Chapter 6

The Private Language Argument and the Undermining of “Josefine the Singer”

I have just argued at length that Kafka’s conception of prose narration, at least as expressed in “In the Penal Colony,” is highly skeptical to the point of Pyrrhonianism: that is, the officer’s act of apparent self-sabotage is itself unmasked as highly questionable, thus revealing that the very act of alleged narration that got us to this point has itself been sabotaged, and ultimately challenged to the point of self-immolation. Thus, though in the process I have gone to similarly great lengths to demonstrate the success with which Kafka undermines the conceit of narrative progression, I have not turned Nestroy’s words into an all-encompassing epigram of my own project. That is to say, while it has primarily to do with unmasking one misconception after the next, there has been substantial progress made here in determining not what these Kafka works mean, but how they do (or, at times, and more importantly, how they undermine our notions of meaning). That said, I have left one prominent approach that may turn even my own project Pyrrhonian after all.

This is an angle with which I approach, fittingly enough, Kafka’s last story, “Josefine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk” (“Josefine die Sängerin, oder das Volk der Mäuse”). In the story, a nameless first-person collective “wir” describes a mysterious singer who, rather than singing in a traditional manner, “pipes” or “squeaks,” but is somehow revered as a folk hero to the “mouse people,” a descriptor only provided in the title. Throughout the course of the story, it is revealed that Josefine’s revered place in the community is as questionable as her singing, and the rather unsurprising revelation of her disappearance at the end hails the eventual disappearance of her legend as well:

Vielleicht werden wir also gar nicht sehr viel entbehren, Josefine aber, erlöst von der irdischen Plage, die aber ihrer Meinung nach Ausgewählten bereitet ist, wird fröhlich sich verlieren in der zahllosen Menge der Helden unseres Volkes, und bald, da wir keine Geschichte treiben, in gesteigerter Erlösung vergessen sein wie alle ihre Brüder. (GW 1:294)
Perhaps we will not miss so much after all. But Josephine, delivered from the earthly troubles, which in her opinion lie in wait for the chosen ones, will happily lose herself in the numberless crowd of heroes of our people. And soon, since we are not historians, in this increased deliverance she’ll be forgotten, like all her brothers.

The goal of this book’s final chapter is to see why this peculiar conclusion—which also marks the conclusion of Kafka’s writing life and life altogether—is of particular significance, but to do so we must first return several times to the beginning of the story and the many claims it makes that, as we will soon see, turn out to be wildly contradictory. At first glance, “Josefine” appears to be about a singer whose song is simultaneously vitally important to the culture from which it originates (and from which it distinguishes itself), and indiscernible as song to anyone except for possibly Josefine herself. It is almost as if Josefine’s “singing” represents a form of sublime communication that not even she fully understands, but that only she can initiate. It is as if an alternative form of language exists, one that is both private (deliberately not understandable to its own audience) and transcendent, in that it is somehow more important than all of them. Or, at any rate, it seems that way as the story begins, as our narrator explains: “Unsere Sängerin heißt Josefine. Wer sie nicht gehört hat, kennt nicht die Macht des Gesanges” (“Our singer is named Josefine. Anyone who has not heard her does not know the power of song”) (1:274).

This initial approach to “Josefine” is a major subject of the critical canon, such as David Ellison’s examination of Josefine’s apparent status as a “servant of the sublime.” Ellison points out that the primary reason the mouse people are unable to understand Josefine is that they are either unable or unwilling to raise themselves (sich erheben) “to the level of music”:

[Unser Leben ist schwer, wir können uns, auch wenn wir einmal alle Tagessorgen abzuschütteln versucht haben, nicht mehr zu solchen, unserem sonstigen Leben so fernen Dingen erheben, wie es die Musik ist (1:274).]

Our life is hard; we are no longer able, even on occasions when we have tried to shake our daily cares, to raise ourselves to anything so high and far as music.

However, as Ellison himself points out, the story turns out to be vastly more complicated than an earth-bound people incapable of transcending to the point that would enable them to properly understand their diva, who serves the familiar Kafkan sublime that hangs permanently just out of reach.

My own final chapter explores Kafka’s last story in terms of what appears at first to be Josefine’s private or transcendental language, a “language” that
“Josefine the Singer”

consists of a sort of music (or the nonmusical, or even nonverbal gesture) her people cannot fully understand, but somehow still appreciate—until they fail to. My first goal is to integrate the field’s most compelling theories about Josefine’s apparent language with a final element of Wittgenstein’s late work: by far the best-known and most-analyzed section of the *Investigations*, which philosophers refer to as the private language argument, and which is first introduced in §243. My second goal, which should now come as little surprise, is to demonstrate that the successful completion of this approach results in the revelation of yet another illusory foundation.

My concurrent examination of the relevance of Wittgenstein’s work to Kafka’s—and by extension to certain important elements of literary modernism in general—will end in this way, with a demonstration of the analytic relevance of Wittgenstein’s late work with Kafka’s final story, that itself concludes with the necessary unmasking of one final illusion. This final illusion is that of the formal requirements of so-called descriptive or philosophical prose (borrowing the terminology of Scherpe and Corngold, respectively). For in “Josefine,” Kafka has left aside even the pretention of narration, and instead presents the story openly as a descriptive or, as Corngold has put it, “hybrid” work—and I would like to argue here that Kafka fails even at *this* subversive and borderline avant-garde form of literary prose. However, through the philosophical discussion surrounding Wittgenstein’s private language argument, we will see that this alleged failure is actually one of Kafka’s most notable literary (and philosophical) accomplishments.

**Step 1: Introducing “Josefine” to the Private Language Argument**

Kafka’s final story has been called an “exceptional” work, in the literal sense of the word, just as its heroine is called an exception (“nur Josefine macht eine Ausnahme” [“Josephine alone is the exception”]), among her stubbornly unmusical people (1:274). As numerous critics have argued convincingly, there are several reasons the story—composed as the complications from Kafka’s tuberculosis reached his throat and took away his own ability to speak—is an exception in his canon. As Michael Minden has recently argued, the story comes to us not from the pseudo-omniscient perspective of a protagonist largely excluded from the one community he needs the most (the Law, the family, the Castle village), but, even more than in the case of the penal colony’s impotent explorer, from the perspective of the “established” society itself. From this perspective, the story is exceptional because it is more or less narrated from a perspective that the more canonical Kafka works strive so terribly hard to conceal. Further, as Ritchie Robertson has argued, as an example of Kafka’s late work, “Josefine” is “for the most part quiet and restrained. It lacks the disturbing or disgusting images” of the early stories “and also their dramatic intensity.” In addition, as Ruth V. Gross has
argued, “Josefine” is also a marked exception to Kafka’s canon because of its choice of a female subject (I hesitate to say “protagonist” because of the narrative distance from Josefine, which we will discuss at some length later on). And Doreen Densky has pointed out recently that Kafka’s eerie choice to narrate the story from a first-person plural perspective makes it exceptionally difficult to grant whatever passes for a narrative voice any solidity whatsoever.

What I want to argue here is that this story is actually not exceptional in the way we believe it to be—that these qualities make the story somewhat unlike Kafka’s other work, but that it possesses other and more important qualities that make it far more canonical than critics such as Minden argue it is. I believe that what makes “Josefine” a canonical story—albeit an extreme example of one—is its remarkable Pyrrhonian trajectory. Not unlike the way in which Wittgenstein both appears to advance philosophy in the Philosophical Investigations and actually rejects the conceit of philosophical progress altogether, Kafka also appears to present a final story, but actually presents something closer to an anti-story along the lines of “In the Penal Colony.”

