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Computer Chess and the Reverse Odyssey of Marx Returns

‘It’s a great huge game of chess that’s being played—all over the world—if this is the world at all, you know.

Oh, what fun it is! How I wish I was one of them!
I wouldn’t mind being a Pawn, if only I might join—
though of course I should like to be a Queen, best.’
— Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*

The chess metaphor in historical fiction has an illustrious history. Any philosophy of history can scarcely avoid the metaphor of the game, both in terms of the pieces (most mere “pawns”) or else the players themselves. Susan Brantly reflects on how in the Middle Ages, “The forces that guided human history were beyond the control of men.” God played chess against the Devil. With the coming of modernity the players are the “men” themselves, equipped with military, political or diplomatic strategies. Torbjörn Säfve’s *Molza*, *The Lover* imagines Vatican politics as a series of “moves,” while in Sven Delblanc’s *The Cassock* General Waldstein “has arranged his garden like a chessboard, with statues of his ancestors arranged as chess pieces.”¹

Glen Robert Downey considers the plight of women in Victorian chess games. In Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* Hargrave coerces Helen into a match. What follows is a series of vulgar advances: chess as the symbolism of a social contract in which women’s sexuality is made to yield. Once the game is won the threat of rape is the corollary of Hargrave’s “playful” sense of entitlement.² In Hardy’s *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, the chess matches are expanded into a long game of social power plays.³ Elfride, in her quest to find a “mate,” is playing a war of

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¹ Susan Brantly, *The Historical Novel, Transnationalism, and the Postmodern Era: Presenting the Past* (London: Routledge, 1999).

² Glen Robert Downey, *The Truth about Pawn Promotion. The Development of the Chess Motif in Victorian Fiction* (PhD Thesis, 1998), University of Victoria, pp. 38–48.

³ Ibid. p. 60.

position rather than a war of manoeuvre. Somehow however she must make up for being the daughter of a bad player. Swancourt, Elfride's father, in selfishly attempting to revive the family's fortunes, makes a habit of scuppering the spontaneity his daughter might otherwise achieve through her own decisions. For Swancourt mad queens must be pawned. Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* offers an alternative instance of mad becoming where the lowliest of individuals manages to attain the rank of royalty. Nonetheless in this case, as Downey observes, "the discovery that being promoted from a pawn (a state of innocence) to a queen (one of experience) does not bring with it a liberation from the game, but only a greater recognition of how trapped within the game she really is."⁴ However twisted the rules may have appeared they still account for Alice's every move.

Naturally when it comes to Marx one expects great things from the pawns; although in his own writings the metaphor is absent. As Brantly observes, Marx "had little use for the chess metaphor and tended to choose technological metaphors instead, as in his famous discussions of basis [sic] and superstructure and in his comparison of history with a locomotive that is fuelled by production and demand."⁵ The chess metaphor instead appears in Benjamin's "On the Concept of History," where we find a synthesis, courtesy of "technology," of game and machine. Benjamin's amusing anecdote of the chess computer (an elaborate con-trick involving a dwarf who is a master chess player concealed beneath a puppet) recalls the type of logical montage that Marx grasped at in his final years, in the faint hope that it might miraculously deliver up "the principal laws of crises".⁶ If chess is an absent metaphor in Marx's works then the logico-mathematical precision of the "chess computer" is nonetheless still emblematic of his late thinking. To speak like a formalist, Marx may have had no time for chess *metaphors*, but that didn't mean that he wasn't *thinking* like a grandmaster. Indeed, the absence of the metaphor may even provide proof of the presence of the concept.

⁴ Ibid. p. 53.

⁵ Brantly, *The Historical Novel*, p. 20.

⁶ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Marx Engels Werke. Band 33* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1976), p. 82.

