Kafka and Wittgenstein

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Chapter 1

*The Trial* and the Law of Logic

If I am to make a case that logical modernism belongs with modernist studies as much as, for example, psychoanalytic modernism, postcolonial modernism, or Marxist modernism does, the primary case I must make is one on behalf of the relevance to literary study, and to Kafka’s work in particular, of symbolic or formal logic—“the New Logic” to Kafka’s contemporaries.\(^1\) Wittgenstein’s early work, taking after Frege and Russell, insisted that all language that made any sense whatsoever did so because it could be pared down to its symbolic equivalent. But how does this relate in any way to Kafka’s most famous novel, *Der Proceß* (*The Trial*), one that has been held to hundreds of standards in the near century since its publication, but never—and for seemingly good reason—this particular standard? After all, as a work of fiction, and of nonrealist fiction at that, it hardly seems that such a concern would at all be relevant to the search for an answer to the novel’s primary and most pressing question: is protagonist Josef K. guilty despite never having a formal charge leveled against him? And, if so (and, as we will soon see, most critics tend toward “yes”), what is his crime? Or, from a more psychoanalytic perspective: what is the origin of his *inherent* guilt? It is precisely by applying for the first time a new logical standard to this text that we can make a rather astounding discovery: that is, that all these previous questions are not necessarily the right ones to be asking.

This is not to say that they are not interesting or worthwhile, or that the fruits of the labor of ninety-plus years of criticism are not compelling. Indeed, by the time K. allows his executioners to twist the knife twice in his heart, his death seems to be a foregone conclusion (“Sie sind also für mich bestimmt?” he greets them [“You’re meant for me?”] [GW 3:236]), and critical interpretations of *The Trial* largely seek to “solve” why this can possibly come to be, especially given the cause for K.’s arrest and trial, which is never made satisfactorily clear. Historical analyses have focused on K.’s behavior in both his urban and social surroundings; for Rolf J. Goebel, K. is a sort of anti-flâneur whose subjectivity “mirrors” the reality of the city, the “petty-bourgeois conventionality of his lodging house, the strict hierarchy in operation at his bank, the many sexualized scenarios, the crowded proletarian streets in the
suburb, and the court’s labyrinthine corridors and overcrowded chambers”
all counting as “outward manifestations of K.’s inner world,” specifically and
especially his “narrowmindedness and social pretensions.”

Further, for Mark Anderson, K.’s rebellion against the Court is an expres-
sion of Kafka’s own rebellion against the “typing” of the “born criminal”
that was in vogue at the time of Kafka’s law studies. Structural approaches
have pointed to the opacity of K.’s trial as a literal expression of the novel’s
textual function: as an expression of the necessary opacity of the text in
general. David I. Grossvogel, for example, has called The Trial simply “a text
about the confusion of critics and other readers that shortly confuses critics
and other readers.”

Psychological approaches such as Walter Sokel’s have
focused, understandably, on the notion of guilt (he argues, “The existence of
guilt—some guilt—is assumed, but its nature is left undefined and remains
unknown both to the protagonist and to the reader”). K.’s guilt in The Trial
has no obvious juridical or literal source within the narrative; thus, what is
left for the psychoanalytic critic is to determine whether his guilt—and he
must be guilty, for he accepts his execution—is predestined (i.e., “Oedipal”) or
self-inflicted (“existential”). For “the unknown guilt in K.’s trial is identi-
cal with his being, not in the sense of original sin, but as a consequence of
the silence of the Court as to what constitutes guilt.” Sokel also reminds us
that “in the absence of any standard definition of guilt and non-guilt, what
might appear most innocent to [K.’s] examiner might be precisely the root of
his guilt if viewed from another perspective.”

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate that the seemingly opaque
proceedings of The Trial—especially Sokel’s crucial revelation about the
absence of either guilt or “non-guilt”—do actually adhere to at least one
straightforward and rigid internal system, though likely not the one we
expect. While the Law (das Gesetz) of the mysterious Court (das Gericht)
remains necessarily undiscoverable, there is another sort of law at work in
the novel, one that governs perfectly and without exception. This is the law of
formal logic, which, as I have mentioned, at the time of Kafka’s writing career
would have been called “the New Logic.” This “new” formal system, a self-
contained language of symbols, rules, and formulae, was invented by Gottlob
Frege in 1879 to express and assess the validity of arguments in mathematics
and the sciences. Forty years later and not quite as new, formal logic then
came under Wittgenstein’s philosophical scrutiny in the Tractatus, a text that
actually offers a surprisingly significant amount of heretofore-unexplored
insight to the inner workings of The Trial, despite their obvious differences
in form and content.