In fact, I think of “Josefine” and “In the Penal Colony” as kindred, first of all in content: note their shared presence of questionable acolytes who are actual ignorers, their final acts of noncommunicative self-disappearance, and so on. But perhaps more importantly, the stories are connected in the way they undermine their own form. With “Josefine,” Kafka finishes what “In the Penal Colony” began: a total undermining of the conceit of literary prose, of the very ability of a story to express anything, whether important or trivial—of, in short, the fear that gripped Kafka for most of his life and manifested itself at the end in physical form. Indeed, “Josefine” is about a songstress who is not one, a “mouse people” who are neither people nor mice, a cherished cultural icon who, it turns out, is neither cherished nor particularly iconic. And, more than that, “Josefine” is also, along the same lines as “In the Penal Colony” but to a much more extreme extent, a story that is not one.

The extent to which this is the case is only possible in light of a further exploration of Wittgenstein’s private language argument, for two important reasons. First, as we will see, the argument provides a highly elucidatory apparatus to investigate what it actually is Josefine might be doing. Secondly, and more importantly, the private language argument’s centrality to the Pyrrhonianism debate in Wittgenstein studies provides the final demonstration as to why “Josefine” itself is, if it can even be classified as a “story” at all, a definitive example of what I will call Kafka’s Pyrrhonian literature—that is, literature whose greatest literary triumph exists in undermining its own status as literature.

As we have seen to a certain extent already, the Investigations are at once revelatory and enraging, in that they appear to offer important and legitimate advances in the philosophy of language and the philosophy of mind—and
yet, their author insists that anyone who comes away from the work with an appreciation for the advancement of these theses is doing it wrong.

Therefore, while we may indeed extrapolate philosophical theses from the *Investigations*, in particular from the private language argument, which Ray Monk reminds us is by far the most heavily discussed of Wittgenstein’s entire canon, we must have those very theses’ self-immolation in front of our eyes, lest we delude ourselves further that the text is something it is not. It is my final argument in this book that Kafka, once again, accomplishes something remarkably similar in his deathbed work to what Wittgenstein accomplishes in his. That is, while we may certainly read and enjoy “Josefine” as a work of prose fiction, as a story, as a work of literature, to leave it at that is to delude ourselves about what Kafka is actually doing. It is my contention that he is, not unlike Wittgenstein, enticing us to follow a story, to make conclusions like we would when we read a story, even a descriptive and highly philosophical story—only to destroy the very conceit of storytelling before our eyes.

How is this destruction accomplished? In Wittgenstein’s case, he appears to present a hypothesis that it is indeed possible to have a private language. He then quite convincingly dismantles the conceit of a private language, and in doing so seemingly decries several hundred years of philosophical inquiry. This makes it seem as if he has not only advanced a philosophical thesis, but a truly revolutionary one. However, if we have paid any attention to any part of the *Investigations*, especially its introduction, we have to remember that presupposing a dismantling of Cartesian dualism and everything that came as a result of it—dismantling the mind-body divide, dismantling the very conceit of a spiritual self that only oneself can understand—also presupposes a protracted interaction with the philosophical canon, and this is something Wittgenstein insisted he did not undergo, because it could not be done.

With “Josefine,” Kafka accomplishes a similar movement. Although Kafka is most certainly not making an argument about the same thing Wittgenstein is, I will argue that he is most certainly making a statement about the dubious existence of a special class of communication. For while Josefine’s singing language (or rather “singing” “language”) is not private in the same sense, the first thing we learn about it is that nobody in her audience truly understands what makes it special—or even what makes it singing. In the end, Kafka and Wittgenstein entice us with problems to solve—in Kafka’s case, it is the problem of what (and how revered) Josefine’s singing really is; in Wittgenstein’s it is the alleged question he himself puts forth of how a private language would work. The first step in understanding what ends up as a dramatically Pyrrhonian arc for both authors is the step wherein they create intricate and fascinating problems and tempt us to try to solve them.

For Kafka, this is the simple problem of what Josefine is actually doing, and what her place in the community of the “mouse folk” actually is—for, as should be unsurprising to any reader of Kafka, the information we are given is conflicting. Indeed, the nameless narrator, as we have just seen, begins the
story with what appears to be a statement of pure adulation: “Wer sie nicht gehört hat, kennt nicht die Macht des Gesanges” (“Anyone who has not heard her does not know the power of song”). The actual ambiguity of this statement notwithstanding (and we will address this later on), the adulation is short-lived, as the narrator only a few hundred words later modifies this adulation. After admitting that “unserer Volk” is necessarily unmusical and that they actually prefer silence, he begins what turns into the story’s larger trend of undermining:

Ist es denn überhaupt Gesang? Trotz unserer Unmusikalität haben wir Gesangüberlieferungen; in den alten Zeiten unseres Volkes gab es Gesang; Sagen erzählen davon und sogar Lieder sind erhalten, die freilich niemand mehr singen kann. Eine Ahnung dessen, was Gesang ist, haben wir also und dieser Ahnung entspricht Josefinens Kunst eigentlich nicht. Ist es denn überhaupt Gesang? Ist es nicht vielleicht doch nur ein Pfeifen? (1:275)

Is it even singing? Despite our unmusicality we have singing traditions; in the old times of our people there was singing; legends tell of it and some songs even survive, though it’s true nobody can sing them anymore. So we have an idea of this, what singing is, and Josefine’s art doesn’t actually correspond to it. Is it then singing at all? Is it not perhaps just a piping?

And it is not just the singing that is methodically undermined to the point of total destabilization—Josefine’s revered place in the community, as “die Ausnahme,” is as well. For by the end of the story, Josefine, before disappearing entirely to little notice or concern, comes across as a temperamental diva—one who, for example, insists on shortening or canceling her concert altogether on account of dubious foot pain: “So behauptete sie z.B. neulich, sie habe sich bei der Arbeit eine Fußverletzung zugezogen, die ihr das Stehen während des Gesanges beschwerlich mache; da sie aber nur stehend singen könne, müsse sie jetzt sogar die Gesänge kürzen” (“Recently she claimed to have hurt her foot in the course of work, which would have made standing while singing difficult; given, then, that she could only sing standing, she would have to cut the concert short”) (1:292).

The question that Kafka’s narrator has presented as the main issue of the story seems at first rather simple: what is her “singing,” really, and why is she deemed important? Although the critical output regarding “Josefine” is markedly less prolific than that of Kafka’s middle works, there are substantial insights to be found in the work of the classic canon (Margot Norris, Ritchie Robertson, and Ellison, for example), as well as some recent inquiry by Kata Gellen that widens the scope of how, rather than what, Josefine’s gestures can potentially mean. For Norris, the significance of Josefine’s non-singing
maintains the common critical focus on Kafka’s obsession with (mis)communication, here characterized by active forgetting or significant negation, and the unique bestial conception of Josefine as a late-career figuration of this obsession, a sentiment with which Ellison agrees. Similarly, Robertson focuses on Josefine’s pseudo-singing as “a profound and subtle meditation on the nature and value of art,” in which “conventional ideas about the autonomy and value of art, even the ideas that a distinct aesthetic realm exists, turn out to be equally illusory.” Indeed, Robertson argues quite rightly that Josefine herself is under an illusion about her art, and the other mice preserve her illusion with great solicitude, but, despite her claims, her performances are simply the medium through which the individual communicates with the communal spirit of his people. Gellen, on the other hand, offers a starkly original take on what it is that Josefine is doing and why it remains important despite not actually being singing. “Wherein lies her power if not in her song?” Gellen asks; the answer is that “her ability to unify the mouse folk derives from her physical position, her self-transformation into a piece of architecture.”

