



## Book Reviews

***Paradoxy of Modernism*. Robert Scholes. New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2006. Pp. xiv + 295. \$33.00 (cloth).**

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Professor Robert Scholes reads with relish the inner significance of texts and images. He likes thick descriptions, witty lounge lizards, and a durably fluffed art. Most of all he likes skilled modern stories which give to his palate a fine tang of the iridescently enduring. His latest book, *Paradoxy of Modernism*, is his fourteenth (not counting his six coauthored and fourteen edited volumes). It is ripe with the pleasures of reading. Indeed, pleasure is at the heart of the book: it discusses pleasure, it manifestly gave pleasure in the writing, and it is a deeply pleasurable read.

Any teacher of modernism, whether experienced or newly minted, will benefit from *Paradoxy of Modernism*. One need not know Scholes's vita to recognize it as the work of a seasoned scholar who has always grasped teaching and scholarship as part of a unified project. As befitting a winner of the Modern Language Association's Mina P. Shaughnessy Prize (for *Textual Power* in 1986), Scholes has a lot to teach about teaching even when he is not directly addressing the subject, and I frequently found myself making mental notes about things to try in my next class. Much of the usefulness of *Paradoxy of Modernism* derives from the clarity and ambition of its central argument.

By "paradoxy" Scholes means "a kind of confusion" generated by binary oppositions that seem "to make clear distinctions where clear distinctions cannot—and should not—be made" (xi). His goal is to clear away the distorting simplifications produced over the years by these oppositions, the most important for Scholes being high and low, old and new, poetry and rhetoric, hard and soft. The problem with these structuring terms is that they effectively obscure the complexity of the middle space in which, after all, most cultural productions are situated. Part I devotes a chapter to each of the oppositions in order to recover excluded middles. Part II then focuses on examples of works marginalized or excluded by the binaries examined in Part I in order to propose paradoxical categories designed to counter the polarizing effects of paradoxes: paradox, in others words, is invoked to purge

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820 paradox. Chapter 5's "Durable Fluff" looks at *The Importance of Being Earnest* in order to think about why some light comedies continue to find an audience over time even as they eschew what Matthew Arnold called "high seriousness." (The next time the Academy Awards shuns a comic performance, you will be reminded of this chapter.) The "Iridescent Mediocrity" of Chapter 6 refers to the conservative middlebrow popularity of the novelist Dornford Yates, beloved by Cyril Connolly and his ilk, despised by Bloomsbury. Chapter 7 examines Georges Simenon in order to defend "Formulaic Creativity" against the "High Modernist" abjection of genre fiction as low and therefore inferior. Certain kinds of fluff, mediocrity, and formulaic writing have endured over the years, and in Scholes's view they not only merit their longevity, they also deserve to be considered, and therefore taught, as examples of modernism. (Here arises a problem, to which I will return.) Part III, "Doxies," comprises two chapters, "Model Artists in Paris: Hastings, Hamnett, and Kiki," and "The Aesthete in the Brothel: Proust and Others." A "doxy," Scholes observes, is defined as "a floozy or prostitute," and this section examines figures who inhabited or explored the "bohemian borders" of modern culture (219). Most compellingly, Chapter 8 conducts a recovery of women "who do not fit into the High Modernist paradigm" (223) by writing about female models who "posed for painters, but crossed over to the other side of the easel, either as painters or writers, and also painters or writers who moved in the other direction and posed for artists, allowing themselves to become objects for the gaze of others" (222).<sup>1</sup> For anyone who has not already closely studied the various writings of Kiki (Alice Prin), who modeled for Man Ray and Brancusi, of Beatrice Hastings, who wrote for the *New Age* and posed for Modigliani, and of Nina Hamnett, who modeled for Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, chapter 8 will come as a revelation. It's all well and good to read D. H. Lawrence's fictionalized portrait of the Soho model "Minnie" Lucie Channing under the guise of the Pussum, or Minette, in *Women in Love*, but how much richer is our sense of the cultural moment if we can hear her in relation to less tendentiously mediated voices.