It first becomes inviting to search for convergence of the texts because of
historical confluence: while The Trial, written from 1914–15, details a man’s
yearlong detainment by an inscrutable authority, the Tractatus was composed
between 1914 and 1918, partly while Wittgenstein was himself actually
detained by the Italians as a prisoner of war. Along more strictly textual
lines, as I have previously mentioned, a more general relationship between Kafka and Wittgenstein has certainly not gone unnoticed in the critical canon, the most canonical examples of which include work by Henry Sussman and Stephen Mulhall. However, this presents only a fraction of what the early Wittgenstein has to offer Kafka’s work, and *The Trial* in particular.

For whereas the mysterious juridical Law in K.’s case seems designed entirely to preclude him from understanding it, and serves to make the action of *The Trial* seem to diminish in validity as it progresses, the “unshakable” laws of logic deliver an entirely different verdict (*GW* 3:241). This is due in large part to the unique logical status of what Wittgenstein will call one of the two “extreme cases” of logical proposition: the contradiction, which we will recognize in *The Trial* at vital junctures in the story. Wittgenstein, as we will also see, grants a special status to the contradiction and its logical partner the tautology: these are without sense (*sinnlos*) but not nonsensical (*unsinnig*); they tell us nothing while still belonging seamlessly to the larger system of formal language (*TLP* 4.461). Here I will use Wittgenstein’s logic to show that K.’s chargeless arrest, quest for tautological innocence, contradiction-filled trial, and perplexingly expected death actually comprise a progression that is, at least according to one law—that of formal logic—wholly valid.

### “How True It All Is”: Truth Conditions in a Fictional World

The clearest way to introduce a logico-philosophical inquiry into *The Trial* is to unearth a common thread between the foundational element of Kafka’s novel, K.’s arrest, and the foundational concept of logical argument: truth conditions. During K.’s arrest, the warder Franz tells K., “Sie werden bald sehen, wie wahr es alles ist” (“You’ll soon see just how true all of this is”) (3:11). The remarkable thing about this statement is not its ominousness but its ambiguity. This is not just because *wahr* can be read as, among other things, “true,” “real,” “verifiable,” and, fittingly, “just,” but also because it is entirely possible to quantify how true, or how real or how just something is—only to conclude that the answer to this investigation is: not true, real, or just at all. This interaction underscores a fundamental issue not only in this scene, but also in logical analysis: in order to proclaim a judgment to be the opposite of *wahr*—be that “unjust,” “unreal,” or “false”—the ability to judge “wie wahr” is necessary. After all, at the climax of K.’s interaction with the Priest, as K. is proclaimed “thought guilty,” he rebuts: “Wie kann denn ein Mensch überhaupt schuldig sein” (“How can a person be generally guilty?”) (3:223). It is, as Jean-François Lyotard has expressed in *The Differend*, “impossible to establish one’s innocence, in and of itself. It is a nothingness.”

Therefore, in order to see “wie wahr” his situation is, K. must have the ability—the conditions present—to judge “wie wahr” altogether. This is apparently the premise inherent in Franz’s threat, but its power as
both a threat and a promise remains in question because of the very absence of the condition necessary to judge the (juridical) justness of the situation: a named charge.

This ability to judge “wie wahr” once again signals the necessity of truth conditions (Wahrheitsbedingungen or Wahrheitsmöglichkeiten [TLP 4.41]). In a logical sense, we might thus begin to recognize Franz’s apparent threat as empty because the truth conditions necessary to make such a judgment never materialize. Instead the “threat” tells K. nothing threatening, because it tells him nothing at all—rather it simply misleads him into expecting the presence of truth conditions (this never-materializing named charge) down the road. But this is only part of the exceedingly complex state of affairs. As The Trial progresses we realize that Franz’s statement was simultaneously empty and prophetic, depending on how one reads wahr: if it is “true” or “just” then the statement is (perhaps intentionally) misleading, because K. never does learn how true or just his arrest is, since for that to happen the truth conditions of his charge would have to have been named. If we read wahr as “real” or “actual,” however, then Franz was indeed making a threat, and a true one at that: the outcome of K.’s trial is an actual, rather than metaphorical, death.

