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Will Norman, review published in *American Literary History Online Review*, Series XI (2017). Author pre-print version.

Matthew Wilkens, *Revolution: The Event in Postwar Fiction*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016.

Matthew Wilkens' monograph, *Revolution: The Event in Postwar Fiction*, aims to offer both a theoretical account of transition as a literary mode, and, drawing on this, a more specific study of the dynamics of transition between modernism and postmodernism in midcentury Anglophone fiction. The first aim, broadly speaking, is tackled in the first half of the book, including chapters on allegory, the event, and encyclopaedic forms. The second is the focus for the remainder, which takes up case studies of three canonical novels of the period, William Gaddis' *The Recognitions* (1955), Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) and Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962). While the individual readings of the fiction are engaging in themselves, and to some degree might stand alone, the intellectual heft of the book and its contribution to the field is to be found in the careful development of a new theoretical apparatus for addressing an old problem: how to account for large-scale formal shifts in the literary system?

In the midcentury United States, perhaps the dominant model for understanding the historical development of contemporary thought and culture was one derived from Hegel. This dialectical model is visible in differing forms throughout a range of figures, many of them transatlantic, from Frankfurt School intellectuals to Vladimir Nabokov. It was there too in the work of Ralph Ellison, whose *Invisible Man* plays a key role in *Revolution*. It is a bold move, then, that Wilkens makes in more or less jettisoning Hegelian models for understanding the discontinuous shifts of midcentury, in favor of a complex framework he constructs from Alain Badiou's theory of the event and Thomas Kuhn's idea of the paradigm shift. The conceptual development of this framework, it must be said, is built in patient detail using an accessible style that seems intended for newcomers to these thinkers. A brief summary necessarily overlooks important stages in this process, but is nevertheless indispensable if we are to grasp the stakes of the book. Badiou's notion of the event, Wilkens explains, is constructed from the mathematical principles of set theory, and in particular hinges upon the question of *what counts*. A revolutionary event, he summarizes, is "a change in the structure of a situation, that is, an alteration of its regime of counting as one" (40). In this sense, an event serves as the index or axis of reference for the constituent elements of a situation, one which calls those elements into a different formation in which certain of them become visible as holding a new function. In a comparable way, Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* offers us the notion of the paradigm, which also "delimits and structures the practices of those who operate in its field" (54). Crises in scientific knowledge can be identified by moments at which there is a proliferation of unexplained and anomalous results -- results, to follow the Badiouian parallels, which do not *count* as such. Wilkens argues that together Badiou and Kuhn offer us a route into conceptualizing why, at certain revolutionary junctures, literary works turn to encyclopaedic and allegorical forms, as ways of treating rogue elements of their situation / paradigm that cannot otherwise be satisfactorily placed. Such works are transitional in the sense that they recognize the impending redundancy of the existing situation without yet calling into being a new regime of counting.

One of the values of the book is the theoretical richness of the conceptual frame sketched above. Wilkens' special interest in the temporality created by the event, its future anteriority, is very suggestive when construed in literary terms and indicates effectively the limits of the novels he studies. In his illuminating commentary on *Invisible Man*, for instance, this temporality allows us to perceive what the novel's protagonist cannot, the way that Rinehart represents the possibility for a revolutionary reconception of both the narrator's self-identity and of what is possible in 1940s Harlem. More generally, the book adds significantly to a growing consensus that the midcentury period in the United States poses particular challenges for the literary historian, by virtue of the instability and uncertainty governing what *counts* as legitimate literary form. While others have used Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the cultural field as the means by which to approach this challenge, Wilkens shows how theories derived from mathematics and the history of science might offer a way forward. The way in which such theories defamiliarize our conventional conceptions of canonical novels carries its own critical valence. An additional achievement of *Revolution* is to delineate with some precision *the transitional* as a literary mode in its own right. While late modernism is a term used frequently in literary histories and criticism, Wilkens's framework opens the door to new and more precise analyses of how midcentury fiction relates to its modernist past. The possibility, moreover, that we are currently undergoing our own moment of transition in the early twenty-first century, means that the book should be of interest to scholars of contemporary literature too.

In the twentieth century, we might look back to the work of the Russian Formalists for an early example of a concerted effort to develop a theory of literary evolution. During the 1920s, Yuri Tynianov and Boris Eikhenbaum in particular took up this very question as their primary concern, focusing on the notion of how specific formal innovations achieved through the cross-fertilization of literary genres created a dialectic process of development. Although originally committed to the idea of an autonomous literary system evolving according to its own internal dynamic, by the end of the decade they had admitted the necessity of taking into consideration the impact of social and political factors existing outside the strict limits of the literary system. This episode in the history of literary criticism is of course bound up with that of the Russian Revolution and the establishment of a communist state. The reason I bring it up here is that it brings into focus the title of Wilkens's book, and his use of the term revolution. It raises a question about the various types of revolution the book evokes, and throws into relief the thorny problem of how literary revolutions might be related to revolutions in other systems, social, scientific and intellectual. To its credit, Wilkens grapples with these concerns throughout, and goes some way to answering them.

Badiou's key examples for his theory of the event are the French Revolution and the establishment of Christianity. Kuhn's examples of scientific revolutions include Copernicus' rejection of the Ptolemaic model of the heavens, and the transition from classical to quantum mechanics in the early-twentieth century. Wilkens's revolution concerns the move from modernism to postmodernism among a fairly small number of Anglophone novelists in the mid-twentieth century. The book rests upon our willingness to abstract these theories from their historical, intellectual and disciplinary contexts. In a certain sense, this is precisely how we test the value of theories as such, but the book's undoubted success comes at a cost visible in the historically attenuated understanding of what a revolution might look like that it offers. It would have been productive to have pursued the way in which both Kuhn and Badiou were broadly products of the same midcentury moment that is under examination. Attention to the considerable impact on Badiou's intellectual formation of the revolutionary moment of the Paris uprisings of May '68, and to his

commitment to Marxist political programs, would have added to our understanding of the book's claims. It was surprising to find no reference to any of the large-scale political revolutions of the twentieth century anywhere in the book, including ones taking place during the very time period under focus, in China in the late 1940s, for instance, or Cuba in the late 1950s.

To return to the concerns of the Russian Formalists, it is not clear whether the revolutionary crisis in the literary system is to be understood as strictly self-generated by the formal logic of modernism's demand for innovation, as seems at certain points to be suggested, or as somehow determined by crises external to the system. The content of the novels themselves point to the latter, in the commodity form of artworks in Gaddis' case, or U.S. race relations in Ellison's. Wilkens's subtle deployment of the term allegory provides one way of resolving this problem, by claiming that his three examples allegorize both elements of wider social crisis and, at the same time but on another level, their own formal impasses. Nevertheless, whatever revolution takes place in the Anglo-American world of the mid-twentieth century, it appears rather nebulous in some respects, lacking as it does consistently articulated determinants, actors, or programs.

Overall, *Revolution* should be seen as a considerable achievement that goes well beyond its contribution to the old question of modernism and postmodernism. The theoretical model it builds for grasping transition as a literary mode in its own right is enlightening and potentially durable, while the book's lucid style makes the navigation of its complex arguments an authentic critical pleasure.

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