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DOES THE CONTEMPORARY NOVEL HAVE STYLE?  
REFLECTIONS ON THE 21st CENTURY BRITISH FICTION

Preoccupation with style in fiction has characterized literary criticism since the classical period of the New Age. “Style is sometimes seen as a mark of personality, sometimes as an affectation; but whether natural or feigned, it is certainly a distinguishing trait of narrative persona” [1, p. 351]. Style has become the canonical marker of originality and art not only of individual authors, but of national literatures and literary epochs as well. A fictional work has to have a different form of narrative, its style has to point to literariness and be distinct from reasoning, reporting or common talk. However, when the novel as a mature literary form came into being in the 18th century, the assumption about its style – as well as the readers’ expectations of it – was, according to the critic Ian Watt in his 1957 book *The Rise of the Novel*, “a prose which restricts itself almost entirely to a descriptive and denotative use of language” [2, p. 31]. Not that decorum or embellishments and ambiguities were totally foreign to it.

Traditionally, each author’s writing manner is viewed as unique if they use “typical syntactic structures, favourite or distinctive vocabulary, kinds of imagery, attitude to subject matter, kind of subject matter” [3, p. 277], as well as “figures of speech, the devices (rhetorical and otherwise), the shape of ... sentences (whether they be loose or periodic), the shape of ... paragraphs” [4, p. 872]. Remy de Gourmont, a French novelist, poet, playwright, and philosopher of the last century, one of the most penetrating contemporary critics of the French Symbolist movement, said that defining style was like trying to put a sack of flour in a thimble (q. from [4, p. 872]). However, attempts to classify, define and categorize styles have never ceased. Moreover, many distinctive authors have received labels

through the markers of their stylistic features, and it is most commonly referred to classics supplied with such personalized attributive adjectives as Chaucerian, Miltonic, Dickensian or Whitmanesque, or, with no adjective, but canonized all the same – such as Hemingway’s style, Zola’s style.

With a noticeable outflow of literary production in the second half of the 20th – beginning of the 21st century, the common concern arose about the stylistic art, stylistic recognizability. R. Barthes’ famous 1967 essay “The Death of the Author” is often wrongly associated with this concern about the loss of individuality, and hence, of style, in that overwhelming sea of writings which often mimic, imitate, parody or “pastichize” others. Stylizations of all kinds engulfed postmodernist fiction reflecting the lamentation of the “used-upedness”. Paradoxically, the American John Barth wrote two mutually exclusive essays: “The Literature of Exhaustion” (1967) and “The Literature of Replenishment” (1979). The former argued for the barrenness of the literary field in terms of style, while the latter highlighted new literary figures that gave hope for the birth of a new spirit in fiction, or, presumably, new enquiries, genres, forms and styles.

Literary scholars of the 1990s – early 2000s who attempted the summarizing critique of the 20th century fiction, noted the wide discussion of the “decline of the novel”, which, ironically, continues to this day, as the 2019 book *The Decline of the Novel* by Joseph Bottum demonstrates. Optimistic in that sense was David Lodge, writing that “literature is a record of human consciousness, the richest and most comprehensive we have. <...> The novel is arguably man’s most successful effort to describe the experience of individual human beings moving through space and time” [5]. Contemporary writing is a controversial area: realist and fantastical, obsessed both with the two world wars and the eternal issue of self-identity through the aftermath of colonization and immigration, with apocalyptic and utopian visions of the world. The modern novel (2000–2025) inevitably engages with the new realities of life, those never before experienced in history: the ubiquitous intervention of IT, AI, DNA, VR and AR, etc.

Several renowned critics have already entered into “broader contemporary dialogue between fiction and history, a kind of fin de millennium, historically transitional mood, registered by a very wide range of writers” [6, p. 30]. They are Peter Boxall, Nick Bentley, James Acheson, Philip Tew. P. Boxall, in particular, accentuates that “the time we are reliving through is very difficult to bring into focus, and often only becomes legible in retrospect” [6, p. 1].

