
Robert Scholes. *Paradox of Modernism*. Yale University Press, 2006. 295p.

ALAN BLACKSTOCK
UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY

Readers familiar with Scholes' *The Rise and Fall of English* should find his latest book equally engaging. Cyril Connolly's characterization of the work of Dornford Yates, quoted with admiration by Scholes in Chapter Six of this book, might apply equally well to Scholes' own work, as it exhibits "a wit that is ageless united to a courtesy that is extinct." What Scholes finds so admirable in the phrase is "not merely its elegant syntax, but the way that the syntax balances against each other and thus emphasizes the words 'ageless' and 'extinct'—suggesting that the admirable quality of Yates' work derives from the oxymoronic or paradoxical combination of something durable with something perishable" (166). In endorsing Connolly's assessment of Yates, Scholes echoes the statement of purpose with which he opens the book: to justify his apparently oxymoronic or paradoxical penchant for writing about such perishable "non-literary" genres as science fiction and crime stories, and to challenge New Critical aestheticism and the New York Museum of Modern Art's doctrine that "modernism is the art that is essentially abstract."

Scholes begins by defining "paradoxy"—a word he evidently coined—as "a kind of confusion generated by a terminology that seems to make clear distinctions where clear distinctions cannot—and should not—be made" (xi). Part I of this book is devoted to interrogating four pairs of binary oppositions common in recent literary and art criticism—high/low, old/new, poetry/rhetoric, and hardness/softness (or sentimentalism)—oppositions that, says Scholes, "often function to suppress or exclude a middle term, forcing many admirable works into the lower half of an invidious distinction" (xi-xii). In Chapter One, "High and Low," Scholes offers a helpful table to schematize the "Great Divide" that infused both the critical theory and pedagogy of modernists on the right, such as Irving Babbitt, Allen Tate, and W.K. Wimsatt, and those on the left like Theodor Adorno and Georg Lukacs. This model sought to distinguish "high" art and culture from "low" by employing such oppositions as good/bad, avant-garde/kitsch, classic/romantic, serious/light, and representation/entertainment, consistently privileging the first term in the opposition over the second. Scholes then proceeds to demonstrate how in his poetry Wordsworth overcame such oppositions "by taking the common and the ordinary (Low) and linking them to 'imagination' and 'the primary laws of our nature' (High)," and suggests that just as "Wordsworth's greatest powers are driven by that low emotion, sentimentality, though these feelings are controlled by great syntactic and semantic powers...so are many of the monuments of Modernism, if we can only get through the paradoxy of Modernist discourse and see them for

what they are” (31). One of Scholes’ central aims in this book, then, is to examine some of the “lighter and less extreme forms of Modernism” and to make the case that “we need the full range of Modernist literature and art in order to understand Modernism—and we need Modernism to understand modernity and hence to see ourselves from the other side” (31-32).

In the remainder of Part I, Scholes addresses the paradoxies old/new, poetry/rhetoric, and hard/soft. Chapter Two challenges the old/new paradox as it played out in the debates carried on in A.R Orage’s influential critical journal *The New Age* over such terms as “modern,” “contemporary,” “realistic,” and “abstract.” (This chapter is copiously illustrated with images taken from the journal itself.) Scholes then links the debate over visual art to divergences in the literary art of the period, associating the work of James Joyce and Gertrude Stein with “a geometrical or abstract deconstruction and reconstruction of human life,” while seeing the work of Virginia Woolf as “developing a Post-Impressionistic form of literary narrative” (81). But even while pointing out these divergences, Scholes attacks the paradox that would “call one of these modes of textuality modern and the other not.” Scholes concludes Chapter Two by examining an article found on MoMA’s website, titled “Modern Art *Despite* Modernism” (emphasis in original), that supports the paradox Scholes has been challenging with its declarations that modernism is “essentially abstract” and that, to quote Scholes’ summary of the article, “[f]iguration is a retrograde movement, going against the progressive tide that was flowing toward Abstract Impressionism” (93). Scholes, however, comparing von Schwind’s representational and sentimental *Morgenstunde* with Gaudier-Brzeska’s abstract *Dancer*, avers, “I have taken pleasure in both works and want each of them in my memory hoard. . . . And so, I am arguing, should you” (94). The paradox that privileges “new” over “old,” like that favoring “high” over “low,” Scholes argues, has resulted in the wrongful exclusion of works from the literary and artistic canon merely because they fail to meet the artificial criteria imposed by these paradoxies.

