

Short Story 67: The Marvelous Brass Chess Playing Automaton

The Urth list — 6 messages, 2 voices, 17 Jul 2014

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Marc Aramini — 17 Jul 2014, 16:45

The Marvelous Brass Chessplaying Automaton*

*I am almost finished with my "Silhouette" write up but still need to finish reading two novels mentioned in the text for research to see if any new connections arise, so I am proceeding with a few of the short stories to more quickly close out the 1970s.

"The Marvelous Brass Chess Playing Automaton", reprinted in *Storeys From The Old Hotel*, was first published in 1977 in **Universe 7*. *

SUMMARY WITH SOME GEOGRAPHICAL DETAILS: The story begins with Lame Hans in jail with his knees up against the bars, playing the machine, pitied by the narrator, the man who brings him food in jail. It is clear that there are some remnants of high technology, with weather satellites still in the air even in a post-nuclear war era characterized by arid, hot droughts. The women form lines and circles to supplicate for rain on the remains of the Schlossberg (Castle Hill — historically the site of a fortress and tree covered hill in Graz, Austria, though the village is called Oder in the story and is most probably Frankfurt, whose fortress-like nature was intended to block the Red Army's advance to Berlin). During a truce in the current German-Russian war, Herr Heitzmann comes (it is still hot after dark) with his chess painted wagon and Lame Hans. That night, in a candlelit inn, Heitzmann challenges the learned men of the town, Baumeister and Eckardt, if they know of any of the great computers of the past age to have survived. When they reply in the negative, he boasts he has the only one, which, instead of controlling human affairs, plays chess. He indicates he is taking it to Dresden, then avers that it cannot be defeated.

Baumeister accepts his challenge and six men carry in the machine. As the game begins, after Baumeister makes the first move and before he can sit, the machine responds with a smooth movement of its own piece. Its reactions are instantaneous. After ten moves Baumeister believes a man must be inside and demands a look. Heitzmann removes both panels so that the machine can be seen through, with its circuit cards and innards exposed, and when they are replaced and the game resumes, Baumeister loses in 22 moves. Albricht the moneylender then bets and loses in 14 moves.

Baumeister offers to buy it, and Heitzmann gets him up to 750 kilomarks as is. Doctor Eckardt continues to play with the machine into the night, losing 3 games. The dwarf Lame Hans limps in and rents a garret for ten marks. Here our narrator reveals that from here many things rely on the testimony of Lame Hans, who has no reason to lie, and that somehow Gretchen and the dwarf Hans fell in love that night.

In the morning, the machine will not play chess for Baumeister. He talks with Lame Hans, who reveals some insight into Baumeister's chess weaknesses. Knowing he was swindled, Baumeister believes he can sell two of his houses to recover the purchase price of the machine

(giving us a fairly good idea of how expensive the machine is, though the ability of Herr Heitzmann to front 2000 kilomarks later is a bit astonishing). Baumeister acknowledges, "I would be willing to believe that you know a great deal about anything. You play like the devil himself," of Hans.

A flyer is released with a challenge in the village of Oder Spree in front of the Inn of the Golden Apples for prospective players to wager against the machine. Hans meets Heitzmann at the Scharzthor in Furthenwald to extend the challenge. Hans offers to defeat the machine if Baumeister can get it operational for the challenge, boasting, "I can beat anybody — you know that." Heitzmann fronts Hans 2000 kilomarks and then follows him in a plastiskin mask.

Hans plans to open a tobacco shop with Gretchen, and he and Baumeister decide Gretchen can operate the machine according to a preset game. He contemplates the sounds of the artillery and the marching of the German forces against the Russians trapped at Kostrzyn (a Polish town — most definitely Kostrzyn nad Odra on the Polish German border rather than the more centrally located Kostrzyn) as they go over the preset strategy, Gretchen stating she is not afraid, since for the prospect of marriage and a shop, she "would do much worse things than to hide in this thing that looks like a stove, and play a game."

Hans shows Baumeister how he hides in the machine, where a panel provides coverage when the chessboard is unfolded as he lifts his body up to avoid detection when the machine is open. The iron black pieces are magnetic, and Gretchen has a hard time getting in the machine. She must remove her gown and shift to get inside.