Such may have been Barker’s starting point in *Marx Returns*, which in all events suits the story the author wants to tell.⁷ But let’s underline the counterfactual nature of the story: all else being equal, what if Marx’s aim to tear the veil from the obfuscating *symbols* of differential calculus—*insofar as* they obfuscate the *real* material nature of so-called infinitesimals—had been pursued from the beginning of his research into political economy, rather than at the “end” (or at least after the publication of the first volume of *Capital*)? This question assumes that Marx wasn’t all along “practising” mathematics anyway; just as Badiou asserts that the mathematician practises ontology without knowing it. Everyone is a philosopher. The point for the Marxist in training is to achieve the practical ends that the philosophical mode of address makes possible. Changing the world? Is that really Marx’s practical end? Framed in this manner, where philosophy—which Marx reneges on (we assume) in his 11th thesis on Feuerbach—is conditioned by mathematical practice, we might conclude that nothing could be further from his mind. The Book is the real object Marx struggles to produce; both as the “objective” thing of description or interpretation, in addition to the “subjective” reality which he works under the illusion of changing. Marx is both *terra firma* and *terra incognita*, *poiesis* and *praxis*, *in* and *of* The Book. This is the frantic and frenzied character that Barker’s novel confronts us with: if time is always catching up with Marx then it’s not a simple question of speeding up, for in that case he would risk completing the Book too soon, forcing the situation, before the revolutionary conditions had ripened: completing the Book before *there is* any Book to complete.

Barker’s novel is rather good at depicting virtual communism, the one that dare not enact itself—“restrained action”—and the examples he uses, although familiar, are sharp-witted and amusing. Wouldn’t it be exploitative, Wilhelm Liebknecht queries at an emergency meeting of the Communist League, for Engels to extract a surplus from his labourers’ work in order to pay Marx a salary? (MR, 202) Surely not if the money were paid from Engels’s salary; though let’s not forget that Engels, as a capitalist, by definition exploits the workers’ surplus labour. Marx manages to square this uncomfortable economic arrangement by reminding himself that he, as *paterfamilias*, is using the income “to pay the fixed and variable costs of his much smaller yet no less productive factory,”

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⁷ See Jason Barker, *Marx Returns* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2018). Page references to *Marx Returns* are written in brackets in the text.

namely: “The communist factory for the purpose of abolishing the factory” (206).

Does exploitation go all the way down? Does it “descend”—imaginary Althusserian descents run throughout Barker’s novel—into the most intimate places that Marx, in his sexual modesty, deems out of bounds? By his own frank admission, as far as Helene’s wages are concerned, he doesn’t know where to start (48). The Book, whose tasks are those in and of the Book—“since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation”⁸—turns on a point of extimacy. Readers of the Marx melodrama will be aware of the dutiful wife syndrome, where Jenny suffers for her other half’s “revolution,” taking on secretarial duties (deciphering Marx’s indecipherable hand) and having to put up with his messy affair with her best friend Helene Demuth. Barker’s approach provides a welcome alternative, and seeing as so much of the historical record must have been destroyed one is free to speculate that if Marx is making the revolution “in theory” then why not have Jenny making it “in practice”?

Portrayed as being naturally indifferent to Marx—in spite of their blissful adolescent romance—Jenny’s communist awakening arises during a hilarious scene in which she tends her sick husband at his bedside. Distracted, she reads out random passages from the *Communist Manifesto*, scandalized yet titillated by the paragraph that deals with “bourgeois marriage,” or the “system of wives in common,” and how its abolition under communism was to bring about the end of “prostitution both public and private.” We might doubt, however, whether the wife really manages to enact the revolution she desires in her private life, thus erasing the distinction between the public and the private, any more than Marx manages to complete The Book. Might she have had more success had her impending affair been announced? Made public? Broadcast at a meeting of the Communist League? Marx’s own infidelity with Helene might conceivably have provided common cause, balanced things out. Free association means egalitarian, the free development of each on condition of the free development of all. But at the decisive moment Jenny holds her tongue, ultimately in thrall to the demon that possesses her, and those “extraordinary saints she has to put up

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⁸ Karl Marx, “A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy” in: *Marx and Engels Collected Works, Volume 29* (London: Lawrence and Wishart Electric Book, 2010), p. 263.

with" (271). The possession—and the romantic indifference that accompanies it—will be clarified in the final act.