However, most disputes concerning The Trial are not about the actuality of K.’s death, but rather about its justice. Thus, using the more juridical meaning of wahr, the fact remains that because K. is not charged, he is also not provided with the truth conditions necessary to pronounce said charge “true” or “false.” This in effect means that K.’s trial does not take place in a system in which he can be found guilty or not guilty of something. This system either lacks truth conditions altogether or they are hidden. Though in the end it does not really matter—if there was ever a charge, it remains “hidden” the whole time and thus might as well not exist—at the early stage of K.’s trial he seems to presume a system that can and will offer him a charge if only he unearths it: after his disastrous first interrogation, he professes “kein[en] Zweifel, daß hinter allen Äußerungen dieses Gerichtes, in meinem Fall also hinter der Verhaftung und der heutigen Untersuchung eine große Organisation sich befindet” (“There is no doubt that behind all appearances of this court—in my case, behind my arrest an the investigation today—there is a massive organization”) (3:56). This may be true, but it is not the sort of organization whose criteria for innocence and guilt are manifest. For example, inside the books he presumes contain the Law he may or may not have flouted, K. instead finds amateurish pornography:

Ein Mann und eine Frau saßen nackt auf einem Kanapee, die gemeine Absicht des Zeichners war deutlich zu erkennen, aber seine Ungeschicklichkeit war so groß gewesen, daß schließlich doch nur ein Mann und eine Frau zu sehen waren, die allzu körperlich aus dem Bilde hervorragten, übermäßig aufrecht dasassen und infolge falscher Perspektive nur mühsam sich einander zuwendeten. (62–63)
A man and a woman sat naked on a sofa, the crude intention of the artist easy to discern; however, so substantial was his lack of skill that in the end one could only make out a man and woman dominating the picture, sitting exaggeratedly upright and, due to the artist’s false perspective, merely leaning toward each other in a belabored fashion.

The crude picture K. encounters presents a poor but nevertheless recognizable approximation of the actual state of affairs of a man and woman in coitus, and it offers us our next opportunity to gain insight from the *Tractatus*. The ability this picture has to represent an actual “state of affairs” also happens to be the sole criterion Wittgenstein presents in the *Tractatus* for how our language makes sense to us. In Wittgenstein’s theory, a proposition (Satz) creates a logical picture that can be compared with the totality of possible actual states of affairs (Sachverhalten) in reality—with all possible truth conditions (TLP 2). A proposition thus presents a relationship between objects in logical space, and the hearer or reader compares that state of affairs with the true state of affairs in the world (“was der Fall ist,” or “what the case is” [TLP 1]). If the picture in the proposition matches reality, the proposition is “true”; if not, it is “false” (3.24). However, what if neither is possible, because the conditions are not present in either the picture or reality to make that comparison? This seems to be the state of affairs K. finds himself in, a world—pornography aside—whose sacred texts either do not exist or do not present a logical picture with which he can compare the state of affairs around him. It is a scheme whose conditions he cannot discern, and thus cannot deem *wahr* (true, just) or its opposite.

K.’s Contradictory State of Affairs

Instead, what we see is a juridical system where there seems to be no need for a formal criminal charge. This K. has no way of understanding, however, so one of his earliest reactions to the arrest is to ask why (“Und warum denn?”), and then for the “Legitimationspapiere . . . und vor allem den Verhaftungsbefehl” (“identification papers . . . and most importantly your arrest warrant”) (3:11, 14). When K. learns that a warrant is not necessary, he attempts to impugn such an alleged law: “Dieses Gesetz kenne ich nicht,” he informs Franz and Willem (“I don’t know this law”) (3:14). To this Franz makes a succinct and perceptive (if peremptory) point: “Sieh Willem er gibt zu, er kenne das Gesetz nicht und behauptet gleichzeitig schuldlos zu sein” (“Look here Willem, he claims he doesn’t know the law and the same time claims he’s innocent”) (3:15). To maintain innocence but not know the law that defines it is to be neither guilty nor not guilty.

K.’s new presumed state of affairs can be thus expressed in formal logic as follows: if the situation “guilty” is G, the act of negation the symbol “∼”,...
and the state of conjunction “&” then Josef K. is: \( \neg G \& \neg \neg G \). This is a logical contradiction, one of the extreme cases (“extreme Fälle”) of propositions whose characterization the analytic philosopher of language Max Black argues is “of decisive importance for Wittgenstein’s philosophy of logic,” and which Black described in 1964 as “original and illuminating, even for those who cannot accept [Wittgenstein’s] analysis of the essence of representation and symbolism.” Contradictions, “unter keinen Bedingungen wahr” (true under no conditions), are one extreme, and their partner, tautologies (true under all conditions), the other (TLP 4.461).

