

1 MATTHEW WILKENS, *Revolution: The Event*
 2 *in Postwar Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins
 3 UP, 2016), 176 pp.

5 Readers of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*
 will remember a pivotal scene in which the
 narrator—the Invisible Man of the title—wit-
 10 nesses an elderly black couple being evicted
 from their Harlem apartment. An angry
 crowd gathers. The Invisible Man watches in
 fascination, alternately dismayed and enthu-
 15 siastic, as the crowd corners the white mar-
 shal tasked with executing the eviction. “The
 marshal was spun this way and that, then a
 swift tattoo of blows started him down the
 street. I was beside myself with excitement.”
 The Invisible Man is conflicted. Does he want
 to pacify the crowd, preventing an outburst
 of violence that will surely bring harsh re-
 prisals? Or is mob justice the only way of re-
 dressing the wrong of the eviction? Later on,
 the Invisible Man encounters a man named
 Dupre, who sets fire to his Harlem apartment
 20 block in protest against living conditions in
 the slums. Dupre, the Invisible Man says, is
 “a type of man nothing in my life had taught
 me to see, to understand, or respect, a man
 outside the scheme until now.” The apparent
 senselessness of the riot both appalls and at-
 25 tracts him. “They did it themselves, I thought,
 holding my breath—planned it, organized it,
 applied the flame.”

30 But what, exactly, did they do? Start a revolu-
 tion? Or merely a riot? What's the differ-
 ence? How do we know a revolution when we
 see one? These, more or less, are the big ques-
 tions Matthew Wilkens takes on in his *Revolution:
 The Event in Postwar Fiction*, a work at
 once fearfully intelligent and, at times, frus-
 35 tratingly abstract. Nominally a study of Amer-
 ican and British fiction of the 1950s—a period,
 Wilkens says, confusing to literary historians
 because neither fully part of the modernism
 that preceded it nor of the postmodernism
 thought to follow—*Revolution* has conse-
 quences for the study of all twentieth-century
 literature. The book's largest quarry is a sort
 of unified field theory of change across dif-
 40 ferent domains of cultural production and of
 politics. What, Wilkens asks, does revolution-
 ary political change have in common with
 “revolutions” in other spheres, like science or
 the arts?

44 For Wilkens, the Invisible Man's descrip-
 45 tion of Dupre as “outside the scheme until
 46 now” is “exactly the formula of the event”

(110), “the event” being a term of art closely
 related to or even synonymous with the con-
 cept of “revolution.” The violence Dupre ini-
 tiates has at least the potential to inaugurate
 a new situation—to accomplish a revolution.
 Wilkens's definition of “revolution” builds
 on and synthesizes two influential theoretic-
 al models of change. First, there is Thomas
 Kuhn's notion of the “paradigm shift,” a
 broadly-invoked account of how scientific re-
 volutions effect corresponding transformations
 in world-view. (Though foundational, Kuhn's
 “paradigm shift” is now largely contested in
 the academic history of science, the discipline
 he helped create.) And then there is Alain Ba-
 diou's notion of the “event,” an unpredictable
 occurrence that permanently alters the con-
 10 tours of a political situation.

On Wilkens's account, both the Kuhnian
 paradigm shift and the Badiouian event offer
 models for thinking about the definitionally
 retrospective character of revolution. It is only
 15 *after* the event has taken place that it might be
 perceived for what it is; indeed, its “eventness”
 consists in the fact that its very taking place
 produces the conditions for its own post hoc
 recognition. If a would-be event fails to pro-
 duce the conditions of its own legibility—the
 conditions by which it can be recognized as
 an event—then it has failed. For the Invis-
 20 ible Man, Dupre's riot is just such a failure, “a
 disaster rather than an event because its vio-
 lence is carried out solely in the service of the
 distinctions it purports to overturn; it merely
 reaffirms the status quo in the process of de-
 stroying Harlem, through its own residents,
 with particularly ruthless efficiency” (111).

