

# PARADOXY OF **MODERNISM**



Robert Scholes

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ROBERT SCHOLES

Yale University Press New Haven and London

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Set in Minion type by Integrated Publishing Solutions.

Printed in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Scholes, Robert E.

Paradoxy of modernism / Robert Scholes.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p. ) and index

ISBN-13: 978-0-300-10820-0 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-300-10820-6 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. Modernism (Art) 2. Modernism (Literature) 3. Arts, Modern—20th century. 4. Criticism—History—20th century.

I. Title.

NX456.5.M64S36 2006

700'.4112—dc22

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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*This book is dedicated to the first friend  
I made in graduate school at Cornell,  
Carl H. Klaus, my colleague and collaborator  
at the University of Iowa, a gifted writer  
and a steadfast friend.*

*And to the memory of Kate Franks Klaus,  
who proved definitively, against much evidence  
to the contrary, that it can be a very good idea  
to marry a poet. I can see her smiling,  
getting ready to respond to that,  
with a wisecrack of her own.*

*To Carl and Kate, then,  
with love*



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## Preface

I have a personal stake in this book, which I want to mention here, partly because I think you have a right to know about it and partly as a way of explaining why I have written the book and what kind of result I am hoping to achieve with it. I have loved stories for as long as I can remember, and loved them rather indiscriminately—high and low, serious and funny, long and short—so long as they did what stories can do: hold my interest and provide the pleasures that we all derive from emotional investment in artificial beings. Moving from those (relatively) innocent pleasures through various academic modes of studying literature and art, I have regularly run into ways of dividing the texts I enjoyed into those that I should indeed enjoy and those that I shouldn't be enjoying at all. Offended at this regular correction of my taste, I have naturally sought to justify my choices, and, over the years, have written about science fiction, about crime stories, and about other kinds of texts that I like. Part of my motivation in writing this book, then, is just a continuation of that project, but there is a second part as well.

Born in 1929, I grew up with Modernism as a part of my heritage, and, attending Yale just before the midcentury, I was

more or less indoctrinated into the New Critical account of aesthetic value, which I see now as a distinctly Modernist account. At Yale, too, I encountered a great teacher of art history, George Kubler, who directed me to the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which, as it happens, was also born in 1929. Visiting MoMA in the late 1940s, I absorbed semiconsciously the museum's doctrine that "modernism is the art that is essentially abstract" (now made explicit on MoMA's Web site). I shall return to both of these views (that of the New Critics and that of MoMA) later in this work, which may be seen as a continuation of my long attempt to extricate myself from these views while continuing to learn about Modernism.

On the literary side, my further academic studies, partly by design and partly by accident, led me deeper into Modernism as a field of scholarship, with special emphasis on writers like James Joyce, whose papers I catalogued at Cornell University, and William Faulkner, who was at the University of Virginia when I first taught there (when I taught *Absalom, Absalom!* in an undergraduate honors seminar, he sat in on the class). My pedigree in Anglo-American literary Modernism was strong enough, then, but my contact with these major writers, whose work I admired, never prevented me from continuing to be interested in their less exalted contemporaries—as they were, of course, themselves. There is no real equivalent for visual abstraction in the literary arts, though a number of attempts have been made to provide literary studies with a notion of Modernism as clear and powerful as MoMA's "art that is essentially abstract." Even so, critics and scholars kept attempting to define literary Modernism in terms of verbal experimentation or some form of departure from grammar, representation, or narrative structure.

Thinking about all this, studying the verbal and visual texts from the modern period, and discussing them with stu-

dents, colleagues, and friends, I sensed that my own understanding of Modernism, and the understanding of it by other people as well, was far from accurate, and, even more important, far from useful in sorting out our own situation and understanding the art and culture of our own time. So I began to reconsider Modernism, casting a wider net for useful texts—and to recognize that this was not my time but a very different time, when other views and values prevailed, which could be understood only by an immersion in the texts of that time, accompanied by a critical acceptance of my own position as a foreigner, an alien in that territory, who needed to make a serious effort to understand the ways and values of the original inhabitants. As I did this, over a period of many years, I began to be more and more aware of a problem which has shaped this book as a whole and every chapter within it—the problem I have named in my title.