The machine is carried out, and the men of the street are glad they aren't in the army who "serve one of those big guns, which get hot enough to poach an egg after half a dozen shots, even in ordinary weather."

Hans does not appear until the last possible second to play the scheduled game, arriving right at the strike of 9. After five moves, the queen pauses in its movement, stopping a square short, and then Hans adapts so that he should lose regardless. The machine proceeds to attack him in an original fashion, and he hears the guns attacking the Russians booming, and hesitates at the final move which would consign him to the planned loss. Hans considers that Gretchen has kicked and made the machine work.

The desire to play chess with someone skillful begins to overtake him as more attractive than a tobacco shop. He begins to play to win, and the machine proves capable of defeating him. At this point Herr Heitzmann in his disguise calls out "Cheat, Cheat". When the policemen go to open the machine, they are careful not to burn their hands. They pull out Gretchen, who has been dead some time and is getting stiff.

Baumeister and Hans are arrested, and Hans plays the machine every day, which no longer functions, moving both sides by hand and always letting the black side win. The narrator says, "Sometimes when he is not quick enough to move the black queen, I see her begin to rock and to slide herself, and the dials and the console lights to glow with impatience and then Hans must reach out and take her to her new position — I have heard that many who have been twisted by the old wars have these psychokinetic abilities without knowing it; and Professor Baumeister, who is in the cell next to his, says that someday a technology may be founded on them."

DISCUSSION: For all its small details of a post nuclear and technologically regressed society which seems to have the class structure of 18th-19th century Europe, this particular story is very straightforward in that the solution posited by the narrator at the end actually fits better to

explain events than several other possibilities: Lame Hans has some kind of psychokinetic and telepathic abilities with his giant head attached to that small body.

Two other possibilities are that the machine actually worked for one day, though the original premise is of course that a machine didn't survive which was believed to have done so. The other is a quite literal Deus ex machina: the ghost of Gretchen in the machine. Unfortunately, she doesn't know how to play chess, and whatever is operating the machine is quite skilled, as skilled as Hans, who can "beat anyone". He considers that Gretchen might have merely been pretending not to know how to play (But he knew that she had not been deceiving him.)?

It is easy to buy the mental powers of Hans not only because of his huge head, but because he never loses at Chess until that final match. He moves immediately, as if he knows what his opponent is going to do. This intellect seems more akin to intuition — why is he so good at chess, "like the Devil?" Because his mental powers extend beyond himself, into the minds of others. With nascent but subconscious telepathy and psychokinesis, we can explain his great talent at chess and the motions of the machine. Hans also winds up playing himself over and over at the end, always losing to the black "machine" side.

The small details of the story, like the remains of Schlossburg and the extent satellites in a clearly technologically regressed society, as well as the extreme heat even after the sun sets, portrays a thorough picture of a society which has stepped backwards, and presages some of the better plot and style effects of *New Sun*, though the old technology still operates more reliably in that setting.

SETTING: The technology mentioned in attacking the Russians trapped in Kostrzyn involves wood-fired steam tractors, as they explore the possibility of turning them into tanks with armor and a canon, the narrator thinking — so that the knights of the chessboard would exist in reality once more. The Russians are using powered balloons, and the still air of the summer grants them an aerial advantage. Since it has been almost a hundred years since computer parts were mass produced, the earliest that the story could take place would probably be the end of the 21st century and is probably a bit later. The action is set in the state of Brandenburg, Germany on the Polish-German border

THE TEXT ON WHAT CONTROLS MAN'S DESTINY:

[The ancient computers] based their extrapolations on numbers. That worked well enough as long as money, which is easily measured numerically, was the principal motivating force in human affairs. But as time progressed, human actions became responsive instead to a multitude of incommensurable vectors; the computer's predictions failed, the civilizations they had shaped collapsed, and parts for the machines were no longer obtainable or desirable.