To illustrate this extremity, Wittgenstein calls to mind the simple tautology “It is raining or not raining.” This tells us nothing, for after hearing it, we have no idea whether we need an umbrella (4.461). And because the tautology imparts no information that matches (or fails to match) with the real world (tautologies and contradictions are not pictures of reality [4.462]), in Wittgenstein’s terminology it is senseless (sinnlos). This is because, as with the aforementioned pornography, a linguistic “picture” makes sense only when it can be compared with, and judged to match or not match, a real state of affairs (4.461). The contradiction also tells us nothing (fails to represent a picture), but in the opposite way: if someone were to tell us “It is raining and not raining,” that would be utterly useless to us no matter the actual situation outside.

In *The Trial*, Franz recognizes that the assertion that one is both ignorant of the law and innocent under it is laughable, that it does no good to impugn the Law or exonerate K. To Wittgenstein, this situation would thus be sinnlos, as K. has correctly, albeit inadvertently, attested (3:21). There are many reasons why K. is patently unaware of the structure and power of the contradiction that has just been attributed to him (as well as the many to come), and most of these will not be able to come to light until Wittgenstein’s philosophy of logic and language is unfurled in far greater detail, but I would like to digress slightly to finesse—and, it is hoped, offset—a point of possible confusion with this approach before I progress. What I’d like to keep in mind is that although logical contradictions exist in the narrative, its protagonist (and likely its author) do not need to be consciously aware of them for them to exist. Mine is what we could call a literarily logocentric exploration, one that echoes Wittgenstein’s insistence that logical relationships have always existed in both language and the world, that our charting out of them does not bring them into existence but rather reveals them as having been there the whole time. In the textual analysis of this and the following contradictions in *The Trial* I am not superimposing upon its protagonist a metatextual awareness of a system it is highly unlikely he would know, but rather pointing out a logical structure that would be there regardless of the novel’s content.

Returning to *The Trial*, then, Franz’s assertion is but one of the numerous contradictions that together make up the larger narrative progression. Although K. himself begins to recognize and name (and register disapproval
of contradictions as his case progresses, at first he seems either unaware of or unbothered by them. When, for example, he threatens to phone the attorney Hasterer, he is told that of course he may call the lawyer, but that he will not receive the help he expects: strictly speaking, K. may and may not call for help (3:21). Even more contradictory is the discovery that although he is technically “being held” (gefangen), K. is not literally being confined, as he remains allowed and encouraged to go to work (3:23). Although the purported contradiction here seems easily explained away by the designation of one gefangen as literal and the other as metaphorical, a contradiction still remains, for while K. is arrested—an extraordinary situation—he is also compelled to go on with his ordinary life. K.’s process of locating his first interrogation is also, in its own way, contradictory: by not asking directly where the Court is but being addressed by the court usher’s wife as if he has indeed asked where the Court is, K. in effect both refuses to ask and asks a question (3:47). As he goes deeper into his case, K. even attempts to defend himself against a contradiction (a statement that is “false” under all conditions) by producing its opposite: a tautology, a general defense brief whose proclamation of innocence is instead “true” under all conditions: “Er wollte darin eine kurze Lebensbeschreibung vorlegen und bei jedem irgendwie wichtigeren Ereignis erklären, aus welchen Gründen er so gehandelt hatte” (“He wanted to offer a short description of his life, and explain why he had handled himself in every situation that could possibly be determined important”) (3:118). Here we see a brief appearance of the other “extreme case” of the proposition: the tautology, true under all conditions. In attempting to exonerate himself of all possible wrongdoing (of the specifics of which he remains necessarily unaware), K. will have to craft a pro se brief that proves innocence under all possible conditions. And, as we might expect, the problem that arises with this attempt is that just as the contradiction that is K.’s legal predicament is impossible to defeat because it itself says nothing, this all-encompassing defense, were it even possible to compose, would also, in its attempt to defend against everything, actually say nothing (TLP 4.461).

As K. continues to interact with his legal defense, the contradictions continue as well, and he even begins to recognize them more clearly. Contemplating the dismissal of Huld, for example, K. views his case thusly: “Immer gab es Fortschritte, niemals aber könne die Art dieser Fortschritte mitgeteilt werden” (“There was always progress, but this sort of progress could never really be called progress as such”) (3:129)—that is, the case both progresses and does not progress. But it is when he is introduced to the painter Titorelli that the contradictions in his predicament become most egregious. In the squalid “atelier,” K. notices something odd about a figure the painter has incorporated into the portrait of an influential judge: he has painted Justice and the Goddess of Victory in one (3:153). This is, after K.’s arrest itself, the most major contradiction we have as of yet encountered, as well as the most symbolically powerful. And, as K. looks closer, the contradiction becomes
threefold: she is actually Justice, Victory, and the Goddess of the Hunt (3:154). This is crucial, because it shows the contradiction in the logic of the Court’s law: Justice, who should be impartial, instead is always the victor, and even ensures this state of affairs by active pursuit of her prey. In order to understand how the law works, we must primarily (and most importantly of all) understand that the Court’s victory, merciless pursuit, and Justice are the same thing. All maneuvering within the system somehow must acknowledge and work with or around this contradiction.

