



English Studies in Latin America

A Game of Chess

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Source: *White Rabbit: English Studies in Latin America*, No. 2 (November 2011)

ISSN: 0719-0921

Published by: Facultad de Letras, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

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A Game of Chess

Pedro Cori¹

The door to the small café opened yet again, letting in the chilly winter air. Alexander looked up expectantly, as he had the other two times this had happened since he had arrived. But this time it was him; a vivid image of himself standing on the threshold looking around, the wood framed glass door slowly pulling shut behind him.

When Alexander put down his mug on the coffee table in front of him, his brother's eyes finally turned his way, drawn by the sound of ceramic on acrylic. He smiled and walked briskly towards where Alexander sat, spreading his arms as he approached. Alex stood to meet his brother's embrace and almost fell back onto the armchair from the man's emphatic hug.

“Ha, ha, brother!” he laughed into his ear.

“Michael, my God! How long has it been?”

Michael held him at arm's length and looked him up and down. “Way too long! I mean look at you. You're balding!” He laughed enthusiastically at his joke while Alexander chuckled along. Michael's own blonde hairline was obviously also receding backwards from his temples at the exact same rate. But it had always been like that. Since he could remember, Michael had found the things they had in common as twins hysterical. That's why he had always greeted Alex so profusely on his birthdays as a kid, and had loved to play games of confusing people, including their father. On

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second inspection, though, the effect of seeing his brother was now more like looking into one of those county fair mirrors that distorted the features somewhat. While Alexander had kept himself lean and wiry as predisposed by their genes, Michael had apparently let himself go a bit and had accumulated what their mother would have called a “healthy” amount of fat around the waist; as socially acceptable for a middle-aged man.

When Michael released him from his greeting, Alexander saw what his brother had in his hand for the first time. It was an oblong chestnut box that he had not seen for at least twenty five years. The click-clacking sound of things shifting inside as Michael lowered it onto the coffee table, brought back instant flashbacks of their childhood.

“Michael! You still have dad’s old chess set?”

It was exactly as he remembered it. A relic of a time he had visited so many times in memory. It was so old that it seemed artisans had not thought of insetting the checkered squares *on* the box that contained the pieces instead of having a separate box for them, and a foldable wooden board all inside another wooden chest. That, and the fact that the pieces were all crafted from African ivory and ebony, made it a gorgeous piece of antique and an extremely heavy ordeal to carry.

“So, do you want to play?” asked Michael. He opened the chest and proffered him the box of pieces for the draw. Chance picked a yellowing ivory knight for Alexander. The one with the broken ear; a battle scar from a heated game they’d had when they were children. He had cried for days with regret after throwing it against a wall and leaving the horse crippled.

“I’ll go get some coffee while you set up.” Michael said, and walked towards the counter. When he came back, Alexander’s king pawn had already been classically pushed to attack the center.

The first few moves of a Closed Sicilian Defense counter followed in quick succession.

“So how have you been?” Michael, as usual, started the conversation.

“I get by,” replied Alexander, concentrated on the board. But Michael knew Alex had played this opening a thousand times and didn’t really need to focus on it.

“That’s some modesty, Alex. I’ve heard you’re getting quite the name in the design scene.”

“I’ve had a few popular projects, but it’s not all it’s cracked up to be.”

“Ha! I have a famous brother. Who would have thought?”

Alexander’s eyes finally left the board. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Jesus, little brother! You still have that temper on you. It was just a joke.”

Michael had been born thirty minutes before Alexander, but still liked to refer to him as ‘little brother’. As kids it had amused him to no end to watch Alex’s irritation rise by the sole mention of the title. That was such a long time ago, he was slightly ashamed to still get a pang of annoyance from hearing it. He put it from his mind, and finally diverged from the book moves with a bold exchange of center pawns. It left the middle of the battlefield at a disadvantage, but gave him the chance to develop a quicker queenside offensive; maybe even prevent the black king from castling. “And how has life been treating *you*? How’s the wife?” he asked at last.