In the final two chapters of Part I, Scholes takes issue with the paradoxies poetry/rhetoric and hard/soft. Citing Yeats’ oft-quoted line, “We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry,” along with the seldom-quoted following line that contrasts rhetoricians, “who get a confident voice from remembering the crowd they have won or may win,” with poets, who “sing amid our uncertainty” (105), Scholes asserts that “the rhetoric/poetry distinction is one not so much of persuasion versus meditation. . . . but of public persuasion versus private persuasion. . . . Poetry, then, is just rhetoric with those nasty connotations of mass audience and political effects removed” (106). Scholes then examines Pound’s

famous imagist poem, “In a Station of the Metro,” and concludes that although according to Imagist theory, combining images in such a way produces superior poetry because it eliminates all rhetorical flourishes such as figures of speech, in reality, both rhetoricians and poets are involved in the art of persuasion: “Pound, for example, is trying to persuade us that faces in a subway station can be as beautiful as flowers. . . . The poet’s aim—that we should learn to see human beauty in the midst of Modernity—is laudable. But to claim that this is not rhetoric simply makes no sense” (118-119). Rather than preserving the artificial distinction between poetry and rhetoric established by modernist critics, Scholes seeks a recognition that modernism “ranged from trying to control responses as completely as possible all the way to giving readers the maximum amount of freedom and responsibility for the meanings of texts” (119).

Similarly, in Chapter Four, “Hard and Soft,” Scholes points to the existence of sentimentality in such canonical modernist works as Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Eliot’s “Prufrock,” and Pound’s “The River-Merchant’s Wife,” and asserts that “there are things about Modernism that are not visible clearly without a proper appreciation of the sentimental” (123). “Sentiment,” Scholes observes, “has been an integral part of Modernism for a long time, and the question, for the greatest Modernists, has always been not how to avoid it but how to include it, protect it, and enhance it” (136). This is the question that Scholes addresses in Part II, “Paradoxes,” which examines works by the “pleasurable writers” Oscar Wilde, Dornford Yates, and Georges Simenon, whose oeuvre demonstrates such paradoxical qualities as “durable fluff,” “iridescent mediocrity,” and “formulaic creativity,” qualities that function “as a kind of antidote to paradox” (xiii). Such texts, says Scholes, illustrate “what we lose if we accept as modern art only works that match the categories generated by the paradoxes that have been crucial to the critical discourse of Modernism” (142).

The punning title of Part III, “Doxies,” suggests the rather lighthearted nature of this section, which deals in Chapter 8 with the “model artists” Kiki, Nina Hammet, and Beatrice Hastings, who posed for artists such as Modigliani, Gaudier-Brzeska, and Brancusi before becoming writers and artists themselves; and in Chapter 9, “The Aesthete in the Brothel,” with the significance of the brothel in the work of Joyce, Proust, and Picasso. This may seem an odd way to end a book on modernist literary and art criticism, but according to Scholes,

The aesthete in the brothel is perhaps the most concrete and powerful representation of the paradox of Modernism that we can find. The Modernist writers and artists kept returning to this scene because it is the place where the flesh and the spirit are brought into the closest proximity, where the question of what is real is posed most powerfully. (273)

“[W]hat we must learn from them,” Scholes concludes, “is the folly of trying to exclude the middle while positioning it as low—and despising both equally” (276). Although modernist critics sought to maintain inviolable boundaries between old and New, low and High, “they could not sustain those distinctions, and their failure is instructive. In the long run, the continuities count for more” (278). Paradoxically, one of the most significant of these continuities is “that most modest attribute, affording pleasure to viewers and readers” which “turns out to be crucial for the survival of works of art in all the modes and media” (278-279). If this formula for survival applies equally to criticism, if criticism must afford pleasure to readers if it is to endure (and I would agree with Scholes that it must), then *Paradoxy of Modernism* is one recent critical work whose survival is assured. ✱