Although I largely agree with each of these theories to some extent, each curiously avoids taking into account why it is that Josefine’s song as it is described cannot mean in the first place. Is this because it is obvious? Hardly, as the narrator’s description of the “piping” is wildly inconsistent at best, and so a non-language that is impossible to characterize cannot be so easily dismissed as noncommunicative. Indeed, I believe there is a tremendous amount of insight to be gained, at least temporarily, by isolating and subjecting to rigorous language analysis what, to the best of our ability to discern it, Josefine is actually doing and how much she may or may not be able to communicate and thus have an effect on her people. This is where Wittgenstein’s work in both language in use (PI §43) and the refutation of a private language argument come into play, for these parts of the Investigations address what I feel to be exactly the aspects of Josefine’s peculiar exceptionalism that the critical canon has yet to examine fully.

For Wittgenstein, the original problem he appears to present seems even more straightforward than Kafka’s alleged problem with Josefine: how would a “private language” work? The primary example he uses is that of the private sensation and apparently incommunicable “language” of pain. As we will see, this is quite topical to “Josefine,” given that her ostensible purpose is to express without articulating, through her “song,” the particular and apparently incommunicable anguish of her people. What Wittgenstein plays at wanting to know at the outset of the private language argument is: how can a person in pain truly bridge that space between the nonlinguistic sensation of pain and the expression of it? That is, “Wie kann ich denn mit der Sprache noch zwischen die Schmerzäußerung und den Schmerz treten wollen?” (“How, then, can I enter, with language, into the space between expression of pain and pain?”) (§245). To see why this is both tremendously
important and surprisingly relevant to “Josefine,” let us first examine in more
detail these aspects of Josefine’s peculiar form of communication that exem-
plify both pain and incommunicability.

Step 2: Kafka and the Undermining of Josefine

Again, the end result of both the Kafka and Wittgenstein texts is that each,
in its own way, dismantles its original conceit, but to see why this is we must
backtrack considerably and treat each conceit as a legitimate concept. This
will momentarily involve approaching the Wittgenstein text as if it is advancing
an important philosophical thesis, and presently involve approaching
the Kafka text as if it were a more traditional prose narrative with a develop-
ning, progressing story, with a plot and an arc. In the case of “Josefine,”
then, the first thing we will notice is the apparent rejection of exactly this
protagonist-to-plot relationship, replaced instead by the complete break-
down or contradiction of nearly every characteristic attributed to Josefine in
the story’s opening paragraph, a phenomenon Margot Norris has aptly char-
acterized within the larger story’s status as more than anything a “gesture of
retraction.”

As we have reviewed several times at this point, at the outset our narra-
tor insists: “Wer sie nicht gehört hat, kennt nicht die Macht des Gesanges”
(“Anyone who has not heard her does not know the power of song”). The
stunning ambiguity of this sentence— does this rightly imply its opposite, that
those who have heard her do?—will be revisited in great detail at the close of
this chapter, but for now to grasp fully the extent to which the story retracts
itself, let us trust its idiomatic surface. That is, at the outset of this story, we
are apparently meant to assume that because he who has not heard Josefine
knows not the power of song, Josefine must be a tremendously powerful
singer. And this is curious, given the immediate way in which the narrator
undermines the very audience that is supposed to reaffirm Josefine’s great-
ness. This begins in the first of five consecutive sentences that, as Gross has
quite rightly pointed out, “are negated or contain negations,” and which
Minden rightly sees as contributing to the story’s “tantalising self-cancelling
effect upon its readers”: “Es gibt niemanden, den ihr Gesang nicht fortreißt,
was umso höher zu bewerten ist, als unser Geschlecht im ganzen Musik
nicht liebt” (“There is nobody who is not carried away by her singing, which
makes it even more worthwhile, as we are not in general a music-loving
sort”) (1:274). How indeed can her song fail to move its audience when
that audience is by definition unmoved by song? But it’s not just that the
mouse people do not normally care for music—as what Ellison refers to the
story’s “narrative unweaving” continues, it emerges that this people actually
prefers silence: “Stiller Frieden ist uns die liebste Musik” (“Silent peace is for
us the dearest music”) (1:274).
Indeed, only Josefine is the exception to this general anguish at sound, but again, that particular podium begins to crumble almost immediately; the mouse people are “doch ganz unmusikalisch; wie kommt es, daß wir Josefines Gesang verstehen oder, da Josefine unser Verständnis leugnet, wenigstens zu verstehen glauben” (“For we are completely unmusical; how does it come to be that we understand Josephine’s singing—or, since Josephine denies our understanding, at least think we can”) (1:274). How, indeed, does an “unmusical” people love Josefine’s music? Is it because, as Minden has argued, she “performs for the community their own vulnerability”? This would lend credence to Robertson’s insistence that “it is not Josefine’s performance but the act of listening to it that matters”—but, again, why? Metanarratively, it makes sense, at least if we approach it from a Corngoldian psychoanalytic perspective, wherein the subject of the story is actually Kafka’s unmusicality, which “resurges in [his] late work” as a “return of the repressed in a mode in which it could be tolerated, a fusion of the even pleasure of writing and the odd pleasure of a reflection on the nature of music.” Narratively, however, we are still left at a loss: why, and indeed how, does an unmusical people (allegedly) love the (alleged) song of its (alleged) singer?

Instead of answering this question, Kafka’s narrator replaces the answer, in proto-Wittgensteinian fashion, with another question that works to undercut it: how can an unmusical people even be qualified to judge something as “Gesang” in the first place? This question has, to be sure, a deceptively “simple” answer:

Die einfachste Antwort wäre, daß die Schönheit dieses Gesanges so groß ist, daß auch der stumpfeste Sinn ihr nicht widerstehen kann, aber diese Antwort ist nicht befriedigend. Wenn es wirklich so wäre, müßte man vor diesem Gesang zunächst und immer das Gefühl des Außerordentlichen haben, das Gefühl, aus dieser Kehle erklinge etwas, was wir nie vorher gehört haben und das zu hören wir auch gar nicht die Fähigkeit haben, etwas, was zu hören uns nur diese eine Josefine und niemand sonst befähigt. Gerade das trifft aber meiner Meinung nach nicht zu, ich fühle es nicht und habe auch bei andern nichts dergleichen bemerkt. Im vertrauten Kreise gestehen wir einander offen, daß Josefinens Gesang als Gesang nichts Außerordentliches darstellt. (1:274–75)

The simplest answer would be: the beauty of her singing is so great that even the dullest sense cannot resist it, but this answer is unsatisfactory. If it were really so, we would, before her song, have an immediate and lasting feeling of the extraordinary, a feeling that from her throat comes something we have never heard before, and which we are not even capable of hearing, something that Josephine alone and nobody else makes possible. But I don’t agree with that opinion,
I do not feel it and I’ve never observed it in others. In trusted circles we tell each other often that Josefine’s singing, as far as singing is concerned, is nothing extraordinary.