Again, K. does not realize this—he will not until he leaves the cathedral several scenes later—and instead prompts Titorelli to expound on the methods of acquittal. These, in turn, are all contradictions in terms simply by naming themselves “acquittals,” but since K. has not yet accepted that contradiction is an inherent part of the Law, he still protests their alleged nonsensicality. Titorelli’s explanation of “die wirkliche Freisprechung,” which none, to his knowledge, has ever received, K. finds simply astounding (3:160). K. specifically points out that Titorelli’s description of the Court as both impervious to petitions of evidence and “open,” followed by the assertion that the innocent need no help from the Court (“der Unschuldige [braucht] vor dem Gericht keine Hilfe”) is a contradiction (“Widerspruch”) (3:160). And, further, that Titorelli has claimed that one can influence the judges personally, but denied that actual acquittal (“wirkliche Freisprechung”) can ever be reached through personal influence: another contradiction (3:160). Titorelli responds that these contradictions are easy to clear up—with another contradiction: “Es ist hier von zwei verschiedenen Dingen die Rede, von dem was im Gesetz steht und von dem was ich persönlich erfahren habe, das dürfen Sie nicht verwechseln” (“We’re talking about two different things: what’s in the law and what I have personally experienced. You can’t confuse them”) (3:161). K.’s next course of action is to fire his attorney—who, in a contradictory action, refuses to stop working for him (3:195).

These contradictions—and, more crucially, the Court’s relationship to contradiction altogether—coalesce during K.’s encounter with the prison chaplain and attempt at exegesis of “Vor dem Gesetz” (“Before the Law”). It is here that the priest reveals that K. has been approaching the contradictions he’s encountered all wrong; effectively, the priest must spell out what others have been showing K. for the entire novel. There is, claims the priest, no contradiction where K. claims to see one (K. has claimed that because the door was meant for the man from the country alone, that it is contradictory for him not to be granted admittance to it). The door has, instead, been created uniquely for the man from the country to be barred from entrance (3:228). There is still, however, a contradiction in the exegesis of the parable altogether, and this is the contradiction whose acceptance might have allowed K. a better outcome of his trial; it is this contradiction that lies at the center of the Law in both its parabolic and “literal” form. It is the priest’s assurance—one Sussman has rightly said “sets the stage for the parable’s
unsettling open-endedness”—that “Richtiges auffassen einer Sache und mißverstehen der gleichen Sache schließen einander nicht vollständig aus” (“Correctly understanding something and misunderstanding the same thing are not mutually exclusive”) (3:229).\(^{31}\)

K.’s “misunderstanding” of the parable (that the door meant for the man should have let him in and the doorkeeper deceived the man) and the “correct” understanding of it (that the door meant for the man should have kept him out and thus the doorkeeper never deceived him and instead just performed his job admirably) are not mutually exclusive. In effect, a simultaneous “right” and “wrong” understanding are necessary to grasp the full import of the Law, to see what it is capable of doing or not doing and why it “wants nothing” from its defendants and instead just greets them when they arrive and bids them goodbye when they leave (3:235). This assertion also conjures up later sections of the Tractatus, wherein Wittgenstein writes that ethical propositions are not part of the factual world because one’s opinion on a matter does not change its facts: “Die Welt ist unabhängig von meinen Willen,” he writes in 6.373 (“The world is independent of my will”). Just as, as Wittgenstein says, one’s opinions do not change the facts (the world), it seems one’s feelings toward the Law do not change its facts. This includes one’s feelings toward the contradiction inherent in the demand that both the power and the irrelevance of an inaccessible Law be acknowledged simultaneously.

