Concluding Thoughts

The Problem with (Critical) Progress

In the preceding chapters we have used the laws of logic to determine why, exactly, understanding something correctly and misunderstanding it are not mutually exclusive, and why this assertion is so important to The Trial; later, using Wittgenstein’s “say/show” distinction, we have seen our conception of metaphorical meaning transformed into a misconception through a reimagining of Gregor Samsa’s form as empty metaphor in The Metamorphosis; then, through his dismantling of the pseudo-propositions of ethics, we have come to understand that the ineffability of ethical judgment means the titular “judgment” of Georg Bendemann wasn’t one at all. Through associating Kafka with Wittgenstein’s Tractatus, we have failed to answer—and instead rendered unaskable—the three most pressing questions about these works. In this way we began to see both the form and relevance of a “logical modernism” to Kafka’s literary universe.

We have then, through Wittgenstein’s later work and the introduction of an analytic skepticism, witnessed the systematic dismantling of not just three more pressing questions about his most famous works—The Castle, “In the Penal Colony,” “Josefine the Singer”—but the total undermining of the fiction process altogether. First, we saw Wittgenstein’s paradox of ostensive definition acted out in all of its absurd dramatic possibility in the confounding nonreferentiality of the word Landvermesser, and the equally compounding system of anti-ostension in the village of The Castle. Then came the unexpected but unmediateable (unmittelbar) murder of the alleged solution to the paradox of ostension, the idea of meaning in “use,” apparent by way of the paradox of rule-following as it came to life—and then dominated a death—in “In the Penal Colony.” Finally, through Wittgenstein’s private language argument and the subsequent arguments it ignited about the philosophical significance of the Investigations altogether, we saw the entire conceit of prose narration undermined altogether.

In making each of these discoveries, we simultaneously teased out both their philosophical and literary implications, in particular their implications with respect to the analytic tradition in philosophy. This process enabled us to redraw the boundaries of the rich, varied, and complex trajectory of
radical skepticism in Kafka’s work to include both logical analysis and ordinary language philosophy from an analytic standpoint. Without the idea of a logical modernism, the total validity of the outcome of *The Trial* (completely regardless of Josef K.’s “guilt”) would be impossible to see with as much clarity or believability; indeed, without Wittgenstein’s preliminary first-order logic, the entire dismantling of the question of K.’s guilt would not be possible to such an immutable extent. Nor would it have been possible to view *The Metamorphosis* from a perspective that defines metaphorical form in such a way, which in turn allows us to let go of a question of what Gregor Samsa “means” and to focus instead on the equally interesting question of how. And in “The Judgment,” what turns out to be radical skepticism of the communicability of Herr Bendemann’s ethical “judgment” is highlighted in its structural similarities to the conclusions about “the limits of language” Wittgenstein reaches in the *Tractatus*.

These “limits” are themselves challenged, however, by none other than Wittgenstein himself after his return to philosophy in the 1930s and to what I term an analytic skepticism. As we saw, the first casualty of his *Investigations* was the bedrock of logical philosophy, the conceit of referentiality that made the picture theory at all possible. The dismantling of this conceit again offers unique elucidation of Kafka’s work in our study of *The Castle*, specifically in an appropriately Wittgenstinian dismantling of the novel’s primary question: is K. a real land surveyor or isn’t he? By unmasking the impossibility of asking that question, I hope I have offered both an interesting and highly skeptical interpretation of *The Castle*, and freed the critic from the onus of answering that question at all by rendering it unaskable. The exposure of unaskable questions continued as I explored “In the Penal Colony,” in which I argued that in making the officer’s death fiercely uninterpretable, Kafka has unraveled the notion of narrative meaning, putting in its place an obtuse descriptive universe whose very opacity is its triumph. And finally, with “Josefine,” we have, thanks to Wittgenstein’s private language argument and the Pyrrhonianism debate surrounding it, the furthering of that triumph, undermining the entire notion of narration to its core, and with it the question of what Josefine is actually doing as a casualty. Six works, six questions, six ways that Wittgenstein has helped us see that they cannot actually be asked.

However, this study does not dissolve all of its relevant questions, least of all the following: what has been the *point* of such an exploration for Kafka studies? This is indeed a question that can and should be asked, and one that deserves a real answer, rather than simply undermining the question once again. I believe the point of this study, and thereby its potential relevance to the discipline, to be (quite appropriately) a proverbial double-edged sword. First of all, I hope that in examining for literary purposes sections of Wittgenstein’s texts that almost never make it outside of philosophical discussions, I have helped to dismantle (or prove unnecessary) a veritable line in the sand that has been present since the analytic and Continental schism that is now
nearly a century old. Analytic philosophy is often considered anathema to literature from both disciplines—philosophers often do not see the interest or point in exploring the philosophy for a sake other than its own, in “using” it, as it were, as literary theory; literary theorists, as I have discussed in previous chapters, are often eager to balk at the very pretenses of immutable concepts that underlie the analytic tradition—although in Wittgenstein’s work, as we have seen, that is most certainly not the case. I would even go so far as to say that, especially given the trajectory of Wittgenstein’s skepticism and the interest with which he undermines the conceits of philosophy and logic, this aspect of the analytic tradition has far more in common with, for example, the deconstructionist criticism that began to dominate literary theory shortly after Wittgenstein’s death in 1951. And so (in Wittgensteinian fashion) if this book is to have had a point, it would be this: I would like to think that I have opened up a new facet of modernism studies (“new” despite its sources all being primary texts from modernism), one that I very much hope will be allowed into the greater literary discourse in a less marginal way.

On the other hand, one could argue that this opening up of Kafka studies to the analytic tradition has “succeeded” only in making Kafka’s well-studied language skepticism so radically skeptical that it has defeated in advance the very act of asking the questions about it that we most want to ask. Is this book, in its own way, a vastly overreaching critical version of the *Tractatus*’s final call to silence? I certainly hope not, but I also quite enjoy the parallel structure of a philosophical approach that, in its own execution, brings about its own self-immolation, exactly in the same way its own content has done. In the end, I suppose it is the reader’s choice: does the inclusion of Wittgenstein, and by extension the analytic tradition, present a bold new direction for Kafka studies, some excellent critical progress? Or does it, simply by being what it is and doing what it does, necessarily invalidate the entire conceit of critical progress, a conceit that was illusory to begin with? Must we simply change direction, or were we doomed all along? After all, the problem with progress is that it always appears greater than it really is.