MYTHIC ALLUSIONS:

The inn is named after the Golden Apples, but in this case I do not think it refers to the apple of discord which began the Trojan War when Paris decided to award it to Aphrodite and start the Trojan War, but rather the three golden apples given to Hippomenes which allowed him to distract Atalanta so that he could win a race against her and marry her, indicating the triumph of intellect and trickery over raw speed and power, which fits with Lame Hans' character a bit better (note the plural apples in the name of the inn).

LITERARY ALLUSIONS:

While Bierce's "Moxon's Machine" deals with a murderous chess playing construct, the actual

machine more closely resembles the situation discussed in Poe's "Maelzel's Chess Player", an essay examining why the historical mechanical chess player known as The Turk was fraudulent. He mentions theories that involve a dwarf and a thin tall child, but eventually settles on a solution that involves the pattern the operator displays the internal workings of the machine to his audience, relying on shadow at times to hide the movement of the possibly full sized operator within:

"For example, he has been known to open, first of all, the drawer — but he never opens the main compartment without first closing the back door of cupboard No. 1 — he never opens the main compartment without first pulling out the drawer — he never shuts the drawer without first shutting the main compartment — he never opens the back door of cupboard No. 1 while the main compartment is open — and the game of chess is never commenced until the whole machine is closed."

He concludes that the automaton uses its left hand because the mechanism to control its movement is inside the shoulder, accessible by the right hand of the person inside it. Some of the description Hans gives about holding his body above in a compartment and the natural darkness inside the machine concealing him from view at a certain point matches Poe's essay closely, though the Brass Chess Playing Automaton does not seem to have an anthropomorphic attachment.

Poe's essay mentions other automatons such as the Magician of Maillardet and the duck of Vaucanson.

CHARACTER NAMES:

The names in general seem to have little bearing on the actual plot, but for the sake of completion:

Lame Hans: A form of John, meaning "gift from God". He uses the pseudonym Herr Zimmer, which means "room or chamber".

Albricht the moneylender: his name is a derivation of the word meaning "noble" and "shining or bright", one of the oldest names in Germany. Ironical that he is a moneylender, perhaps showing the regression of the society.

Father Karl - meaning "free man" or "strong", he runs the church.

Doctor Eckardt — a name indicating "the strong point of a sword" or "brave edge", though this version is missing the h.

Burgermeister Landsteiner (also the name of the scientist who originally categorized blood types). Could mean land-stone.

Gretchen — described as "the fat blond serving girl who usually cracked jokes with the soldiers and banged down their plates", her name means "pearl" and can be derived from Margaret (the popularity of this name increased after Goethe's *Faust*, and the similarity in publication date of this story to "Silhouette", with its dominant German future, shows Wolfe's interest in German names and themes at this time). Also interesting in light of the statement that Lame Hans "plays like the devil himself".

Professor Baumeister - the distinguished visitor, his name means "master builder."

Scheer the innkeeper- someone who makes scissors — the cutting connotation might resonate in the story in the manner that he prices his various lodgings.

Von Koblenz — leader of the German Army, attacking the Russians and marching up the Oder Valley. Hans believes he should advance only to Glogow. Koblenz is a place name which means “confluence”, where two rivers meet.

Willi Schacht the strong smith’s apprentice — an occupational name for someone who makes shafts for tools.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS: There seem to be very few in this, save for whether or not the jailer's assumption that Hans does indeed play himself are true, which seems to fit the evidence. Perhaps the close metaphorical association of the chess game with the war between Germany and Russia (makeshift tanks as knights) gives some indication of who will actually win the battle at the Polish-German border, considering that Hans tells Baumeister he should use his knights more carefully and then thinks later that he would run things differently than those in charge of Von Koblenz' army, but this is mere speculation.

CONNECTION WITH OTHER WORKS: This is a pretty straightforward story for Wolfe for all its fine detail, but the future resembling the past is a fairly consistent motif in his writing.