**Ex Falso Quodlibet and K.’s Valid Conclusion**

It is after this defining moment that K. begins to understand how his trial must end, and indeed in the next scene he dies. The proclamation that one must accept such a dramatic and seemingly ridiculous contradiction in a sovereign Law is what seems, frankly, senseless, and what lends the Court its reputation among critics for complete opacity and obtuseness. And as a contradiction it is necessarily senseless (sinnlos)—again, because it does not tell us anything (TLP 4.461). However, Wittgenstein does help us to make two vital discoveries about this senselessness, both of which, unlike the contradiction itself, tell us a tremendous amount about K.’s plight. The first distinction we must understand is that to Wittgenstein, contradiction, while sinnlos, is not nonsensical (“unsinnig” [4.4611]). The second distinction we must understand is that this unique standing preserves the contradiction’s place within the system of formal logic and thus also its place within wholly valid arguments. It is these distinctions together that will allow us to see both the logic and the validity in the outcome of K.’s case.

K. complains that in the Priest’s interpretation of “Before the Law,” one must take the Doorkeeper’s proclamations for true, and the Priest responds: “[M]an muß nicht alles für wahr halten, man muß es nur für notwendig halten” (“One must not hold all of this for true, one must only deem it
necessary”). This K. finds to be a depressing opinion (“trübselige Meinung”), for then the lie establishes the world order (“[die] Lüge wird zur Weltordnung gemacht” [233]). From a logical standpoint, K. is wrong once again, in that the Priest has not stated an opinion (“Meinung”) but a fact—in logic, a step in an argument does not need to be true, but only needs to conform to the necessary criteria in the logical symbolism. Our first task here is to recognize why, exactly, contradictions and tautologies remain part of the logical symbolism and thus conform to these necessary criteria (TLP 4.461). To demonstrate this, Wittgenstein constructs a truth table that lays out all possible truth conditions and results for a particular proposition (see below). For example, if we wanted to determine the conditions under which “Today is the first of December” is true, we would use the letter “p” to stand in for the date, and create a table with two columns, one for each possibility. We then fill out the table with the totality of all possibilities; that is, if the actual date is December 1, then “p” is true and “¬p” is false; if the actual date is any other date, “p” is false and “¬p” true, etc.

The usefulness of the truth table becomes clearer, however, when we are dealing with more complicated propositions, such as “Today is not the first of December, and it is raining,” with the second elementary proposition (Elementarsatz) now represented by r. In this more complicated case, the above proposition is only true when the ¬p column has a T and the r column also has a T, and perusing the table allows us to determine easily and quickly exactly the conditions necessary for that to happen (see bold text at bottom right):

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It is also possible to use the same structure to discern the truth and falsity of propositions that are never true in the actual, physical world—or, alternately, always are. Take, for example, “It is raining or not raining,” and “It is raining and not raining.” Wittgenstein knows unequivocally that tautologies are true under all conditions while contradictions are true under no conditions precisely because he has used the truth-table method to determine this much. Because of this, these extreme cases still belong to the structure, the symbolism. Thus, while they tell us nothing (are sinnlos), they are not nonsensical in the way “octopus is a verily” is nonsensical, in that “octopus is a verily” cannot be truth tabled due to the very category errors that make it
appear nonsensical in the first place. In Wittgenstein’s parlance, a piece of complete gibberish does not have the form of reality (4.18)—the logical form of reality, expressible in a truth table (below). “It is raining and not raining,” however, does—as does “Josef K. is neither guilty nor not guilty”:

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This is why a logical contradiction, (also called “the False”), can, as contemporary logicians Jon Barwise and John Etchemendy put it, “act[] just like any other sentence in a proof”—why, as Wittgenstein put it before them, a contradiction still belongs to the logical symbolism. However, more important for our purposes than the fact that a contradiction still belongs to the logical symbolism is the philosophy behind why a logical problem can remain valid with a contradiction still in it. This is the heart of why K.’s predicament is valid despite the many contradictions in the Law. When a logician is attempting to solve an argument, in the course of her proof she may come upon (or, more often, intentionally create) a contradiction. Here is the remarkable part: after a contradiction, the logician may continue the argument any way she chooses, presumably to reach a “true” conclusion but often to reach a “false” but still valid one, thanks to the rule of *ex falso quodlibet*, or “after a contradiction comes anything.”

