yet these suppositions would be inaccurate: allusions to modernist writers and a ‘certain level of erudition’ are not coterminous with the enigma.<sup>8</sup> Warner’s poems are grounded in the modernist tradition, and often resist categorisation as either mainstream or ‘innovative’. Yet his work is certainly not ‘marooned’ alongside Hill’s with Pound and Eliot in the 1950s: as I shall illustrate in this chapter, Warner also shares with Don Paterson and Philip Larkin an innate suspicion towards enigmatical poetry.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, critical responses to Warner’s immersion in languages other than English reflect the tendency of mainstream poems to accommodate the reader, as Paterson recommends in his introduction to *New British Poetry* (2004), rather than to challenge ‘complaisant aesthetics’ with allusive and elusive poems.<sup>10</sup> In this context, the publication of Warner’s work by Bloodaxe, a purported champion of accessible poetry, might appear surprising.<sup>11</sup> However, his recourse to the demotic introduces a register into his poetry familiar not only from the work of modernist writers such as Pound and Artaud, but also, with added insouciance, of Paterson and Larkin. Paterson’s tendency to subvert his own poetics – as in the reference to his own ‘bullshit’ in *Rain* (2009) – is mirrored in Warner’s lines such as those from ‘Pictogramme’ in *Confer* (2011) in which the poet-narrator opines that television is ‘shite really’ (p. 25).<sup>12</sup> Warner’s vacillation between modernist and anti-modernist forebears thus situates his work on the ‘cusp’, as Roddy Lumsden terms it, between mainstream and ‘innovative’ writing.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, James Byrne’s poetry initially appears to have more in common with writers from the London and Cambridge Schools: ‘Inclub Satires’ from *Blood/Sugar* (2009) begins with an epigraph addressed to Pound, and proceeds to satirise a poetry reading in which the ‘Chanel poet [. . .] cares to market absolute clarity’ (p. 71).<sup>14</sup> This sequence draws on a long history of ‘innovative’ antipathy to the commodification of contemporary poetry, as in Basil Bunting’s dismissal of poetry prizes as the symptom of ‘a philistine establishment encouraging mediocre poets to write for an indifferent public’.<sup>15</sup> As with Bunting’s appraisal of Ford Madox Ford’s poetry, Byrne’s tentative poetic explorations ‘never end in

discovery, only in willingness to rest content with an unsure glimpse'; as the latter phrases it in 'Apprentice Work' from *Blood/Sugar*, 'everything is invitation' (p. 11).<sup>16</sup> Yet Byrne's work is also 'cusp' in that he draws on the formal propensities of both mainstream and 'innovative' poetry.<sup>17</sup> Whereas 'Historia' from *White Coins* (2015) starts Byrne's collection with the 'open form' that Peter Howarth has noted is indebted to modernist poetry, in the subsequent sequence, 'Economies of the Living', the abstractions, imperatives and metre have more in common with Hill's collection *Scenes from Comus* (2005) than the work of George Oppen.<sup>18</sup> Byrne's work, like Hill's, forms an instance of the 'temperate' or 'moderate' modernism that I discussed in the Introduction, which is open to the formal capacities of the enigma.<sup>19</sup>

This chapter thus explores whether debates surrounding metamodernism should be attuned to formal engagement rather than the frequency of allusion to modernist writers. In the context of Warner's poetry, Andre Furlani's sense of metamodernism as 'a perpetuation' as well as a 'departure' – akin to James's 'continuity and adaptation' in *The Legacies of Modernism* (2011) – is most keenly felt in 'Nervometer', the Lincolnshire poet's creative translation of Artaud's *Le Pèse-Nerfs*.<sup>20</sup> Artaud's narrator attracts Warner as one version of the iconoclastic outsider in literary modernism, such as the protagonist Ferdinand Bardamu in Louis-Ferdinand Céline's novel *Journey to the End of the Night* (1932).<sup>21</sup> Drawn to the immodesty and singularity of *Le Pèse-Nerfs*, Warner nevertheless 'departs' from Artaud's misogyny, anti-intellectualism and sometimes overly florid rhetoric to produce a sequence that develops the enigmatical poetics of the French poet's original text. This particular 'recrudescence' of modernism is anticipated in Warner's first collection, *Confer*, in which he reimagines Pound's 'In a Station of the Metro' in his ruminations on the Parisian underground.<sup>22</sup> As I discuss later in this chapter, rather than resulting in the lyrical puzzles of 'Nervometer', 'Métro' forms a neo-modernist pastiche of its predecessor: Warner's poem does not 'depart' from its modernist antecedents – that also include Richard Aldington's 'In the Tube' (1915) – in its élitism and antipathy towards the human form. In contrast, the '*Lutèce, Te Amo*' sequence from *Pretty* revitalises a modernist Paris of intellectuals, iconoclasts and eccentrics, and reimagines Charles Baudelaire's insalubrious city of poverty, and 'women of "pleasure"'.<sup>23</sup> In *Hello. Your Promise has been Extracted* (2017), the exuberant *flâneur* of '*Lutèce, Te Amo*' metamorphoses into a more disillusioned narrator who considers the 'implicated subject' during his European excursions.<sup>24</sup> However, this extended engagement with the

individual's entanglement in histories of oppression halts when the poet-narrator comments – after an exposition of various trauma victims – that there is 'nothing to be done'.<sup>25</sup> In contrast, Byrne's knowledge of colonial implication in recent atrocities in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Burma results in a different kind of commitment in his collection *Places You Leave* (2021). Rather than considering inertia, in 'Cox's Bazar' Byrne recounts his workshops in a Bangladeshi camp in which traumatised survivors of the Myanmar massacres recall 'some of the worst human rights abuses committed this century' by the Burmese army.<sup>26</sup> Rather than capitulate to the formal restrictions of committed writing that I discussed in the last chapter, Byrne has produced a haunting poem that draws on the tradition of 'innovative' writing, and engages with survivor testimony by including lines into the texture of the poem that originated in the poetry workshops that he conducted in the camp. After an exposition of enigmatical commitment in relation to *Places You Leave* and *The Caprices* (2019), the final section of this chapter then discusses a selection of Byrne's open form poems: 'Historia' from *White Coins* and the sixth poem in *Withdrawals* (2019). These poems illustrate that writing considered in the context of debates about metamodernism should be understood in terms of formal achievement, the 'in-itself' of an artwork, rather than primarily in relation to a wrestling with modernist antecedents.<sup>27</sup>

### **The Enigmas of *Le Pèse-Nerfs* and 'Nervometer'**

In this section, I discuss Warner's engagement with Artaud's work in terms of a 'continuity' with and 'adaptation' of modernist predecessors, but also, more importantly, in the context of the literary enigmas at the heart of *Le Pèse-Nerfs* and 'Nervometer'.<sup>28</sup> Warner is attracted to Artaud's iconoclastic acts in their various – and sometimes contradictory – forms, from his diatribes against canonical literary figures such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Franz Kafka, to his discussions with and subsequent rejection of André Breton's group of Surrealist artists.<sup>29</sup> In turn, Artaud was clearly drawn to the artistic insurrections of the Surrealists, and their dedication to 'the strongest possible attack on literature and art'.<sup>30</sup> The enigmaticalness of *Le Pèse-Nerfs* forms an inextricable aspect of this iconoclasm, as Artaud attempts to describe the 'unnamed states, these superior positions of the soul [...] these periods in the mind, these tiny failures' that he argues are ignored by psychologists; the poet might not 'appear to advance much' in this matter, but he claims that he is nevertheless 'advancing more' than his literary peers, who are dismissed as 'bearded asses'.<sup>31</sup> In

'Nervometer', these 'shadows of men' cannot understand Artaud's distinctive conception of reality, which consists of a fragmented and amorphous state, 'in a corner of one's self', and an anguished condition 'of extreme shock, enlightened by unreality'.<sup>32</sup> Artaud describes *Le Pèse-Nerfs* as 'a kind of constant waste of the normal level of reality' ('*Une espèce de déperdition constante du niveau normal de la réalité*').<sup>33</sup> These 'low voiced' words are a deliberate travesty of the 'reality principle', since the French poet can 'no longer touch life'.<sup>34</sup> Artaud rails against the 'shadows of men', including psychologists and artists, who refuse to share this 'puzzle' of his alternative vision of reality.<sup>35</sup> In the second section of 'Nervometer', Warner delays the predicate ('[...] are lost in the shadows of men') for eleven lines as Artaud augments his description of acquaintances who chose to pathologise him with the less radical 'angst' rather than a more amorphous mental state of 'luminous pestling' (p. 64). The 'darkness' of men, in Jack Hirschman's translation of *Le Pèse-Nerfs* (p. 34), cannot understand Artaud's experience of the physicality of his angst. Moreover, there is 'a point, phosphorescent, where reality | finds itself [...] metamorphosed': Artaud's descriptions of his disrupted thought processes, a 'decanting at my core', are actually a productive 'waste', an enigmatic and creative morass that – in R. P. Blackmur's words – change and add to the 'stock' of reality, rather than merely trying to replicate it.<sup>36</sup>

