Kafka and Wittgenstein

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Franz Kafka’s novels and stories have the dubious honor of being often and hastily relegated to the confines of a single adjective that is supposed to evoke both the necessary uniqueness and slippery indescribability of its namesake. Though it may be unfair to the twentieth century’s best-known German-language author to relegate him to an “-esque,” if I were forced at gunpoint to explain what “Kafkaesque” is supposed to be, I would recite from memory the “Kleine Fabel” (“Little Fable”), a tiny story whose mouse protagonist gives way to an existential cat villain, and in so doing double-crosses us twice:


“Alas,” said the mouse, “the world gets smaller every day. At first it was so wide that I was afraid, and as I ran along I was happy when I finally saw walls appear in the distance at my right and left. But these long walls closed in so fast that I’m already in the last room, and there in the corner is the trap into which I must run.” “You’ve simply got to run the other direction,” said the cat, and ate it.

I choose the “Little Fable” because I see it as both a perplexing work on its own and a baffling microcosm of Kafka’s fictional universe, partly because the way in which it captivates the reader, even at its tiny length, is the same way in which all of Kafka’s most captivating works are captivating. This is an appeal that is surprisingly quantifiable for a writer who himself specialized in the ineffable: that is, “Little Fable” displays three elements now attributed, for better or worse, to the aforementioned Kafkaesque.

The first is the characterization of the mouse, who embodies the Kafkan quasi-protagonist’s ability to portray certain doom by way of outside forces
that appear to exist precisely to seal that doom—in the fable’s case, these forces are depersonified into narrowing walls (representing a slow, oppressive end) and a trap (representing a quick and violent one). This dichotomy appears all over Kafka’s canon: we see it in Josef K.’s slowly but inevitably encroaching trial and the quick and gruesome “execution” (or is it murder?) that brings it to an end; we see it in Georg Bendemann’s slow, albeit largely symbolic, suffocation via his overbearing father (echoed in the suffocating nature of the Bendemann family flat), itself put to an end by Georg’s hastily stipulated suicide. It reappears in the “death” of Gregor Samsa’s individuality, freedom, and dreams at the hands of the late-capitalist world, itself brought to an end by his sudden metamorphosis into a monster—which itself brings about yet another suffocating, slow death meant in large part to mirror the one that was taking place before the metamorphosis. And, in its most violent incarnation, we see this dichotomy in the ornamental torture prescribed by the penal colony’s officer, one that ends up instead as a quick, grotesque but altogether unvarnished impalement.

The second way in which the “Little Fable” acts as a fitting epigram for the would-be Kafka reader is its double-twisting plot, remarkable in this case, given the story is three sentences long. The first twist comes when the mouse-protagonist realizes (albeit from a shady outside source) that she has been running in the wrong direction; she has been going about the entire thing the wrong way. Similar realizations occur once again throughout Kafka’s body of work, from Josef K.’s lumberingly slow realization that he has been conducting his trial in precisely the opposite way the Court prefers, to the tiny short story “Die Bäume” (“The Trees”), in which the tree trunks’ elegant placement in the snow makes them appear light on its surface and able to be set rolling “mit kleinem Anstoß” (“with a light push”), when in actuality they are “fest mit dem Boden verbunden,” or firmly wedded to the ground (GW 1:105). But is this even true? The narrator, able to come across in this four-sentence story as both playful and melancholy, twists the tiny plot again, cautioning us: “Aber sieh, sogar das ist nur scheinbar” (“But see, even that is only appearance”). This action is the third and likely most famous element that creates what we broadly call the “Kafkaesque”: the second twist, in which despite the important realization of some important wrong in the first twist, the protagonist (or in the case of “The Trees” the reader, wanting some closure on just how movable the trees are) is nevertheless soundly defeated.