We should note the limp of lame Hans, evidenced in the walk of the devil in Wolfe's very early “Easter Sunday” and also present in the main character of “Silhouette”, Johann, (which also features women whose names are based off of Margaret from Faust). Castle (from *Operation Ares)*, Severian, and Silk will also share this feature. The strange dwarf twisted by science and radiation to develop mental powers is perhaps present in “Tracking Song”, while the dwarf in “King Under the Mountain”, even though he exercises great control over the surface, lurks beneath like a shrunken and repressed id seizing control. There is definitely this tension between the conscious and subconscious in lame Hans, who probably loses the chess match with his subconscious powers (and contemplates that perhaps the tobacco shop won't make him happy, as a worthy chess adversary would — but he might be good at chess primarily because of his unknown mental powers). Eventually in this short story project, we will discuss the false leg of Wolfe's grandfather in conjunction with the limp, as it is specifically referenced in “How I Got Three Zip Codes.”

Malzberg and Jack Dann used this as the basis for their sequel, “Tourist Trap” in *Shadows of the New Sun*. It is worth analyzing this story briefly so that I can talk about the intrinsic destabilization of a more postmodern work. I am not certain that the same logical approach I always take to Wolfe, where hypothesis that are implied but perhaps not overtly stated are used to explain other gaps in the narrative, will work on a writer like Malzberg, who seems to begin with the premise of insanity as a presupposition and favors extremely subjective but inconsistent viewpoints in many of his works, such as *Beyond Apollo*.

Their story is also narrated by a man bringing Hans his food as a jailer. Here Hans claims the computer is moving by itself, though it is not plugged in, though the jailer denies it. The Black Queen moves when Hans goes to demonstrate it. The narrator checks to make sure no one is inside. The narrator claims that Hans is ahead of the machine by 160 games to 22. This jailer sees it as “a dull refraction of lame Hans's madness.” The narrator claims that he is in the state of Bavaria, though the original seems to be set in Brandenburg. He does imagine that Hans has created a persona to inflate his own ego, since jailers “see aspects of prisoners that they do not see themselves.” In this story, Hans calls his jail cell Plato's Cave, which “has something to do with idealization as opposed to the grim actuality furnished within the Bavarian compass”. Hans

invites his jailer to play as the white side, since he has eliminated the machine after 160 victories, saying the jailer has now taken the machine's place in the second series.

It is here revealed that Hans is something of a tourist attraction, reenacting the tournament that resulted in Gretchen's death, and the narrator's own attempt to flee to the north ended by being detained at the border, resulting in being sentenced to the role of Hans's jailer, with more freedom than Hans, who is occasionally interrogated (for what?).

"The good aspect of totalitarianism is that it grinds all of its subjects into a monotony of feeling and circumstance" - the story seems to flirt with criticism of a totalitarian state almost totally absent in the original Wolfe story, with its professor owning two houses and using university money as well as the possibility of Hans owning a store — the operating system of the community seems completely different in this story.

Our narrator continues:

"The question of who is the prisoner, who the guardian, seems quite abstract at this moment. 'Gretchen suffocated,' I observed pointlessly. 'So she did. Life itself is a dismal affliction, an imposition upon us. We breathe, we do not breathe; it is all the same. Like totalitarianism. Life itself is a species of suffocation. We are now on the clock. An imaginary clock of course, but no less determinant for all of this.'"

At this point our narrator realizes that "Bavaria is more than Bavarian: It is the world itself." As the game continues, the narrative spins outwards from an objective viewpoint:

'Mate in ten moves,' he said. 'By the way,' he added, 'all of this is in your imagination.' As if from a great distance, gasps and throttles come from somewhere behind him, deep in his cell. Gretchen is suffocating again.

This ending might resemble the disintegration at the culmination of Wolfe stories such as "Melting", where the narrative point of view simply disappears into something much more subjective, but I contend that Wolfe operates slightly differently than Malzberg (not sure how much of Dann's style is in the ending). Malzberg's reliance on subjective immersion almost always creates a sea of insuperable insanity from which we cannot claw free, whereas in "Melting", the name John Edwards shows a theological perspective to that angry disintegration of our character and the appearance of a previously unknown "I" claiming that it is getting tired of everyone in the wake of our viewpoint character simply melting: Buddhist principals and Christian sermons create sense of this melting. In Wolfe, reality still has some objective explanation, even if it is in the mind of an angered deity and vessels who temporarily have physical existence before returning to purely spiritual reservoirs.