This railing against 'shadows' of professionals who cannot understand Artaud's mental distress encompasses the anti-intellectualism that Artaud endorses throughout the enigmatic form of *Le Pèse-Nerfs*, and that Warner wrestles with in his creative translation.<sup>37</sup> The rejection of 'bearded asses' in *Le Pèse-Nerfs* obviously contrasts with the intellectual propensities of other modernist writers – such as Eliot's absorption of Henri Bergson's lectures at the Collège de France in 1910–11 – even if Artaud's anti-literary statements can partly be understood in the context of his flirtation with Surrealism between 1924 and 1926.<sup>38</sup> However, Artaud's denigration of the arts does not accord with Warner's allusions to philosophy, literature and art elsewhere in his *oeuvre*, as I shall demonstrate in relation to the latter's excisions from *Le Pèse-Nerfs*. Nevertheless, at the start of 'Nervometer', Warner emphasises the first instance of Artaud's provocative statements in *Le Pèse-Nerfs*, '*Il ne faut pas trop laisser passer la littérature*' ('You must not admit too much literature'), by relocating it as the final line in part one: this sentence anticipates the anti-literary bravura of the extended 'All writing is pigshit' section later in *Le Pèse-Nerfs* that constitutes part ten of 'Nervometer'.<sup>39</sup> Warner's poet-narrator relishes the provocation, just as Larkin delighted in Wilfred Owen's declaration that his war

poems were not concerned with poetry: 'Isn't that a marvellous thing to say', the Hull poet eulogised in a letter to Monica Jones.<sup>40</sup> The artistic piquancy here lies in the purported rejection of the art form that these writers utilise, but which, for Larkin and Artaud, is dominated by coteries of 'bearded asses'.<sup>41</sup> However, Warner is attentive to the fact that the translation of '*Il ne faut pas trop laisser passer la littérature*' is not as simple as Jack Hirschman's version suggests, in which 'You have to do away [...] with literature'.<sup>42</sup> In Artaud's *Collected Works* (1968), Victor Corti translates the sentence instead as 'Literature must not show too much' (p. 70). '[S]how' introduces an ambiguity into Artaud's ostensibly anti-literary statement: allusions to literature may be present in the writing, but they should be implicit or at least avoid ostentation. Warner's translation, 'You must not admit too much literature', permits a similar, but different, ambivalence towards the literary. '[A]dmit' may mean 'disclose' various literary derivations, or it may indicate that the poet-narrator should debar examples of literature in a Surrealist resistance towards artistic tradition. In this instance, Warner's tracking of Artaud's iconoclasm in *Le Pèse-Nerfs* errs on the side of caution when addressing the ostensibly anti-literary. However, if the Surrealist diatribe against the canon appears partly checked in Warner's translation of this early line in *Le Pèse-Nerfs*, the 'all writing is pigshit' sequence is less equivocal.<sup>43</sup>

To paraphrase this section of *Le Pèse-Nerfs*, any writing that seeks to control experience, adheres to the 'reality principle', or thinks it can eschew ambiguity, the enigmatic and the slipperiness of language is 'pigshit'.<sup>44</sup> Yet Warner translates '*Toute l'écriture est de la cochonnerie*' as 'All writing is dishonest', rather than Hirschman's 'all writing is pigshit' and Corti's 'Writing is all trash'.<sup>45</sup> Rather than the more dismissive 'trash', Warner's 'departure' from *Le Pèse-Nerfs* introduces, it seems, either a structuralist sense of 'dishonest' writing, in that the signifier splits from the referent, or a poststructuralist approach to language in which meaning is constantly deferred.<sup>46</sup> However, the following clause makes it clear that 'dishonest' appertains specifically to '*Les gens qui sortent du vague*', 'Folks that shun the nebulous'.<sup>47</sup> Later on in this passage from *Oeuvres Complètes* (1956), Artaud's 'folks' are not 'all' writers, as in the initial, provocative statement, but rather '*cochons pertinents, maîtres du faux verbe, trousseurs de portrait, feuilletonnistes, rez-de-chaussée, herbagistes, entomologistes*' (p. 96). Corti translates this astonishing diatribe as aimed at 'pertinent pigs, masters of the false word, despatchers of portraits, gutter writers, graziers, entomologists' (p. 75); Hirschman prefers the more florid 'confectioners of portraits, pamphleteers, ground-floor lace-curtain herb collectors, entomologists' (p. 39). Rather than

'gutter writers' or 'pamphleteers', Warner chooses 'serial novelists' for '*feuilletonnistes*' (p. 73); a more literal translation would simply be 'serialists'. Warner's phrase recalls Adorno's critique of Sartre's conception of the 'committed' novelist that I discussed in Chapter 2, as someone who can convey historical truth through prose. Entomologists – and probably 'ground-floor lace curtain herb collectors' too (p. 39) – wish to classify nature: Artaud compares this process to a circumscribing of words, the dully empiricist version of language that Adorno rejects in his defence of autonomous art in 'Commitment'. In a passage that Warner excises from his version of *Le Pèse-Nerfs* a few sentences later, Artaud explains further his commitment to 'nebulous', anti-scientific writing: 'Do not expect me to tell you what all this is called or into how many sections it is divided, or to tell you its value [. . .] Or clarify it, or bring it to life, to adorn it with a host of words, polished meaning'.<sup>48</sup>

This passage provides an apt description of the enigma of *Le Pèse-Nerfs* as a whole, and Artaud's conception of 'nebulous' poetry that Warner pits against 'serial novelists' (p. 73). Yet the French writer's conception of elusive writing is directed against intellectuals and 'bearded' poets as much as popular culture. In addition, Artaud's defence of the obscure in this section from *Le Pèse-Nerfs* is ironic in the context of Warner's restructuring of 'Nervometer' that indicates another divagation from the modernist antecedent. Warner sometimes deliberately eschews Artaud's more 'nebulous' writing so as to produce a more fluid and cogent sequence (p. 72). In his striving to 'detail the events of thought' elsewhere in *Pretty* – as in his extended ruminations on somatic minutiae in 'Metousiosis' – and his wish to produce a concise version of *Le Pèse-Nerfs*, toiling 'for precision' with the 'uncoiled movements' of translation, he cannot help but become one of the 'contemporary bastards' of exactitude that Artaud dismisses. This tactic leads to a refinement of the following clause, '*Tout la gent littéraire est cochonne*' (p. 95), that Hirschman and Corti translate, respectively, as 'the whole literary scene is a pigpen' (p. 38), and 'the whole pack of literati are trash' (p. 75).<sup>49</sup> '[S]cene' is suitably vague, and 'literati' refers to the learned and those who read widely: this description certainly appertains to Warner's labours. Yet Warner's 'men of letters' draws attention away momentarily from 'contemporary bastards' such as the translator himself, and focuses instead on clubbable and usually aged connoisseurs of literature (p. 72). Artaud's iconoclasm then veers away from these 'bastards' to target scientific writing, and inferior novelists in Warner's translation. In the next sentence, Artaud adumbrates those who '*ont des points de repère sans l'esprit*' (p. 95), who have Hirschman's 'vantage points in their spirit' (p. 38), Corti's



'landmarks in their mind' (p. 75); or, in Warner's version, those 'who would map the mind' (p. 72). In the midst of this anti-literary and anti-scientific diatribe, Warner's version of *Le Pèse-Nerfs* then prudently exorcises a passage that recalls Eliot's women who 'come and go | Talking of Michelangelo' in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'.<sup>50</sup> Artaud similarly indulges in misogyny in the 'pigshit' passage when, in Hirschman's translation, there are 'those [authors] about whom women talk so well, and also those women who talk so well, who talk of the contemporary currents of thought; those who [. . .] drop names, who fill books with screaming headlines [. . .] are pigs' (p. 38). As I discuss later in relation to *Hello. Your Promise has been Extracted*, Warner has been accused of misogynistic portrayals of female characters, but here he is careful to disassociate women from '*la cochonnerie*' (p. 95).