In the Kafkan second twist, what had been uncovered as an illusion—in the case of the “Little Fable,” the running direction of the mouse—is then itself unmasked as an illusion, the uncovering of which finally leads to the real problem (which had been well covered up by the illusory problem of direction): the mouse was a mouse in the first place, that is, living cat food, destined to be gobbled up by a larger and more ferocious predator the whole time. This double twist could certainly be classified as a trope reappearing in a large portion of Kafka’s writings. Foremost examples of this include “Ein
Landarzt” (“A Country Doctor”), in which the doctor rushes into the night to care for a sick patient, who is actually quite well, but who really turns out to be quite ill; or back to “In der Strafkolonie” (“In the Penal Colony”), when the first twist involves the officer choosing to end his own life by way of the torture machine he so loves, and the second coming in said machine impaling him unceremoniously through the head.

And yet, there is at least one more way in which the “Little Fable” resonates with Kafka’s work in a larger sense, and it is the impetus for the approach and insights of this book. That is the larger implication of the double twist altogether, or the initial delusion that is actually covering up a larger and more important delusion. For this pattern also occurs in Kafka criticism, from its beginnings in the age of Benjamin to its current incarnation as one of the most prolific subsections of literary studies. As Kafka critics, we are often and understandably under the impression that in the course of our critical exploration, we are going to find out what his works mean. The approach I advocate in this book argues instead that in this search we are sorely mistaken. Instead, the problems and illusions we portend to uncover, the important questions we attempt to answer—Is Josef K. guilty? If so, of what? What does Gregor Samsa’s transformed body mean? Is Land Surveyor K. a real land surveyor or not?—themselves presuppose a bigger delusion: that such questions can be asked in the first place.

The story of this approach is one that veers away from Kafka and then back to him, by way of one of his contemporaries, Ludwig Wittgenstein. Though Wittgenstein is widely considered the most important philosopher of the first half of the twentieth century, his influence in the literary world is limited. And although the many points of intersection between Wittgenstein’s philosophy and Kafka’s prose are too complex to distill into a single sentence, and indeed occupy the entirety of this book, the first similarity I would like to put forth is rather indirect but quite fitting. That is the way in which Wittgenstein’s own epigram to his second major published work (second of two), the Philosophische Untersuchungen (Philosophical Investigations), relates to Kafka’s “Little Fable.” The motto of the Investigations is a line that Wittgenstein didn’t write. It comes from a little-known Viennese satirist of the mid-nineteenth century, Johann Nepomuk Nestroy, and his play Der Schützling (The Protégé). Taken from the words of the hapless rags-to-riches-to-rags protagonist Gottlieb Herb, it reads: “Überhaupt hat der Fortschritt das an sich, dass er viel größer ausschaut, als er wirklich ist” (“But overall, the thing about progress is that it always appears greater than it really is”).

This apparent truism is ambiguous in a very perplexing way. Is the “thing about progress” that it is actually insignificant, but looks great, and thus we should be thinking about how insignificant it is and possibly try to make it “truly great” by progressing some other way? Or, is the “thing” about progress the very fact that it appears great to us—that we are prone to view it as either great or small at all? This funny, frustrating ambiguity points back
toward Kafka’s fable: is the trouble with the mouse’s “progress” in a certain
direction that it wasn’t correct—or is it that she was under the misguided
impression of a correct direction? This points again to the daunting task
of the Kafka critic: is the problem with our critical “progress” that it is not
nearly as significant as we think it is—or that we were under the misguided
impression that such progress was possible to make?

It is this question that provides the impetus for *Kafka and Wittgenstein*,
and for the subsequent case for what I have decided to call “analytic modern-
ism,” a literary modernism that shares the ideology—intentionally or not—of
the early analytic tradition in philosophy, which is usually not viewed in
conjunction with literature. But the impetus to view Kafka and Wittgenstein
together is both deceptively clear—each is, after all, a foremost exemplar of
the twentieth century in his respective field—and highly complex. For exam-
ple, first I must explain that *Kafka and Wittgenstein* might actually be called
*Kafka and Wittgensteins*. This is because the majority of scholars who study
Wittgenstein separate his work into two periods, the “early” period (1912–
23), wherein he was primarily interested in refining the logical philosophy
of Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell, and the “late” period (1933 to his
death in 1951), wherein Wittgenstein found tremendous fault in not only his
own early work, but the entire concept of a “philosophy of logic” altogether.
While the late period contains reams of posthumously published notes and
lectures, including the works now known as *The Blue and Brown Books, Ver-
mischte Bemerkungen (Culture and Value), Über Gewißheit (On Cer-
tainty)*, and the *Investigations*, the early period is characterized by a single
book, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, and an ensuing decade of silence.