The period under discussion – which is commonly referred to as the “contemporary” – has received various attributes: Z. Bauman calls it “liquid modernity” [7, p. 1], G. Lipovetsky – “hypermodernism” [8, p. viii], T. Vermeulen and V. Akker – “metamodernism” [9, p. 1], J. Nealon – “post-postmodernism” [10, p. 1], K. Stierstorfer – “beyond postmodernism” [11, p. 1], G. Potter – “after postmodernism” [12, p. 4], N. Bourriaud – “aftermodernism” [13, p. 2], A. Kirby – “digimodernism” [14, p. 1], N. Blincoe – “the new puritans” [15, p. 3], A. Kelly – “the new sincerity” [16, p. 5], R. Saldívar – “speculative realism” [17], W. Funk – “aesthetics of authenticity” [18, p. 2], I. Hassan – “aesthetic of trust” [19, p. 303]).

Besides, such nominations as “neorealism” / “new realism” are commonly spread. This multiplicity in understanding contemporary fiction leads us to the problem of style. By style I shall rather mean not an individual author’s writing parameters, but a collective kind of achievement(s), or writing in style, which can be associated with the above.

To be in style inevitably stands for being distinct, visible, relevant, interesting, in demand. Trying to assess the contemporary British novel in this context, I shall discuss the following points:

1. Is postmodernism (as a style) still in fashion?
2. Is any classic style popular – in terms of continuity or mimicry?
3. What style(s) do novelists choose to attract sophisticated and seasoned readers?

Point # 1. To answer the first question, which is at the heart of the current theoretical debate, I prefer to take a dialectical view. Literary production always lags behind those events and phenomena it reproduces and reflects. It is journalism that is produced in the moment; literature needs a temporal distance. To quote N. Bentley, “In terms of literary form perhaps the style that continued to loom over the first decade of the twenty-first century was postmodernism, despite most commentators agreeing that the heyday of postmodern fiction and art peaked around the 1980s and 1990s in Britain” [20, p. 13]. No doubt, many early 21st century writers continued to engage with narrative techniques, styles and approaches that reveal intersection with postmodernism, interrogating its legacies in a number of ways.

David Lodge in his 2001 novel *Thinks...* inserts a narrative experiment: the novel’s main character Helen Read makes her students write a stylized essay “What is it Like to be a Bat?” in the manner of any stylistically recognizable author. Martin Amis, Irvine Welsh, Salman Rushdie and Samuel Beckett were selected and successfully imitated by the students. Here is an example of mimicking Beckett: “Where? When? Why? Squeak. I am in the dark. I am always in the dark. It was not always so. Once there were periods of light, or shades of darkness. Squeak. There would be a faint luminosity from the mouth of the cave. When it faded I knew it would soon be time to leave the cave, with the others, to go fluttering through the dusk. Squeak. Now it is always dark, uniformly dark . . . I can feel with my foot-whisker that there is another beside me. He has a foot-whisker too, I feel it brush against me from time to time. Squeak. I say he, it could be a she for all I know . . . Squeak. Better to remain in a state of uncertainty. Uncertainty is unpleasant, but certainty can be worse . . .” [21, p. 95].

What this experiment with style – and in style – demonstrates, is that nothing is impossible in our age, when a writer ceases being only a story-teller. He/she can easily adopt any previous style and master it. He/she can change the gender-marked writing to challenge our prejudices (as I. McEwan does in his novel *Sweet Tooth*, 2012). A contemporary novelist is / has to / and does become a specialist in a certain field of knowledge, which he/she masters in order to pass over to the readers, as the novel form seeks not only to entertain and instruct, but also to inform and educate.

Examining the “Acknowledgement” pages of contemporary novels, we are faced with an amazing list of documents, scientific data, research materials that the author has worked with. Thus, Pat Barker (b.1943) spent years in the First World War archives to bring onto the surface some unnarrated and uncomfortable facts (apart from the actual WWI historical document): she made an amazing discovery of facial surgery and the relations at the famous Slade School of Fine Art, to face contemporary readers with the buried horrors of bodily suffering in her 2007 novel *Toby’s Room*. Hilary Mantel (1952–2022), who dug up the secrets of the Tudor family and King Henry VIII’s rule in her trilogy (*Wolf Hall*, 2009; *Bring Up the Bodies*, 2012; *The Mirror and the Light*, 2020), confessed that she saw her fictional (and flesh-and-blood) character Thomas Cromwell in her dreams every night, for such intense and profound was her engagement with research. Helen Dunmore (1952–1917), in order to expose the psychological truth of the trauma of Stalin’s and Soviet dictatorship in the novels *The Siege* (2001) and *The Betrayal* (2010), refers to a whole range of books on the subject. David Lodge, in order to entertain the reader with the mystery of human consciousness, dug deep into neuroscience, thoroughly mastering the science and works of Francis Crick and Christof Koch, neo-Darwinism by Richard Dawkins, Gilbert Ryle, Joseph Levine, David Chalmers, James Trefie, Stuart Southerland, Noam Chomsky, Gerald Edelman, Antonio Damasio, William James, Daniel Dennet, and V.S. Ramachandran [5].