From my analysis of 'Nervometer' so far, it can be deduced that Warner adheres to the intertextual sense of metamodernism as a complex working through of modernist antecedents, including sensitive interpretations of the 'nebulous' *Le Pèse-Nerfs*. But how does Warner inscribe Artaud's enigmatical poetics into the *form* of the creative translation? Having outlined Warner's adherence to and divergence from the iconoclasm of *Le Pèse-Nerfs*, it is important to consider the way in which he deals with 'stylistic tenor and texture' and 'idioms of diction' in 'Nervometer', as well as 'the overarching organization' of the narrative.<sup>51</sup> In his notes to *Pretty*, Warner describes 'Nervometer' as lurking 'somewhere between a version, collage and liberal translation of Antonin Artaud's *Le Pèse-Nerfs*' (p. 79). However, some critics have interpreted the '*After*' at the beginning of the sequence (p. 61) to indicate an entirely creative response to rather than translation of Artaud's work: Paul McDonald refers to a 'beautiful suite of poems *inspired* by Antonin Artaud'.<sup>52</sup> Despite some divergences, 'Nervometer' is in fact best understood as a close and often ingenious translation of *Le Pèse-Nerfs*, which sometimes improves on the original in its compression of the sequence, and its excision of superfluous or offensive material. Translation thus forms a way to get as close as possible to a modernist antecedent in another language, without denying the possibility of contemporary refinement. Unlike Artaud, Warner toils for concision in 'Nervometer', and a requirement to avoid what Pound termed the emotive 'slither' of poetry.<sup>53</sup> It is commendable that Warner manages to evade this pitfall in a sequence that is steeped in heightened rhetoric: indeed, Artaud referred to his cerebral ruminations as 'imperceptible slitherings', a phrase that recalls Pound's admonishment.<sup>54</sup> Warner achieves Poundian exactitude in his translation of *Le Pèse-Nerfs* through creative extemporisation on the original, and judicious editing. 'After' in



epigraphs to translations functions as a temporal adverb denoting continuity as well as rupture: after all, the contemporary piece is usually ‘in imitation of’ or ‘in the style of’ the previous artist.<sup>55</sup> Continuation here designates a creative rendition of Artaud’s *Le Pèse-Nerfs* that is still entuned to the Surrealist sequence, but also willing to take creative risks in order to enhance Warner’s version. Part two of ‘Nervometer’ contains an example of this creative approach to translation. Corti and Hirschman translate the enigmatic phrase ‘*une trituration effervescente*’ as, respectively, ‘an excited manipulation of powers’ (p. 33), and ‘an excited grinding of powers’ (p. 70), whereas Warner conceives the phrase as ‘a luminous pestling’ (p. 64), a more concise, rhythmical and aptly poetic version than the alternative translations.

At the same time, this succinct rendition chimes with Artaud’s depiction of angst in this passage as an enigmatic but nevertheless physical manifestation. Similarly, Warner’s compact phrase ‘myoclonic belief’ (p. 65) provides a sharper alternative to Corti’s translation of ‘*Le sommeil venait d’un déplacement de croyance*’ (p. 88) as ‘Sleep came from the shifting of belief’ (p. 70). However, Warner also veers from the original French here in order to create a tauter alternative, since ‘myoclonic’ links to the previous clause, that replaces Hirschman’s ‘nerves taut the leg’s whole length’ (p. 34) with a more effective verb: ‘nerves tense the legs’ whole length’ (p. 65). Warner’s divergences from the literal result in a more elegant translation: in the same section, Hirschman and Corti translate ‘*ce brusque renversement des parties*’ (p. 88) as, respectively, ‘this brusque reversal of parts’ (p. 34), and ‘this brusque reversing of roles’ (p. 71), whereas Warner chooses a less awkward phrase, ‘the sudden inverse of opposites’ (p. 65). Similarly, Warner plumps for the terser ‘Desiccated minds’ to translate ‘*tous les esprits se dessécher*’ (p. 74), rather than Hirschman’s ‘all minds parched’ (p. 39) or Corti’s ‘all minds dry up’ (p. 76). Through this concision, Warner is able to reject the unnecessarily verbose, as in Hirschman’s translation of ‘*les ratiocinations d’une nature imbécilement pointilleuse, ou habitée d’un levain d’inquiétudes dans le sens de sa hauteur*’ (p. 89) as ‘the ratiocinations of an imbecilically fastidious nature, or inhabited by a leaven of worries in the sense of height’ (p. 35). In contrast, Warner opts for the succinct phrase ‘dim finickiness’, and ‘the inhabiting of angst rising to its height’ (p. 67). Three lines later, Warner then avoids rhetorical rather than emotional ‘slither’ when he exorcises the hifalutin lines ‘*Un impouvoir à cristalliser inconsciemment, le point rompu de l’automatisme à quelque degré que ce soit*’ (p. 90), that Hirschman translates as the impotence ‘to crystallize unconsciously the broken point of automatism to any degree whatsoever’ (p. 35), and Corti – equally awkwardly – as ‘A

powerlessness to fix unconsciously the point of rupture of automatism at any level whatsoever' (p. 72).

In adhering to Pound's warning about 'slither', Warner thus simultaneously condenses Artaud's enigmatic writing about his amorphous states of mind. This process is also evident in the manipulation of narrative structure: Warner compresses the first four paragraphs of *Le Pèse-Nerfs* into four lines that allow for a more dramatic opening to the sequence. Rather than begin with Corti's 'I really felt you break down the environment around me, I felt you create a void to allow me to progress' (p. 69), Warner hones in on Artaud's lines that are translated in Corti's third paragraph: 'I have always been struck by the obduracy | of mind – by how it must always want to think | in dimensions' (p. 63). Warner is thus able to focus immediately on disrupted mental processes – the main theme of *Le Pèse-Nerfs* – and emphasise Artaud's desire for the impossibility of being able to think outside of thinking. Subsequently, whereas Hirschman's grandiose translation refers to the 'glacial blooms of my inner soul' that dribble 'all over me' (p. 26), Warner's version is much crisper: 'I admit of an intricately wrought soul – | brimstone, phosphoric' (p. 63). In part four of 'Nervometer', Warner writes of 'A word – precise, subtle' (p. 66): he aims for this lexical neatness throughout his version of *Le Pèse-Nerfs*, as at the end of this section, when '*la portée*' (literally the 'range' of a word) is translated as 'import', rather than Corti and Hirschman's 'scope' (pp. 72, 35). Indeed, the English title itself forms a key example of this process: the latter translate '*Pèse-Nerfs*' (p. 96) as 'Nerve Scales' (p. 75) and 'Brain-Storm', whereas Warner coins the more precise 'Nervometer'. Moreover, in part five, Corti and Hirschman render '*le tout es dans une certaine flocculation du choses*' (p. 90) as, respectively, 'the whole thing lies in a certain flocculation of objects' (p. 72), and 'Everything lies in a certain flocculation of things' (p. 35), whereas Warner compresses these sentences into four words: 'All this is flux' (p. 67). Translation itself is a form of Poundian 'cleansing' here, as a choice word or phrase renders the original French in a more singular fashion than the other translators.

### 'Métro', 'Lutèce, Te Amo' and Neo-Modernism

The fulmination in *Le Pèse-Nerfs* against precise 'bastards' encompasses Artaud's sense of his work's enigmatic irreducibility.<sup>56</sup> As I have outlined, the objects of his ire in this sequence include artists, scientists and, by proxy, his translators. However, in relation to the rest of his *oeuvre*, these 'shadows' of men who misunderstand him include the working class as well

as the cultural élite.<sup>57</sup> Artaud renounced, for example, ‘as a coward every being who does not agree that life is given to him only to separate himself from the masses’.<sup>58</sup> Such disdain forms a key attribute of the first reference to Artaud in *Pretty*: Warner ruminates on the photograph in *Portraits d'écrivains* (2010) of a youthful Artaud in ‘*Lutèce, Te Amo*’, and emphasises the sneer of the youthful, attractive iconoclast, rather than the dishevelled and drug-ravaged poet in 1947, whose rants included an anti-Semitic diatribe against Kafka.<sup>59</sup> Warner’s poet-narrators in *Confer* and *Pretty* often share with Artaud his sense of élitism as a prerequisite for the artist’s distinctiveness. In ‘*Legare*’ from *Confer*, the narrator rewrites a sentence from *The Great Gatsby* (1925), in which Nick Carraway ponders that ‘Every one suspects himself of at least one of the cardinal virtues, and this is mine: I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known’; in Warner’s poem, élitism ‘in Fitzgerald’s vein’ is considered instead ‘a cardinal virtue’ (p. 52).<sup>60</sup>

