



NEO-MODERNISM AND METAMODERNISM: THE RETURN OF FORMAL EXPERIMENTATION IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY BRITISH FICTION

Avksentieva G. A.

*Candidate of Philological Sciences,
Associate Professor at the Department of Ukrainian and Foreign Literature
South Ukrainian National Pedagogical University
named after K. D. Ushynskyy
Staroportofrankivska str., 26, Odesa, Ukraine
orcid.org/0000-0001-7767-540X
avksentevag@gmail.com*

Key words: *neo-modernism,
metamodernism, British fiction,
formal experimentation, literary
periodisation, stream-of-
consciousness, fragmentation,
metafiction, contemporary novel.*

Contemporary British fiction exhibits a remarkable revival of modernist experimental techniques, prompting scholarly debates about whether this represents neo-modernism, metamodernism, or an entirely new aesthetic formation. This research examines how twenty-first-century British writers, including A. Smith, T. McCarthy, Z. Smith, D. Mitchell, and E. McBride, employ fragmentation, stream-of-consciousness, metafiction, and temporal dislocation – formal strategies associated with canonical modernism – while engaging distinctively contemporary concerns, including digital culture, globalisation, climate crisis, and post-truth epistemology. Through close analysis of representative novels published 2000 – 2025, this study identifies both continuities with historical modernism and significant departures that distinguish contemporary experimentation. The research demonstrates that while neo-modernist writers revive modernist techniques, they do so self-consciously, with an ironic awareness unavailable to the original modernists, creating palimpsestic texts that simultaneously invoke and distance themselves from modernist precedents. This doubled relationship – reverence and critique, inheritance and innovation – characterises what theorists term metamodernism: an oscillation between modernist formal rigour and postmodernist irony that refuses to settle into either position definitively. By analysing how formal experimentation serves contemporary political and ethical commitments rather than aesthetic autonomy for its own sake, this analysis contributes to emerging scholarship on twenty-first-century literary form while challenging narratives that position postmodernism as the definitive endpoint of experimental fiction.

НЕОМОДЕРНІЗМ І МЕТАМОДЕРНІЗМ: ПОВЕРНЕННЯ ФОРМАЛЬНИХ ЕКСПЕРИМЕНТІВ У БРИТАНСЬКІЙ БЕЛЕТРИСТИЦІ ХХІ СТОЛІТТЯ

Авксентьєва Г. А.

кандидат філологічних наук,

доцент кафедри української та зарубіжної літератур

ДЗ «Південноукраїнський національний педагогічний університет
імені К. Д. Ушинського»

вул. Старопортофранківська, 26, Одеса, Україна

orcid.org/0000-0001-7767-540X

filologia@pdpu.edu.ua

Ключові слова: *неомодернізм, метамодернізм, британська художня література, формальне експериментування, літературна періодизація, потік свідомості, фрагментація, метафікція, сучасний роман.*

Сучасна британська художня література демонструє різке відродження модерністських експериментальних технік, що спонукає наукові дискусії щодо того, чи це являє собою неомодернізм, метамодернізм чи цілком нову естетичну формацію. Це дослідження розглядає, як британські письменники ХХІ століття, включаючи А. Сміта, Т. Маккарті, З. Сміта, Д. Мітчелла та Е. Макбрайда, використовують фрагментацію, потік свідомості, метафікцію та часову дислокацію – формальні стратегії, пов'язані з канонічним модернізмом, – водночас зачіпаючи характерні сучасні проблеми, включаючи цифрову культуру, глобалізацію, кліматичну кризу та епістемологію постправди. Завдяки ретельному аналізу репрезентативних романів, опублікованих у 2000 – 2025 роках, це дослідження визначає як спадкоємність з історичним модернізмом, так і значні відхилення, що відрізняють сучасне експериментування. Дослідження демонструє, що хоча письменники-неомодерністи відроджують модерністські техніки, вони роблять це свідомо, з іронічним усвідомленням, недоступним для оригінальних модерністів, створюючи палімпсестичні тексти, які одночасно закликають до модерністських прецедентів та дистанціюються від них. Цей подвійний зв'язок – шанування та критика, успадкування та новаторство – характеризує те, що теоретики називають метамодернізмом: коливання між модерністською формальною суворістю та постмодерністською іронією, яка відмовляється остаточно закріпитися в будь-якій з цих позицій. Аналізуючи, як формальне експериментування служить сучасним політичним та етичним зобов'язанням, а не естетичній автономії заради самого себе, цей аналіз робить внесок у нові дослідження літературної форми ХХІ століття, водночас кидаючи виклик наративам, які позиціонують постмодернізм як остаточно кінцеву точку експериментальної художньої літератури.