Unsurprisingly, Wilkens offers the French
 Revolution as an exemplary “event,” an his-
 25 torical rupture after which everything looks
 different. The Revolution retroactively re-
 names all of the elements of the historical
 situation that produced it. “Thus, although
 the peasantry, for instance, was clearly an ele-
 ment of the French situation before the Rev-
 olution, the revolutionary peasantry of the
Grande Peur [...] exists only as a term of the
 Revolution itself. The same is true of the guil-
 30 lotine, the ‘Marseillaise,’ and any of the other
 elements of the site, all of which are measured
 against the event” (44). The Revolution suc-
 ceeds as an event not just because it replaced
 one kind of government with another, but be-
 35 cause, in order to do so, it triggered a compre-
 hensive re-description of the terms of reality
 itself. This is what it shares conceptually with

the Kuhnian paradigm shift. Kuhn¹ himself would seem to authorize the application of his model to political history when, of the “parallel between political and scientific development,” he writes: “Political revolutions aim to change political institutions in ways that those institutions themselves prohibit” (93). Should a revolution succeed, the institutions it targets are utterly transformed—just as, in science, “when paradigms change, the world itself changes with them” (111).

Wilkens is a scholar of literature; the use he makes of Kuhn and Badiou is characteristic of literary criticism’s happy methodological eclecticism. But it has risks. The topic of Kuhn’s usefulness (or lack thereof) for political history and theory is a well-trodden one, but Wilkens’s Kuhn comes without any qualifications or hedges derived from the secondary literature. On Badiou, conversely, one wishes Wilkens had rather less expertise—his exhausting glosses of that philosopher’s ostensibly mathematical models for understanding the ontology of the event can be very hard going. I suspect that among potential readers of this book I am not alone in my inability to parse lengthy footnotes like “Cardinality is also the concept that allows the natural numbers to be derived from the empty set...by setting $\emptyset = 0$ and defining the successor $S(a) = \alpha U \{a\}$ so that $1 = \{0\} = \{\emptyset\}$ [...]” (135). My own cognitive limitations should not dictate anyone else’s interpretive tactics, but I am not convinced that I need to understand set theory in order to comprehend such formulations as “an event is a change in the structure of a situation [...] there is always one situation that exists before it and another, comprising different elements, after it” (40).

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As his discussion of the riots in *Invisible Man* suggests, Wilkens is interested in the representation of political revolution in the novel. But this is only half of his subject. More broadly, he is concerned with revolution as the engine of literary-historical change and of the retrospective periodization, both popular and academic, which makes such change visible. Why the 1950s? According to Wilkens, “[s]ocially, politically, and historically, those years make up an odd interregnum between

the first half of the twentieth century [...] and the pervasive transformations of the later sixties that mark the beginning of our contemporary world” (1). *Revolution* offers three case studies, each meant to illustrate in different ways the uniquely transitional character of the literature (and, presumably, of the wider culture) of the 1950s: William Gaddis’s *The Recognitions* (1955), Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1953), and Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* (1962). In different ways, each of these novels shares two traits that Wilkens says belong saliently to the art and culture of “revolutionary” periods: they are allegories, and they are encyclopedic.

Drawing primarily on Walter Benjamin, Wilkens’s insights about allegory’s relationship to revolution are some of the book’s most penetrating and exciting. Allegory is often thought of as proper to periods of belief—think of the stable Christian allegory of Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*—but, according to Wilkens, the most intensely “‘allegorical’ ages” (21) are in fact those during which large-scale belief-systems are unsettled or appear inadequate. In the Baroque analyzed by Benjamin, allegorists are caught between, as Wilkens has it, “the waning of Christian hermeneutic hegemony” and “the clear emergence of an alternative worldview” (22). We are meant to take the 1950s as similarly interstitial, an ambiguous decade on either side of which relative coherence can be perceived. For Wilkens, then, allegory is most interesting when it addresses (and attempts to resolve) a difficult, ambiguous, or uncertain situation; when, in other words, it must strain against the inadequacy of its own schematizing. The flipside of the allegorical strategy—always a strategy of ordering, of coherence—is “encyclopedism,” the sprawling, heterogeneous, everything-and-the-kitchen-sink aesthetic characteristic of *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Giles, Goat Boy*, both mentioned in passing as postmodern touchstones (96). In the “transitional” literature of the 1950s, encyclopedism and allegory are not simply opposed but dialectically enabling: “On the one hand, such literature is marked by the expansive, accumulative strain of epic encyclopedism...It is disordered, heterogeneous in form and content, more allusive than tightly referential, and prone to unchecked gigantism. On the other hand, if this literature is not to be simply incoherent, it requires the imposition of some sort of interpre-