In this section, I examine how Warner’s *flâneurs* in ‘*Métro*’ and ‘*Lutèce, Te Amo*’ similarly separate themselves from the alleged vulgarity of the crowd, which Pound typifies as ‘*un visage stupide*’ (‘a stupid face’) in ‘*Dans un Omnibus de Londres*’ (1916).<sup>61</sup> Andrew Thacker considers underground travel as ‘the central symbol of *urban* modernity in the twentieth century’, because it ‘produces the perilous necessity of trying to individualise one’s identity and thus distance oneself from the lumpen mass’: ‘*Métro*’ functions as a neo-modernist rather than metamodernist examination of disdain, in which Warner reimagines Pound’s ‘In a Station of the Metro’ in a contemporaneous Paris of rejected clones.<sup>62</sup> Albert Bermel argues that Artaud intended to ‘strip sexuality of its sentimental disguises’, and the same claim could be made for the poet-narrator’s depiction of a blonde woman on the underground in ‘*Métro*’, who enables him to ‘distance’ himself from the ‘mass’.<sup>63</sup> She initially attracts his attention through what he further considers to be superficial physicality: this rejection results in an apocalyptic ending that replicates Richard Aldington’s attack on his fellow passengers in his 1915 poem ‘In the Tube’, which ends with the accusation ‘What right have you to live?’<sup>64</sup> Thacker analyses the contractions in time and space afforded by the underground of the modernist city, but these are not Warner’s concerns in ‘*Métro*’: instead, the poet-narrator argues that such conforming objects of desire as the anonymous woman are ‘asking’ to be ‘cut down’.<sup>65</sup>

Artaud’s sense of the iconoclastic writer who dismisses cowards who do not agree ‘that life is given to him only to separate himself from the masses’ is clearly important to Warner’s mordant poet-narrator.<sup>66</sup> However, rather than a metamodernist continuation and adaptation of the modernist

antecedent in 'Nervometer' or an enigmatic exposition of Thacker's sense of compressed time and space, in 'Métro' a neo-modernist élitism predominates that replicates rather than transforms its predecessor. In Pound's 'In a Station of the Metro', the 'apparition' of plural faces immediately takes the reader away from any specificities of the crowd: this movement eases the shift in the second line to the even more abstract petals and bough.<sup>67</sup> In contrast, Warner's 'Métro' initially moves in the opposite direction, from the amorphous huddle to 'that' blonde's décolletage (p. 30). During the *outré* exposure of 'unsentimental' desire, the first two stanzas invite the reader to register her distinctiveness: this process is reflected in the stanzas' metrical tension, as her arresting image instigates metrical breaks or inversion on 'Take', 'take', 'that', 'scrape', 'seeps', 'cheeks' and 'roughed high'.<sup>68</sup> In the third stanza, the poet-narrator dispels this illusion with the assertion that she is not 'special': his distaste is registered in the repetition of her 'seeping' features, akin to the 'Antagonism [. . .] Disgust [. . .] antipathy' in Aldington's poem: she is only 'of a certain kind', one of 'those faces', like the collective eyes that interweave 'In the Tube'.<sup>69</sup> The tone here is that of Artaud's élitist whose 'life is given to him only to separate himself' from the 'wet dogs' that he refers to in his essay on Van Gogh: the poet-narrator appropriates the 'bough' in Pound's poem to refer to the 'branch' of humankind, on which various 'kinds' or 'scions' eclipse individuality.<sup>70</sup> A 'scion', from the old French '*ciun*', denotes a young root, but also a descendant of a noble family: 'Métro' replicates Pound's sense in 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberley' that our diminished and 'botched' civilisation is old and corrupted, a 'bitch gone in the teeth'.<sup>71</sup> Of course, the disposable 'types' that the neo-modernist poet-narrator abhors in 'Métro' do not appertain to his own persona, just as Aldington distinguishes himself from the depicted 'Eyes of greed, of pitiful blankness, of plethoric complacency'.<sup>72</sup> As with a female prostitute in Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857), the poet-narrator in 'Métro' may primarily be concerned with the ruminations of a *flâneur*, but he thereby inevitably 'denies her the power of observation, entirely objectifying her'.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, it may be possible that the depicted woman may herself be a *flâneuse*: as Deborah Parsons argues, 'in the modern city of multiplicity, reflection, and indistinction, *la femme passante* is herself a *flâneuse*, just as the "man of the crowd" is also a *flâneur*' (p. 6).

Rather than reworking the modernist antecedent to hone enigmatical poetry, therefore, as in Hill's response to Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1941), Warner's 'Métro' is 'marooned' in 1915 with Aldington's 'In the Tube'.<sup>74</sup> In this pastiche of the modernist outsider, who becomes 'increasingly

detached from his asphalt experience', the implication remains that the poet-narrator is in some way distinctive as opposed to his object of desire, and the travellers described as a 'growth of soft flesh, rattling minds, | just asking to be cut down'.<sup>75</sup> '[S]oft flesh' functions here as the amorphous and anonymous 'meat' in Céline's *Journey to the End of the Night*, akin to a 'seepage' of cancerous growth that underpins the supposedly vacuous brains of the masses, with their 'rattling minds'.<sup>76</sup> The murderous impulse in response to Aldington's question, 'What right have you to live?', transforms the comic violence contained in 'Take [...] that' in the first stanza into the unpleasant similarities between the closure of 'asking to be cut down' and the colloquial phrase 'asking for it', a misogynist response to the voluptuousness described in the first stanza. In the space of eighteen lines, desire has quickly metamorphosed into violence: there is more than a hint of pseudo-modernist fascism in the poet-narrator's reaction that she, and, by extension, humankind, deserve to be 'cut down' for their lack of distinction. Thacker argues that John Carey's inditement of modernist élitism in *The Intellectuals and the Masses* (1992) can be read in the context of literary responses to the underground as an 'anxious rejection of one's travelling companions [...] another spatial phobia, where what produces panic is [...] the crowded density of other people'.<sup>77</sup> Such a generous reading is hard to glean from the closure of 'Métro': far from panicking, the controlled diction suggests a suave and cynical poet-narrator, who is perfectly relaxed in his summation that the 'soft flesh' of humanity should be obliterated.<sup>78</sup>

Compared with 'Nervometer', and its considered engagement with the enigmas of Artaud's *Le Pèse-Nerfs*, 'Métro' therefore functions as a pastiche of modernist tropes and sensibilities, regurgitating them in a form of poetic melancholia. It may be that the poem is deliberately 'marooned' in 1915, and is intended to be a satire of early twentieth-century élitism. Indeed, due to the lack of contemporaneous detail – unlike Aldington's 'slates on the floor' and 'woodwork pitted with brass nails' (p. 74) – 'Métro' could as easily be set in the modernist as the contemporary period: the possibility remains that Warner could be depicting a response to the underground from the early twentieth century, rather than replicating the abhorrence in the present. In contrast, *Lutèce, Te Amo* returns to Paris as the archetypal modernist city in order to revitalise its depiction in early twentieth-century writing as a centre for intellectuals, iconoclastic artists and eccentric individuals. As Thacker outlines, Paris is a 'thoroughly overdetermined cultural space: the city of light, the capital of modernity, the home of the "lost generation", or a magnet for avant-garde writers and artists across Europe and far beyond – these are just a few of the epithets and

descriptions used to capture the cultural standing of the French capital' (p. 24). In the twenty sections of '*Lutèce, Te Amo*', Warner utilises his characteristically macaronic diction to engage with a litany of modernist writers, artists and ex-pats, including Apollinaire, Artaud, Picasso, Hemingway, Jean-Paul Sartre, Egon Schiele, Fernand Léger and Chaïm Soutine.<sup>79</sup> Paris here is a city intertwined with its modernist antecedents: Warner puns, for example, on 'grenadine' and 'grenade' when Hemingway offers Picasso a carton of explosives after the liberation of Paris (p. 19).<sup>80</sup> In addition, the reader encounters reimagined 'outsider' figures from Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*, such as prostitutes and beggars. Warner adheres to Baudelaire's conception of the *flâneur*: he is 'open to the stimuli and walks the streets of the city at a slow and leisurely pace, an observer and recorder [...] the archetypal modern subject, passive and open, restrained and appreciative'.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, as in Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* (1927–40), '*Lutèce, Te Amo*' maps 'the relationship between things, the thresholds and invisible boundaries of Paris', and functions similarly as a 'vascular network of imagination' (p. 52). However, Warner does not merely perpetuate a 'structure of feeling' surrounding Benjamin's Paris in the 1930s, but 'departs', in Furlani's terms, from modernism by depicting a contemporaneous Paris concerned with issues such as homelessness, racism, the European Union and the legacies of collaboration during World War Two.<sup>82</sup> There is no attempt in '*Lutèce, Te Amo*' to transform the destitute into Baudelaire's symbols of transcendence in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, as when the poet-narrator exclaims, in 'The Seven Old Men', '*Ces sept monstres hideux avaient l'air éternel*' ('These seven hideous freaks had a look of eternity about them!').<sup>83</sup> Nor does Warner replicate Baudelaire's departure from 'loathsome things' into phantasmagoria in *Les Fleurs du Mal*: 'everything', the poet-narrator contends in 'The Little Old Woman', 'even horror, turns to magic' ('*Où tout même l'horreur, tourne aux enchantements*') (p. 179). Indeed, the utopian spirit of Benjamin's project – or, indeed, Le Corbusier's modernist architecture – is entirely absent from '*Lutèce, Te Amo*'. There is no prospect that the 'fractures and joins of the everyday' will reveal exciting Surrealist possibilities 'of *what might be*', as in Benjamin's city.<sup>84</sup> Instead, in the epigraph to '*Lutèce, Te Amo*' from Durs Grünbein's 'Europe After The Last Rains', Europe flounders as an unsettling 'dream' of late capitalism (p. 11).