The multi-layered connections in the novel between communism and chess invite an interesting analysis. However, in admitting the *metaphorical* equivalence of communism as the “real movement” to chess as a “game” we would be subscribing to a philosophy of history which surely goes against the author’s intentions. There is no outside of The Book, as Marx himself will come to realize. As such the dimensions of the board and its rules, even the identities of opposing players, overwhelm the question of who in the end stands to triumph:

Marx wondered whether by “bigger” Helene meant a board of infinite dimensions. On such a scale checkmate might be achievable in a finite number of moves. It seemed plausible on condition that the parameters of the game provided for the possibility of checkmate in n-moves which, despite being a very, very large number was still *not* infinite (36).

The question of how to account for the infinite in finite terms is the dominant and ingenious theme in Barker’s novel. It finds expression in the narrative voice which suggests to Marx that an evil genius must be behind this lawless game, that there must be a Higher Law at work capable of barring the lawlessness. The falling of mathematicians into religion has provided down the centuries the suture for unsolvable problems, the personal awakening that wards off the mathematicians’ descent into madness. Marx’s “religion” is far from personal, instead being the monstrous outgrowth of a whole society whose cell-form is the commodity, meaning that there is no refuge for the intellect. Marx’s descent into hell has no bottom.

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The games in which Helene plays Jenny are always encountered mid-flow. Marx enters or exits their game as a spectator and remains as ignorant as we are about how long it’s been going on or is likely to last (“as long as it takes,” responds Helene to Marx at one point (34)). This discontinuity raises the question of whether or not it’s the same game the women are always playing, a never-ending game where “checkmate might be achievable in a finite number of moves.” When eventually Marx finds the time to sit down and take on Helene his victory at the board seems hollow, as if she weren’t the real or a worthy opponent. Ever more so the case with Jenny, who afterwards Marx forces, much to

her unwillingness and bemusement, to play Helene. This mismatch inclines us to doubt the veracity of all that went on before, of this unique game that struggles to reach conclusion.

Marx's "return" is a dramatic question opposed to the notion of the sad passions which he in his own self-pitying reflections on the state of his constitution always affirms. Tragedy is the boomerang effect, the law of unintended consequences; the law of heroic *action*. Marx struggles to avoid all responsibility, too invested in his own "philosophy" of science that men make history in circumstances not of their own choosing. But he discounts the possibility that not to choose is still a choice and that his personal misfortunes are always self-inflicted. "Circumstances" will eventually lead him back to Trier on "a reverse Odyssey where, instead of a nostalgic trip home, one is carted back to a house in turmoil and upheaval" (262). This purposeful and unconscious return-as-reversal is what separates the Marx story as drama from the melodrama of a Dickensian novel, as well as from the epic of the nostalgic return.

We are living in a culture that sees tragedy everywhere; that fetishizes it. In mid-nineteenth-century England, around 60,000 children would die each year of tuberculosis. When Charles Darwin's daughter Annie died of the disease in 1851 he wrote in his diary: "We have lost the joy of the household, and the solace of our old age. She must have known how we loved her. Oh, that she could now know how deeply, how tenderly, we do still and shall ever love her dear joyous face! Blessings on her!"⁹ Another child, Mary, died in early infancy.