Introduction. The twenty-first century has witnessed an unexpected renaissance of formal experimentation in British fiction, reviving techniques associated with canonical modernism, including fragmentation, stream-of-consciousness, temporal disruption, and metafictional self-reflexivity. This revival complicates literary historical narratives that positioned postmodernism as a definitive break from modernist aesthetics, followed by a return to traditional realism in the contemporary period. Instead, writers including Ali Smith (2016), Tom McCarthy (2005), Zadie Smith (2000), David Mitchell (2004), and Eimear McBride (2013) demonstrate that modernist formal strategies remain vital resources for engaging with contemporary experience, though

deployed toward different ends and with self-conscious awareness of their historical status, which creates ironic distance from original modernist projects.

This phenomenon has generated scholarly terminology to capture its distinctive character. Neo-modernism suggests direct continuation or revival of modernist aesthetics, emphasising formal similarities while potentially underplaying historical differences. Metamodernism, coined by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker (2010), describes cultural logic characterised by oscillation between modernist sincerity and postmodernist irony, neither fully embracing nor completely rejecting either position. Late modernism, proposed by Tyrus Miller (1999) and others, identifies experimental writing continu-

ing modernist projects well into the postwar period, blurring supposedly clear boundaries between modernism and postmodernism. These competing terms reflect genuine uncertainty about how to periodize and characterise contemporary experimental fiction.

This research examines contemporary British fiction's relationship to modernist precedents through close formal analysis of representative novels, investigating both technical similarities and crucial differences. The study focuses specifically on British fiction to maintain historical and cultural coherence while recognising that similar phenomena occur in other national literatures. British modernism's particular character – its relationship to empire, its engagement with Irish and Scottish literary traditions, its class politics – creates a specific context for understanding contemporary British writers' engagement with modernist inheritance. The analysis examines how postcolonial critique, feminist politics, digital culture, and climate consciousness inflect contemporary deployment of modernist formal strategies, demonstrating that form never exists autonomously but always serves specific cultural work.

By situating contemporary experimental fiction within longer trajectories of British literary history while attending to its distinctive twenty-first-century characteristics, this research contributes to emerging scholarship on literary periodisation, the politics of form, and relationships between aesthetic innovation and cultural change. The analysis challenges both nostalgic celebrations of modernist revival and dismissive characterisations of contemporary experimentation as derivative pastiche, instead examining how formal innovation remains possible after postmodernism through strategic recombination of inherited techniques with new concerns and contexts.

Results and Findings. Understanding contemporary experimental fiction requires examining debates over literary periodisation and the temporal boundaries of modernism. Traditional literary history positioned modernism as an early twentieth-century phenomenon roughly spanning 1890-1940, superseded by postmodernism beginning mid-century and continuing through the twentieth century's end. This narrative suggested a linear progression where postmodernism's ironic playfulness and rejection of grand narratives definitively broke with modernist seriousness and formal innovation. However, this clean periodisation increasingly appears inadequate to describe the messier realities of actual literary production.

Tyrus Miller's concept of late modernism challenges clear modernism-postmodernism boundaries by identifying writers, including S. Beckett, W. Burroughs, and V. Nabokov, as continuing modernist experimental projects well into the supposed postmodern period. Late modernism's characteristics – extreme formal fragmentation, paranoid epistemol-

ogy, dark pessimism – differ from high modernism's qualified optimism about aesthetic redemption while maintaining commitment to formal innovation. This concept suggests modernism never cleanly ended but evolved into darker, more sceptical forms that resist easy categorisation as either modernist or postmodernist [Miller, 1999].