In spite of the fact that some novelists – Nicola Barker, A.L. Kennedy, Hari Kunzru, Toby Litt, Tom McCarthy, David Mitchell, Ali Smith, Will Self and others – “continue to use narrative techniques associated with postmodernism”, they have also “reintroduced a set of grounded ethical positions” [20, p. 17] that seem to be more appropriate to the new millennium. Kate Atkinson’s *Life after Life* (2013), for example, experiments with chronology in presenting readers with deeply unsettling experience of existing in history and living through the darkest moments.

David Mitchell’s novels make confusions of characters’ appearances and disappearances in various parts of the world, crisscrossing themes and historical references. In *Cloud Atlas* (2004), Mitchell’s most outstanding novel, there are typical postmodernist interactions between the distant past and narrative present. It depends on stylization, as the manuscript “found” by one of the narrators, is, presumably, the 19th century journal. A similar approach characterized A. Byatt’s *Possession* (1990) and P. Ackroyd’s books *Hawksmoor* (1985) and *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983). D. Mitchell intersects nine historical periods applying specific modes of writing characterizing six different narrators whom he constantly interrupts. Then he picks them up again to complete their narratives and mirror-reflect them in the second half of the book. Each first-person narrative is a text read by the narrator of the next one, which is definitely a tribute to postmodern playfulness with historicity. Nevertheless, Mitchell’s style reveals what he called “levels of reality in the post-modern novel”, as he “attempts to arrive at some defined and concrete sense of human values that tie the periods and forms together” [20, p. 17]. “Viewed chronologically, the novel traces the degeneration of

human life over time. Viewed narratively, the novel suggests that, despite the presence of evil..., we can still resist the tide of history” [22, p. 31]. The search for meaning in *Number9Dream* (2001) involves a dichotomy between spirituality and consumerism, naivety and crime in contemporary Japan. As N. Bentley observes, “the novel as a whole establishes the sense that the search for meaning is still a worthwhile endeavor thus rejecting the skepticism of such a quest in much postmodern thinking” [20, p. 17].

A still more resolute return to the “levels of realism” is exhibited in Mitchell’s 2006 novel *Black Swan Green*, which defies genre definition. It blends together Ich-Roman, Bildungsroman and Künstlerroman, and as a result, comes out in a contemporary shape of the novel of maturity, or growing up (toeing an imaginary line with another new genre of crossover literature). The narrator’s virtuoso use of a specific idiolect – a mixture of teenage jargon, innumerable allusions to the culture of the 1980s, as well as metaphoric inner speech of a highly imaginative child – produces the effect of empathy for the reader. It is simultaneously a co-feeling of having experienced something similar in our childhood to this or that extent, of having been witness of the same historical and cultural events in the 1980s (whatever the country), and, which is most important – of sharing the common human experience of growing up – within and without. In any case, the return to the classical genres mentioned marks a significant point.

“It is possible, then”, Nick Bentley concludes, “to think of the 2000s as a decade in which novelists and cultural critics examine the end, or indeed, ends of postmodernism” [20, p. 14]. For one literary fashion to be replaced by another, as the history of world literature shows, there has to be a trigger, a shock, an event of almost global dimensions, such as were the two world wars which delineated modernism and the postmodern world, or the revolutions of the previous centuries. The 21st century was born with a shock of 9/11, which was “a dose of reality exposing the illusions and complacency of western society” [20, p. 5]. Slavoj Žižek pointed out that “it was before the WTC collapse that we lived in our reality, perceiving Third World horrors as something which was not actually part of our social reality; as something which existed (for us) as a spectral apparition on the TV screen – and what happened on September 11 was that this fantastic screen apparition entered our reality” [23, p. 16].

