



Paradox of Modernism

ROBERT SCHOLES

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REVIEWER: **Larry T. Shillock** is head of Humanities and holder of the Drusilla Stevens Mazur Research Professorship at Wilson College.

Humility is in short supply these days in general, and it has rarely been evident in large amounts across academia. It is therefore refreshing to encounter Robert Scholes' latest hook, *Paradox of Modernism*. Scholes, Research Professor of Modern Culture and Media at Brown University, comes to his subject after more than 50 years of studying modern literature and art. While still a graduate student at Cornell University, he cataloged the papers of James Joyce, a project that became his dissertation and first book. He has since published widely on modernism and reading, doing so in a restrained, even self-deprecating, voice that isn't often associated with leading scholars.

Paradox of Modernism approaches its subject from the vantage of critics and artists alike. Historically, a master narrative—articulated jointly by them—has defined the field of modernism. It emphasizes the experimental literature and visual art that have proven so influential for more than a century. As "experimental" suggests, modernism continues the radical projects of literary realists and impressionists even as it moves away from them. For its part, literary realism was exhausted by the early 20th century, especially in its use of lengthy, sociological description. Critics and writers alike wondered what forward-looking literatures would take its place. Virginia Woolf answered their question in her deservedly famous essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown." There she remarks that "on or about December, 1910, human nature changed," and she indicates that art changed irrevocably in response. The agent of change was the terrible and indefensible World War I. In response to its burnt battlefields and social dislocation came writing that overturned traditional approaches, subjects, and especially forms of literature. The writing of modern life had itself become a form of revolt.

Aesthetic revolt, of course, was a pre-war focus of visual art as well. The emergence of Cezanne, for example, changed the representation of nature and the human figure, enabling the early development of cubism by Braque and Picasso. Being a revolutionary, therefore, was less a solitary experience

than one marked by dialogue. Indeed it's important to understand that the fin de siècle was a heady time when revolutionaries competed for acclaim, and it was by no means clear which of many artists and approaches would triumph. Cases had to be made that certain artists were representatively modern before figures like Eliot, H.D., Joyce, Pound, Proust, and Woolf achieved their present stature.

Paradox of Modernism shows how the great divide that we today assume separates "high" modernism from "low" popular culture had to be created and, once created, defended. However canonical this distinction has become, it has long been dissatisfying to students of modernism, since the categorical separation was routinely violated by the very modernists we hold most highly. Imagine, for instance, the development of analytical cubism without experiments in collage, or postrevolutionary Russian cinema without the emphasis on the lives of peasants whose political troubles took the form of filmic montage. Scholes shows how binary oppositions like high/low shade off into hierarchical distinctions like good/bad or even enduring/disposable. The relationship of the terms works to emphasize the extremes—examples of genius are often contrasted with those of kitsch—and to exclude the shared "middle." Consequently, Scholes' book reads the important critical accounts of modernism and representative artistic manifestos so that it may show how their authors used these invidious distinctions to construct value and mastery simultaneously.

Throughout, Scholes uses "paradox" to mean categorical problem. A Paradox occurs when what we say about modernism and art falls short of what artists and writers actually did. By pointing to these problems of definition, Scholes opens up the modern list of great works to include what he terms "durable fluff," in the case of Oscar Wilde's hilarious *The Importance of Being Earnest*; "iridescent mediocrity," as evidenced by the novels of Dornford Yates; and especially the "formulaic creativity" of Georges Simenon's Maigret detective series. At issue throughout *Paradox of Modernism*, therefore, are history and the unvoiced need for greater scholarly humility among the champions of modernism. Scholes' effort leads to the perhaps unavoidable conclusion that elevating the great—because difficult—works of modernism by disparaging the mass cultural texts written alongside them has had the unfortunate effect of excluding the wide, modern "middle" and thereby reducing how well readers and scholars understand the fluid dialogue of experimentation that would come to characterize modernity and its art. •