Metamodernism theory, developed by T. Vermeulen and R. van den Akker, proposes that contemporary culture oscillates between modernist enthusiasm and postmodernist irony, without definitively settling into either position [Vermeulen & Akker, 2010]. Rather than synthesis that resolves tensions, metamodernism describes perpetual movement between poles – sincerity and scepticism, construction and deconstruction, hope and melancholy. Applied to literature, metamodernism suggests that contemporary experimental fiction simultaneously invokes modernist formal strategies and maintains postmodern distance, creating productive instability rather than a stable aesthetic position.

The politics of form proves crucial for understanding contemporary experimentation. While modernist aesthetics often emphasised autonomy – art for art's sake – contemporary experimental fiction typically serves explicit political purposes, including feminist critique, postcolonial resistance, anti-capitalist analysis, and environmental advocacy. This instrumental deployment of experimental form differs from modernist aestheticism while maintaining commitment to formal innovation as an essential rather than optional dimension of political literature. Understanding this shift requires examining how specific formal choices enable particular political interventions.

Fragmentation constitutes perhaps the most recognisable modernist technique revived in contemporary fiction, manifesting through discontinuous narratives, abrupt shifts in perspective, temporal dislocation, and resistance to unified plot structure. However, contemporary fragmentation differs from modernist precedents in crucial ways, particularly regarding attitude toward fragmentation's meaning and political implications. Where modernist fragmentation often expressed cultural crisis while implicitly seeking aesthetic unity that might compensate for social disorder, contemporary fragmentation frequently embraces multiplicity without nostalgia for lost wholeness, reflecting postmodern acceptance of permanent plurality.

Analysis reveals that contemporary fragmentation typically serves explicit political or ethical purposes rather than expressing alienation or pursuing aesthetic autonomy. The fragments often create unexpected connections rather than emphasising disconnection, suggesting possibilities for solidarity and collective action despite apparent social fragmentation. This instrumental deployment of experimental form dis-

tinguishes contemporary from modernist aesthetics while maintaining commitment to formal innovation as politically necessary rather than mere stylistic choice.

The stream-of-consciousness technique, pioneered by modernists such as Woolf and Joyce to represent unmediated mental experience, appears frequently in contemporary experimental fiction. However, contemporary deployment often carries scepticism about transparent access to consciousness that modernists more readily assumed. Where modernist stream-of-consciousness implied depth psychology and authentic interiority beneath social masks, contemporary versions frequently emphasise how consciousness itself is socially constructed, mediated by language and ideology, rather than offering direct access to essential selfhood.

Contemporary stream-of-consciousness frequently incorporates digital media's influence on consciousness, representing how contemporary subjectivity is shaped by constant connectivity, information overload, and attention fragmentation. Characters' thoughts are interrupted by text messages, social media feeds, and digital notifications, creating a consciousness that differs from modernist interiority's relative isolation from such technological mediation. This represents formal innovation addressing twenty-first-century conditions rather than merely repeating modernist techniques in unchanged form. The technique also addresses collective rather than individual consciousness more frequently than modernist precedents do. Where modernist stream-of-consciousness emphasised individual psychological uniqueness, contemporary versions often explore how personal consciousness connects to collective experience through shared cultural references, political events, and social movements. This shift reflects contemporary emphasis on social construction of subjectivity and political solidarity over modernist individualism.

Temporal disruption – violation of linear chronology through flashbacks, flashforwards, circular structures, and simultaneity – constitutes another modernist technique revived in contemporary fiction. However, contemporary temporal experimentation often addresses specifically twenty-first-century concerns, including the long duration of the climate crisis, digital media's temporal compression, and globalisation's synchronisation of distant events. Where modernist temporal innovation questioned clock time in favour of subjective psychological time, contemporary versions frequently address how multiple temporalities – geological deep time, digital instantaneity, historical memory – coexist and clash in modern experience.

Climate fiction's temporal innovations represent a particularly distinctive contemporary development

without a clear modernist precedent. Writers address climate change's temporal complexity – how present emissions determine future warming while current impacts result from past carbon releases – through narrative structures that collapse distinctions between past, present, and future. This temporal entanglement reflects the climate crisis's actual temporal characteristics rather than only serving aesthetic purposes, demonstrating how formal innovation responds to specific contemporary challenges.