In terms of historical chronology, this demarcation line – Žižek and other scholars argue – also marks a retreat from postmodernism, a kind of sobering about the real Reality, not the playful fiction that eschews points of reference. Rather, the dumbfounding start of the 21st century awoke a sincere and conscious aesthetic response to things that had been dormant in the underlayers of the western world’s collective consciousness, almost to the point of denial. Now the world had to come to terms with the real existence of terrorism not somewhere on the outposts of everyday existence, but close to everyone’s home. In Britain, an almost instant aesthetic response to the terrorist attack manifested itself in Pat Barker’s *Double Vision* (2003), J.G. Ballard’s *Millennium People* (2003) and Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* (2005). This and other social realities had actually been shaping our

communal experience. Thus, Martin Amis in his article published in the *Guardian* described the bombing attack on the World Trade Centre as the “apotheosis of the postmodern era” [24].

In a philosophical sense, such postmodernist sensibilities as radical skepticism about grand systems claiming the possession of truth, or grand narratives usurping the power to offer the interpretation of history and human nature, or total relativism and decenteredness – were no longer relevant, and the new pleiad of writers began to think beyond that limit. Many authors representing the literary scene today grew up with postmodernism as their major surrounding style and discourse. So, to them, it was no longer revolutionary, or innovative, or challenging, it became a tradition, a mainstream. As a result, to stand out in the era of new sensibilities, one has to become innovative against the stale innovativeness of the predecessors. The writers who established their position in the 1990s as representatives of postmodernist genres and forms – Martin Amis, Julian Barnes, A.S. Byatt, Angela Carter, Ian McEwan, Salman Rushdie, Jeanette Winterson – had contributed to the wide acceptance of postmodernist ideas to the point of these becoming political goals that had struck home. “By the 1990s, however, a certain amount of easy recognition of the ludic qualities of postmodernism meant that for most interested parties postmodernism was now just part of the cultural wallpaper” [20, p. 15] and contributed to its own end.

Point # 2. Let us make this bold assumption that from approximately that point in history, 9/11, the novel has taken up a new turn – away from the broad relativism towards conscious inclusiveness. Thus, answering the second question of this paper, it is now possible to identify quite a number of 21st century novelists “who have attempted to return (or continue) to work in a broadly realist mode as an implicit rejection of postmodernism” [20, p. 17], and those engaged in looking for new realisms.

Let us consider some of the critical assessments of this phenomenon. As P. Boxall notes, “There is, in the fiction of the new century, as well as in a very wide range of other disciplines and intellectual networks, a strikingly new attention to the nature of our reality – its materiality, its relation to touch, to narrative and to visuality” [6, p. 10]. Ph. Tew also points out to a “new sense of reality” and, consequently, to “a new sense of the text” [25, p. 29], which he terms “metarealism”. I. Huber also stresses “some sort of a return to the real” [26, p. 28].

These new realisms encompass ethnicity, which continues to reflect marginalization in British society (Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003), Andrea Levy’s *Small Island* (2004), Caryl Phillips’ *A Distant Shore* (2003)). Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (2000) was famously described by the critic J. Wood as “hysterical realism” indicating the tension between postmodern play and realistic portrayal where “the conventions of realism are not being abolished but, on the contrary, exhausted and overworked” [27].

As far as the aesthetical, cultural and ideological practices go, rejecting ideology and historical fact, and facing the collapse of the communist regime in the 1990s, brought postmodernism’s lack of coherence and linearity at odds with the

emerging new (or just traditional but rather hitherto unfashionable) historical research and resulting fiction: Pat Barker, Jane Harris, John Harwood, Hilary Mantel and Sarah Waters. These authors, notably the twice Booker prize winner Hilary Mantel, developed narrative strategies – let's term them “style” – that establish a grounded, informed and balanced sense of the past, disrupting, like postmodernists would do, certain official versions of history, which has resulted in a different view of it. History is no longer presented as something monolithic; rather, it is a “living process”, which is re-lived in the novels by concrete historical figures, and the author explores their minds and consciousness. At the same time, contemporary historical fiction seems to have abandoned the fashion for the so-called “alternative history” and the “historiographic metanovel”. Instead, a historical novelist today once again resorts to the search for truth, at least for something that can be trusted, for psychological verisimilitude – basing on biographies, historical document and being very suspicious of official versions of historical records.