Michael looked at the pieces for a moment, considering his brother’s unorthodox play, but then proceeded with his development in normal fashion. “Well, you know, work’s work. Same crappy office job, with a marginally increasing pay for all my year’s worth of ‘hard work for the company’. The wife is good, I guess. The wife is fat. She never did get around to those gym sessions after giving birth to Katie.” He lay back onto the armchair with his hands intertwined over his belly sighing. “Guess I can’t really complain. But one always does, am I right?” He smiled. “Katie’s grown to be a beautiful woman, though. I have to constantly keep all the douche bags that hang around her at bay. Damn vultures.”

“What is she, like twenty now?”

“Twenty-one. I’d forgotten you hadn’t seen her since the baptism.”

“Yes.”

They stared quietly at the pieces, letting the low murmur of the coffee shop envelop them for a while. The moves played themselves out reminding each other of once very familiar playing styles. Some even drawing a smile from the memory of a specific game in their past.

“So, how about you?” inquired Michael, breaking the silence, “Any significant others in the works?” He looked at Alexander as he let go of his bishop, leaving it to defend a threatened knight.

“No.”

Maybe chess hadn't been a good idea after all, thought Michael. He had believed it might ease the awkwardness of so many years apart as they got reacquainted, but he had forgotten how quiet his brother could become when he was concentrating. This meeting had more purpose than a friendly game though, so he was not going to be easily deterred.

"How come? Are there no women in this city interested in a successful industrial designer with a still decent amount of hair?"

"Guess not," was Alexander's only reply. He looked fixedly at the board with his chin between his forefinger and thumb, like he always did when he was thinking hard. The other hand gripped the head of a pawn so hard, the flesh around it tinted with white.

"Aww, come on. You're telling me there is absolutely no—"

"Michael, I'm gay."

Michael dropped the piece he had been pondering to move, and stared at his brother dumfounded. He was at a loss for words. His brother's outbreak had been abrupt, but not shouted. Even so, it had attracted a few curious glances from around the café.

"Check."

"What?"

"Check," Alex repeated.

Michael looked slowly down at the board and realized his brother's knight was threatening his king with impunity. It had left its powerful previous position, but was now forcing Michael to move his royal piece and forfeit future castling.

"Why you sly little bastard!" he said, comprehension dawning on him, "You tricked me! Ha! That's new. Boy you had me scared there for a while." He relaxed back with his coffee after moving his king to the only admissible position available.

Alexander gave him the crooked smile he had developed as a kid to differentiate himself from Michael.

"Yes. But I still *am* gay."

“Aw, come on!” Michael put his elbows on his knees and ran his hands through his hair back from his forehead. He took a couple of deep breaths. “How come you hadn’t told me?” he said at length, with a hint of test in his voice that could only possibly be perceived by a twin.

“Michael, I haven’t seen you in more than twenty years.”

“And whose fault is that?” Michael looked up towards his sibling. The judgment was now more evident.

“You’re blaming me?” Alexander tsked sarcastically, “I guess it’s in your nature.” He moved his knight back to safety, giving away the attack initiative.

“Don’t give me that condescending crap. You haven’t answered a letter or gotten in touch in all this time. You changed your address, your phone number, and only when your work started appearing on the internet was I able to find you again. How is any of that on me?”

Alexander was staring at the board again with his chin in hand; silent. But his gaze seemed to be aimed towards a place much farther away; hidden somewhere in the depths of those worn monochrome squares.

Michael sighed and rubbed his forehead. He brought out his queen to attack one of the more disputed center squares.

“I don’t see why it makes a difference,” Alexander said after a while, without looking up.

“It makes a *big* difference!” Michael snapped back impulsively.

“Why?”

Michael was silent for a moment, not having thought of a follow through for his reply. “Well...”

“Oh my God, it’s because of that new Catholic thing of yours, isn’t it?”

“Alex, I was baptized twenty-two years ago. I’ve been a Catholic almost half my life. And no, it’s not that. It’s just... it’s strange, you know? You think you know someone--”

“Oh, give me a break! Now you’re being condescending. I mean, really? The ‘You think you know someone’ speech? For fuck’s sake Michael, don’t insult me.”