Digital media's influence on temporal experience shapes contemporary temporal experimentation. The continuous presence of social media feeds, the collapsing of temporal distance in digital archives, and the internet's enabling of instantaneous global communication create temporal experiences that differ from those of the modernist period. Contemporary novels represent these digital temporalities through rapid cutting between scenes, incorporation of social media content, and characters experiencing multiple temporal streams simultaneously through devices.

Metafictional self-consciousness – texts commenting on their own construction – connects contemporary fiction to both modernist self-awareness and postmodern playfulness while differing from both. Modernist metafiction typically addressed philosophical questions about the possibility of representation, while postmodern metafiction emphasised textuality and rejected depth in favour of surface play. Contemporary metafiction often combines these approaches with explicit political content, using self-reflexivity to examine power relations in representation and the political stakes of storytelling.

Contemporary metafiction frequently addresses questions of cultural memory and historical representation, examining whose stories get told and whose remain marginalised. By foregrounding narrative construction, these texts make visible power relations in storytelling rather than naturalising particular versions of history or identity. This political deployment of metafictional technique differs from both modernist philosophical inquiry and postmodern playfulness by explicitly connecting formal self-consciousness to questions of justice and representation.

Linguistic experimentation – violation of standard grammar, syntax, and vocabulary – connects contemporary fiction to modernist language innovation while often serving different purposes. Modernist linguistic experimentation frequently pursued aesthetic goals of making language fresh or representing consciousness more accurately. Contemporary experimentation often serves explicitly political purposes, including feminist critique of patriarchal language, postcolonial resistance to colonial linguistic domination, and representation of marginalised experiences that standard language inadequately captures.

Contemporary writers also experiment with incorporating multiple languages, dialects, and registers within a single text, representing the linguistic diversity of modern Britain. This multilingualism differs from modernist experimentation by explicitly addressing postcolonial conditions and resisting monolingual nationalist narratives. The linguistic mixture creates formal innovation while serving the political purpose of representing actually existing diversity against reactionary fantasies of linguistic homogeneity.

Digital language's influence appears in contemporary fiction through the incorporation of text message grammar, emoji use, hashtags, and internet slang. This represents formal innovation addressing how digital communication transforms language rather than merely repeating modernist linguistic experimentation. Contemporary writers must navigate between literary language's traditional resources and digital communication's new forms, creating hybrid languages appropriate to twenty-first-century conditions.

Perhaps the most significant distinction between contemporary experimental fiction and modernist precedents involves attitude toward politics and social engagement. While modernist aesthetics often emphasised art's autonomy from political concerns – art for art's sake – contemporary experimental fiction typically serves explicit political purposes. Formal innovation is understood as politically necessary rather than pure aesthetic choice, with experimental techniques enabling political insights and interventions that conventional realism cannot achieve. This instrumental view of experimental form differs fundamentally from modernist aestheticism.

Feminist politics shapes much contemporary experimentation, with women writers employing formal innovation to critique patriarchal narrative structures and create alternative possibilities for representing female experience. E. McBride's syntactic violations, D. Levy's fragmented autobiography, and A. Smith's temporal fluidity all serve feminist purposes of disrupting patriarchal narrative conventions while creating new forms adequate to women's experiences. This demonstrates how feminist politics requires formal innovation rather than accepting inherited forms that encode male perspectives.

Postcolonial critique inflects contemporary experimentation by attending to how colonialism shapes narrative forms and whose stories the dominant culture legitimises. Contemporary writers employ fragmentation, multiple perspectives, and linguistic hybridity to resist colonial narrative structures while representing postcolonial subjects' complex relationships to colonial languages and literary traditions. This political dimension of formal choice distinguishes contemporary from modernist experimenta-

tion while connecting to postcolonial theory's emphasis on form's political implications.

Climate crisis increasingly shapes formal innovation as writers develop narrative strategies adequate to representing unprecedented ecological transformation. Temporal experimentation addressing climate change's long duration, fragmentation representing species extinction and ecosystem collapse, and metafiction examining narrative's role in climate denialism all demonstrate formal innovation responding to specific contemporary challenges. This means genuinely new development without clear modernist precedent, suggesting that formal innovation continues to evolve rather than merely repeating past experiments. Anti-capitalist critique appears in contemporary experimental fiction through formal strategies that expose capitalism's colonisation of experience and thought. T. McCarthy's novels demonstrate how corporate capitalism shapes consciousness and limits imaginative possibilities, using experimental form to create critical distance from capitalist realism that treats market logic as inevitable. This political deployment of experimental technique differs from both modernist aestheticism and postmodern resignation, asserting the continued political relevance of formal innovation [McCarthy, 2005].