The present political and informational technologies offer so many versions of “truth”, even about our current moment, that the study of historical novels presents a good conceptual base to reflect on the issue of “making” or “writing” history. As many scholars have concluded, fiction has turned into a necessary instrument of historisation, as it can say / complement / testify what other forms of historical narratives cannot.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, realism acquires a more express appeal to the psyche, consciousness and memory. Actions in novels often take place in psychiatric clinics, mental institutions, paying attention to the overwhelming side-effect of living longer – mental disruptions and dysfunctional memory. Groundbreaking findings in psychiatry, neurology and other sciences studying the human mind stimulate the search for meaning not only in the external logic of events, but also in the nature of our inner selves (David Lodge, Maggie O'Farrell, Salley Vickers, Julian Barnes, Mark Haddon, Ian McEwan, Emma Healey). The term “neurological realism” comes from Charles B. Harris, “The Story of the Self: *The Echo Maker* and Neurological Realism” [28]. Two similar genre terms exist. The first is the “neuronarrative” from Gary Johnson [29, p. 169]. The second is “neuronovel” from Marco Roth [30]. All three critics identify the genre using exemplary works of contemporary literature and they interpret it as a distinctly contemporary phenomenon.

Reality and truth are inseparable from the material and physical aspects of life. Therefore, contemporary writers address with increasing frequency the human body, even in its ugliness, deformity and disease. Ailments, mutilations, traumas, wounds and the suffering in flesh can be found in the novels of Sarah Hall, Pat Barker, Ian McEwan, Helen Dunmore.

Point # 3. Addressing this question, I rely on N. Bentley again. He singles out a group of authors “who have self-consciously returned to modernist techniques as a way of return to a pre-postmodernist aesthetics” [20, p. 17]. For example, Ian McEwan in *Atonement* (2001) and *Saturday* (2005) practices the style of modernism, with its interior monologues and free indirect discourse, as well as a “one-day” plot.

If one had to compliment a work of fiction of the 21st century with an “Oh, you have style” exclamation, it would be addressed to the novel of consciousness, or the neuronovel. McEwan’s 1997 *Enduring Love* was already a response to the shifting perceptions of the brain and mind in contemporary scientific and medical research. This is how one specialist researcher assesses the significance of the neuronevel: “the penetration of consciousness, the exploration of the workings of the human mind, and the mapping of a subjectivity that could both bear the weight of, and act as a lodestone for, the autonomous, liberal, perhaps even moral individual” [31, p. 84–85].

This takes us to the role of science in artistic creativity. The first clearly marked signs of incorporating science into fiction can be found even in John Donne’s “alchemic” poems, in the Enlightenment novels, but especially evidenced in the naturalistic trend (Emile Zola, Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, Gerhart Hauptmann, and in a certain sense, George Moore and Thomas Hardy) at the turn of the 20th century. Novelists looked up to science in search of answers to the eternal question: why do human beings manifest such different characters? They looked into natural philosophy, biology, sociology and psychology to explore and mystify those psychological concepts to which natural sciences have not found any definite answer. Lodge in the novel *Thinks...* (2001) builds a fictional case on his brilliant study of the cognitive theory of mind, only to conclude, with the main character’s point of view, that it has ever been left to literature to describe and transfer the ungraspable and vague qualia of human sense experience. Mark Haddon in the *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003) explores autism, and Richard Powers in *The Echo Maker* (2006) treats facial agnosia. In his turn, Ian McEwan explores what is known in medicine as Huntington’s disease (a neurodegenerative genetic disorder and dementia) in *Saturday*.

Now the time has come for modern concerns, such as: What is man in the epoch of intelligent machines, clones, the sex industry, epistemological doubt and language’s alleged inadequacy, complexes and neuroses, and syndromes? D. Lodge in his epochal work *Consciousness and the Novel* (2002) states: “Literature constitutes a kind of knowledge about consciousness which is complimentary to scientific knowledge” [32, p. 16]. The central conflict in Lodge’s novel *Thinks...* reflects the epistemological gap between cognitive science and literary/artistic insight and their paradoxical interpenetration. This gap is created by the hegemony of technological progress. Thus, in *Thinks...* this mythical parallel feeds up the central discord, for the mystery of human consciousness is the longed-for Grail, and Messenger and Reed (with their homonymic speaking names) are the two methods of gaining possession of it: through knightly valor (Ralph’s chivalrous ramblings in the scientific labyrinths) and by means of centuries-old spiritual, mystical tradition and worldly wisdom (Helen’s catholic background and her inveterate belief in the immaculacy of her marriage to Martin).

Thus, presenting two different points of view on the same issues and experiences/events, and permeating Ralph’s passages and Helen’s diary entries with third-person narration, Lodge establishes a bulwark to the two temples

of knowledge: “computerized messaging” from Messenger strives towards determinacy in the discovery of the ultimate law of human consciousness, and it is also terribly sexually charged; while Reed’s “reading” of the cultural inheritance oscillates between conventional knowledge of religion and literature and reveals a more reserved, ruminating character. At a certain moment the two are brought together in a love romance, which is also a meaningful fusion and interchange, and dialogue between spiritual knowledge and cognitive science.