And yet we don't think of Darwin's life as tragic. High birth rates were normal for Victorian families irrespective of social class. Jenny Marx gave birth to seven children, only three of whom survived to adulthood; the Darwins had ten. There is nothing tragic about this high mortality rate. Indeed, Darwin accounts for it himself in *On the Origin of Species*, noting that the number of individuals of a given species is governed by natural selection, which determines how each individual's inherited characteristics aid and abet it in the "struggle for existence." Only a culture profoundly anesthetised to the real causes of human

⁹ Charles Darwin, "Chapter 1. III. – Reminiscences of My Father's Everyday Life" in: *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin, Volume I (of II)* Edited by His Son, Project Gutenberg Ebook. 1999, n. pg. Available at: <www.gutenberg.org/files/2087/2087-h/2087-h.htm>.

suffering would mention tragedy in relation to infant mortality. The word is derived from the Greek for “goat” (*tragos*), whose blood sacrifice would have been lamented in song at the Theatre of Dionysus in fifth century Athens.

On the available evidence there is nothing to suggest that the deaths of the Marx children were tragic, at least according to the historical definition of tragedy handed down to us from Aristotle. The deaths were sad, and of course their lives were defined through *struggle*. But they were not tragic, since the mere fact of being born, becoming ill, then dying, sooner or later, is a biological fact. In order to be a tragic figure the deaths in question would need to be attributable to an act of *hubris* on the hero’s part. There is no evidence to suggest Marx committed any such act in the case of any of his four deceased children. It was arguably Charles Dickens—like Darwin, Marx’s contemporary—who was responsible for this perversion of the idea of the tragic death, which he memorialized through his depictions of children’s undeserved suffering, their poor unfortunate souls, to such an extent that the plight of almost any Victorian child is today thought “tragic.” But this Dickensian propensity for melodrama is more worthy of a satyr play. As Oscar Wilde reportedly put it: “One must have a *heart of stone* to read the death of little Nell without laughing.”¹⁰

Marx is widely portrayed as a Dickensian hero in order to *humanize* him. By depicting Marx as a “nineteenth-century life,” to borrow the title of Jonathan Sperber’s wholly unconvincing biography, one relativizes the man and his ideas. Marxism is thus envisaged as one “school of thought” among others; one man’s intellectual contribution to an age. In highlighting the role reversal, the *peripeteia*, and indeed the fear which *real* history inspires, at the expense of the pity, Barker’s novel confronts us with the genuinely tragic form of the Marx story.

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The narrative in *Marx Returns* is framed by historical events—the bloody repressions of June 1848 and May 1871—that Marx cannot possibly predict and whose ramifications he fails grasp, even if it is he who in the tragic sense sets things in motion. Barker’s novel is an Oedipal drama in which love and politics collide. Only a chess computer in the sense of a universal Diophantine equation solver would be truly equipped to describe the random unfolding of the tragic act; of what, on Aristotle’s definition of tragedy, is possible according to

¹⁰ Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Knopf, 1987), p. 441.

the law of probability or necessity. However, there is no “law” of randomness,¹¹ despite Marx’s frantic search for the existence of “laws [of capitalist production] themselves, of these tendencies working with iron necessity towards inevitable results.”¹² In *Marx Returns* the epic form of the poem and the nostalgic return home of a man finally at peace with his own history, having laid to rest his demons, is rejected by the author. “The only writer of history,” writes Walter Benjamin, “with the gift of setting alight the sparks of hope in the past, is the one who is convinced of this: that not even the dead will be safe from the enemy, if he is victorious. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.”¹³

Barker conjures the true stakes of Marx’s tragedy which instead of ending in reconciliation, forces it to assume terrifying forms in its prospect of life after death, or of what somewhat ridiculously has come to be known as permanent revolution.

¹¹ Gregory Chaitin’s research into algorithmic information theory proves that despite being definable, randomness is incomputable. See Gregory Chaitin, *Meta Math! The Quest for Omega* (New York: Vintage, 2006).

¹² Karl Marx, “1867 Preface to the First German Edition” in: *Capital, Volume 1*, trans. S. Moore and E. Aveling, ed. F. Engels (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1999. Online version), n. pg. Available at: www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/p1.htm [accessed 24 September 2015].

¹³ Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” VI. trans. D. Redmond, Marxists.org., 2005. Available at: <www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>.