We have been familiar with the notion of paradox as a literary value ever since the New Critics popularized it a half-century or more ago. But paradox? What is that? I am using the word to indicate a kind of confusion generated by a terminology that seems to make clear distinctions where clear distinctions cannot—and should not—be made. In particular, I shall be examining the terminology that has been deployed in definitions and discussions of Modernism in literature and the other arts—a terminology generated at the time when what we know as Modernism was establishing its place in the culture of the English-speaking world, and sustained by the critics and scholars who sought to interpret Modernism and teach others about it. This terminology was based on apparently clear and simple binary oppositions—high/low, for instance, or old/new—which turn out, upon examination, to be far from simple and anything but clear. Taken together, these oppositions often function to suppress or exclude a middle term,

forcing many admirable works into the lower half of an invidious distinction. The four chapters constituting Part I of this book are devoted to explorations of four major paradoxies that have shaped Modernist critical discourse.

These paradoxies share a tendency to reject or suppress any middle term that might mediate between their extremes. My project, then, has been to look into this critical terminology and explore the confusions and contradictions lurking there, hoping, among other things, to recover the middle that they exclude. In doing this I regularly capitalize the first letter of key terms as a way of calling attention to their status as objects of investigation rather than solid critical assumptions on which to build—capitalization being less intrusive than such alternatives as scare quotes or italics. I shall begin with a chapter on the distinction between High and Low, which has been the founding binary opposition for all Modernist critical terminology.

In the second chapter, I propose an examination of the paradox of Old and New in the visual arts, not from MoMA's perspective but from that of a weekly magazine appearing in the crucial years from 1910 to 1914. In these excerpts from *The New Age*, we will hear the voices of artists and critics as those voices argued about what should be the proper art for modern culture—and we will look at images of the works they were discussing. The critical vocabulary of Modernism began with the visual arts, and was to some extent—and not always happily—adopted by literary artists and critics. Writers like Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford, for example, borrowed the term Impressionism to describe their own literary work, and Virginia Woolf was discussing Cézanne with her sister and Roger Fry even as she began her own career as a novelist.

After the investigation of Old and New in art, we shall conclude Part I with two more considerations of the workings

of paradox in the definition of Modernism in literature: the distinction between Poetry and Rhetoric in Chapter 3, and that between Hardness and Softness or sentimentalism in Chapter 4. In Part II the focus will shift to discussions of works of modern literature that are excluded or marginalized by Modernist paradox. Part of what we miss when we regard Modernism through the lenses provided by its polemicists and writers of manifestos is the importance of traditional values in establishing the durability of works of literature and visual art. And by traditional values I mean things like empathy with characters and concern for their fates in fiction, the pleasures of recognition and seeing freshly in visual art, and the defamiliarizing effects of poetic language. I also mean wit and grace, whether verbal or visual. The one thing that distinguishes the arts from other kinds of texts is that their aim is pleasure. They can please by representing pain and ugliness, but please they must—or they are not art but something else. 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. Therefore I shall have something to say in the following pages about the importance of being earnest about pleasure, assuming the risk of paradoxical discourse myself.

The emphasis in Part II, then, will be on pleasurable writers and texts, best described by paradoxical categories—with paradox itself functioning here as a kind of antidote to paradox: Oscar Wilde and “Durable Fluff” in Chapter 5, Dornford Yates and “Iridescent Mediocrity” in Chapter 6, and Georges Simenon and “Formulaic Creativity” in Chapter 7. Then, finally, in Part III, we will consider what I call “Doxies”: lives and texts concerned with prostitution or the bohemia that exists on the border of the brothel, where artists and models exchange places

and aesthetes get down and dirty. Some of these texts are journalistic or cast in the form of casual memoirs. Such texts are the doxies of Modernism, represented in Chapter 8 by letters and memoirs from women who modeled for Modernist painters. Others reveal High Modernist authors descending to low places, as with Proust and Joyce in the world of prostitutes and brothels in Chapter 9.