Here the undermining gains in intensity: perhaps her singing is so spectacular even those who do not care for music love it. But this is not the case: what we learn here is that her “singing” is rather ordinary. And this question is again not answered, but instead simply leads us to the larger, central, and most severely undermining question of the story: is what Josefine does even really singing (as we have seen before, “Ist es denn überhaupt Gesang?” [1:275]).

This question-leads-to-worse-question-leads-to-even-worse-question structure exemplifies what Ellison has rightly characterized as the story’s “highly concentrated declarative (assertive) exposition,” which, as we will see both now and in harsher and more complete light later in the chapter, are also “the essential elements of the narrative’s eventual undoing.” And the central element of this undoing is the question: is Josefine actually just whistling, or piping (pfeifen)? As Robertson has characterized it, “the very nature of [Josefine’s] art is problematic, for she does nothing but squeak, and this is the sound made by all the mice as a matter of course.” And yet, the narrator initially determines that it is not, in fact, ordinary piping, but instead something mysterious, something that cannot be described but which has an effect upon its audience nonetheless.

Indeed, this indescribable greatness is great not because what Josefine does is at all extraordinary, but because of the extraordinary effect ("große Wirkung") on its audience: “Und wenn man vor ihr sitzt, versteht man sie; Opposition treibt man nur in der Ferne; wenn man vor ihr sitzt, weiß man: was sie hier pfeift, ist kein Pfeifen” (“And when we sit before her, we understand her; we can only see opposition from a distance; when we sit in front of her, we know: what she’s piping here is no piping”) (1:277). What we are left with mid-story is that Josefine is somehow special and not special, exceptional and not exceptional; as Gross has described her, a seeming contradiction—but she is more than this. For the result of this contradictory force is that Josefine’s status, her very presence, the very description of who she is and what she is, seems to be completely vanishing. In fact, the truth—the “Rätsel ihrer großen Wirkung”—is that when Josefine sings, nobody understands her at all; indeed, “sie singt ja ihrer Meinung nach vor tauben Ohren; an Begeisterung und Beifall fehlt es nicht, aber auf wirkliches Verständnis, wie sie es meint, hat sie längst verzichten gelernt” (“in her opinion she’s singing to deaf ears anyway; there is no lack of rapture and acclaim, but real understanding, as far as she sees it, she’s learned to stop expecting”) (1:278).

And yet, this does not stop her from feeling entitled to understanding, entitled, indeed, to her “große Wirkung.” The narrator has her saying: “Ich pfeife auf euren Schutz” (“I pipe for your protection”) while the people think
privately: “Ja, ja, du pfeifst” (“Yes, yes, you pipe”). And, further, what she “pipes” is, in seeming opposition to its great effect, thin and weak, what the narrator enchantingly describes as a “Nichts an Stimme” (“nothing in voice”) (1:281–83). Effectively, Josefine’s allegedly enrapturing abilities also hinge on her ability to express both a completely unremarkable piping and a nothing—for again, silence and nothingness is the most revered “sound” of all in this community:

Sie spricht es nicht so aus und auch nicht anders, sie spricht überhaupt wenig, sie ist schweigsam unter den Plappermäulern, aber aus ihren Augen blitzt es, von ihrem geschlossenen Mund—bei uns können nur wenige den Mund geschlossen halten, sie kann es—ist es abzulesen. (1:281)

She doesn’t put it in so many words, or any other words; she says very little altogether; she is silent among the blabbermouths. But from her eyes it flashes, from her closed mouth—among us few can truly shut his mouth; she can—we can read it.

But the story would be far less confounding if, even in her squeaking and her silence, Josefine actually were as revered as we were initially led to believe she is. In fact, instead she seems to have all of the behavior of a diva with none of the rapturous audience to which she feels entitled—for example, if she feels her audience is insufficient, often she initially refuses to go on at all, and requires rather extreme measures of placation:

Man tröstet sie, umschmeichelt sie, trägt sie fast auf den schon vorher ausgesuchten Platz, wo sie singen soll. Endlich gibt sie mit undeutbaren Tränen nach, aber wie sie mit offenbar letztem Willen zu singen anfangen will, matt, die Arme nicht wie sonst ausgebreitet, sondern am Körper leblos herunterhängend, wobei man den Eindruck erhält, daß sie vielleicht ein wenig zu kurz sind—wie sie so anstimmen will, nun, da geht es doch wieder nicht, ein unwilliger Ruck des Kopfes zeigt es an und sie sinkt von unseren Augen zusammen. (293)

We comfort her, flatter her, we all but carry her to the place she’s meant to sing. Finally she bursts into uninterpretable tears, but when she begins, with what is obviously the end of her will, to sing—exhausted—her arms not spread out as usual but instead hanging down lifelessly next to her body, so that we get the impression that they’re a little bit too short—just as she’s about to start, now, she can’t do it after all, an unwilling shake of her head shows us this, and she breaks down before our eyes.
What much of the finest criticism of this story attests, and not necessarily wrongly, is that what is happening here is a rather obvious but still quite moving dismantling, and not just of Josefine’s status as an artist, but of her “art form” itself, which, it turns out, is both impossible to describe and surprisingly banal. Chris Danta, for example, sees both the undermining of Josefine’s “art” and her disappearance as an unveiled parallel to her creator, in both his relationship to his own art and his demise, while Robertson characterizes not just “Josefine,” but Kafka’s late oeuvre on the whole, as focusing largely upon “the relationship between the speculatively or artistically inclined individual and the society he or she belongs to.” This is certainly apparent in the text itself, as the narrator insists of Josefine that “was sie anstrebt, ist also nur die öffentliche, eindeutige, die Zeiten überdauernde, über alles bisher Bekannte sich weit erhebende Anerkennung ihrer Kunst” (“what she strives for is public, unambiguous, enduring recognition of her art, one that goes farther than anything we have ever known”) (1:289).

However, instead of focusing, like the vast majority of criticism of this story does, on the active dismantling of, or in the view of some critics, active forgetting of, a questioned art form, what if instead we, rather counterintuitively, concentrated on the structure of that art form on its own, separate from its public? While this may seem unnecessary—after all, what is Josefine without her mouse folk?—instead it is quite the opposite: in fact, by examining the difficulty (or, rather impossibility) of Josefine’s singing language, we can actually see just why it must fail to capture the anguish of its public, and in doing so relate it to both Wittgenstein’s private language argument itself, and its eventual undermining.

### Step 3: Wittgenstein and the Impossibility of Private Language

Indeed, returning again to Wittgenstein, the failure of Josefine’s squeaking is fascinating to investigate through a language game, one that itself introduces and elucidates the final section of the *Investigations* I investigate alongside Kafka: the private language argument. I would like to go about this by setting up a first move in the game that mirrors the first move in the private language argument: it would seem feasible that the primary reason that Josefine’s squeaking cannot—again, not does not, but cannot—fully and convincingly sing the pain and vulnerability of her people is that one cannot actually express one’s pain in a way that others can actually understand it. That is, the sensation of pain is a private sensation, and any language meant to codify, homogenize, and express that pain, be it speaking or squeaking, would simply be an unsuccessful articulation of this private sensation. In this argument, the “language” of pain is private. But is a private language possible? As Wittgenstein introduces the argument in §243, it seems quite possible indeed. After all, people talk to themselves in different ways all of the time:
Ein Mensch kann sich selbst ermutigen, sich selbst befehlen, gehorchen, tadeln, bestrafen, eine Frage vorlegen und auf sie antworten. Man könnte sich also auch Menschen denken, die nur monologisch sprechen. Ihre Tätigkeiten mit Selbstsprächen begleiteten. —Einem Forscher, der sie beobachtet und ihre Reden belauscht, könnte es gelingen, ihre Sprache in die unsre zu übersetzen.

