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Book Review Kafka and Wittgenstein

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Kafka and Wittgenstein: The Case for an Analytic Modernism.

Rebecca Schuman. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015; 220 pp.; \$34.95 (paper)

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I.

Rebecca Schuman's study of Kafka's novels and stories adapts a "dissolution"-style argument from Wittgenstein's work on philosophical problems and applies it to the *interpretive* problems confronting Kafka's readers. Each of its six main chapters is framed as an intervention in a crowded field of interpretations given by Germanists and other scholars of literary modernism, all of which speak in some way or other to persistent basic problems of interpretation, such as whether Josef K., the protagonist of *The Trial*, is guilty or not, or what the meaning of the officer's death in his own torture machine is in the story "In the Penal Colony." Schuman depicts questions such as these as illusory, and implies that all the rival interpretations which even attempt to answer them are essentially misbegotten. Although her business is mostly interpretive, on literary terrain, she conducts it primarily in an academic (as opposed to what I think of as a literary-critical) mode, which is reflected in the style of interpretive arguments she makes, calling on the powerful machinery of an authoritative external discourse, a "theory," to support her conclusions. The wrinkle is that Schuman enlists the notoriously anti-theory Wittgenstein as her theorist. She calls the resulting account "analytic modernism," a type of literary modernism informed by analytic philosophy which is to vie with Marxist, psychoanalytic, or deconstructionist accounts of modernism.

Most of the book is given over to making Schuman's case for analytic modernism on practical critical grounds, i.e., showing that her approach bears fruit on a work-by-work basis. The book falls into two parts scaffolded by a more or less conventional "early" and "late" Wittgenstein, with each chapter pairing a literary work with selected philosophical ideas. In Part One, relying on the *Tractatus*, she pairs *The Trial* with an application of the distinction between sense, nonsense, and senselessness in order to address the question of whether Josef K. is guilty or not (chapter 1); *The Metamorphosis* with the saying/showing distinction in order to address the question of what the metaphor of Gregor Samsa's bug body means (chapter 2); and "The Judgment" with the ineffability of the ethical in order to address the question of why Georg Bendemann leaps so precipitously to his death in apparent obedience to the titular verdict of his father (chapter 3). In Part Two, switching to the *Investigations*, Schuman pairs *The Castle* with ostensive definition in order to address the question of whether the protagonist K. is the genuine land surveyor he is taken to be by the occupants of the village governed by the nearby castle (chapter 4); "In the Penal Colony" with rule-following in order to address the question of the meaning of the apparently abrupt malfunction of the torture machine which kills its greatest advocate, the officer who had spent most of the story's duration explaining the machine's operation to a visiting observer to the penal colony (chapter 5); and "Josefine the Singer" with private language in order to address the question of

whether Josefina's singing is genuinely understood by her people, or is even singing at all (chapter 6).

II.

Schuman's claims to have made a case for analytic modernism will be a source of consternation for interested readers. Her account is undermined by her failure to provide a definite statement of the position she wishes to defend, a defect that can be attributed substantially to needless obscurity in the book's organization and its exposition of its more programmatic business, but also to Schuman's tendency throughout to interrupt her own argument to offer previews, deferrals, and promissory notes, which has the effect of burdening the readers with uncertainty as to when they will be entitled to regard Schuman as having given a stable statement of her views. There is also a stylistic problem with the calibration of the magnitude of her assertions; she seems overly fond of superlatives dropped into sentences so as to promote them to the level of devastating claims.