This whole book, then, will constitute a sort of *descensus ad avernum*. (Did I mention that Virgil came to my class when I taught the *Aeneid*? Actually, he didn't, but the ghost of Miss Jennings, my high school Latin teacher, was there, I assure you.) Anyway, the descent is easy, the poet said, and I hope you will find it so. Parts of Chapters 1, 4, and 6 appeared in an essay published in *Narrative* (vol. 11, no. 3 [October 2003]). I am grateful to the editor, James Phelan, for very helpful advice at that time and also for permission to use those materials in this book, where they appear in extensively revised and expanded versions. Part of Chapter 8 appeared in the *Hemingway Review* (September 22, 1999), and I thank Susan Beegel for permission to use it here. All materials drawn from *The New Age* have been taken from the digital edition of that journal available at <[www.modjournal.brown.edu](http://www.modjournal.brown.edu)>, where they may be accessed and used freely by anyone, and I strongly recommend that site to all those who share my interest in modernity and Modernism. The manuscript of this book was read by John Kulka, of Yale University Press, by Carl Klaus, James Phelan, and an anonymous reader for the Press. They saved me from many follies, and I am grateful to them all. The faults that remain are, I am afraid, necessary aspects of whatever virtues this book may claim.

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# Paradoxy of Modernism





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# Part I

## Paradoxies

In this part we shall explore the major oppositions that have structured discussions of Modernism in literature and the arts: High and Low, Old and New, Poetry and Rhetoric, Hard and Soft. In Modernist critical discourse, each of these sets of terms has operated to exclude a middle ground or to obscure complications and combinations of the basic oppositional terms. My main goal in these chapters will be to recover what has been excluded or to restore complications that have been lost. These discussions are meant, among other things, to set the stage for later chapters that focus primarily on artists and texts that have been marginalized if not excluded by the manifestos and critical dogmas of Modernism, though we shall return to High texts in Low places in the final chapter.



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High and Low  
in Modernist Criticism

*I want to insist on the existence of badness in poetry and so to establish an antithetic point of reference for the discussion of goodness. . . . The purpose of my essay is . . . to show the relationship between examples acknowledged to lie in the realms of the good and the bad.*

—W. K. Wimsatt

**M**y objectives in this chapter are to look into the way the terms High and Low were deployed in the critical discourse around Modernism, and how they slide easily into absolute notions of Good and Bad. I shall also try to situate that discourse in relation to some earlier versions of the High/Low distinction, and

to use the results of that investigation to argue that the paradox we find when we look into these matters should lead us to rethink the Modernist canon and curriculum, opening up both of these to accommodate texts formerly excluded, and should make us more alert to the way that texts we think of as belonging to one or the other of these categories often have crucial elements that our critical discourse associates with its opposite.

In a recent article Andreas Huyssen finds it necessary to clarify the interpretation of the “Great Divide” between High and Low Modernism that he advanced to such great effect in his book, *After the Great Divide*:

Much valuable recent work on the editing, marketing, and dissemination of Modernism has misconstrued my earlier definition of the Great Divide as a static binary of high Modernism vs. the market. My argument was rather that there had been, since the mid-nineteenth century in Europe, a powerful imaginary insisting on the divide while time and again violating that categorical separation in practice. After all, the insight that all cultural products are subject to the market was already advanced by Theodor Adorno, key theorist of the divide, in the late 1930s. (366–67)

Huyssen goes on to say that he was mainly interested in how the divide played out in the context of Post-Modernist attempts to break down the wall between High and Low, and that he now wishes to reconfigure or reconsider the divide in terms of a global approach to comparative literary studies. This is all well and good, but it seems to me that certain aspects of the divide have never been properly understood, and that in order to understand them we need to reexamine some of the internal

contradictions and other problems that I am calling paradoxy in the work of those who theorized the divide during the Modernist period—not just Adorno but others, ranging from Georg Lukács and Clement Greenberg to the literary New Critics. It will also help, after this, to consider briefly some previous formulations of the High/Low opposition, from which the Modernist version evolved.