¹ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2012).

1 tive or relational scheme to hold its divergent
2 elements together" (64).

3 A principle object of the encyclopedic narra-
4 tive's encyclopedism is literature itself—the
5 encyclopedic narrative becomes a compen-
6 dium of past styles and genres. This is one
7 reason why, for Edward Mendelson (whose
8 seminal work on encyclopedism substantially
9 informs Wilkens's own), *Don Quixote* is such
10 an important early encyclopedic narrative. By
11 supplementing Mendelson's account of ency-
12 clopedism with a sophisticated discussion of
13 allegory, Wilkens shows us something quite
14 profound about a certain strain of long novel
15 in the twentieth century: "[A]llegorical inter-
16 pretation giv[es] shape and legibility to the
17 raw material of the encyclopedia" (67). I think
18 this is exactly right about the motivation be-
19 hind, and the effects of, a certain kind of long
20 novel. We are given the proliferating messes of
21 history, incommensurable discourses jostling
22 against one another for our attention—but we
23 are also given the promise or the intimation of
24 a key, of a vision of order with which to make
25 sense of the sprawl.

26 But isn't this a time-honored way of read-
27 ing no less canonically modernist a text than
28 *Ulysses*? What about it is specific to the period
29 after modernism? Wilkens's sensitive theoretic-
30 acumen radically enriches our understand-
31 ing of how some twentieth-century novels
32 work, but it seems to me that many of his de-
33 scriptions apply as well to the period before the
34 1950s as to the 50s themselves—to say nothing
35 of the period after. My resistance to Wilkens's
36 periodizing applies to his treatment of allegory,
37 too. Allegory, he says, is a "ubiquitous feature
38 of post-war fiction," even as "the Romantic age
39 was an anti-allegorical one, just as were the pe-
40 riods at the beginning and end of the twenti-
41 eth century. For allegory to thrive, our ways of
42 knowing and communicating knowledge need
43 to be more unsettled" (14, 18). It is not at all
44 clear to me that the period from, say, 1899-1925
45 was not sufficiently "unsettled," with respect to
46 "ways of knowing" and much else besides, to
47 qualify as an "allegorical age." By some mea-
48 sures it is arguably the most unsettled span in
49 human history. Nor is it obvious that the most
50 important American and European literature
51 of the period—*The Magic Mountain*, *Heart
52 of Darkness*, *The Waste Land*, to pick exam-
53 ples not exactly at random—is not allegorical
54 through and through.

55 Indeed, I finished *Revolution* newly uncer-
56 tain about how formally to distinguish post-

57 modernism from modernism, though, like
58 Wilkens and others, I think I know it when I
59 see it. One quite familiar effect of putatively
60 postmodern "encyclopedism" is its promiscu-
61 ous stylistic and generic allusiveness, its
62 relentlessly ironized participation in a range
63 of voices, idioms, literary kinds. Modernism's
64 own techniques—like the stream-of-consci-
65 ousness—come in for special attention. As
66 Wilkens puts it of *The Recognitions*, "the
67 once-defamiliarizing techniques of canon-
68 ical modernist texts from Joyce and Stein to
69 Faulkner and Eliot [are shown] as codified
70 and denumerable, even when they no longer
71 work especially well" (73). But the parodic
72 deployment of such "denumerable" styles was
73 already a central part of encyclopedic narra-
74 tives in modernism proper, in, for instance,
75 modernist parodies like Wyndham Lewis's
76 *The Apes of God*, but also in *Ulysses* itself,
77 not to mention non-Anglophone works like
78 Hermann Broch's *The Sleepwalkers*.