Barweise and Etchemendy describe this rule as an effective way to find a solution to a tricky proof by, in many instances, deriving a contradiction on purpose in a subproof, counseling the beginning logician: “If in a proof, or more importantly in some subproof, you are able to establish a contradiction, then you are entitled to assert any [first-order logic] sentence P whatsoever.” So it is not just that the contradiction belongs to the symbolism and “acts just like any other sentence in a proof,” though that is what enables *ex falso quodlibet*. The complex philosophical origin of this rule in the *Tractatus* comes in remark 5.12, when Wittgenstein argues, “Insbesondere folgt die Wahrheit eines Satzes ‘p’ aus der Wahrheit eines anderen ‘q’, wenn alle Wahrheitsgründe des zweiten Wahrheitsgründe des ersten sind.” That is, for the truth of a conclusion p to follow out of the truth of a premise q, this is only possible when all of the truth conditions of p are also truth conditions of q. Let’s say one of the premises (q) of a long argument is “That man is wearing shoes.” And let’s say that after several other premises whose details we won’t go into yet (r, s, t, etc.), the true conclusion (p) of this argument is “Today is the first of December.” What this means is that the truth conditions of p (today’s date) must contain the truth conditions of q (whether or not a particular man is
wearing shoes). Now let’s say that one of the aforementioned premises r is “That man is not wearing shoes.” This means that r is actually the negation of q: r=¬q. Now, things get interesting. If r=¬q and we’ve already established in the argument that q and r are both premises in the same argument, then we are faced with a contradiction. Now let’s say after many more complex lines in our proof, our true conclusion is still p: “Today is the first of December.” Wittgenstein has claimed that p still contains the truth conditions of q & r: p still contains the truth conditions of the contradiction.

This is possible because the contradiction, though it is allowed to participate in an argument owing to it belonging to the logical symbolism, is true under no conditions and thus effectively has no truth conditions (4.461). This, in turn, is possible because a contradiction works, as Wittgenstein says, like the zero in mathematics: everything is capable of containing “nothing” within it, in addition to whatever else it has—that is, if I have seven apples, I have nothing plus seven apples. Thus, to say that if a conclusion p follows out of a premise q but q is part of a contradiction, p—whatever p is—can obviously contain those truth conditions, since those truth conditions are null, and everything can contain “nothing.” Wittgenstein describes this quite beautifully by allowing that in 5.143 that “die Kontradiktion verschwindet sozusagen außerhalb der Sätze. [Sie] ist die äußere Grenze der Sätze” (“the contradiction disappears, so to speak, outside the proposition. She is the outermost border of the proposition”).

Ex falso quodlibet (or the rule of “False Elimination”) applies to Josef K.’s predicament in much the same way. Many—or rather most, if not all—of the premises leading up to K.’s conclusion (as it were) are contradictory: “Josef K. is not guilty and not not guilty”; “Victory and justice are the same thing”; “An arrested person is also free”; “An acquitted person is actually just pre-arrested”; “Correctly understanding something and misunderstanding the same thing are not mutually exclusive”; and so on (3:153, 229). After each contradiction, Kafka may put anything he wants, so long as it is grammatically put together in such a way that it belongs to the logical symbolism. And that thing, whether true or false, will be valid, because the only definition of logical validity is that it is invalid for all of the premises of an argument to be true but the conclusion false. Thus, The Trial’s own conclusion can be interpreted as “Therefore, Josef K. is executed,” or “Therefore, Josef K. is murdered,” or “Therefore, Josef K. commits assisted suicide,” and all are equally valid. Thanks to the complete lack of truth conditions the Court has presented us—in both K.’s foundational predicament where he is denied a named charge, and in the contradictions that follow—we will never know whether any of these interpretations of K.’s death is wahr (true or just). But according to the law of logic, anything that happens to K., so long as it can be phrased in a German declarative sentence with the correct logical form (TLP 4.18), is, as the Priest says, “notwendig,” because it conforms to the criteria necessary to obey the law of logic. Depending upon our views of K.’s
inherent, existential, or self-created guilt, we may call what has happened to him fair, we may call it unfair, we may call it predestined, we may call it a shock—but thanks to 5.12, we may not call it illogical, nonsensical, or invalid. And this is the case purely due to the internal logic of his situation, and possible to see even without the aid of extratextual markers such as the bestowing of original or, as Sokel has argued, “existential” guilt upon K. to make his predicament make sense.27

Conclusion: K.’s False Elimination and the Ineffable

And yet, saying that K.’s death makes perfect sense does not really make the end of The Trial more satisfying. If his chief crime during the trial was failing to recognize the power of contradictions in logic, can he really be blamed for that? Can any of us? Leaving aside the fact that most of us do not reduce juridical quandaries into first-order logic as a matter of course, it still would have been impossible for K. to understand this about his trial. This is because, in addition to including tautologies and contradictions in the valid symbolism, logic as Wittgenstein conceives it contains another caveat: its structure—that which makes it logical, that which makes language logical—cannot be uttered in language. Therefore, the fact that K.’s case makes sense logically, is logically valid, does not help him at all, because nobody can explain this to him and he cannot explain it to himself.