Although several prominent philosophers, coalescing in the early 1990s and
calling their approach the “New Wittgenstein” (foremost of whom are Cora
Diamond and James Conant), present compelling reasons for a unified Witt-
genstein, and although I address and work with the “new reading” in some
detail in later chapters, I have chosen nonetheless to relate Wittgenstein’s
work to Kafka’s in two parts. The first concentrates exclusively on Kafka and
the *Tractatus*; the second on Kafka and the *Investigations* and, to a much
lesser extent, *Culture and Value*.

There are two important reasons for my decision to frame my own inves-
tigation within the “two Wittgensteins” paradigm. The first is that there is a
tremendous amount to be gained by looking at particular problems of lan-
guage, logic, communicability, and referentiality in several of Kafka’s most
famous texts, specifically from a perspective that takes into account only
Wittgenstein’s early work. This is in part because if I were to view the early
work from the perspective of the later work, I would have to keep acknowl-
edging that in Wittgenstein’s (later) eyes the early work was “wrong,” or
misguided, and thus could not treat any of its important developments in
formal logic as if they meant or said anything. I believe this approach would
preclude an entire oeuvre of potential Kafka scholarship, one that takes into
account a vital scientific development that was underway at exactly the same time Kafka wrote all of these works, that of “the New Logic.” As I will argue in the first half of this book, Wittgenstein’s early goal in the *Tractatus*—composed while its author was a soldier and then a prisoner during the First World War—was to delineate the limits of a logically ideal language. This is very much a modernist project, one that sought to pare down the concept of “linguistic sense” into a set of rules as elegant, clean, and functional as the house Wittgenstein designed for his sister in 1925.

This is both because and in spite of the apparent contentiousness of Wittgenstein’s position within modernism, one Michael LeMahieu points out that Wittgenstein created himself by apparently dismissing any self-placement within the philosophical canon in the *Tractatus*’s introduction: “Viehweit meine Bestrebungen mit denen anderer Philosophen zusammenfallen, will ich nicht beurteilen” (“To what extent my endeavors concur with those of other philosophers I do not wish to judge”) (*TLP* 2). Indeed, in the exact gesture of refusing to reconcile the logical and what many describe as the later aphoristic elements of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein expresses, in LeMahieu’s conception, a “bad” modernism—as opposed to a “good” modernism that reconciles art and life. All that said, the *Tractatus*’s stated goal, what it does hope to elucidate and reconcile, is the uncovering of illusory, misguided philosophy.

But is this goal even realized? Only, it turns out, in its self-immolation and the complex recognition of its own impossibility at the *Tractatus*’s conclusion, an end that brought about first a decade in which Wittgenstein left philosophy altogether, and then a return that signaled a radical departure from modernist “ideal language” philosophy. So, why should we even concentrate on the *Tractatus* for a minute, much less a hundred pages, if it fails (and, indeed, I will have more to say about the relative importance of said “failure”)? Because in order to see how Wittgenstein got to this failure, it is vital to concentrate first on the *Tractatus* for a minute, much less a hundred pages, if it fails (and, indeed, I will have more to say about the relative importance of said “failure”)? Because in order to see how Wittgenstein got to this failure, it is vital to concentrate first on the *Tractatus* in isolation, so that we can see how Kafka’s own works reflect both the language skepticism of early modernism and accompanying idealism of the New Logic—a tension that happens to be exemplified in the *Tractatus*. Only by understanding this relationship to the fullest possible extent will we then appreciate Kafka’s relationship to the later Wittgenstein—to, as it were, the breakdown of formalist modernism and the advent of the expressionistic, and eventually postmodern.