This intensive assimilation of and then 'departure' from modernist forebears does not mean that Warner then strives for the enigmatic sublimity of 'Nervometer', as the first section of '*Lutèce, Te Amo*' demonstrates.<sup>85</sup> In 'Here', pigeons represent the masses, and are associated

with tourist sites in the first arrondissement. Deploying one version of the three words that Warner repeats throughout this sequence in *Pretty* ('*désinvolté*', '*envolver*' and '*in-vólvere*'), the birds are also '*désinvoltés*' (p. 13), parading an 'excessive liberty' (p. 11) as they defecate on the statues of Molière, Voltaire and Joachim Murat.<sup>86</sup> Warner then links these Columbiformes to less 'libertine' outsiders, the peripatetic workers in 'the old slum shacks of the Carrousel': the latter recall Baudelaire's labourers in 'The Swan', who toil in the Carrousel's 'makeshift booths, those piles of rough-hewn capitals and pillars' (p. 175); in '*Lutèce, Te Amo*', the stalls are no sooner 'unwrapped' than 'packed off' north beyond the palace wall (p. 13). Like Benjamin's arcades, the fairground in '*Lutèce, Te Amo*' symbolises a Paris that is about to vanish: similarly, Baudelaire notes the ephemera of the 'makeshift' and 'rough-hewn' in 'The Swan', lamenting that 'The Paris of old is there no more – a city's pattern changes, alas, more swiftly than a human heart' (p. 174); Baudelaire's '*Tableaux parisiens*' track this 'pattern' of disappearing lifeforms and objects. However, Warner's emphasis is on a celebration of liberty in the dissolute form of these 'flying rats', and their iconoclastic defecations. Pigeons let 'piss-shit combos' fall on a representative of revolutionary history (p. 13): Murat was an admiral and Marshal of the Empire during Napoleon's reign. It is no coincidence that the final two statues are themselves iconoclasts: the birds' actions underline Molière's satire of church pieties, and Voltaire's critiques of religious dogma. This demotic of 'piss-shit combos' can be aligned with a desire to *épater les bourgeois* (p. 13), as in Artaud's dismissal of all writing as 'pigshit'.<sup>87</sup> In this section, the repetition of 'I guess' suggests a less revolutionary intertextual link to Larkin's poetry. The second instance of 'I guess' indicates a necessary failure of memory, and act of imagination, as the poet-narrator envisages but cannot vouch for the historical authorities corralling the fairground vendors. In contrast, at the exact moment in which Warner introduces a simile for the first time in the poem and entire collection ('like [...] the old slum shacks'), he simultaneously undermines this metaphorical gesture with poetic insouciance ('I guess'). Warner's phrase recalls Larkin's similar ending to 'Mr Bleaney' ('I don't know') that undercuts the suppositions about the factory worker that Larkin has outlined in the preceding twenty-seven lines.<sup>88</sup> Similarly, the first 'I guess' subverts the putative connection between the libertine pigeons and the slum shacks, just as Larkin betrays his concern that Mr Bleaney may be entirely unlike the vulgar figure he has imagined, who prefers working-class sauce bottles to the more ubiquitous gravy. 'I guess' ('*je suppose*') is not a phrase that one can imagine Artaud deploying, whose emphasis instead is



on iconoclastic overstatement rather than the vacillations over the poetic encountered in the work of Larkin, Paterson and Warner.

In other words, mainstream poetry's suspicion towards the artistic form it purports to celebrate remains an undercurrent in Warner's *oeuvre*. In contrast, part four of '*Lutèce, Te Amo*' returns to an implicit veneration of modernist antecedents peppering the sequence, that is opposed to the perceived vulgarity of 'Continental Culture' (p. 18). In the last chapter, I outlined Brecht's rejection of 'culinary' art, which exists merely for the audience's pleasure rather than mindful engagement: Warner's poet-narrator is trapped between the incessant bells of Notre Dame, and what he perceives as a vulgar repetition of Bach's Toccata. The 'culinary' is then associated with prostitution, as the 'phantasm' ambles to rue Blondel and a young '*putain*': the phrase ('whore' rather than 'prostitute') is reminiscent of Baudelaire's use of '*catin*' in '*Au Lecteur*' to describe an 'old whore' in the first poem of *Les Fleur du Mal*.<sup>89</sup> Warner then associates her with the cheese wrappers of Tommes des Pyrénées and Saint-Marcellins, similarly 'pimped and pressed against the glass' (p. 16), in an implicit attack on commodification that encompasses the 'culinary'. Artaud makes the same link between culture and prostitution when he comments that 'There are those who go to the theatre as they would go to a brothel. Furtive pleasure. For them the theatre is only momentary excitement'.<sup>90</sup> Warner and Artaud focus on the perils of commodification, rather than Baudelaire's moralising about prostitutes in *Les Fleur du Mal*.<sup>91</sup> In part six, Artaud and Brecht's sense that the classics are often merely 'pimped' to an audience desperate for a thrill reaches its apotheosis in Warner's diatribe against 'Continental Culture' that is sustained for thirty-one lines (p. 18).<sup>92</sup> Here, the poet-narrator disdains classical musicians who strive to make their music more palatable to tourists, as well as philistine celebrations of Left Bank establishments such as Les Deux Magots or Café de Flore. Even when 'possessed with a rabid sense of vulgarity', as Buse *et al* put it in *Benjamin's Arcades* (2005), the 'flâneur haunts the streets in search of material' (p. 11): the poet-narrator joins the 'coterie' from Romford, Phoenix and Denver, and winces at the 'culinary' appreciation of the violinists' 'jazz hands', as musicians 'add a little theatre' to 'demanding' music (p. 18). Recalling the tempting cheese wrappers 'pimped' in windows in part four (p. 16), the dangers of accommodating culture are likened to the glass panes of Mulberry, Vuitton and Christian Dior that flank the medieval square where the concert takes place. Subsequently, the 'tainted' music funnels into Left Bank cafes, where trinkets harbour allegedly tempting smears of 'intellectual spunk' that Sartre discharged around the time he wrote the

articles on ethics finally published as *Cahiers pour une morale* (1983) (p. 18).<sup>93</sup> Part six of ‘*Lutèce, Te Amo*’ thus presents élitism, as in ‘*Legare*’, as a necessary virtue in its dismissal of what the neo-modernist poet-narrator, an ‘autocratic Le Corbusian *flâneur*’, perceives as egregious vulgarity and errant philistinism.<sup>94</sup>

### Enigmatical Commitment in ‘Cox’s Bazar’ and *The Caprices*

In *Hello. Your Promise has been Extracted*, Warner quotes – one assumes with approval – Adorno’s statement in *Aesthetic Theory* that by ‘crystallising itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as “socially useful,” [art] criticises society by merely existing’.<sup>95</sup> Throughout this book, I return to Adorno’s conception of enigmaticalness as a form in which art can register its resistance to the ‘reality principle’ (p. 120) and the “socially useful” (p. 226). Poems such as ‘*Lutèce, Te Amo*’ could be argued to oppose ‘existing social norms’ through their endorsement of modernist-influenced writing and their dismissal of ‘Continental Culture’.<sup>96</sup> However, as I noted in Chapter 1, Adorno’s understanding of art in *Aesthetic Theory* does not encompass all instances of literature: despite its underpinning modernist ex-pats, ‘*Lutèce, Te Amo*’ does not comply with the philosopher’s sense that modern art embodies an ‘abstractness’ and ‘irritating indeterminacy’ than distinguishes it from ‘older aesthetic norms’ (pp. 21–2). Moreover, the irony of Adorno’s quotation embedded in *Hello. Your Promise has been Extracted* is that the collection does not resist ‘existing social norms’ or predominant aesthetic expectations in the form of the passages that engage with the implicated subject (p. 226). These sections are the most prosaic in the entire book, as when the poet-narrator refers to the explosion in Tianjin on 12 August 2015: ‘I know you care. I know the effort it takes to forget the river running between Tianjin and Beijing, the corruption of which is utterly complete’ (p. 76).<sup>97</sup> As Adorno stresses in *Aesthetic Theory*, ‘Art holds true to the shudder, but not by regression to it’: literature may ‘merely exist’, but only books that respond adequately to atrocities through their ‘truth content’ can truly, in Adorno’s definition, be referred to as art (p. 118).