Scholes may have been partly motivated to include a chapter about objectified women becoming subjects of modernism owing to a controversy, to which he alludes, aroused by earlier versions of his argument about brothels and modernism. In the early 1990s Scholes delivered a talk "In the Brothels of Modernism: Picasso and Joyce" and also published a version online.<sup>2</sup> Gayatri Spivak objected to a 1991 instance of the talk chiefly on the grounds that "there was a qualitative absence of assuming woman as agent of Modernism" ("BM," paragraph 2). Scholes also suggested that Virginia Woolf "never quite becomes a modernist" and "remains an impressionist and post-impressionist throughout her career" ("BM," paragraph 3). Scholes offered a brief response to Spivak in his web version, but chapter 8 offers a more extended meditation on the roles of women in modernism. Judging from his return to the topic, Scholes seems honestly to have meant his earlier comment about Woolf as "a purely descriptive matter rather than an evaluative one" ("BM," paragraph 3), but it nevertheless did not sit well with a significant percentage of his audience.<sup>3</sup> In any case, Scholes now comments on Woolf's efforts to write for a common reader (i.e., to seek out the excluded middle with respect to readership) that she succeeded "often enough to lead a committed Modernist critic like Hugh Kenner to deny Woolf's writing a spot in the Modernist canon"; Scholes continues: "If Woolf is not a Modernist we are indeed in the land of paradox" (25). The current argument shifts the focus from Joyce and Picasso to Proust (thereby introducing a queer dimension) and from gender to a consideration of the brothel as an excluded middle in which the flesh, associated with the lowbrow, and the spirit, associated with the highbrow, are brought into close proximity. Associated by whom? By Woolf in her essay "Middlebrow," which for Scholes is representative of modernism's unfortunate penchant for undervaluing writers and artists who insist on trying "to please a broad audience" (275). Being welcomed into the ranks of exemplary modernists, it would seem, can be a mixed blessing.

But beyond showing that Scholes has changed his mind about some things, the case of Woolf raises the enduring problem of what counts as modernist. Scholes's laudable and explicit aim is

to enlarge the category to include all sorts of texts that canonical distinctions tend to exclude. Scholes shows that texts considered low often share qualities with those considered high, and vice versa, hard with soft, and so on, but it becomes hard to say just what for Scholes warrants inclusion under the rubric of modernism. One criterion could be called ethnographic: to the extent that a text helps fill out our sense of the full range of modernist culture, it should be included in the modernist canon. But the adjective here begs the question: is modernist culture the same as modern culture, and if so, why hang on to the term “modernist” at all? To some degree, it seems that “modernist” stands out against the background of the “modern” owing to its responsiveness to a particular set of ethical and aesthetic values. For Scholes is calling on us not simply to read more widely and deeply into the modernist period but also to value more highly works that have endured (he believes) owing to the “traditional values” of “empathy with characters and concern for their fates,” “the defamiliarizing effects of poetic language” that permit “the pleasures of recognition and seeing freshly,” “wit,” and “grace” (xiii). So, we should read widely, but without abandoning (in the manner, say, of cultural studies) hierarchies of value.

Here, of course, is a can of worms. Wyndham Lewis, who lacks empathy for his characters, is for Scholes “largely unreadable,” and Dorothy Richardson, who has empathy but lacks narrative suspense, “has not lasted well either” (124). But given that Richardson is out of print in the United States and Lewis amply available, does the *material* test of time therefore indicate that empathy is less valuable than narrative drive? Readers who prefer Richardson to Woolf will offer a different take on what permits one writer to outlast another in the marketplace. And what about a reader like me, whose capacity for extreme detachment makes *Tarr* fine entertainment indeed, if not, admittedly, for most of my students?

Scholes is less consistent than he might be in specifying the sources of the paradoxes that have warped the reception of modernism. Sometimes modernists themselves seem to blame, chiefly through their all too successful efforts to manage their reception through manifestos and guidebooks. Other times the problem lies more with a much longer critical tradition, particularly as it has been enacted in the classroom. Perhaps Scholes is too polite to lay any blame on a generation of politically correct postmodern critics who, in order to advance their own professional careers, wilfully mischaracterized the multifarious productions of modernism by overgeneralizing the significance of certain notoriously illiberal practitioners of modernism.

I suspect that ultimately Scholes would have no problem admitting that his set of values might not be appropriate for everyone, and would suggest instead that each of us should broaden our syllabuses to include a wider range of texts according to our tastes, regardless of what received wisdom might recommend. For much comes down here to the question of pleasure. Scholes’s paean to pleasure comes with an historical edge: “We do not take pleasure seriously enough, I believe, and Modernism, with its emphasis on the connection between greatness and difficulty, is to some extent responsible for this” (xiii). Of course, what Scholes does not say is that he evidently takes as much pleasure in difficult texts as he does, say, in genre fiction or popular films. Thus he is as at home quoting Adorno, Horkheimer, Lukács, and *Finnegans Wake* as he is citing Dornford Yates, *Spider-Man 2*, and sentimental hacks such as Shakespeare.

The point, then, really is as much a matter of pedagogy as of theory or literary history. Scholes adopts a deeply ethical relationship to texts. He wants to hear the voices of the past as clearly as he can, on their own terms. But hearing well requires careful reading, reliable texts, and a good sense of the context that lends each voice its distinctiveness. Scholes lives up to his ideals by paying close attention to influential arguments, such as Horkheimer and Adorno’s in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which too often are cited without really having been closely read; by providing improved translations of key passages (in Proust, Aristotle, and Simenon); and by making available, through his work on the online Modernist Journals Project, a rich array of texts and images to which he turns in order to strip away layers of received assumptions that keep us that much further from the historical moment of modernism.<sup>4</sup> Full presence, he knows, is an illusion, but all efforts toward the asymptote are welcome.