A person can encourage himself, order himself, obey, blame, punish, put a question forth and answer it. We could even think of people who only spoke in monologue. Who accompanied their activities by talking to themselves.—An explorer who watched them and listened to their speech might be able to translate their language into ours.

But talking to oneself is not the same as a truly private language, Wittgenstein reminds us. Talking to oneself is merely using common language silently. And indeed, what Josefine is doing is not talking (squeaking) to herself; she is squeaking from herself in a way that is supposed to express her own pain and fear in a way that somehow reminds her listeners of their pain and their fear, while still remaining, in its inexpressibility, necessarily distant enough from them that her singing/squeaking/expressing is destined to fail. That would be something completely different, a private language spoken aloud in public, one Wittgenstein describes thusly as §243 continues: “Wäre aber auch eine Sprache denkbar, in der Einer seine inneren Erlebnisse—seine Gefühle, Stimmungen, etc.—für den eigenen Gebrauch aufschreiben, oder aussprechen könnte?” (“Would a language also be possible to imagine, in which a person could write down his inner experiences—feelings, moods, etc.—for his own use?”). The interlocutory voice asks the next feasible question about this, which is: “—Können wir denn das in unserer gewöhnlichen Sprache nicht tun?” (“—Well, can’t we do that in our ordinary language?”). Wittgenstein’s straw man is quick to point out that expressing inner sensation with ordinary language (“to oneself” or aloud) is not what he means: “—Aber so meine ich’s nicht. Die Wörter dieser Sprache wollen sich auf das beziehen, wovon nur der Sprechende wissen kann; auf seine unmittelbaren, privaten, Empfindungen. Ein Anderer kann diese Sprache also nicht verstehen” (“—But that is not what I mean. The words of this language will refer to what can only be known to the person speaking; to his immediate, private sensations. Another person could thus not understand it”).

Again, this would seem to describe rather well the predicament in which Josefine finds herself (again, assuming that in her world, squeaking is language): she is speaking using the vehicle of the mouse folk’s ordinary language—squeaking—but in a way that is indescribably set apart, so that its true nature remains, as Wittgenstein has just said, incommunicable (“unmittelbar”). And again, what Josefine needs to—but cannot—express is, as Wittgenstein has just said, private sensation: fear, anguish, pain.
In Josefine’s case, it does seem that her pain, her sensations, form a kind of “private language.” And if this is the case—thus triggering the next phase of the language game—this would mean that her problem, and I suppose by extension the problem of all such “artists,” is that they can express their anguish (or other emotions) internally, but only internally. In this view, the idea that there then is something within them that they cannot express is a foregone conclusion. This reformulation of the same language crisis that I have been discussing for much of this book is one, then, that “solves” the crisis by predicating it upon the existence of a private language—specifically, in this case, a private language of pain.

Wittgenstein posits at the private language argument’s outset that there is indeed something slightly off about the way words relate to—or refer to—sensations (“Wie beziehen sich Wörter auf Empfindungen?” [“How do words relate to sensations?”] [§244]). Perhaps, he argues, we learn the meaning of the word “pain” like this: “Es werden Worte mit dem ursprünglichen, natürlichen, Ausdruck der Empfindung verbunden und an dessen Stelle gesetzt” (“Let words be connected with the original, natural, expressions of the sensation and used in their place”) (§244). That is, a child is injured and cries, “und nun sprechen ihm die Erwachsenen zu und bringen ihm Ausrufe und später Sätze bei. Sie lehren das Kind ein neues Schmerzbenehmen”—and, eventually, the word “pain” does not mean “crying,” but rather it replaces the wordless cry (“and then the adults talk to him, and teach him exclamations and later sentences. They teach the child a new behavior of pain”) (§244). And yet, Wittgenstein’s initial narrator is not satisfied with this relationship; he wishes to know in a more precise way how we can actually use language precisely and effectively to “get between pain and the expression of pain” (§245). Again, this is effectively the question at the heart of why, in Kafka’s story, Josefine’s singing fails: in what way has the narrator, and have we, and has Josefine herself, decided to get between pain and its expression?

Wittgenstein “answers” this question by rephrasing it into a more difficult problem in §246, which many philosophers believe to be the true introduction to the private language argument. In this remark, the problem is phrased as such: In what sense are sensations private, and why does it matter? (In our case, our interpretation of why Josefine’s squeaking is both special and fails would lead to this: In what sense are Josefine’s sensations private, and thus in what sense is her squeaking a private language?). Section 246 begins: “In wiefern sind nun meine Empfindungen privat?” (“To what extent are my sensations private?”) For, after all, interjects one of Wittgenstein’s interlocutory voices, another person can never really know if someone is in pain: “—Nun, nur ich kann wissen, ob ich wirklich Schmerzen habe; der Andere kann es nur vermuten” (“—Well, only I can know if I’m really in pain; another person can only guess it”). This, then, would ensure that pain—and therefore, by extension, most if not all sensation—is private; one registering one’s pain to oneself would, then, be a form of private language.
Not so fast, says an interlocutor: “Das ist in einer Weise falsch, in einer anderen unsinnig” (“That is in one way false, and in another nonsensical”). Why in one way false? Because, it turns out, the interlocutor has misunderstood the use of the verb wissen (to know; “nur ich kann wissen”): “Wenn wir das Wort ‘wissen’ gebrauchen, wie es normalerweise gebraucht wird (und wie sollen wir es denn gebrauchen!) dann wissen es Andre sehr häufig, wenn ich Schmerzen habe” (“If we are using the word ‘to know’ as it’s normally used [and how else should we use it!], then other people know quite often when I’m in pain”). The first interlocutor is not convinced: “Ja,” insists the interlocutory voice, “aber nicht mit der Sicherheit, mit der ich selbst es weiß!” (“Yes, but not with the certainty with which I myself know it!”). How does this undermine the understanding of the word wissen? Surprisingly, Wittgenstein’s problem is not with the perceived issue here of one being unable to communicate the fact of one’s pain to another, with the certainty one can only have about her own pain. That is, the problem is about the words we use to claim that certainty in the first place:

— Von mir kann überhaupt nicht sagen (außer etwa im Spaß) ich wisse, daß ich Schmerzen habe. Was soll es denn heißen—außer etwa, daß ich Schmerzen habe?

Man kann nicht sagen, die Andern lernen meine Empfindung nur durch mein Benehmen,—denn von mir kann man nicht sagen, ich lernte sie. Ich habe sie.

Das ist richtig: es hat Sinn, von Andern zu sagen, sie seien im Zweifel darüber, ob ich Schmerzen habe; aber nicht, es von mir selbst zu sagen.

— It can’t be said of me at all (except perhaps as a joke) that I know I am in pain. What, then, is that supposed to mean—except perhaps that I am in pain?

Others can’t be said to learn of my sensations only from my behavior—for about me one can’t say: I learned them. I have them.

Here is the truth: it makes sense to say about other people that they are in doubt about whether I’m in pain, but not to say it about myself.