In contrast with these passages in *Hello. Your Promise has been Extracted*, the form of the poetry as well as the words’ import in Byrne’s *Places You Leave* offers recourse to the poet-narrator’s provocation in Warner’s collection that there’s ‘nothing you can do – there’s nothing to be done’ (p. 76). As Rothberg notes in *The Implicated Subject*, the temptation is often

towards despair and inaction that 'prop up the structures of inequality that mar the present' (p. 1). On the one hand, the prosaic sentence in *Hello. Your Promise has been Extracted* replicates a platitude about social inertia; but it only does so ironically, as the previous phrase, 'Just a note to softly lull', intimates (p. 76). The implication is that there *is* something to be done, but what this 'is' demands remains unexplored in the matrix of 'indirect, structural, and collective forms of agency that enable injury, exploitation, and domination'.<sup>98</sup> In contrast, Byrne and Shehzar Doja delivered poetry workshops in April 2019 on the work of Eliot, Pound, H. D. and Mina Loy in Cox's Bazar, the world's largest refugee camp.<sup>99</sup> Many of the inhabitants had escaped from the Tatmadaw, the armed forces of Myanmar, and had no formal education. Yet together they produced the poetry anthology *I am a Rohingya: Poetry from the Camps and Beyond* (2019), that was submitted to the evidence at the International Court of Human Rights in The Hague surrounding Aung San Suu Kyi's actions during the atrocities.<sup>100</sup> Nevertheless, the opening poem in *Places You Leave* begins with fragmented ruminations on the failures of 'committed' poetry to respond to the atrocities recounted in *I am a Rohingya*. In 'Cox's Bazar', trauma 'is missing' on the 'blank page', and a mother's letter to a guard about a 'non-trial' is a merely a 'windbreak'.<sup>101</sup>

Enigmatic lines proliferate during this lament for poetry's inefficacy, such as 'Without "art", it's just "he", meaning brother. Come here, brother, but he isn't listening'. These lines do not work in terms of the 'reality principle': even if we appreciate that the first clause links back to 'putting the art back into heart' in a previous line, we do not know exactly what they signify; but this in no way attenuates the affective field of traumatic dissonance.<sup>102</sup> Rather than conceive of his response to the Myanmar massacres in terms of the neo-modernist outsider, Byrne's engagement combines personal recollections of the camp with these allusive and elusive examples of Rohingya testimony: a second-person narrative encapsulates the different perspectives, at the same time as Byrne stresses his 'comfortable seat of western privilege'.<sup>103</sup> Testimony's fractured narratives form the 'Scars of damage and disruption' that are the 'modern's seal of authenticity' in *Aesthetic Theory* (p. 23). However, rather than representing the 'scarred' western subject of post-Holocaust philosophy, the 'fracturedness' of this testimony refers to human rights abuses in Myanmar, and the poet's struggle to assimilate aspects of the survivors' grief into his work (p. 126). Whereas the 'you' in *Hello. Your Promise has been Extracted* wishes to implicate the reader in the poet-narrator's ironic response to implication ('there's nothing you can do' [p. 76]), the second-person narration in 'Cox's Bazar' implores the reader instead to listen carefully to

the testimony, such as the recounting of a brother who ‘ran towards the Tatmadaw, crying “Jayzu, Jayzu”’, and whose subsequent fate is unclear. Thereafter in the poem, the brother’s narrative is compressed into the enigmatic phrase ‘Jahaj of air’: ‘Jahaj’ means ‘ship’ in Bangla; the phrase may refer to the traumatic capture of the brother, his internment in the ‘Jail’ recounted in the next sentence, the anguish of the addressee or the ‘jail of fresh air’ in a poem from *I am a Rohingya* that describes Pacifist Farooq as lost in a ‘dark cosmos’.<sup>104</sup> Such instances of suffering conveyed through this prose poetry are considered at the end of the first page to be ‘bare as a pulse, a knife’ (p. 7). If this simile continues into the next clause, then this writing establishes a vulnerable attempt to engage with the workshop attendees’ mourning, as the next sentence, ‘Siblings in graves’, indicates. However, Byrne then reverses the elusive simile in the next line, so that poem is, subsequently, ‘bare as a knife, a pulse’. This, more redemptive, reading of the testimony and overall poem offers ‘Cox’s Bazar’ as a more potent response to the atrocities, a ‘pulse’ in itself that underscores the Rohingyas’ survival and the possibility of future redress, as with the presentation of the anthology amongst the evidence surrounding Aung San Suu Kyi’s implication in the atrocities.

Yet how are these ambiguities of consolation contested in the enigmatic lines of fractured testimony, and the puzzle of the poem as a knife or ‘pulse’? In the tradition of the elegy, reparations of form are always implicated in an economy of suffering. The beginning of ‘Cox’s Bazar’ alludes to one of Pound’s Cantos (CXVI) when the poet-narrator complains that ‘you’, rather than the modernist poet’s work, ‘would like to cohere’ (p. 7): the elegiac irony here is that the traumatised writer or anguished interlocutor may not ‘cohere’, but the poem as a whole certainly does with its terse yet elusive sentences.<sup>105</sup> Attentive to the long history of compromised solace in the elegy, James notes that modernist forms are especially potent and fraught in their engagement with the iterations of trauma: ‘Consolation for modernism [...] is often legible—and controversial—in works whose ruptured forms draw energy and articulacy from traumatic, sorrowful, or foreboding situations that seem beyond the textual representation, let alone recovery’.<sup>106</sup> Indeed, there has been a critical ‘turn’ against the seeming inextricability of modernist legacies and trauma fiction since the publication of Roger Luckhurst’s *The Trauma Question* (2008): other literary forms, such as realism, are clearly efficacious in dealing with traumatic experiences. Yet this critical development risks occluding Adorno’s conception of the ‘truth content’ of a work of art to make a (true) point about the capaciousness of literary form.<sup>107</sup> In *Discrepant Solace*, James stresses that the heightened ‘expressive vigour’ of modernist – and, by extension, metamodernist – works of literature risks ‘giving the appearance of

form parrying the traumas they dramatize—turning the pathetic consolations of precarious continuity into the aesthetically thrilling consolations of linguistic redress' (p. 27). An 'expressive vigour', the 'in-itself' of poetry, or what Eliot terms 'concentration', certainly predominates in 'Cox's Bazar', as opposed to the prosaic passages about implication in *Hello. Your Promise has been Extracted*.<sup>108</sup>

However, maybe Warner wishes precisely to circumvent 'aesthetically thrilling consolation' through the 'deaestheticization' of poetry.<sup>109</sup> This might be the case, were it not for an 'expressive vigour' straining underneath the prose, as when the poet-narrator in *Hello. Your Promise has been Extracted* characterises the world as 'a writhing slaughterhouse of blood and garbage' (p. 76), an image akin to that of the globe 'flapping its bandages' in 'Cox's Bazar'. In contrast, the puzzle of the lines about the poem as a knife or pulse in Byrne's poem resist the 'thrilling consolation' of form by endorsing elegiac redress and fallibility at the same time: the poem is a 'weapon' against trauma – like the '100 poets in English' that the poet-narrator 'reloads' for the workshops – but also a useless 'windbreak' (p. 7).<sup>110</sup> Subsequently, such ruminations on the testimonial qualities and drawbacks of the poetry develop into the conflicted ending to the first part of the poem, with its re-writing of the Orpheus myth in 'Cox's Bazar'. Wary of his adjudication on this fractured testimony, the poet-narrator rejects any concept of himself as an orphic, 'eternal traveller'; a 'centre' that 'does not hold', in a gesture towards W. B. Yeats's 'The Second Coming'.<sup>111</sup> If the Yeats reference still appertains to the next sentence, 'To think of poetry as orphic' also 'does not hold': testimonial poetry such as 'Cox's Bazar' may not be mellifluous, entrancing or mystic in this understanding of 'orphic', but there is nevertheless a productive awkwardness in the dissonant fragments and macaronic style that arise out of traumatic events (p. 7).