We can start with Lukács, who was insisting on the distinction as early as 1914–15, when he wrote *Theory of the Novel*. In the preface he wrote for the 1963 edition of this book, Lukács points out that he had composed the work during World War I, in a mood of profound depression as he contemplated the future of Europe. First published in a journal, it appeared as a book in 1920. In this work, Lukács wished to make an argument for the novel as a major form of literary art—a motivation that he shared with such illustrious predecessors as Gustave Flaubert and Henry James, though his reasoning was very different from theirs. For Lukács the novel succeeded the epic as the proper narrative mode for an age after the death of God, a narrative grounded in what he called a “transcendental homelessness” (61). Lukács felt that the dignity of the novel was threatened by the presence of a number of similar but trivial narrative modes, the most prominent among them being “mere entertainment literature” (71). The novel, he asserted, unlike other literary genres, was cursed by having an evil twin: “a caricatural twin almost indistinguishable from itself in all inessential formal characteristics: the entertainment novel, which has all the outward features of the novel but which, in essence, is bound to nothing and based on nothing, i.e. is entirely meaningless” (73).

Lukács wanted the novel to do serious cultural work, which meant, for him, a Hegelian project, in which characters would embody the workings of a progressive historical dialectic.

tic. This led him, as similar concerns led Erich Auerbach, to privilege novels that offered a coherent and historicized narrative position (omniscience) and dealt with social and economic forces from a progressive perspective, exposing the evils of capitalistic society in the manner of Balzac or pointing the way toward a better social system. The pessimistic naturalism of Zola he did not approve, and, indeed, Lukács linked naturalism to aestheticism as excessively concerned with sensual details. Granting these concerns their seriousness, his attack on “the entertainment novel” is still shocking in its vehemence: “the entertainment novel . . . is bound to *nothing* and based on *nothing*, i.e. is *entirely* meaningless” (emphasis added). The double nothings, and the unnecessary adverb intensifying the already absolute “meaningless” to a presumably lower level of inanity, reveal a serious problem here.

This man was protesting too much. Which suggests that he was fond of the guilty pleasure found in these works and was trying to exorcize the demon from his consciousness. But my serious point here is that multiplying the zeroes and intensifying the meaninglessness simply will not work. Literary texts cannot be classified so rigidly. The divide that Lukács was trying so strenuously to create never existed and could not exist, because narratives are essentially entertaining, whether epics or novels, and because a narrative cannot be entirely meaningless or based on nothing. In asserting that novels are “essentially entertaining,” I mean to insist that narrative structures are linked to a distinctly human psychology of pleasure at a very fundamental level of existence. Lukács was too thoughtful a critic to ignore this, and in his later work he modified his extreme position. But the question of the purity or rigidity of the divide is the most important issue we shall face. If we were to follow Lukács, we might define the opposition in terms of entertainment versus representation (allowing the word “rep-

resentation” to stand for the complex issues Lukács addressed using terms like “realism” and “narration”), but before accepting any single view, we must look more deeply into the ways in which various critics have defined the divide. We can begin with the powerful formulation articulated by the American art critic Clement Greenberg in the 1930s.

In his 1939 essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” Greenberg made a frankly class-based assessment of the High/Low divide. Great art—high culture—depends, he argued, on a class with leisure and education: “No culture can develop without a social basis, without a source of stable income. And in the case of the avant-garde, this was provided by an elite among the ruling class of that society from which it assumed itself to be cut off, but to which it has always remained attached by an umbilical cord of gold” (8). But these proper patrons of the highest art, “the rich and the cultivated,” were being wooed away from supporting the avant-garde artists who kept the flame of culture alive—wooed away by a spurious commercial or academic substitute: “that thing to which the Germans gave the wonderful name of *Kitsch*: popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fictions, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc., etc.” (9). In a brief historical excursus, Greenberg blamed the birth of kitsch on “peasants who settled in cities as proletariat and petty bourgeois.” These wretches “learned to read and write for the sake of efficiency, but they did not win the leisure and comfort necessary for the enjoyment of the city’s traditional culture” (10). Thus they demanded—and got—something less elevated than the art that the rich and cultivated had supported:

To fill the demand of the new market, a new commodity was devised: ersatz culture, kitsch, destined for those who,



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