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry. Can we just calm down here for a second?”

Alexander made a huffing noise and advanced a pawn to defend the spot his brother was threatening. The game would probably revolve around who controlled that space now.

“Look, I’m sorry, alright?” Michael insisted, gesticulating with open hands, “You just shocked me a bit, little brother. Not seeing you all this time, and now suddenly you’re gay... but I’m okay with it, you know? Your choice and all. It’ll just take some getting used to.”

“Well, I’ve been gay for longer than you’ve been Catholic, so I don’t know about suddenly,” replied Alexander matter-of-factly; but his eyes were probing, attentive; waiting for his brother’s reaction. Michael just looked at him, and for the first time didn’t seem to have a retort. Seeing that he was being scrutinized, he automatically averted his eyes to one side and then, finding nothing there that could pass for attention-worthy, back towards the game. But that was enough for Alexander to know he had driven his point home. He watched Michael squirm between the two obvious options: bringing more forces to bear on the contested center spot, or forfeit it to gain the advantage elsewhere. He pondered how to proceed; finally deciding to play it cool. If his brother clammed up right now, it would be the baptism all over again; so he didn’t follow up on his comment. He wondered what his brother was thinking. Would he move that rook? What was his motive for looking him up after all this time? Just to catch up?

Michael thought about what to do next. Should he keep trying for that hot center square or take on another tactical route? He wondered what his brother was thinking; if he would take the bait of rook for bishop, pawn, and some center pressure; and asked himself when the follow-up to his comment would come. He moved the rook up, and the exchange was immediate. The four subsequent moves followed automatically, leaving now more than half the pieces in the box.

Alexander knew the silence would soon become unbearable for his brother. Years with him had taught that, if you wanted him to talk about something he didn’t want to, you had to offer him silence as the only alternative. He would try to escape the subject any time now.

Michael stared at the board, deep in thought. Alexander was probably expecting him to go on the defensive at this point, and he had half a mind to indulge him. He decided against it in the end, and instead moved his queen forward into an aggressive exchange that would probably leave him queenless and at a slight material disadvantage, but would certainly dismantle his sibling's current offensive strategy. "Is that what you wanted to talk to me about at Katie's baptism?" he asked calmly.

Alexander only allowed himself to be surprised for a second. Then his expression turned sad. Now that the tables had turned on him, he wasn't sure what to say. He didn't know if Michael was actually listening, or if it was just a ruse to confuse him so he could keep his denial of everything intact. Maybe he was just that naïve. "Well, it was implicit in that, I guess," he decided to respond, "Then again, I always thought that you of all people knew and would understand..." The black queen was taken by a white rook, which was recaptured by a black bishop. "It seems nothing can be taken for granted".

Michael was pinching the corners of his closed eyes over the ridge of his nose, as he did when trying to control his own temper. "Well, I didn't, okay?" he blurted out, "I'm sorry I'm not the Sherlock you expect of me." His words spoke defiance, but his averting eyes told Alexander of shame.

"So why didn't you speak to me at the baptism? If everything was so unclear, why didn't you allow me to explain?"

"Everything was clear back then," Michael sighed, "You had left the house because you hated dad; you were ashamed of him and his previous life." He looked down, blushing as he realized how childish the words sounded as they came out of his mouth; taken at face value his whole life; never contested by reason. "He said you had turned into a criminal..."

"Is *that* what he told you about—" Alexander was suddenly pointing an accusatory finger, "And you believed *that*?"

"Well..." Michael blushed redder, but then got a hold of himself. "Well, you hadn't contacted us for two years. You didn't come to my baptism, my marriage, and you missed my daughter's birth. It wasn't *so* farfetched to believe, was it?"