These cautious, ambivalent and enigmatic poetics in 'Cox's Bazar' continue, to an extent, in Byrne's engagement with the repercussions of austerity and maximalist politics in *The Caprices*. However, although the collection contains enigmatical lines such as the 'hissing face, chained | to sleep in a star's coda' in '*The sleep of reason produces monsters*', and 'treasures buried under numerals' in '*Why hide them?*', the emphasis in *The Caprices* is often on 'committed' responses to contemporary crises in the context of Goya's perplexing images.<sup>112</sup> In *Hello. Your Promise has been Extracted*, the passage in which Warner engages with the implicated subject and declares 'there's nothing to be done' (p. 76) is followed by a section (III) that recounts the impact of austerity in Greece during the Eurozone crisis: Athens comprises a city of riots, police brutality, random shootings and

insalubrious neighbourhoods. This section contains the quotation from *Aesthetic Theory*: as with my critique above of Warner's passages about implication, the segment does not 'crystallise' into 'something unique to itself' (p. 92) due to its prosaic form in which he recalls a café owner's expletive, inebriated anarchists and a girl asking for directions: 'From behind the girl's trousers flaunt four tiny stitches of white thread below the waistband, announcing their four-figure price tag' (p. 88). For Adorno, the 'in-itself' of a work of art, the dialectic between form and content, is much more important – as in his critique of 'commitment' – than the artwork's 'message' (p. 125). Rather than asking 'What is it all about?', the critic's main question should be 'Is it true?' (p. 127); the 'facture' of the artwork (p. 129), the quality of its artistic execution, should be the author's priority. In contrast with the prosaic passages in *Hello. Your Promise has been Extracted* that present a litany of traumatic experiences, from the explosion in Tianjin to the impact of austerity in Greece, the 'facture' of *The Caprices* consists of terse and sometimes ambivalent responses to structural violence in Goya's images from *Los Caprichos* (1799). 'Why hide them?', for example, presents alternative readings of Goya's apparent diatribe against greed:

To avarice pocketing a pouch sack.  
 To treasures buried under numerals.  
 Money disappears into haircracks  
 like a lizard scuttling into a wall.  
 Old man, face wracked by the sea,  
 buried under this Great Depression.  
 Living alack, what's owed is illusory.  
 The banker smirks like a sovereign. (p. 51)

Initially, the poem follows the interlocution indicated by the title: four figures at the back of the image, identified as bankers, laugh at the monk in the foreground, who forlornly attempts to hoard his money. The ironical toast suggested in Byrne's first preposition ('Here's to . . .') clearly denounces the avaricious figure 'pocketing a pouch sack'. Emphasised by the metrical breaks in the first line, the poet notes that Goya's careful positioning of the money bags in relation to the main figure's body indicate that, for the monk, the relinquishment of the money amounts to castration.

The enigmatic line that follows appears to relate to the monk's greed, as 'treasures' are 'buried under numerals': his money may be concealed in that it forms an integral part of the 'numerals', but it may also be 'hidden' from the figures in the sense of stashed away, in an action akin to those of

unscrupulous financial advisors. At the same time, Byrne begins to draw attention to the ambiguous process of identification in Goya's print.<sup>113</sup> The banker-figures could be accused of greed as much as the monk: in lines that appertain to the financial crisis of 2008 and subsequent austerity, the poet-narrator notes that money begins to disappear into 'hair-cracks | like a lizard scuttling into a wall'; skilled financiers are also those who can squirrel away money 'under numerals' (p. 51). Unusually for the satirical *Los Caprichos* sequence, the viewer's sympathy is directed away from, as well as towards, the 'victim', whose bowed head is positioned in the centre of the frame. In a sense, the real casualties, the destitute who suffer from the avarice of the religious hoarders and bankers, are absent from the frame. Attentive to these visual ambiguities, Byrne then directs the reader's empathy in the rest of the poem towards the monk, the 'Old man', whose face is 'wracked by the sea', and the anguish in divulging his savings.<sup>114</sup> The repetition of 'buried' in line six stresses that the monk – and, by extension, the reader – is a victim of wider financial pressures. In the last line, Byrne refers to the most prominent banker on the right-hand side of Goya's frame, who 'smirks like a sovereign' (a coin or ruler). The reversal of identification is complete in the poem, as the closure suggests that 'sovereign debt' is, in some senses, 'illusory', since the reader, like the monk, is implicated in a financial system of ubiquitous credit, 'buried under numerals' (p. 51).

Byrne and Warner are thus responding to similar historical events in *Hello. Your Promise has been Extracted* and *The Caprices* – in this instance, the financial crisis and subsequent austerity – but with vastly different artistic 'factures'.<sup>115</sup> Similarly, in 'The sleep of reason produces monsters' from *The Caprices* we are presented with an enraged response to the European Union. Akin to the Greek café owner in Warner's book who suddenly rages against the Eurozone ('*Fuck the Germans*') (p. 82), a man is 'hissing' into a mirror in *The Caprices* (p. 64) in a markedly different cultural context:

Now that the state legitimates hate,  
a wakeful trump of doom thunders  
valley deep (where are the Blakes  
and Miltons now?) Crisis of mirrors  
where my neighbour reasons only  
with himself: a hissing face, chained  
to sleep in a star's coda. A fantasy  
that whatever is pure is ENGLAND (p. 64).<sup>116</sup>



As Byrne recounts in the introduction to his collection, *The Caprices* ‘was written during times of increased polarisation in Europe, when political events like BREXIT were painfully debated’: this poem from *The Caprices* ‘was written on the day of Britain’s EU referendum’ (p. 18). The opening line is prescient in that it anticipates President Trump’s response to the ‘Unite the Right’ rally in August 2017: despite the presence of white supremacists at the event, and the murder of Heather Heyer, he commented that ‘very fine people on both sides’ were involved.<sup>117</sup> Goya’s title for the most well-known image in *Los Caprichos* contains an enigma that impacts on any potential response to Trump’s infelicities. If reason metaphorically ‘sleeps’, does it produce monsters by neglecting to pay heed to, in this instance, the rise of alt-right politics? Or does ‘real’ sleep in Goya’s title engender fantastical creatures that have somehow – as a counterpoint to reason – transferred fantasy into the political arena? With a pun on John Milton’s line ‘A wakeful trump of doom must thunder through the deep’ from ‘On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity’, the poet-narrator indicates that both possibilities appertain in Trump’s assemblage of alt-right desires and fantasies into political concretion.<sup>118</sup> Byrne’s ‘sleep’ also echoes P. B. Shelley’s response to Peterloo in ‘The Masque of Anarchy’, that citizens must ‘Rise like Lions after slumber’ in the wake of such governmental atrocities.<sup>119</sup> The elusive image of the ‘crisis of mirrors’ denotes, perhaps, a calamity of entrenched and bifurcated politics in which a neighbour ‘reasons only | with himself, akin to the ‘no-name couple’ in *Withdrawals* who hoist the national flag ‘as if [their house] were a consulate’ (p. 64).<sup>120</sup> This serpent-like character is ‘hissing’ and ‘chained | to sleep in a star’s coda’, that recalls Satan ‘Chained on the burning Lake’ in *Paradise Lost*.<sup>121</sup> In Byrne’s enigmatic image, the ‘star’ is likely to appertain to the ‘star’ of popular culture in this poem, Donald Trump: the president’s irrational politics – as the poet-narrator regards them – have hypnotised the neighbour, who needs to be ‘awakened’ by reason, but remains stubbornly ‘chained’ to the constant reprisal (‘coda’) of Trump’s maximalist politics (p. 64). In an angry retort to the ‘hate’ that begins the poem, the poet-narrator alludes to the politics of race that are, for him, ‘chained’ to Brexit: the last line emphasises the fantasy of a ‘pure’ England denuded of immigrants.

### The Enigmas of Open Form: ‘Historia’ and ‘6’

The simmering resentment at bifurcated politics in ‘*The sleep of reason produces monsters*’ thus strives to create something ‘unique to itself’ in

poetry that is attentive to the enigma of Goya's original image.<sup>122</sup> In 'Historia' from *White Coins*, the allusive and elusive responses to atrocity, austerity and polarised politics outlined in 'Cox's Bazar' and *The Caprices* switch to the more personal context of the poet's childhood, and a 'fracturedness' in which the poet-narrator recalls being 'bombarded' with an 'impulse | of survival'.<sup>123</sup> 'Historia' can refer to an 'investigation, inquiry, research, account, description, written account of past events, writing of history, historical narrative', but the stable signification indicated in this diction is undercut by the poem's fragmented narrative.<sup>124</sup> The trajectories specified in the epigraph, 'moving on or going back to where you came from' (p. 11), are evident throughout the poem: 'Historia' portrays a return to (for the reader) puzzling events, and – as in 'Cox's Bazar' – a potentially redemptive transition away from this traumatic past. Akin to the 'dialysis of rain | inside a garden well' (p. 14), the imaginative return to childhood suggests a form of purging, as unnerving images as 'toxins' are pored over and expunged. This process, as with the rain and dialysis, is repeated: the disconcerting images reprove any possibility of the 'aesthetically thrilling consolations of linguistic redress', as in the isolated and unexplained line 'merely to show up'.<sup>125</sup> Discomfiture is registered in the first line of the poem, as 'sharp toys' give way to a 'field zesty with fire' (p. 11). In one sense, the latter image registers 'expressive vigour' through poetic synaesthesia that combines the sunset with its supposed 'taste'.<sup>126</sup> On the other hand, the 'field zesty with fire' links with the more unsettling image later in the poem of the 'naphtha mirage | over the wheatfield' (p. 13). This depiction of a shimmering sunset as flammable oil connects with the unsettling domestic scene on the same page in which the poet-narrator is 'cupping at the curtain frame | fearful of fire | on the domestic zodiac'; moreover, the mother figure is 'admonished' at the 'fire-grate' with a passive verb that suggests understatement (p. 14).