What, after all, does it mean to say “I know I am in pain”? Though others can, we can’t say we don’t know we’re in pain (for everyone knows her own pain!), so for Wittgenstein it is equally impossible to say we do. Thus, in this situation, we are misusing the verb wissen (to know), or at any rate we are presupposing a meaning of it that doesn’t really make sense. So there can’t be a private language of pain, because that would be tantamount to saying “I know I am in pain,” in German “Ich wisse, daß ich Schmerz habe,” a strange and intentional use of the first subjunctive, which is used exclusively
for reported speech and thus almost never in the first person. Indeed, he seems to have used “ich wisse” for a very important reason, and that is to show immediately to any speaker of German that this use of wissen is contradictory: why would one have to report one’s own speech?

In short, the presupposition of a private language of sensation actually rests upon a tremendous misunderstanding about how all language works, indicative in this particular misuse. Wittgenstein further attacks this misunderstanding in §247, by demonstrating that if we were to defend our (mis)use by attempting to clarify our purpose (“Absicht”), that simply demonstrates a further misunderstanding of the word Absicht:

“Nur du kannst wissen, ob du die Absicht hattest.” Das könnte man jemandem sagen, wenn man ihm die Bedeutung des Wortes “Absicht” erklärt. Es heißt dann nämlich: so gebrauchen wir es.

(Und “wissen” heißt hier, daß der Ausdruck der Ungewißheit sinnlos ist.)

“Only you can know if you had that intention.” We might tell someone this when we are explaining to him the meaning of the word “intention.” For then it means: that is how we use it.

(And here “know” means that the expression of uncertainty is senseless.)

To summarize this extraordinarily difficult but highly relevant idea: we cannot actually say “Ich wisse, daß ich Schmerz habe,” because that odd use of the self-reported word “know” is so bound together with the odd context in this situation—which is, according to one of Wittgenstein’s interlocutors, the “purpose” of self-reporting our own pain, a curious and unnecessary activity. Thus, in order to know what “know” means in this situation, we also have to know what “purpose” means in this situation, which means all we really know is how “know” is used in this particular situation. Thus, all a sentence such as “Ich wisse, daß ich Schmerz habe” really means is the expression of several grammatical facts in a particular context: an unconventional but technically correct use of the first subjunctive followed by a dependent clause. What we have here is simply, as Monk has put it, a misunderstanding of the difference between a grammatical remark like this one and a material remark—that is, a remark that makes some sort of discovery rather than simply expressing preexisting facts. “Ich wisse, daß ich Schmerz habe” is simply a grammatical remark we have been under the illusion of a material one.

Now with our new understanding of the misunderstanding of wissen comes a new understanding that the sentence “Empfindungen sind privat” (“Sensations are private”) is itself a grammatical rather than a material remark. Monk further helps us to see that in §§247–49, Wittgenstein has actually
cautioned us that “if we then start talking about the certainty with which we know our own pain, then we need to be shown that what prompts such talk is a confusion between a grammatical remark and a material one.”

The point is then demonstrated in its absurd extreme in §248, when Wittgenstein compares “Empfindungen sind privat,” which we mistakenly believe should denote some sort of discovery about the existence of private sensations (and thus the possibility of a private language), and “Patience spielt man allein” (“One plays [the solitaire game] Patience by oneself”), which is a banal and tautological remark. Thus, arguing that “sensations are private” as a meaningful sentence that actually says something about the existence of a private language is not arguing at all; it is simply making an obvious remark that imparts no discoveries about language, but rather perpetuates a significant misunderstanding about the nature of language.

Perhaps our problem is not that private language itself is impossible, but that we have been approaching the problem the wrong way. Wittgenstein’s straw-man narrator attempts to come up with a different and more viable way in which a private language is possible: if the statement that “Empfindungen sind privat” is not actually indicative of a private language, then what about a different sort of private language? That is, what if I were to claim that I could keep a sensation diary, so that every time I felt a certain sensation I’d name it “E” and write “E” every time I felt it? (§258). Wittgenstein’s interlocutor is not buying it: how is the sign “E” sure to evoke that particular sensation? Easy, claims the first voice: I concentrate that way, I do it on purpose—so any “correct” use of the diary would predicate correct memory of the sensation. Aha, says the interlocutor: but there is no “Kriterium für die Richtigkeit” (“criterion for correctness”) in this situation. “Man möchte hier sagen: richtig ist, was immer mir als richtig erscheinen wird. Und das heißt nur, daß hier von ‘richtig’ nicht geredet werden kann” (“We would like to say: right is whatever will seem right to me. And that only means that here we can’t talk about ‘right’ ”) (§258). The result is that the entire game of being able to keep a feeling diary to which one would assign a “private” sign is again illusory, for in order for a sign to be truly unintelligible to other users, it would also have to be unintelligible to its user, and thus its entire existence would be predicated on the absence of the very functionality it would have to possess in order to truly be a private sign. There is no private language—there is simply, as originally put forth in §243, ordinary language spoken to oneself.

This brings us back to square zero when attempting to determine if a private language exists, and the implication of this train of thought in Kafka’s story is this: it seemed like Josefine was failing to capture her audience because her legitimate private sensations were expressible to her via squeaking, but largely incommunicable to her audience. Kafka’s narrator has contradicted the exceptionalness of Josefine’s squeaking while still somehow making the case for it, but seen from this angle, we have no choice but to determine that
her squeaking is actually 100 percent the banal and ordinary language of her people. And thus, her people fail to respond to the squeaking not because the squeaking fails to be intelligible to them—but because they simply, for one reason or another, do not like it.

Step 4: A Pyrrhonian View of Kafka’s Late Work

Still, Wittgenstein’s dissolution of the conceit of private language may not seem tremendously important outside certain specialized philosophical discussion, but let us not forget that the stakes here are actually quite high: the ostensible foundation of all modern philosophy, Descartes’s Meditations, hinges directly upon exactly the kind of mind-body duality the existence of a private language would justify. Thus, what makes the so-called private language argument the most discussed in all of Wittgenstein’s philosophy is the potential implications it has for philosophical discourse altogether. That is, if a private language is impossible (because for it to be unintelligible to other users it would also have to be unintelligible to its user), then not just the conceit of private language is toppled, but so is the entire conceit of a purely mental and philosophical realm. This has consequences for “Josefine” as well, and these are more far-reaching than they at first appear.

The apparent relevance of the private language argument to “Josefine” is, in short, the following discovery: the common claim that Josefine is simply incapable of expressing to others a private anguish that is expressible to her is fully subverted. Instead, what she is really doing with her “Nichts an Stimme” (“nothing in voice”) is, actually, nothing. Her squeaking may appear to have an adulated place in her people’s canon of performance artists—much like, Wittgenstein implies, Cartesian dualism has in philosophy—but in actuality, occupying that place is merely the mouse folk’s ordinary language of squeaking. So Josefine’s status is not in peril because the public now fails to appreciate her (similarly to the foregone publics in the penal colony or “A Hunger Artist”); it was always and only in peril, or rather it was never special in the first place. Instead, it was ignored or mildly tolerated as the ordinary squeaking it was.