Alexander tried to muster more indignation, but all he managed was resigned disappointment at the truth of the saying ‘there is no blinder man than the one who refuses to see’. He had half expected something like this. Their father had always had a great influence on Michael. As children, he had believed absolutely anything he told them without question; he had been his hero. It seemed not much had changed over the years if he had convinced Michael to take up their lost Catholic faith, get baptized, and regard his brother as a felon without rising red flags of doubt. “I should have figured he’d say something like that,” he said, “but Michael, you were there the night he kicked me out!” How could you not see what we were arguing about?”

Michael had moved his remaining rook to defend against his rival’s onslaught while Alex thought, and was taken by surprise by this new attack. “I... umm... I don’t know. You guys were always arguing about something or other, and you didn’t keep me in the loop. I knew something bleaker was going on that time, but at one point I just couldn’t stand it any longer...” A shadow of doubt made its way across his face, then, realizing his brother might notice, he continued defensively. “I just had to leave, okay? I don’t remember *exactly* why. It was two decades ago!”

As soon as the words had escaped his lips, he knew he had stepped on the twig. Alexander, who was just setting up his knight to fork his king and a crucial pawn that guarded the doorway to attack, snapped his eyes up from the piece to fix them on him. It was too late to take it back, so all he could do was mentally slap himself on the forehead.

“I didn’t ask why,” said the suspicious eyes, “I didn’t care about the ‘why’. You broke the most important and beautiful promise you ever made to me, and that was enough. But now that you seem so eager to neglect the reason, I’m curious...” There was acid in his voice.

Michael had always hated that thing Alex did where he could read him like a book, but this had been just stupid. He reluctantly moved his king away to lose the pawn. It had been defended, so he did get the knight in return; along with the material advantage, but his position was greatly deteriorated. He deliberated on the wisdom of denial. It hardly warranted keeping this charade any longer, and his brother’s next taunt furthered this reasoning.

“Or are you going to tell me you don’t remember that either?”

He remembered. It was one of the few things he recalled clearly from those confusing times. They must have been around eighteen, and they had been at a New Years Eve party when Alex had

found himself accosted by two burlier guys emboldened by drink. Michael had stepped in and been drawn into a fight that had left the three of them fairly beaten up.

“You promised you’d always be by my side to protect me,” continued Alex, just in case Michael’s silence hinted room for interpretation. “Why was that night when dad was clearly kicking me out, not part of always? The one time I needed you most, you ran away. Why?”

“I...,” stuttered Michael, unable to think under all the sudden pressure, “I don’t know, I just couldn’t stand it anymore. I had to get out of there.”

“Why?!”

“I felt cheated, okay?! I don’t know!” Michael burst in exasperation.

Alexander was taken aback by his brother’s ejaculation, and had to take a moment to process. Also to let the snooping ears of the coffee shop settle back into their own affairs. An old lady had left all pretense of knitting to devote her full attention to their conversation. “Excuse me; would you mind?” he shot indignantly at the woman. She picked up her sticks again immediately, and started knitting furiously, staring unwaveringly at her work. He turned back toward his brother who, in turn, had gone back to staring at the few pieces still giving battle on the field; a vacant expression in his eyes; almost resigned. A knife of pity pierced Alexander’s chest for a second, but he was now determined to see this through. He moved his queen to reinitiate the offensive and to break his brother’s line of sight on the board. “*You* felt betrayed?”

Michael would not respond. He had fallen into too many of his brother’s traps tonight. But now that he had gotten him talking, Alexander was adamant. “Michael, I never—,” he started, but then stopped short. The pieces had fallen into their twisted places in his head without warning. His eyes widened with realization as he saw how they fit perfectly askew. “Michael...,” he leaned closer across the table to better look at his sad reflection, “were you jealous?”

Michael slowly leveled his gaze towards Alexander’s. It was like looking into his own eyes; and he could see pain, almost physical, trapped inside. “Somehow I just knew you had broken the promise first,” he said at last. His hands trembled as he held one of his defeated knights and tried to smirk at Alex. All he could contrive was a shaky half-smile. “I guess you *were* technically committing a crime back then, huh?” He looked pleadingly at his brother.