Much of what Schuman does have to say specifically about analytic modernism as the type of literary modernism for which she argues occurs, somewhere, in the book's scaffolding. In addition to the six chapters already mentioned, the book includes an introduction, a long preface to Part One, a short preface to Part Two, and a set of concluding remarks (not to mention endnotes in which some material pertinent to this matter is marooned). The basic obstacle is that across this structure, Schuman specifies an analytic modernism—discussed principally in the introduction—that cleaves into two varieties of literary modernism which she calls “logical modernism” and “analytic skepticism.” It's clear that she associates the former with the *Tractatus* and the latter with the *Investigations*, and thus that she counts the corresponding literary works of the first and second parts of the book (also subtitled accordingly) as exemplifying the respective varieties of modernism. What only becomes evident after much more probing on the part of a reader looking for more clarity is that she does not attach much definite additional meaning to any specifically literary sense of her names for her three literary modernisms. She calls logical modernism “logical modernism” because she uses the *Tractatus* to characterize it, and that phrase characterizes the *Tractatus* for her (p. 12, p. 37; cf. p. 198n12), with the emphasis on “logic.” Likewise with “analytic skepticism” and the *Investigations* (p. 12, p. 110), emphasis on “skepticism.” (A further complication is that both of these modernisms partake of the “language skepticism” or “linguistic skepticism” which Schuman submits was shared by Wittgenstein, Kafka, and others of their Austrian milieu, per pp. 22-31. But this forms more of the atmosphere of the book as a whole, and is rarely invoked with much specificity.)

The wish for more definite statements of what “logical modernism” and “analytic skepticism” consist in, as varieties of literary modernism, stems not from a mania for rigorous definitions (nice as those can be), but from questions that are provoked naturally by Schuman’s interpretive arguments in the individual chapters. The essential dependency of her account of these modernisms on two distinct phases of Wittgenstein’s thought suggests one question, in particular, that is illuminating to consider even if it was not necessarily incumbent upon her to do so. Given that the default suggestion, inherited from a received understanding of Wittgenstein’s development, would be that some form of development is to be expected between logical modernism and analytic skepticism *as varieties of literary modernism*, does Schuman’s account tend to encourage or discourage the thought of such a development?

Just on the literary level, Schuman gestures toward, without insisting upon, a developmental perspective on Kafka’s works that aligns fortuitously with the early/late scheme of Wittgenstein’s development. But in summary, at least, she is emphatic that her results take the same, conclusive form no matter the period of Wittgenstein’s work used to support them: “Six works, six questions, six ways that Wittgenstein has helped us to see that they cannot actually be asked” (p. 194). We might grant that the dogmatic tone here, redolent of the early Wittgenstein, could suit those of her results that are supported by the *Tractatus* (she mentions “resolute” readings but prefers to invoke a traditional one). But given the fashion for undogmatic readings of the *Investigations* in particular, philosophers will wonder how Schuman could render all six of her results with “cannots” in equally absolute terms. That she in fact embraces a fairly dogmatic-sounding “Pyrrhonian view” for her later Wittgenstein (p. 160, p. 11) does not really settle the question, either, since this only calls attention to the interpretive arguments she actually makes in the individual chapters with the help of sometimes later and sometimes earlier Wittgensteins, with (as she emphasizes, p. 194 again) nevertheless convergent conclusions as to the illusory nature of the problems of Kafka interpretation. Are they all supposed to be equally convincing despite the shift in their source of support? And if the shift matters, how does it reflect on the arguments of the earlier chapters?

III.

These are not necessarily questions which will seem to arise on a chapter-by-chapter level, where the pattern of Schuman’s interpretive arguments is anchored in her perception of the texts that she reads. This pattern is sketched most nicely in the first few pages of the introduction (pp. 3–7), where she exemplifies the Kafkaesque with a reading of Kafka’s “Little Fable” (the one about the existentially mis-oriented mouse corrected and then promptly eaten by a cat). She identifies in it a double-twisting plot structure which

reappears in many of Kafka's works, in which a character first realizes that he or she (or it!) has been under some illusion, only to realize that the initial illusion had been covering up some larger and more important one behind which stands the character's real problem. Schuman claims that this pattern has an implication for interpreters of Kafka, as well:

As Kafka critics, we are often and understandably under the impression that in the course of our critical exploration, we are going to find out *what his works mean*. The approach I advocate in this book argues instead that in this search we are sorely mistaken. Instead, the problems and illusions we pretend to uncover, the important questions we attempt to answer—*Is Josef K. guilty? If so, of what? What does Gregor Samsa's transformed body mean? Is Land Surveyor K. a real land surveyor or not?*—themselves presuppose a bigger delusion: that such questions can be asked in the first place. (p. 5)

The double twist is effected swiftly in the “Little Fable,” simply by means of the narrator's last bit of work: to recount what the cat says and does to the mouse. “‘You've simply got to run in the other direction,’ said the cat, and ate it.” After three sentences from the mouse recounting his perception of his shrinking world and impending doom, that is all it takes to make the reader see the mouse's fate according to the illusion-covering-an-illusion structure Schuman describes.

The patterning of Schuman's invocations of Wittgenstein for more complex tales also follows this illusion-covering-an-illusion structure. So, for example, she identifies a story element, like the narrator's remark near the beginning of “Josefine the Singer” that “anyone who has not heard her does not know the power of song” (quoted on p. 184). She invokes an idea of Wittgenstein's and argues for its applicability to the element, for instance the idea that “our misunderstanding of the nature of our language” makes us “mistake a grammatical remark for a material one” (p. 188), used to support the claim that the narrator's remark about Josefine only apparently attests to the value of her art—thus uncovering a first illusion. And eventually, she reasons toward a second, larger illusion, typically by invoking in a literary register the major (negative) consequences which she associates with the relevant philosophical work of Wittgenstein's; in the present example, toward the illusion that there could even have been a question: “viewed as a Pyrrhonian work [the story] does something quite different [than leaving unsolved the question of the nature and value of Josefine's performances,] and quite remarkable: it leaves *dissolved* the question of the nature and value of Josefine's singing” (p. 189).

The shape of this pattern inclines Schuman toward using the most potent Wittgensteinian ideas in featured roles in her interpretations, presumably just because these would facilitate the tidiest and most conclusive-sounding dissolutions of the questions she depicts as illusory. For instance, she denies the possibility of a private language on the basis of remarks about the grammar of the word “know” (cf. *Investigations* §246), i.e., unmasks the thought of a private language as illusory (pp. 178-182), and then denies that issuing reminders about obvious grammatical remarks constitutes any kind of advancement of a philosophical thesis, i.e., any hint of philosophical progress (p. 183).

But this means that much turns on the applicability of the Wittgensteinian ideas to the literary elements to which they must apply. In the case of the narrator’s remark about not knowing the power of song that I quoted above—perhaps the linchpin, though not the core, of Schuman’s argument in the chapter it belongs to—it seems questionable whether this should be spoken of as a “grammatical remark,” as she does; in context, her implausible reasons for insisting upon it seem to force her to deny the obvious truth, that the narrator who makes the remark means, as anyone saying those words would have to, that Josefine’s song is powerful (attesting that this is materially so).

IV.

Other doubts about applicability arise elsewhere, such as in the fifth chapter, where Schuman seems to secure it at the cost of leaving a lot of relevant evidence unaccounted for. The interpretation of Kafka centers on an application of Wittgenstein’s rule-following considerations from the *Investigations* to the events of “In the Penal Colony.” Schuman wishes to argue, among other things, that no kind of ironic reading of the machine’s malfunction is possible, because this would presuppose that the machine had ever worked successfully prior to the time of the explorer’s visit to the penal colony. Schuman denies this, partly on the basis of details of the story, which is designed not to show a successful execution and renders what the officer says about the executions doubtful from the explorer’s perspective; and partly on the strength of her reading of the rule-following considerations, which she seems to take—the twists in her reasoning become hard to follow—to confirm the impossibility of legitimately proving or validating anything about the machine or the officer’s rules for it. Her own interpretation maintains that the officer’s suicide is “uninterpretable” (p. 160).