Academic literary studies show greater enthusiasm for experimental fiction than the general reading public, with scholarly attention disproportionate to commercial success. This academic validation provides economic support through university teaching and research grants, enabling experimental writers to continue producing difficult work despite limited mass readership. However, dependence on academic institutions raises questions about experimental fiction's relationship to popular culture and whether formal innovation has become a purely elite phenomenon. Generational differences in reception suggest that younger readers are more receptive to experimentation than older audiences. Digital natives accustomed to hyperlinks, multiple windows, and nonlinear information navigation may find experimental fiction's formal strategies more intuitive than generations raised on linear print narratives. This demographic shift could indicate experimental fiction's increasing mainstream acceptance, though evidence remains preliminary.

International contexts reveal that British experimental fiction circulates primarily within Anglophone literary cultures rather than achieving a broader global readership. Translation difficulties and cultural specificity limit the international circulation of experimental work compared to more accessible realist fiction. This geographical constraint raises questions about whether formal experimentation remains valuable if it reaches only limited audiences within specific cultural contexts.

Conclusion. Contemporary British experimental fiction demonstrates that modernist formal innovations remain vital resources for engaging twenty-first-century experience, complicating narratives' positioning of postmodernism as a definitive break from modernist aesthetics. However, contemporary experimentation differs significantly from modernist precedents through self-conscious awareness of techniques' historical status, explicit political commitments that supersede aesthetic autonomy, and responses to specifically contemporary conditions, including digital media, climate crisis, and globalisation. These differences justify concepts such as neo-modernism and metamodernism, which acknowledge both continuities and departures from historical modernism.

Analysis reveals that contemporary formal experimentation typically serves instrumental purposes rather than pursuing aesthetic autonomy. Fragmentation, stream-of-consciousness, temporal disruption, metafiction, and linguistic innovation all address political and ethical concerns, including feminist critique, postcolonial resistance, climate crisis, and anti-capitalism. This politicisation of experimental form distinguishes contemporary from modernist aestheticism while maintaining commitment to formal innovation as politically necessary rather than mere stylistic preference. The doubled relationship to modernist inheritance – simultaneous reverence and critique, inheritance and innovation – characterises metamodernist oscillation between modernist sincerity and postmodern irony. Contemporary experimental fiction refuses to settle definitively into either position, instead maintaining productive tension that enables both formal innova-

tion and political engagement. This complex positioning suggests that literary innovation continues beyond the supposed endpoint of postmodernism, demonstrating that experimental fiction remains a vital cultural force.

As the climate crisis intensifies, digital media evolves, and political polarisation deepens, formal innovation will likely continue addressing these contemporary challenges. Contemporary British experimental fiction demonstrates that modernist techniques remain adaptable to new contexts and concerns, suggesting that literature's formal resources are not exhausted but continue to enable innovative responses to changing conditions. Understanding this ongoing evolution requires abandoning teleological narratives of literary history's predetermined endpoint, instead recognising that formal innovation remains an open-ended process responding to unpredictable futures.

REFERENCES

1. Levy, D. (2011). *Swimming home. And Other Stories*.
2. McBride, E. (2013). *A girl is a half-formed thing*. Faber & Faber.
3. McCarthy, T. (2005). *Remainder*. Metronome Press.
4. Miller, T. (1999). *Late modernism: Politics, fiction, and the arts between the world wars*. University of California Press.
5. Mitchell, D. (2004). *Cloud Atlas*. Sceptre.
6. Smith, A. (2016). *Autumn*. Hamish Hamilton.
7. Vermeulen, T., & van den Akker, R. (2010). Notes on metamodernism. *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 2(1), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.3402/jac.v2i0.5677>

Дата першого надходження статті до видання: 21.01.2026

Дата прийняття статті до друку після рецензування: 25.02.2026

Дата публікації (оприлюднення) статті: 10.04.2026