"Tourist Trap" is completely different, indicating that a totalitarian existence destroys individuality and blurs the line between jailer and jailed, but giving us little to contextualize this "imaginary" ending. Malzberg and Dann may have latched onto the mental powers of Hans, but it seems that society itself is under attack for creating this system without liberty that leads only to insanity. Is our narrator trapped inside the machine and suffocating? Yes, but it might not be the chess playing machine, but the machine of the jail and of a society without freedom, with no egress. Hans, too, seems trapped by the memory of Gretchen suffocating, an ideal that he might be projecting upon reality here. Whether the story indicates that our jailer is suffocating, literally trapped in the machine, or simply trapped in a restrictive social system that effectively makes life an illusory dream, it is difficult to ascribe an objective reality to the story in light of the last two paragraphs. For this reason, I feel that Wolfe's stories might often parade as postmodern, but only in the rarest of instances does thematic closure require a complete

overthrowing of basic plot and story elements as if they don't matter or exist in an objective framework that is ultimately more or less discernible.

Marc Aramini — 17 Jul 2014, 17:07 · in reply to Marc Aramini

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On rereading that last sentence I feel as if I created a mixed construction. Perhaps the last word should be "indiscernible", since we are talking about what Wolfe's stories DON'T require. Sorry.

Marc Aramini — 17 Jul 2014, 17:10 · in reply to Marc Aramini

In any case, you understand that I am saying basic plot and story matter in Wolfe, and the framework is ultimately discernible.

On Thu, Jul 17, 2014 at 10:07 AM, Marc Aramini <marcaramini at gmail.com> wrote:

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Jeffery Wilson clueland.com — 18 Jul 2014, 05:30 · in reply to Marc Aramini

On 7/17/2014 11:45 AM, Marc Aramini wrote:
weather satellites still in the air

Unless you mean literally in the atmosphere, there's no particular reason they would stop orbiting; they might not *work* after a century of solar flares, though.

MYTHIC ALLUSIONS:

The perpetual heat and vague geography suggests to me they may be in Hell to some degree.

LITERARY ALLUSIONS:

We have a Hans and a Gretchen, and a woman killed in a hot oven - is this a coincidence?

Jeff Wilson - <jwilson at clueland.com >
A&M Texarkana Computational Intelligence Lab
< <http://www.tamut.edu/cil> >

Marc Aramini — 18 Jul 2014, 05:57 · in reply to Jeffery Wilson clueland.com

I don't think the geography is more like hell than any atmospheric warming, post nuclear war society would be, but I agree with the hansel and gretel resonance... Wolfe has echoed that tale in at least two other short stories ("in the house of gingerbread" and I think "the little stranger") but those ones had witches. This one only has the oven itself.

On Thursday, July 17, 2014, Jeffery Wilson [clueland.com <jwilson at clueland.com>](mailto:jwilson@clueland.com) wrote:

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Jeff Wilson - <[jwilson at clueland.com](mailto:jwilson@clueland.com)>
A&M Texarkana Computational Intelligence Lab
<<http://www.tamut.edu/cil>>

Jeffery Wilson [clueland.com](mailto:jwilson@clueland.com) — 18 Jul 2014, 06:42 · in reply to Marc Aramini

On 7/18/2014 12:57 AM, Marc Aramini wrote:

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it being parts of different places can mean it is a subjective or reconstructed place, based on imperfect recollections or from the lives of different inmates - this would provide a nice level of parallelism with Hans's delusional world in his cell, being tormented by the Devil (who is) Himself

or perhaps the jailer narrator is the Devil's self-insertion into the hellish false sub-creation - he is the keeper of the keys after all

or the jailer could be Wolfe's self-insertion, as he is the story teller
and the keeper of the keys that would let Hans out of his cell, just as Wolfe has the keys to the story puzzle after all

or both - it would not be the first time Wolfe casts himself as a devil, after all

Jeff Wilson - <[jwilson at clueland.com](mailto:jwilson@clueland.com)>
A&M Texarkana Computational Intelligence Lab
<<http://www.tamut.edu/cil>>