These fractured images form the 'hieroglyphs' that Adorno discusses in *Aesthetic Theory* (p. 124), a 'remainder' of enigmatic and unexplained images that explore, in 'Historia', a sense of constant edginess (p. 121). In a singular description of the poet's 'lightly strung' nerves and aesthetic sensibilities, the poet-narrator becomes a six-year-old child 'made of violins' who is 'stumped' by the 'metronomic light': the reader encounters a striking yet also puzzling image that hints at the signified (intermittent or diurnal light beams) but which is not, in Adorno's phrase, strictly 'decodable' (p. 12). Associated with liminal objects in the house such as window frames, the poet-narrator is 'on the edge', with 'blackish fingernails | from



simile of the poet-narrator writing 'like an unarmed gunsler in plain sight' appears to jar, but only if the expectation is a rational account of elusive art.<sup>128</sup> The collocation 'gunsler' fuses 'gonsel' – a criminal carrying a gun – and 'gunslinger': the poet-narrator's writing of the letter and the poem are potentially incendiary but also hopelessly exposed acts (p. 12). After all, it is impossible to be a 'gonsel' without a gun: the intimation perhaps is that narrator's anger remains unassuaged apart from in the context of the enigmatic poem. Any redress to the relative's last letter, 'like someone divided at birth', occurs through metaphor: the latter is a 'convict', with a 'cashier's head for business'. Subsequently, in the most memorable image in the poem, the poet-narrator asks, 'What kind of meat have you cooked into now?' Byrne deploys a Célinian metaphor of humans as decaying carcasses that we have already encountered in Warner's 'Métro', and adds the tropological piquancy of 'cooked' to suggest, in another example of 'off-key' eloquence, that the family member has somehow hardened into a well-done 'meathead'.<sup>129</sup> A neo-modernist distancing from the subject, as in 'Métro', potentially enters the poem when the poet-narrator retorts 'As if you never asked what consciousness is made from', but the subjunctive suggests that they may well once have engaged in such philosophical rumination, and the accusation is dispelled in the sibling's attempt to 'absolve' himself 'under the sun'. The last five lines then conclude with an inditement of the character's inability to distinguish conversation from the discourse of business: he remains 'Consistent as a coin | in the rust of empire' (p. 12); this perplexing simile suggests indefatigability despite economic and historical restrictions, as in the money 'scuttling into cracks' during financial crises in 'Why hide them?' from *The Caprices* (p. 51). In a final, irrational statement that incorporates the irrationality of constant haggling, the poet-narrator announces that the family member would 'bid for the wind | if [they] knew where it lived' (p. 12).

### The 'Chanel' Poet versus the 'Innovative'

My analysis of these elusive allegories in *White Coins* and *Withdrawals* might suggest that Byrne's metamodernist poems should be considered solely within the remit of 'innovative' poetry. 'Inclub Satires' from *Blood/Sugar* complements this association: the sequence forms a riotous admonishment of the mainstream poetry scene, depicting gratuitous posturing, artistic self-congratulation and indulgence in insubstantial glitz. In his review of the collection, Paul Stubbs concurs with the 'necessary,

devastating and much needed wake-up call for those still deluding themselves that British poetry is in a healthy state. Byrne hurls his pen like a spanner into the clunking machinery of this lie'.<sup>130</sup> 'Inclub Satires' certainly undercuts writerly fatuities, such as tired assertions during 'Q&A' sessions ('*It just came to me*'); the 'Egg Head' in Ted Hughes's 'Famous Poet' becomes '*The Combover*', the 'hard-boiled topper' who considers his artistic legacy more than his poetry, that consists of 'familiar orchestral gesturings'.<sup>131</sup> Addressed to Pound, the first poem in the sequence begins with a mainstream poet depicted as a sexual predator, a more dangerous version of Hughes's ageing rhymester, who abuses his fame to molest 'like a young rooster'; he is transformed into a grotesque combination of a Tiny-Tears doll and a louche swaggerer in his 'gastric-sagging suit' (p. 70). The prize-winning ceremony of the Jeffrey Deamer Prize is satirised as 'The Dreamer Prize', a 'vernal farce': Byrne transfers Pound's admonition of his supposed friend's '*malignant buncomb*' in a review of his Cavalcanti translations to the prize-winner.<sup>132</sup> In a costume of useless ornamentation, the 'porcelain apple' of the 'Chanel poet' then 'cares to market absolute clarity | and so, says nothing of minor importance' (p. 71). In adhering to the discursive, the 'Chanel poet' 'de-aestheticises' poetry in a way that means that the Dreamer Prize rewards literature that is, ironically, not actually a work of art in the context of *Aesthetic Theory*, but the attenuated legacy, according to the narrator, of 'Larkin' and his 'limpet-clinging proxy-squad' (p. 78). In part two of the sequence, Byrne proceeds to contrast 'Q&A' clichés with more elusive poetics that chafe against the underlying banalities, with lines such as 'Spoilbank of domesticity, inspiration a spiderplot | *It leapt up and said WRITE ME! A complete ambush*' (p. 72).

However, despite this diatribe against mainstream poetry in 'Inclub Satires', the form of Byrne's writing often indicates poetics shifting between the categories of mainstream and 'innovative' writing. In *The Caprices*, for example, Byrne deploys the basic structure of iambic pentameter in order to emphasise numerous subtle divergences, such as the '**pouch sack**' in '*Why hide them?*' that stresses the impotence of the avaricious monk (p. 51): such metrical intricacy is comparable to the deft switches in rhythm and emphasis that I analysed in the last chapter in relation to Hill's *Scenes from Comus*. In contrast, Warner's mainstream poetics consists of his iconoclastic deployment of Paterson's demotic and Larkinesque insouciance, rather than Byrne's assimilation of rhythmical dexterity. Yet Bloodaxe's championing of Warner's supposedly 'public' poetry is not straightforward: the editor Neil Astley has

stated in a documentary that he wishes to publish 'poets who've been around for some time, but haven't had the readership which their work deserves', as the camera pans across collections by Peter Didsbury and B. S. Johnson's *House Mother Normal* (1971).<sup>133</sup> There is an inevitable tension between a desire to publish neglected poetry influenced by modernism alongside 'accessible' poets. With its intricate collage and creative translation of Artaud's enigmatical *Le Pèse-Nerfs*, Warner's 'Nervometer' can hardly be considered to be 'public' poetry in the sense Paterson outlines in *New British Poetry*, that has an 'intolerance to ambiguity' and an antipathy towards that which is 'not strictly definable'.<sup>134</sup> Yet Warner and Byrne are 'cusp' poets in markedly different ways. Byrne's metamodernist writing is primarily concerned with elusive poetics that aspire to a 'zone of indeterminacy' where poetry 'await[s] its interpretation' (p. 128). In contrast, despite his engagement with modernist antecedents in a more explicit way than Byrne – as in 'Métro' – Warner's writing often draws back from the enigmatic: as Adorno argues in *Aesthetic Theory*, it is exactly the responses of those who flinch from art that emphasise the potential of an artwork's enigma (p. 119).

Apart from the notable exception of 'Nervometer', Warner's abstaining from enigmatical poetics thus indicates the limitations of any version of metamodernism that relies solely on 'the importance of the relation of the poem to other poems by other authors'.<sup>135</sup> This capacious model of metamodernism focuses on the authorial manipulation of prior ingredients rather than the formal qualities of the resultant texts. Julian Barnes's *A Sense of an Ending* (2011), Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012) and Tom McCarthy's *C* (2010) have been utilised as examples of metamodernist fiction: the first two novels are examples of 'experimental fiction shaped by an aesthetics of discontinuity, nonlinearity, interiority and chronological play'.<sup>136</sup> Yet all these novels draw primarily on the legacies of nineteenth-century realism rather than the revolutions in form of early twentieth-century modernism. Mirroring the conservative nature of the form of Barnes's novel, the protagonist Tony Webster compares himself on several occasions to Larkin, the *enfant terrible* of mainstream poetry for the narrator of 'Inclub Satires'.<sup>137</sup> Smith's concrete poem about an apple tree ('Apple tree, apple tree | Thing that has apples on it. Apple blossom') and stream-of-consciousness narrative at the beginning of *NW* is striking in its brevity compared to the overall neo-realist narrative, and cannot help come across as a tokenistic engagement with the legacies of modernism compared to the work of

poets such as Hill and Prynne.<sup>138</sup> In contrast, throughout this book I have outlined a form of writing in which authors engage with modernist antecedents but also, as with Warner's 'Nervometer' and Byrne's open form writing, produce enigmatic poetry that remains a 'question mark', a 'constitutive darkening' that is not undercut by insouciance, or embarrassment that art remains a vexation.<sup>139</sup>