The second reason I chose to address the early Wittgenstein in isolation is that I envision this as a truly interdisciplinary piece of scholarship: that is, one that does not seek to incorporate philosophical texts into the literary methodology, but instead considers the philosophy on its own terms, using its own canon and its own approaches. To that end, the majority of philosophical approaches to the *Tractatus* do consider it to contain valuable insight into logic and language, and consider it distinct from the later work, and so for the most part I would like to as well. Further, by and large the discipline
of philosophy views the *Tractatus* as one of the founding documents of analytic philosophy; hence, the “analytic” in the “analytic modernism” I hope to uncover here.\(^\text{11}\)

In connecting Kafka’s work to the earlier Wittgenstein, I reapproach from a logical perspective three common questions we ask ourselves and each other about three of Kafka’s most famous works, questions to which I have alluded above. In *Der Proceß* (*The Trial*), is protagonist Josef K. guilty—and if so, of what? In *Die Verwandlung* (*The Metamorphosis*), what does Gregor Samsa’s transformed body represent? And, finally, in “Das Urteil” (“The Judgment”), why does Georg Bendemann take that fated jump to his death off the bridge? Each of these questions, I find, actually unearths a larger problem that can be elucidated by an analysis of the logical structure of each story’s interior world.\(^\text{12}\)

In the case of *The Trial*, it is the unexpected discovery that the apparently senseless proceedings against Josef K. are actually quite valid in a logical sense, a discovery made possible by a close analysis of Wittgenstein’s conception of the functions of tautology (something true under all conditions) and contradiction (something true under none) in logical symbolism. In *The Metamorphosis*, I use Wittgenstein’s famous assertion in *TLP* 4.1212 that “Was gezeigt werden kann, kann nicht gesagt werden” (“What can be shown, cannot be said”) to facilitate a dramatic and transformative expansion of the common assertion (most commonly attributed to Stanley Corngold) that Gregor Samsa is a literal truth metamorphosing into his metaphorical self. Finally, in the case of “The Judgment,” I use one of the revelations at the *Tractatus*’s conclusion (that ethical judgment is nonsensical) to undermine the titular judgment of the story.

Because the *Tractatus* is so seldom used in literary analysis—and because, in fact, the very idea of logical analysis of literature seems on the surface impossible—this book’s first half begins with an extensive preface that offers both an accessible distillation of the *Tractatus*, and an exploration of its wider contextualization within Austrian modernism, and within the milieu of other specialized “modernisms” that have come out of decades of critical study: Marxist, Zionist, fascist, structuralist, post-structuralist, and so on. The preface for the book’s second half, which deals entirely with Kafka’s relationship to the *Investigations*, the primary text of the so-called later Wittgenstein, is quite a bit shorter, due to the ease of introducing the *Investigations* directly alongside the Kafka criticism. Additionally, Wittgenstein’s transition from the *Tractatus* to the *Investigations* is so interesting and so crucial, that it is worthwhile to jump far ahead of ourselves and discuss it briefly here—another reason the preface to part 2 is able to get away with such brevity.

The “late Wittgenstein” is a period that began after the decade of silence into which Wittgenstein entered after the publication of the *Tractatus* and its apparent goal to end all philosophy by proving philosophical propositions impossible. Wittgenstein spent his premature retirement from philosophy as a
village schoolmaster in Puchberg am Schneeberg outside of Vienna, and as an architect, designing the aforementioned sleek house for his sister Margarete, which still stands today in Vienna’s third district. When he finally returned to philosophy in the early 1930s, it was as a changed man: first, as Wittgenstein began the *Investigations*, he was in the process of transitioning to what Ray Monk aptly terms “a new life” in Cambridge. And he was philosophically changed as well, no longer satisfied with logical philosophy. Instead, he was quite convinced that not only was philosophical logic insufficient at explaining how our language did and did not work, but that the entire conceit of a philosophy of logic was mistaken. As Wittgenstein remarked in *Culture and Value*, even (and especially) the *Tractatus*’s very famous notion—and one that will be discussed in this book in a tremendous amount of detail—of ascending and then discarding a ladder (*TLP* 6.54) was misguided:

Was auf einer Leiter erreichbar ist, interessiert mich nicht.

I could say: if the place I am trying to get to could only be reached by a ladder, I would give up trying to get there. Because the place where I really want to get to must be the place where I already am.

What is reachable by a ladder does not interest me.