79 My uncertainties about Wilkens's peri-
80 odization notwithstanding, I share his intuition
81 that there is something crucially transitional
82 about the 50s, though it's hard to say just what
83 it is. In *The Recognitions*, for instance—a very
84 long, difficult novel about an impassioned art
85 forger who believes he has authentic access to
86 the spirit of the Northern Renaissance, the ob-
87 ject of his expert forgeries—the preoccupation
88 with forgery prefigures postmodernist skepti-
89 cism about authenticity without quite getting
90 there: "[A] large part of what is at stake in the
91 novel is the process by which these dichoto-
92 mies [between authenticity and forgery] have
93 begun to break down but in which their terms
94 remain the operative ones through which to
95 articulate a new framework for aesthetic valu-
96 ation" (78). *The Recognitions*, a novel of thick
97 allegorical atmosphere that nevertheless, by
98 its various stylistic and formal difficulties, re-
99 fuses to make its meaning at all clear, is a per-
100 fect instance of the kind of allegory Wilkens
101 sees as produced in periods of uncertainty and
102 transition. Gaddis's tortured treatment of au-
103 thenticity and originality in the art-world al-
104 legorizes a larger uncertainty about where the
105 sources of cultural value or authority are to be
106 found—an uncertainty that, on Wilkens's ac-
107 count, would have to wait until postmodern-
108 ism proper for its full development. This read-
109 ing accounts not only for *The Recognitions*'s
110 themes—forgery, the art-world, and Christi-
111 anity—but also for its formal peculiarities, its
112 semi-parodic stylistic density and metastasiz-

ing allusiveness. (The difficulty, in my view, is that so much of modernism proper is *already* an allegory of its own failure and an interrogation of the fragility of the sources of cultural authority—"For two gross of broken statues / For a few thousand battered books," as Ezra Pound put it in *Mauberry*.) Beyond or above the local allegories about art and authenticity, Gaddis offers a kind of meta-allegory about aesthetic modernism's inadequacy to new historical conditions.

As Wilkens explains in his discussion of Doris Lessing, such meta-allegory will eventuate in the properly postmodern form of metafiction. Like a latter day Fredric Jameson (clearly Wilkens's ideal critic), Wilkens is interested in the relationship between novelistic representation, political ideology, and historical change. His best readings share Jameson's knack for the virtuosic unearthing of literary form's political and ideological underpinnings. For Wilkens, allegory becomes interesting when the allegorical referent is obscured—the very uncertainty about how to make sense of a deliberately murky allegorical symbol-system enacts "a kind of radical critique of the epistemological structures underpinning the situation from which [allegory] emerges" (25). By wedding a certain kind of character (a politically self-conscious radical for whom gendered subjectivity is the central problem for political change) to a certain form (metafiction), Lessing will attempt to leave behind "the impasses of late modernism" (130). That she doesn't quite succeed is, according to Wilkens, what makes her 1962 novel, like *The Recognitions* and *Invisible Man* before it, an exemplary document of the transitional 50s.

Wilkens calls *The Golden Notebook* "the last text of late modernism" (114). *The Golden Notebook* is a novel of ideas in which the protagonist, one Anna Wulf, tests out theories about gender, English colonial rule in Africa (like Lessing, she is a white Rhodesian by birth), and leftist political commitment in a series of color-coded notebooks, the fragmentary interaction of which both describes and enacts her own psychic breakdown. In the titular "Golden Notebook," Anna (or Lessing) hopes to resolve the paralyzing contradictions in her personality and historical and political positioning. Crucially, the Golden Notebook involves Lessing in the writing of metafiction—self-reflexive fiction about its own making, one of the most prominent formal trends

in the postmodern period to which Wilkens's 50s are prelude. "[T]he metafictional Anna, the one who has written every word in *The Golden Notebook* and who is thus unavoidably a figure for Lessing, has created a new form—neither exactly memoir nor fiction nor cultural critique...The move that Lessing's text undergoes, displacing its allegory from the level of content to the metafictional form of the text, is only a short step from postmodernism proper" (130).