But despite what he may not know about the past use of the machine, the explorer surely knows that the officer believes, among other things, that by design the condemned do not know their punishments. At least not, that is, until they supposedly come to understand these, bodily, halfway through the torturous process of execution, as the pun-

ishments are scrawled, as inscriptions of the commandments violated, on their skins. By selecting his own punishment in response to the explorer's refusal to give a sign of support for him to the others in the colony, the officer is evidently breaking with protocol—in the very same act with which he seeks to punish himself, as it were to serve both as justice's agent and its patient. What could this mean? Is the explorer, or are we, obviously mistaken to think that there is a sensible question of how the officer's action is to be interpreted, even if we grant that the officer might not have ever actually carried out a successful execution, or any at all? I don't pretend to know, and I would hardly deny that the rule-following considerations may remain just as relevant to addressing these questions as to the ones Schuman is inclined to address in order to reinforce her case for analytic modernism. But it seems that pertinent questions about the story cannot be so easily dismissed as illusory.

V.

In Schuman's first chapter, which applies ideas from the *Tractatus* to *The Trial*, there seems to me to be a larger unresolved question about the applicability of the ideas. There are also serious issues with her reasoning about them. Schuman begins, as elsewhere, by recalling a long-standing question of interpretation about Kafka's work. Here, the question is: "is protagonist Josef K. guilty despite never having a formal charge leveled against him?" (p. 39). The interpretive difficulty stems from the fact that the reasons for K's arrest and trial are never made clear, to him or to the reader; all he ever learns about the extraordinarily odd trial and the inscrutable court from the others he encounters during the course of the novel is, seemingly, contradictory. Yet in the end he is taken away and killed. Schuman's proposed interpretation is:

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. (p. 41)

She is emphatic about treating that validity in logical terms. The case for this interpretation depends largely upon Schuman's identification of a number of "contradictions" in the world of the story, noticed by K. or even called contradictory by him. The trick of the interpretation is the identification of these "contradictory" story elements with tractarian contradictions, which then lack sense rather than being nonsensical; have no truth conditions; and could be said to belong to the symbolism of logic, reflecting a necessary feature of the world rather than saying anything informative—anything at all—about it. Schuman uses characteristics such as these to argue for "the validity in the outcome of K's case" (p. 47). Her tactic is to point to the previously identified contradictory "prem-

ises,” and then to invoke *ex falso quodlibet*. She claims that in this light, “we may call what has happened to [K.] fair, we may call it unfair, we may call it predestined, we may call it a shock—but... we may not call it illogical, nonsensical, or invalid” (p. 51). But her use of logic is murky:

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. (p. 50)

It is discouraging that at this point Schuman footnotes Barwise and Etchemendy’s textbook *Language, Proof and Logic* specifically to refer to a section which explains the customary distinction between valid and sound arguments, as she seems to have been confused about some elementary points, such as that the validity of an argument is independent of the truth of its premises, or that a conclusion to an argument is true or false, a logically valid consequence of the argument’s premises (or not), but is not itself something that can be “valid” in the intended sense. Indeed, though Schuman repeatedly refers in general to some posited “argument” for purposes of discussion, she never specifies one that K.’s judges might be applying to his case, or one that might be constructed from various statements about the law or the court on the level of jurisprudence. Perhaps thinking of one might have raised the question of the *need* to reason from the contradictory premises in the first place. She is focused only on the idea that *ex falso quodlibet* is a valid rule of logical inference. And, seeming to suppose this would be the only relevant rule given the mess of contradictory premises she assigns to whomever is doing the reasoning, she embraces what she takes to be the conclusion. But as her source Barwise and Etchemendy notes, “An argument with inconsistent premises is always valid, but more importantly, always unsound” (p. 141). Perhaps she was caught on the first half of that remark. Barwise and Etchemendy also note, a few lines above it, “There is no reason to be convinced of the conclusion of an unsound argument.”