But how is this possible? Does the first paragraph of this story not introduce Josefine’s character as an exception, and does it not claim that “Wer sie nicht gehört hat, kennt nicht die Macht des Gesangs” (“Anyone who has not heard her does not know the power of song”)? The final step of this exploration is to return to this sentence, and bring the entirety of Wittgenstein’s Pyrrhonian project together to clarify our last major misunderstandings about this story: not only have we as readers been under the mistaken impression that Josefine was ever perceived as special in the first place, but we have also been under the mistaken impression that Kafka has been telling us a story about this at all. What I would like to show here is that upon closer inspection, the story
of Josefine is not actually a story that takes the form of a litany of contradictions—it is simply the unremarkable presentation of several grammatical facts that subvert the act of narration altogether. In this way, it is what we can call Pyrrhonian literature or Pyrrhonian storytelling.

What we have to realize is that the conclusions we have just come to regarding both Wittgenstein’s private language argument and “Josefine,” however elucidatory, are still predicated upon one grand illusion apiece. Wittgenstein appears very convincingly to have argued that there is no such thing as a private language; there is language that is spoken to oneself, but if that language can be intelligible to oneself, then it can be intelligible period. And as we have just seen, the consequences of his argument are potentially vast. In Kafka’s case, the story also seems rather convincingly to have exposed its central artist as banal and unworthy of exceptional status. And yet, to stop at both of these “theses” would be to miss the entire point of both texts.

For what is at stake here is that, no matter how elegant and final both texts’ “theses” seem to be about the nature of philosophy and art, no matter how many misunderstandings they appear to have uncovered, another and even more grievous misunderstanding prevails if we do not recognize that these “conclusions” are, in fact, not conclusions but illusions. Much of the philosophical criticism of Wittgenstein’s private language argument addresses the problem that the argument (or alleged argument) cannot actually be the intense negation of—and therefore engagement with—the history of modern epistemology. As we have seen briefly before, philosophers refer to what Wittgenstein is doing with the private language argument—and, by extension, the entire Investigations—as Pyrrhonianism, as self-immolation, creation of something to show, in that creation, its assured destruction. As David Stern has succinctly pointed out, while on the surface the Investigations have little in common with—in fact, seem to completely destroy every thesis of—the earlier Tractatus, what they do have in common is perhaps the most important thing about each one: Pyrrhonianism.

Again, a unifying Pyrrhonian impulse has been discussed with respect to Wittgenstein’s entire corpus at exhaustive length, and indeed there is no analyst of any aspect of the Investigations—and, for some critics from the “New Wittgenstein” group, of the Tractatus as well—that can approach anything in them without addressing at least one of two extreme cases (to borrow a term from the earlier Wittgenstein) of Investigations interpretation. That is, one must, to some extent, argue that either Wittgenstein’s investigations do advance philosophical theses, and that Pyrrhonianism is itself a philosophical thesis and thus cannot be fully realized, or that the Investigations, like the Tractatus before it, is a text that offers pseudo-theses, transitional remarks, and that the full act of understanding them absolutely necessitates their self-destruction.

The problem with the first approach is that if one is to believe that Pyrrhonianism is a thesis, and a valid one, one would have to follow through on
the *Investigations*’ Pyrrhonian trajectory—and thus acknowledge the throwing away of yet another ladder, which leaves behind perhaps only one thesis, Pyrrhonism (which then must throw itself away to be complete). This is intensely problematic, in that without those philosophies which the Pyrrhonian has demanded self-destruct, Pyrrhonism does not make much sense. The problem of the second approach is that—Diamond’s “transitional” thesis aside—this would mean that every discovery we have previously made about important linguistic paradoxes such as that of ostension and rule-following is not *really* a discovery. Thus, despite Wittgenstein’s stark instructions regarding landscape sketches, we are left somewhat bereft of a reason to read the *Investigations* at all.

There is no answer that could possibly be satisfying or comforting enough. What we have instead is, succinctly put, a compelling *impossibility*. Unsurprisingly, I would also like to use the term “compelling impossibility” to talk about “Josefine,” because I believe that the most important thing about this text is not the systemless and yet systematic takedown of its protagonist, but the fact that this takedown is only illusory. And, further, this particular illusion cements the work as an utterly defiant piece of prose, one that lures us quite convincingly into believing that we are reading a story but then, in the end, disabuses us of that notion. In short, “Josefine” is a companion piece to Wittgenstein’s *Investigations* not because of its curious portrayal of a “private” language that isn’t one, but because of its status as a Pyrrhonian text, one that also forces us to chose from gradients of two equally compelling but rather fatalistic approaches to it. These approaches are as follows: either “Josefine” is a story, but it is a story that destroys the act of storytelling, or “Josefine” is not a story at all. The first approach is Pyrrhonian; the second is austere. And as we now well know, these approaches parallel two major approaches to Wittgenstein’s philosophy.

To see why both approaches are equally possible and equally necessary, we should examine closely both the end and the beginning of “Josefine.” The story (or, more properly, pseudo-story) ends with its heroine, her reputation in shambles and her art questioned to the point of its existence, refusing to sing altogether, her “gift” and thus her own existence disappearing from the mouse people:

So war es letzthin, das Neueste aber ist, daß sie zu einer Zeit, wo ihr Gesang erwartet wurde, verschwunden war. Nicht nur der Anhang sucht sie, viele stellen sich in den Dienst des Suchens, es ist vergeblich; Josefine ist verschwunden, sie will nicht singen, sie will nicht einmal darum gebeten werden, sie hat uns diesmal völlig verlassen. (1:293)

That happened a while ago; but the latest news is that she has disappeared, just at a time when she was expected to sing. It is not only her followers who are looking for her; many have put themselves in the
service of the search, but it’s all to no avail; Josephine has vanished, she won’t sing; she won’t be begged into singing a single time; this time, she has deserted us completely.

This at first seems to solidify the nonexistence of a “private language” for Josefine—what she achieves in refusing to sing, after that very “singing” has been undermined to mere squeaking and then even worse than that, is not that she keeps her unique ability to express the mouse folk’s pain to herself in a private “language,” but that she achieves true privacy, total silence and isolation, necessarily without language. Indeed, this seems to be the inevitable conclusion of her story:


Soon the time will come when her last squeak sounds and falls silent. She is a small episode in the eternal history of our people, and the people will overcome the loss. It won’t be easy for us; how can our gatherings be possible in total silence? Still, weren’t they also silent when she was there? Was her piping actually notably louder or more alive than it will be in memory? Was it even during her lifetime more than a simple memory? Was it not, actually, because Josephine’s singing was already, in this way, incapable of being lost, that our people in their wisdom prized it so highly?

In what way have Josefine’s status or art form been overcome? Has the folk overcome the loss of Josefine due to what Ellison has termed the “general forgetfulness” that subsumes the entire story? I believe it is more insidious than this. In fact, the word Kafka uses here at the end of Josefine, überwinden, is the same word Wittgenstein uses at the end of the Tractatus to call for an overcoming (or, in some translations, transcending) of the illusion of philosophical language. My view of Josefine’s status supports this use of überwinden—the mouse people have not overcome Josefine’s singing because they no longer like it (or never liked it); instead, they (and we) have simply come to view it for what it really is: nothing, really, but another ladder to be thrown away. Minden has called the “fact” of Josefine’s separateness “the
only certain thing about her,” but I believe this to be an illusion as well.23 Again, paralleling the earlier Wittgenstein and the end of the Tractatus, the final lines of “Josefine,” as we now revisit them, are an acceptance of silence:

Vielleicht werden wir also gar nicht sehr viel entbehren, Josefine aber, erlöst von der irdischen Plage, die aber ihrer Meinung nach Ausewählten bereitet ist, wird fröhlich sich verlieren in der zahllosen Menge der Helden unseres Volkes, und bald, da wir keine Geschichte treiben, in gesteigerter Erlösung vergessen sein wie alle ihre Brüder. (1:294)

Perhaps we will not miss so much after all. But Josephine, delivered from the earthly troubles, which in her opinion lie in wait for the chosen ones, will happily lose herself in the numberless crowd of heroes of our people. And soon, since we are not historians, in this increased deliverance she’ll be forgotten, like all her brothers.

