Kafka and Wittgenstein

Schuman, Rebecca

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The philosophical component of the following chapters marks an important transition from the “early” Wittgenstein to the “later,” and thus a further development of what I call analytic modernism. As I have discussed in this book’s introduction, after the *Tractatus*’s publication, a disgruntled Wittgenstein, fed up with what he saw as a grievous misunderstanding of his slim volume’s main point (despite said slim volume being accepted, quite unconventionally, as his doctoral dissertation and granting him the Ph.D. from Cambridge), left philosophy for school teaching and architecture. What returned him to the discipline he attempted to dismantle was, in the end, a desire to attempt to dismantle it again in a different and possibly better way. The result was the *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (*Philosophical Investigations*), the volume upon which Wittgenstein worked for the rest of his life, and which at the time of his untimely death of prostate cancer in 1951 was still incomplete.

While the *Tractatus*’s unconventional numbered structure, resolute interconnectedness, and small stature necessitated a pre-exegesis before the first half of this book could even truly begin, the structure and (if we are to take Wittgenstein at his word) purpose of the *Investigations* are different. Ostensibly, the *Investigations* are a set of landscape sketches upon which we are to gaze, not a whole whose trajectory we must understand before we begin—indeed, as we are about to see, the entire concept of “trajectory” is contrary to the spirit of the project. While the *Tractatus* was just seven numbered propositions long, with all the subsequent text simply (or not so simply) modifying sub-propositions, as I mentioned briefly in my introduction, the first half of the *Investigations* consist of *hundreds* of propositions, again numbered, but not always progressing in a linear fashion (for remember the “problem with progress”?). What really distinguishes the *Investigations* from their predecessor, however, is not just the little-cited second half, which transitions into full prose essays, but the confounding detail that the first half’s numbered propositions take the form of an argument between at least two disagreeing voices, one of whom is meant to be a sort of metaphysicist’s straw-everyman, and the rest of whom (there is debate about whether there is but one “interlocutor”
or several) are meant to disabuse this everyman of his illusions.¹ Here, however, is where the differences between the texts begin to converge once more: although Wittgenstein goes about his task in a markedly different way, in the Investigations he tackles the same issues he did in the Tractatus: the mystery of how our language works, and what it can and cannot do.

Though the Investigations are in many ways far more complex than the Tractatus, their format makes them far easier to integrate into literary study without much of a preface; thus, my concurrent exploration of the Investigations and the Kafka works that bring them to life—The Castle, “In the Penal Colony,” and “Josefine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk”—sets directly off on the proverbial hike, rather than preparing for many pages at base camp as was necessary with the Tractatus. However, just because the structure of the Investigations hints literary does not mean that the structure of my arguments surrounding them must (or even can). Indeed, it may be surprising to realize that despite its total lack of formulae and truth tables, the second half of this book takes a structure that is oftentimes even more analytic than the first.

What I mean by an analytic structure is this: while the Tractatus offered us a logicist’s take on “dissolving” the central problems of several of Kafka’s best-known works, the Investigations offer us something wholly different, and, some might say, markedly less analytic. For there are no truth tables to be found in the Investigations, no sub-propositions, no clear and triumphant demarcation of what language can and cannot do, no rules. On the contrary: one of the text’s most interesting sections, which I visit in great detail in chapter 5, dismantles the conceit of “rules” entirely. But if the Investigations do not subject language to analysis, then why, we may ask, do they still belong to the analytic canon, and why does a concurrent exploration with Kafka still merit the term analytic modernism? As we are about to see, the Investigations’ status as ordinary language philosophy (a term that will be explored in the detail it deserves momentarily), as well as the volume’s relationship to the Tractatus, makes Wittgenstein’s second book one of the analytic canon’s most discussed.

Its relationship to literature is, however, not the same as that of the Tractatus, and thus I have termed the result of its pairing with Kafka not “logical modernism,” but rather “analytic skepticism,” putting an analytic twist on the radical language skepticism whose multifaceted relationship to Kafka’s canon I have already discussed at some length in earlier chapters. All this is to say that while their primary philosophical source is not as analytic on its surface, the following chapters’ exploration of the Investigations as a literary companion, structurally and in my argumentation, take a highly analytic approach, perhaps even more so even than previous chapters.

In writing the following chapter, for example, I found that a more philosophical structure was the most successful in bringing the most clarity possible—to me, and thus also hopefully to readers—to Wittgenstein’s
paradox of ostensive definition, which is quite complex and far-reaching in its implications. What I do in this half of the book, in particular with the chapter that follows, on *The Castle*, is very much in the philosophical (or perhaps social-scientific) vein: I offer bold hypotheses about the appearance of particular and important paradoxes from the *Investigations*, and then a systematic analysis of the appearances of said paradoxes throughout Kafka’s texts. In doing so, my hope is twofold: I want to offer a multidisciplinary approach to literary analysis that is welcoming to and inclusive of readers from other disciplines such as philosophy or cognitive science, and I also want to offer a thesis that is both dramatically clear and clearly presented, with as little jargon as humanly possible. Therefore, it is my hope that in both content and method, the following exploration continues to make the case for an analytic modernism.