The problem is that according to Wittgenstein, logical structure shows itself with language, but cannot be uttered in language. It is in fact logic, rather than any metaphysical “truth,” that is the subject of Wittgenstein’s famous utterance from TLP 4.1212: “Was gezeigt werden kann, kann nicht gesagt werden” (“What can be shown, cannot be said”). Since what is happening to K. is a matter of logical rather than juridical necessity, it follows that it is beyond K.’s language to conceive what is happening to him altogether.28 However, that K. cannot utter the essence of his predicament—the form of a logical contradiction—is not merely a result of all logical form being unsayable. As we have discussed before, though contradictions can be put into a truth table—though they have the form of reality—they do not present an actual picture that can be compared with the real state of affairs (4.462). Wittgenstein points out that because we cannot picture what we cannot picture to ourselves, we also cannot say what we cannot picture: “Was wir nicht denken können, das können wir nicht denken; wir können also nicht sagen, was wir nicht denken können” (“We cannot think what we cannot think; accordingly, we cannot say what we cannot think either”). Accordingly, logic fulfills the world (“die Logik erfüllt die Welt”), and the limits of the world are also its limits (“die Grenzen der Welt sind auch ihre Grenzen” [5.61]). What we cannot picture to ourselves—a tautology, a contradiction, or even real nonsense—we also cannot say; thus, although logically valid, the nature of
K.’s predicament cannot be said clearly, and thus, according to Wittgenstein, cannot be said at all (*TLP* introduction). Since, as has now been established from multiple angles, one cannot defend oneself against nothing—despite the inclusion of that “nothing” in a valid argument—K. still has no chance to speak this truth to himself, since he has no possibility of doing so.

As K. is being led to his death, Kafka’s narrator makes the following claim, one that at first appears to be the basis for K.’s last struggle for life: “Die Logik ist zwar unerschütterlich, aber einem Menschen der leben will, widersetzt sie nicht” (“Logic is no doubt unshakable, but it cannot withstand a man who wants to live”) (3:241). K. likely means one or more lay appropriations of Aristotelian logic here—though nothing is to stop the reader with a vivid imagination from arguing that he read Frege and Russell outside the narrative space—so assuming that when K. thinks about “die Logik” he means formal logic may seem like a stretch. However, Wittgenstein’s entire conception of logic—adapted from Frege’s before him—is that all language, and therefore all thought, is logic, whether we see it there or not (*TLP* 5.61). Therefore, even though K. might not explicitly be talking about formal logic when he claims “die Logik ist . . . unerschütterlich,” it is the force that binds together the form of his reality and of the thoughts and spoken language that have attempted to express it.

Thus, if we indeed think of “die Logik” as actual formal logic, then we can see that only the first part of K.’s pre-death assessment is true, at least according to Wittgenstein: logic is, indeed, unshakable, its structure not contained or containable within language and thus impervious to its malfeasant content, including the contradiction. The second part, however—that logic, though unshakable, cannot withstand a man who wants to live—makes Kafka’s sentence, and thus also K.’s juridical sentence, into yet another contradiction. For if something is both unshakable and cannot withstand a certain force, it is the false. And, further, had K. decided to fight for his life and win, this “conclusion” would have been as valid as any other—the logic would actually have withstood a “man who wants to live,” making the second half of the statement false and thus once again proving both the arbitrariness of K.’s death and the unshakability of logic itself.

Logic is, indeed, unshakable, and its law provides an unshakably clear and present, if ineffable, consistency to a narrative progression many of us mistakenly assume to be opaque. For being opaque is not the same as being ineffable but clearly present in form and structure; Wittgenstein’s “what *can* be shown, *cannot* be said” is supposed to clarify, rather than obscure, our understanding of the logical form of language and reality. Furthermore, K.’s trial is certainly rife with contradiction many of us would call paradox, but rather than simply accept the alleged canceling out of a paradox, we might notice instead that viewed formally, contradiction presupposes neither an illogical nor an invalid state of affairs. The unmasking of that contradiction instead offers a novel interpretation of K.’s situation on a metalevel, while
reaffirming that the essence of what K. actually needs to know to help himself can never be known to him because he cannot utter it and thus cannot think it. It is my hope that this exploration has offered a convincing point of departure in my quest to connect formal logic and literature, especially during the explosive time in literary history when *The Trial* was written, when language skepticism was a powerful current in Austrian literature and thought, and rigorous analysis of logic was just coming into importance. And finally, I also hope that my initial excavation of a preexisting “logical turn” in modernism will stand together with the various other currents in analysis of *The Trial*, as well as, so to speak, on its own validity.