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Kafka and Wittgenstein by Rebecca Schuman

Hugo Strandberg

Schuman, Rebecca, *Kafka and Wittgenstein: The Case for an Analytic Modernism*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015.

When reading academic literary criticism as a philosopher, it is often hard to understand what is going on. It would be easy to see the point if what the academic critic did was just a more advanced form of what any reader does, discussing with friends a novel we have all read. At their best, such discussions are very close to the text, and a perceptive and knowledgeable reader would no doubt make significant contributions. For the academic critic, however, the literary text is often far from central. Instead she is much more theoretically and philosophically minded. This, however, does not make it any easier for the philosopher to understand what is going on. Quite the contrary.

Such difficulties of understanding become very palpable when I read Rebecca Schuman's *Kafka and Wittgenstein*. As a Wittgensteinian philosopher with Kafka as one of my favorite authors, this ought to be a

book for me – I think before having started to read it, but it does not take many pages to make me feel estranged. No doubt, Schuman is sometimes a perceptive reader, but the illuminating things she has to say are said in passing, in the midst of discussions of theory and the works of other interpreters of Kafka. (The numerous references to other interpreters are partly to be explained by the fact that *Kafka and Wittgenstein* is originally a doctoral dissertation, to what extent rewritten I do not know.) Her discussions of Wittgenstein, on the other hand, are basically flawed – even if this is a criticism she would probably see as irrelevant, a fact which makes the whole book even stranger. Let me explain.

Apart from some introductory material, *Kafka and Wittgenstein* consists of six chapters, each dealing with one work of Kafka in the light of one theme in the works of Wittgenstein. The first three chapters

connect *The Trial*, *The Metamorphosis* and “The Judgment” to the *Tractatus*. In the chapter on *The Trial*, Schuman criticizes interpretations that focus on whether Josef K. is guilty or not. The problem with such interpretations is, according to Schuman, that since Josef K. encounters logical contradictions again and again (as an example, she mentions the figure Josef K. notices that the painter Titorelli has incorporated a figure of Justice and Victory as one into the portrait of an influential judge), and since anything follows from a logical contradiction, what makes the judgment that Josef K. is guilty logically valid is logical form as such – and this form cannot be said. This also explains the ending of the novel, when Josef K. says that he dies “like a dog”: he has been deprived of that which makes us human, the ability to communicate, for his death is a consequence of the unsayable, logical form.

The second chapter is basically a discussion of the concept of metaphor, occasioned by the academic discussion of metaphors in the works of Kafka (*The Metamorphosis* in particular). Schuman wants to contribute to this discussion by means of the notion of metaphorical form she develops in the chapter, with reference to Wittgenstein’s saying/showing-distinction. In the next chapter, she discusses Kafka’s short story “The Judgment”. The fact that Georg Bendemann obeys his father and commits suicide strikes the reader as nonsensical, she says, and many interpreters have therefore

tried to find some reason behind this nonsense. Schuman’s basic point is that this is a mistake: Wittgenstein has showed that there is no reason behind nonsense. More specifically, Schuman’s point has to do with Wittgenstein’s contention that there is no such thing as ethical propositions and judgments, which in this context means that it is not possible to make a judgment concerning the relative good or evil of George’s conduct. And as Wittgenstein puts it (T § 6.5): “When the answer cannot be put into words, neither can the question be put into words. *The riddle* does not exist.” In other words, the question which the interpreters of “The Judgment” has tried to answer does not exist.

The second part of the book connects *The Castle*, “In the Penal Colony” and “Josefine the Singer” to the *Philosophical Investigations*. In the chapter on *The Castle*, Wittgenstein’s remarks about ostensive definitions in the beginning of the *Philosophical Investigations* are the focus of Schuman’s discussion. She writes (116): “Wittgenstein insists that this entire concept [of ostensive definition] is an illusion.” This makes it possible for her to account for K.’s problem in the novel: it is not possible for him to identify himself as a land surveyor and be understood, since for this to work, “I am a land surveyor” must be an ostensive definition.

Having come this far, the reader of *Nordic Wittgenstein Review* does not have to be told that *Kafka and Wittgenstein* contains dubious inter-

pretations of Wittgenstein, and dubious philosophy as well. This criticism, Schuman would probably not see as relevant – as suggested by the penultimate chapter, on “In the Penal Colony” and rule following. (The final chapter, dealing with “Josefine the Singer” and the private language argument, I will not discuss here.) Schuman bases her interpretation of Kafka’s short story on Kripke’s rule following skepticism, summing it up as the claim that there is no way to tell what anyone means with any word, conceding however that this “may seem a tad contrived” (159). Furthermore, she is fully aware that this skepticism is not Wittgenstein’s. In other words, what matters here is not whether Kripke’s interpretation is the best interpretation of Wittgenstein’s remarks on rule following or not, nor whether Kripke’s interpretation is good philosophy or not, but whether reading Kafka through the Kripkean theory gives rise to an interesting interpretation of “In the Penal Colony”. It is here the philosopher has a hard time to follow her: if something is bad philosophy, the interpretation of a literary work it gives rise to must be bad, I would like to say.

Generally speaking, the affinity Schuman sees between the works of Kafka and Wittgenstein consists in the self-undermining quality of their writing: the ambiguities in the case of Kafka, both calling for and resisting interpretation; the propositions of the *Tractatus* being a ladder that

should be thrown away after one has climbed it; the *Philosophical Investigations* not containing philosophical theses and thus no answers to traditional philosophical questions but the dissolution of them. There is of course something to all of this, but Schuman exaggerates the extent to which *Philosophical Investigations* is self-undermining. She writes (185): “one must, to some extent, argue that *either* Wittgenstein’s investigations *do* advance philosophical theses [...] or that the *Investigations*, like the *Tractatus* before it, is a text that offers pseudo-theses [...] and that the full act of understanding them absolutely necessitates their self-destruction.” Here Schuman forgets that it is possible to say something substantial without advancing any theses, a possibility the disregard of which accounts for the theoretical character of her own text. This is a possibility Wittgenstein refers to when saying things like “the work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose” (PI § 127), “don’t think, but look!” (§ 66), and “It is like a pair of glasses on our nose through which we see whatever we look at. It never occurs to us to take them off” (§ 103).

In fact, if one would really like to do literary criticism in a Wittgensteinian spirit, it is remarks such as these that are important, whereas the specific things that Wittgenstein said about, say, rule following are comparatively far from as important. In this respect, the situation of the philosopher and the situation of the academic literary critic are not that

dissimilar: these remarks contain a message that is as challenging and as difficult to take to heart for both of us.

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