So the sort of argument Schuman wishes to make is clear enough. I think it is worth noting, though, how far she is from being able to make it in the first place—a matter of the applicability of Wittgenstein’s ideas. I noted above that her case depends on identifying a number of contradictory story elements with tractarian contradictions. Indeed she more than once clearly wants to express these in a canonical form, $P \ \& \ \neg P$, or in the form of a negation of a tautology, $\neg(P \vee \neg P)$, as if to emphasize that what is at stake is solely a point of logical structure. But her “premises” (as recalled on p. 50) include:

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.

Schuman obtains the first of these from a passage in the first chapter, “Arrest,” of *The Trial* (I refer in what follows to the Breon Mitchell translation [Schocken Books, 1998], pp. 8–9). K. wants to see the arrest warrant, and identification papers from the guards Franz and Willem. One guard chews him out for this, concluding his little harangue by saying, “That’s the Law. What mistake could there be?” K. says he doesn’t know that law. Thus:

“All the worse for you,” said the guard. “It probably exists only in your heads,” said K.; he wanted to slip into his guards’ thoughts somehow and turn them to his own advantage or accustom himself to them. But the guard merely said dismissively: “You’ll feel it eventually.” Franz broke in and said: “You see, Willem, he admits that he doesn’t know the Law and yet he claims he’s innocent.” “You’re right there, but he can’t seem to understand anything.”

Schuman’s gloss on that last remark of Franz to Willem is: “To maintain innocence but not know the law that defines it is to be neither guilty nor not guilty” (p. 43). She is quick to formalize an expression of K.’s “state of affairs,” $\neg G \ \& \ \neg \neg G$ (her locutions suggest she treats G as a predicate applied to one individual, $K.$, but all her expressions of the complex proposition, and most of the things she has to say about it, treat it as belonging only to propositional logic), which she goes on to discuss in the context of a tractarian idea of contradictions and tautologies as saying nothing, uninformative, using natural-language examples such as “it is raining or not raining” which are roughly canonical in form.

If we’re going to play this game, though, then we have to note that what Schuman later calls “Franz’s assertion” is *not*, canonically, a contradiction. There is what Franz says (or maintains), and what K. says (or maintains). It’s Schuman who conjoins them. On what grounds? Given the way trials are ordinarily conducted, it seems that if anything, we would have grounds only to say $G \vee \neg G$, or $\neg(G \ \& \ \neg G)$. This captures the adversarial character of the claims being considered, a matter that Schuman seems, as if by fiat, to have resolved by accepting it as strictly unresolvable in the world of the novel. It seems that we have to read Schuman’s gloss, “To maintain innocence but not know the law that defines it is to be neither guilty nor not guilty” (p. 43), as a substantial interpretation proposed by her, not strictly of the things said by the characters, or of these together with

the situation K. finds himself in, but of *the novel*, the entire literary work. Or, better: of its world.

In the discussion leading up to her claim about the “validity” of K.’s fate, Schuman more than once invokes the idea that tractarian contradictions are part of the logical symbolism (pp. 48, 49)—they belong to it as one of its possibilities. But for whatever reason, despite a discussion of truth tables (pp. 48-50) and an earlier discussion of the ontology and semantics of the *Tractatus* (pp. 15-22), she does not check her interpretations regarding the contradictoriness of K.’s situation against the complementary point of tractarian doctrine, that a contradiction, forming—just like a tautology—a kind of limit of the world, *says nothing about the world*, i.e., says nothing about some contingent state of affairs involving objects belonging to it. But K. finds himself, at least for our purposes here, among just those objects. His own existence is one of many contingent states of affairs. We might say that these, and K. himself, are what Kafka’s novel says something about; and Schuman with him, in interpreting the novel. We might also venture that the novel accomplishes this by picturing *a* world. What Schuman does not seem to have resolved is how an interpreter is in a position to say that talking about a novel’s world necessarily shares a logic with talking about *the* world; or to say how a seemingly contradictory contingent, novelistic world is to be reconciled with the actual world, about which contradictions say nothing.