This massive shift was in stark contrast to the views of the logical positivists (Rudolf Carnap, Moritz Schlick, and others in the well-known Wiener Kreis, or Vienna Circle), who treated the *Tractatus* like a founding document, much to Wittgenstein’s annoyance. For he, true to his word, sought to discard it altogether, or rather, as the remark above suggests, to simply disengage entirely. There is a lively and interesting debate in the philosophical community, one that the second half of this book visits in more detail, surrounding just how interconnected the early and late Wittgensteins are, but again, even if one were to take the view of the so-called New Reading and argue for a unified Wittgenstein, one must understand the early Wittgenstein on its own terms.

The structural differences are vast and apparent between the two representative texts of Wittgenstein’s canon, books that have granted him the place in the philosophical community of the early twentieth century’s most important philosophical mind. The *Tractatus* is a scant eighty pages long, full of white space between enumerated propositions that are for the most part quite pithy. And these propositions number only seven in total, with the rest of the text made up of their sub- and sub-sub-remarks. The *Investigations*, on the other hand, are both voluminous in pages and inconsistent in format. The first half consists once again of numbered remarks, though this
time no sub-remarks exist, and although the remarks often coalesce around what appear to be main points—three of which I address in great detail in this book’s second half—just as often they do not, and their intricate system of cross-reference extends even to their highly challenging writing style (and the second half of the *Investigations*, meanwhile, is written in largely uninterrupted prose). Further, while the German of both the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* is remarkably clear and contains not a single superfluous word, the *Investigations* complicate matters immensely by being “narrated” by at least two (probably more) interlocutory voices, one of whom seems to be a Platonist “straw man,” and the rest of whom seem to be setting that straw man straight. The two texts’ structural differences also seem to highlight their differences in focus and approach: while the *Tractatus* sought, via rigorous logical analysis and the refinement of a logically perfect notation, to define as clearly and irrevocably as possible the “limits of language,” the *Investigations* sought to dethrone the conceits of philosophy (including logical philosophy) by undermining one alleged philosophical “problem” after the next. Both texts were primarily concerned with language, but while the *Tractatus* sought to formalize all language that could be used (and relegate the rest to nonsense, or *Unsinn*), the Wittgenstein of the *Investigations* delighted in returning words “from their metaphysical back to their everyday use,” which is why the later Wittgenstein is often associated with ordinary language philosophy. These complex issues, and their relationship both to Kafka and to the deconstructionist critical canon, are all approached in great detail in the second half of this book.

Another difference between the “two Wittgensteins” is one of use in the literary canon. As we will see, the *Investigations* are quite a bit more popular in conjunction with literary studies—and, further, unlike the sparse, enumerated *Tractatus*, the *Investigations*, though vast, can be waded into with, as I have just mentioned, a far briefer preface. Instead, the section of this book devoted to what I call “analytic skepticism”—that is, Kafka’s textual relationship with the *Investigations* and the later Wittgenstein, one that is quite similar to his relationship to later deconstructionist movements—begins as the *Investigations* do, with an investigation of a particular delusion under which language users often labor: that of ostensive definition, or the idea that one can learn the referent of a word by another person pointing to the object that word “stands for” and saying the word.

It turns out that an excellent way to demonstrate why this understanding of language is flawed is by looking at the way Kafka plays with the “referents” of the word *Landvermesser* (land surveyor) in *The Castle*; I have placed the term in scare quotes because, as we will see, what Kafka actually succeeds in doing is undermining the gesture of ostension in a way that would make Wittgenstein proud, despite the latter’s alleged distaste for the writings of the former. It is also highly appropriate to begin the late-Wittgenstein section of this book with a look at a land surveyor (or at any rate the word...
for “land surveyor,” since K. does not actually survey land), given Wittgenstein’s own introduction to the *Investigations*, which insists that rather than philosophical theses, what he presents to us in this book is an album of “Landschaftsskizze,” or “landscape sketches.”

If we return once again to the *Investigations’* motto (“But see, the problem with progress is that it always looks greater than it really is”), we can see how it works together with Wittgenstein’s “landscape sketches” mentality, and with his later assertion that he is no longer concerned with getting anywhere a ladder goes. And, further, we can see the expansion of such a mentality in the final two chapters of this book, which examine later developments in the *Investigations* alongside Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony” and “Josefine the Singer.” Again, my reading of the motto is that the real “problem with progress” is neither its direction, its destination, nor the perceived amount thereof, but rather that by being preoccupied with measuring said progress (in degree, in direction), we have been ignoring the real problem that has been staring us in the face: the problem of determining and orienting our actual location.