In *Saturday*, McEwan, in response to 9/11, explored empathy, referring to his own essay: “Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion and the beginning of morality” [33]. The fictional terrorist attacks in the novel provoke a kind of moral and spiritual boost of a surgeon-neurologist Perowne. It happens he is involved in a typical “McEwanesque” accident. The doctor becomes a victim of a sick man’s fit and obsession. He and his family, including his pregnant daughter, find themselves hostages in their own house. In between the minor traffic accident that involved the intruder and the crucial liberation scene, there is a lot of introspection involving both family matters, politics and the philosophy of life. As it happens, it is a poem that saves lives. Perowne’s daughter starts reciting M. Arnold’s poem “Dover Beach” (1867), and the poetic magic brings empathy and tears into the intruder’s eyes. Later, it is Perowne who performs a brain surgery on this very man. Thus sensibility can save lives, however, the man character still hopes for a logical explanation of human consciousness: “Could it ever be explained, how matter becomes conscious? ...he knows it will come, the secret will be revealed... an irrefutable truth about consciousness” [34, p. 255].

Another work that merits the compliment of style is S. Faulks’ *Human Traces* (2005) which took him five years to finish – he spent months in libraries reading psychology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, neurology, etc., and with charts and diagrams hanging everywhere on the walls of his study. *Human Traces*, in addition to being a novel of consciousness, is a story about relationships, a kind of romance. Both main characters’ – Jacques Rebiere’s and Thomas Midwinter’s – year of birth is 1860 (while Ch. Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* was published in 1859). The two young men start a friendship because they are united by a love of science studying consciousness and the brain. They are motivated differently though. Jacques dreams of curing his elder brother Olivier of his “madness”. Thomas is attracted by a more philosophical and abstract purpose: to find an answer to the question “What makes us human?”. Consciousness and the brainwork at that point in history were still Terra incognita.

Further peripetias bring about a rich variety of enlightening subjects. The young alienists/mad doctors get involved in life-changing personal relations with each other’s relatives; they open a sanatorium high up in the Swiss Alps; they travel around the world attending famous psychiatrists’ lectures, doing anthropological studies, offering their own concepts to the public. Discoveries about human “madness” and failures to explain – let alone cure it – result in both

inspirational and disappointing conclusions, the major one expressing the novel's haunting message: "...what makes us mad is almost the same thing as that which makes us human" [35, p. 222].

Coming back to the issue of style in the contemporary novel, it is worthwhile to mention the most recent follow-up of the debate about the decline of the novel, explicated by J. Bottum, who writes that "the novel came into being to present the Protestant story of the individual soul as it strove to understand its salvation and achieve its sanctification, illustrated by the parallel journey of the new-style characters, with their well-furnished interiors, as they wandered through their adventures in the exterior world" [36, p. 11–12]. However, the critic argues, as modernity progressed, "the thick inner world of the self increasingly came to seem illmatched with the impoverished outer world, stripped of all the old enchantment that had made exterior objects seem meaningful and important, significant in themselves. This is what we mean by the crisis of the self: Why does anything matter, what could be important, if meaning is invented, coming from the self rather to the self? The novel – already running down parallel tracks of interior and exterior life thanks to its Protestant origin – was uniquely positioned as an art form to present a vivid picture of that crisis. And, indeed, it was able to do something more than just present the crisis of the self. The novel was uniquely positioned to attempt to solve that crisis, as well. The novel was an opportunity for artists to assume the role of demiurges, filling their fictional worlds with meaning, reenchanting the exterior setting in which their characters move, and thereby showing readers how to live well in modern times by uncovering connections between the self and the self's environment at any given moment in the historical progress of the culture" [36, p. 11–12]. The disturbing conclusion is that it is no longer so; and the variety of style modulations, transformations and modifications testify to the fact.

The answer to the question put in the title, as it results from the above overview, is hard to present as univocal. On the one hand, continuity is evident: the British writers have never been too much into experiment, and so they remain more cautious of it today; but on the other hand, the new realities of life dictate their own conditions and propel novelists into new-found lands, invigorating them with stylistic and genre techniques to accommodate new knowledge.

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