Are these three novels revolutionary works? Wilkens's answer seems to be "no." They are, rather, symptomatic failures. Each is "unable to produce the subject-figure for which it calls and therefore remains a transitional rather than a fully achieved work of postmodernism" (124). In *The Recognitions*, Wyatt, the art-forger, retreats into a Thoreauvian pledge to "live deliberately"; in *Invisible Man*, the eponymous narrator retreats into the "backward-looking" contemplation of "the ideal of democracy itself as an American trait" (113). Both novels end with a nostalgic glance backwards; each fails to fully envision the kind of person proper to the new epoch that will only be fully inaugurated in "the later sixties." In Anna Wulf, conversely, Lessing *does* present such a subject, or at least dramatizes the impasse that comes after modernism: "We are left, finally, with a book that puts into practice a way of forming new subjects, even though it isn't able to take up the content that would be required to sustain them. *The Golden Notebook* gives us, in short, an allegory of late modernism's end" (115).

Towards the end of *Revolution*, Wilkens diagnoses *The Recognitions's* and *Invisible Man's* failure to accomplish the aesthetic, formal, and political revolutions they point towards by insisting that "they stopped short of supplying a figure analogous to the revolutionary peasant, the Bolshevik, or the early Christian" (127). *The Golden Notebook*, on the other hand, does go some way towards supplying such a figure, though not quite: "Doris Lessing's *Golden Notebook* is almost that book" but "falls [...] narrowly short of articulating a full-blown postmodernity" (114, emphasis mine). But Wilkens has, to some extent, stacked the deck. By beginning with the politically quietist *Recognitions*, then moving to the politically ambivalent *Invisible Man* (with its vexed relationship to the traditions of the black protest novel) and ending on *The Golden Notebook*—a novel that is *specifically*

1 *about* the relationship between the personal
 2 and the political—Wilkins ensures that the
 3 kind of revolutionary “subject” more or less
 4 analogous to “the revolutionary peasant, the
 5 Bolshevik, or the early Christian” will appear
 right on the cusp of postmodernism.

I confess I can’t quite grasp what Wilkins means by “success” or “failure.” My largest confusion relates to this “subject-figure” for which each novel supposedly calls but which it cannot produce, therefore falling short of “achieved postmodernism.” Do canonical postmodern novels contain such subject-figures? Is *Gravity’s Rainbow’s* Tyrone Slothrop one, for instance? I would have liked an account of an exemplary postmodern, post-50s novel against which to measure the changes Wilkins sees forecasted but not really achieved in the 50s. The slenderness of Wilkins’s archive is a strength insofar as it allows us to see compelling commonalities among these three very different novels. But it also permits Wilkins to tell a much neater story than a more expansive consideration of the period’s literary production would have allowed. If, as Wilkins suggests in his chapter on Lessing, metafiction is the formal mode appropriate to the new subjectivity allegedly

emerging after modernism, how does our understanding of this historically determined form change if we remember that it is, in fact, a distinctly *modernist* phenomenon? Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, after all, appeared in 1921, and examples could be multiplied. And what about major 50s works like Muriel Spark’s *The Comforters* (1957) or William S. Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch* (1959)? These seminally postmodern novels conform in some respects to Wilkins’s analysis, but would nevertheless require significant revisions to his overarching narrative.

These are quibbles, though, provoked by Wilkins’s welcome argumentative boldness. *Revolution* contains startling discernments on almost every page. Its account of the connection between allegorical techniques and revolutionary change is nothing short of brilliant, even if its periodizing claims are (as periodizing claims always are) a bit rough at the boundaries. Literary critics and cultural historians of both the post-45 period (focusing on the U.S. and elsewhere) and of modernism will be building on and refining the insights in *Revolution* for a long time to come.

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