In this view, which is the position taken by what philosophers call the “Pyrrhonian” approach to Wittgenstein, the *Investigations* do not, then, advance philosophical theses. Countering the Pyrrhonian argument is the “positive,” “ordinary language philosophy,” or anti-Pyrrhonian argument, which posits instead that Wittgenstein has unmasked the old, failed ways of doing philosophy to show us how to do philosophy better. The Pyrrhonian view, on the other hand, insists that Wittgenstein is trying to show us that philosophers have been misguided all along. The Pyrrhonians, as with the *Tractatus*, are most concerned with taking Wittgenstein as literally as possible, in which case, as Robert Fogelin argues, Pyrrhonians see “his aim [as] not to supply a new and better pair of glasses, but, instead, to convince us that none is needed.” The conundrum for Wittgenstein readers is, then, this: do the *Investigations* reject bad philosophical progress in favor of better philosophical progress, or do they reject the entire notion of philosophical progress altogether? It is precisely this debate, and its development around two more fascinating paradoxes—rule following and private language—that allows us to see the way in which Kafka undermines several pretenses about prose narration in much the same way Wittgenstein undermines the pretense of philosophical progress.

In this book’s discussion of “In the Penal Colony,” I pick up where the exploration of *The Castle* left off—with Wittgenstein’s apparent assertion that while referential theories of linguistic meaning are misguided, our language can have meaning in its use (§43). The trouble with this assertion, however, is the highly problematic need to have a universal understanding of what “use” means—that is, to have rules for how language works. Instead, there is no such thing as following a rule, only single instances of individual behavior; as such, there is also no way to tell if someone or something has followed a rule—such as, for example, whether or not a bloodthirsty officer’s
suicide on the torture apparatus he has spent the entire narrative space praising “malfunctions.”

This book’s seventh and final chapter visits Kafka’s last story, “Josefine die Sängerin, oder das Volk der Mäuse” (“Josefine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk”), and once again uses the *Philosophical Investigations* to uncover not one, but two instances of radical skepticism in disguise. Both of these skeptical moments come in the exploration of the *Investigations*’ Private Language Argument. I will first uncover a potential reason behind the apparent failure of Josefine’s “singing” to captivate its audience. But it will then be Wittgenstein’s subsequent undermining of the illusion of philosophical progress *altogether*—the so-called Pyrrhonian project many philosophers attribute to the *Investigations*, and especially the Private Language Argument—that allows me to draw the final and most dramatic parallel between Kafka and Wittgenstein. That is, I argue that with “Josefine,” Kafka finishes what he started with “In the Penal Colony”: namely, just as Wittgenstein undermines the conceit of philosophical progress with the Private Language Argument, Kafka’s “Josefine” also displays a complete and radically skeptical undermining of the conceit of prose narration.

Both Wittgenstein texts are from the modernist canon—indeed, both are exemplary of modernist spirits, though different variations thereof. The *Tractatus*’s “logical modernism” showcases its radical rejection of idealism and realism by isolating the few elements of our world that can display a “truth”—true/false propositions, as we will momentarily see—and paring them down to their unadorned general form. The “analytic skepticism” of the *Investigations* showcases what was most interesting and radically skeptical about late-modernist movements—namely, the full breakdown of the conceit of “truth” altogether; indeed, what some might be inclined to call the nascent moments of deconstruction, several years before the term was coined. It is my intention in the pages that follow to demonstrate the relevance to Kafka studies—to literary studies in general—of viewing these two philosophical modernisms as philosophical companions to modernist literature. As I have endeavored to demonstrate in this introduction, the primary trajectory of this book is not to pose new questions about Kafka, but rather to show that what would serve us best is to dismantle the old ones, and in doing so unearth a preexisting but largely unexplored avenue in literary inquiry, one that contains the kernel of deconstruction but predates it by several decades, and one that should, in its undermining of the most important questions we ask about Kafka, free us from the illusions that often undergird them.