But why must a fully realized understanding of Josefine’s squeaking result in overcoming the illusion that it was ever special in the first place? This brings us, finally, back to the first lines of the story, to a particular sentence that I insisted some time ago was dangerously ambiguous: “Wer sie nicht gehört hat, kennt nicht die Macht des Gesangs” (“Anyone who has not heard her does not know the power of song”). The problem with this sentence is that in order to believe that “Josefine” contains contradictions and digressions—which, as Samuel Frederick has pointed out recently, would still make it a narrative, albeit a relatively plotless one—one must take the first sentence as a material remark.24 That is, one must understand the negations in it to imply their positive counterparts: if he who has not heard her knows not the power of song, then he who has heard her does. But where in this sentence is that implied positive correlation truly demanded? Where is it proven? It is not—only in the proper context, the context in which Josefine’s audience is enraptured, does this implied meaning solidify. But this context does not exist—in fact, an opposite context does—and so what we have instead is a remark in a contextual vacuum. In previous chapters we have learned that within this contextual vacuum, no unshakable ostensive reference can be pinned onto any word in this sentence, nor can its implied opposite “rule” truly be a rule. And in this chapter we have learned that the result of discovering that there is no such thing as a private language is the simultaneous discovery of the misunderstanding of the nature of our language wherein we mistake a grammatical remark for a material one. The most important aspect of “Josefine” that Wittgenstein’s private language argument can teach us is that most readers mistake “Wer sie nicht gehört hat, kennt nicht die Macht des Gesangs” for a material remark that implies a positive correlation, wherein in actuality it is merely a grammatical remark.
that states a fact whose causality is completely indeterminate: “Wer sie nicht gehört hat, kennt nicht die Macht des Gesangs.” He who has not heard her does not know the power of song. Nothing about the German language actually predicates a causal relationship between these clauses. As a grammatical remark, the sentence simply states a set of grammatical facts that are fairly redundant. He who has not heard Josefine does not know the power of song, but the reason he does not know the power of song could be anything. To assume otherwise would be to assume we know how the causal relationship is being used in this context, and that assumption is faulty. Thus, at no point in the story was the power of Josefine’s alleged song ever even attested, and as a result it cannot really be contradicted, digressed, or forgotten. Robertson has argued that the story leaves “unsolved the question of the nature and value of Josefine’s performances,” but viewed as a Pyrrhonian work it does something quite different and quite remarkable: it leaves dissolved the question of the nature and value of Josefine’s singing.25

A Final Conclusion

With its central problem dissolved, unmasked as an illusory problem, I believe this leaves “Josefine” vulnerable to the claim I have previously made that it is not a story per se. Minden has argued that the text has “rolled up its own meaning behind it until, most obviously, it finishes by establishing the absence of exactly that which it had set out to make present to the reader (that is, Josefine),” but again, without a positive statement about Josefine at the start, this is actually impossible.26 Far more accurate is Robertson’s characterization that in “Josefine” the act of “narrative has largely given way to reflection,” but again this begs the question: reflection on what?27 On the nature of art and the artist’s place in the community? Perhaps, but we must reimagine this reflection from the perspective that no remarkable art ever existed in the first place. There is but one element left undissolved, however: what of the claim that follows shortly after “Wer sie nicht gehört hat . . .” that, in the unmusical mouse folk, “nur Josefine macht die Ausnahme” (“Josefine alone is the exception”)? Critics such as Ellison believe this state of exception is one of the many things the story curiously undermines.28 Again, I believe this sentence has been misinterpreted as a material remark, with most readers assuming a more colloquial use of the verb machen inside of the idiomatic expression “die Ausnahme machen.” In reality, without the proper context—an adoring public that actually demonstrates this exception as meaning that Josefine is actually musical—we have instead a grammatical remark: Josefine makes the exception, which can literally mean that she makes it for herself, that she insists upon being viewed as an artist for no reason whatsoever. It can also mean that she is the exception to something, but what exactly that is cannot actually be determined, and to assume it can would again rest upon a serious
misunderstanding of language. Thus, the understandable view that, as Robertson has put it, Kafka’s narrator “unfolds a series of paradoxes” is actually mistaken as well.29

Ellison has asked, on behalf of all of us, “What kind of narrative progression will characterize this tale?”30 Again, as I have argued with “In the Penal Colony,” I believe this tale actually has no progression whatsoever, and is barely a tale in any sense—but that, as Nestroy has written and Wittgenstein has framed the Investigations, again, the problem with progress is that it always looks greater than it really is. Not unlike Wittgenstein, Kafka seemed remarkably concerned (and unimpressed) with what he perceived to be conceits about language use that didn’t work (bringing us back to the spear remark from the preface to part 1 of this book). In this vein, his final story does indeed serve as an exception to his earlier work, but not only because of its use of a female central character, and not only as, in the Corngoldian view, a continuation because of its fixation on the hybrid literary and speculative text or the hybrid human and animal mode of expression. “Josefine” is exceptional literature, but not an exception to Kafka’s canon. This is because of its remarkable ability to finish what “In the Penal Colony” began—a protest against, an undermining of, the tradition of prose narration, itself couched in the apparent medium of prose narration.

Robertson’s theory is that from 1917 on, Kafka “abandoned an expressive view of art for a mimetic one,” no longer wanting to express his own feelings but rather “die Welt ins Reine, Wahre, Unveränderliche [zu] heben” (“to lift the world into purity and inalterability”).31 In other words, Kafka wanted to express the world as all that was the case—and yet, as we have seen, he remained for his entire career doubtful that his language was in any way up to the task. In this way, Kafka’s late work encapsulates the Pyrrhonian aspects of both Wittgenstein’s early and later work: just as Wittgenstein’s Investigations aimed to dismantle the conceits of philosophical language the Tractatus failed to, and yet still within the medium of self-immolating philosophy, “Josefine,” as Kafka’s last work, functions similarly as a dissolution of the conceits of prose narration, still somehow contained within that very medium.

Directly in the midst of the private language argument, Wittgenstein’s narrator makes a seemingly aphoristic comment: “Der Philosoph behandelt eine Frage; wie eine Krankheit” (“The philosopher treats a problem like an illness”) (§255). But this is anything but a stand-alone aphorism—this is a direct indictment of the very “argument” Wittgenstein himself is allegedly making, or rather of the very idea of philosophical argument in general. That is, the philosopher is intent on solving something. But what happens if we stop viewing a philosophical question like a sickness? Only when we let go of the misguided need for a “cure” can we recognize the original question’s most important illusions and delusions, and then we can dissolve rather than solve it. In Kafka studies, the critic has also until now been intent on solving
the problem of Josefine: *Is she singing? What is she doing, really? Was her singing ever important to her people?* But, again, if we realize that those questions are not actually sicknesses that have to be cured, and once we are freed from the pressure to find answers for them, we can truly see the actual problems they present.