It was just like Michael to turn everything uncomfortable into a joke, thought Alexander, but he gave his brother a tired crooked twist of the lips to act as an olive branch of appreciation. The attrition, though, was unable to hide in his features. “Yeah, I guess it was before Lawrence v. Texas...” For a while he was still too overwhelmed to elaborate. All these years thinking that Michael had just bailed on him to keep up his own perfect imaginary world, were hard to replace in his mind with the image of his brother falling for the childish and spiteful grudge game he had played and botched that day. It hadn’t been a complete failure after all, he thought, but the result had been quite unexpected. As he remembered when he had devised that stupid soap-opera-worthy scam, he couldn’t help but bring back his motives along. When he did, his temperature began to rise again. His brother was making one of the last strives that were available to him for checkmate. It was desperate and obvious, but could still be a great threat if Alexander didn’t play perfectly. “But Michael,” he pushed, “you had been avoiding me for weeks! Every time I tried to get close to you after that party, you rejected me.” He tried not to sound so accusing, but failed miserably.

Michael, thinking the interrogation concluded, had started to relax, and was once again exasperated by the renewed onset from his twin. “Well, Alex, I was confused. I was a damn kid, for God’s sake! I had you on one side, with an affection I didn’t really understand. Then there was dad, with whom you fought more and more often... And... and then he started with his God stuff again; and about ‘the sins of the flesh’, their ‘divine punishment’... Man, do you remember how gullible I was back then? I didn’t understand what I felt... Jesus, I was scared shitless.”

Meh, thought Alexander, *‘back then’*. Michael had crossed himself and looked contrite as soon as he’d stopped blaspheming. “So basically you’re saying that we missed our life together because you were a *coward*?” The poison came out in a torrent Alexander couldn’t control and the look of guilt on Michael’s face turned it sour in his throat. But it could not be stopped. Years of resentment and bottled up anger gushed out with every word; out of every pore. “You’re saying that because of *your father*—“

“Alex, stop.”

And like that, the gates were closed. Michael was looking at him with eyes bloodshot from the strain of not shedding tears, but there was determination in his countenance. His hand was extended over the board with its palm down, and it had suspended everything. Alexander, taking in the measure of his own abuse, looked dejectedly at the closest edge of the table.

“It’s true,” Michael said when the dust had settled. He still looked rattled, but his voice had become steady. “And that is why I’m here. To apologize and say thank you.”

“Thank me for what?” He almost didn’t want to hear it.

“For hating me and resenting me. For having left me without another word. For not being able to forgive me in all this time, or come back for me. If it wasn’t for all of that, I wouldn’t have what makes me want to wake up each morning. I wouldn’t have my Katie.” He had intertwined his fingers while he recited this; then looked at Alexander straight in the eye. “Thank you, Alex. I’m just so sorry it had to be built on your misery.”

Alexander could say nothing. All the fight had gone out of him in a second, and all of a sudden he felt extremely tired. Like if a hundred sleepless nights had come back to haunt him all at once. He gazed outside through the fogged banisters of the shop, and he could discern that it had already gotten dark and the streetlights had been lit. There were fewer patrons around them, and the nosy old lady had fallen asleep with her knitting in hand. Everything seemed sluggish and quiet, and way too simple.

“You picked up the wrong piece,” stated Michael.

“What?” Alexander said, coming back to his senses.

“You picked up the wrong piece,” he repeated.

Alexander looked down at the last ivory pawn in his hand, being slightly lifted from its white square. He could only move it forward one space and was heading to be promoted, but then he saw it: Michael’s second bishop, hiding in his closest corner, waiting to trap his king in four more moves. He laughed heartedly out loud at the miscalculation. Sitting back against the armchair, he put his palm against half his face as he enjoyed the hilarity of the situation he would have flown into a rage about if they’d still been children.

When he leaned towards the table to pay the price for his inattentiveness, a very old and faded image of their father losing miserably at chess to a young Alex, making up for a row they’d had, drifted in silently and subtly from the back of his mind. It lingered in the stuffy scented air between them for a moment, and then slowly dissolved away. He toppled his king in defeat, after his

pawn's unwise advance. Michael chuckled along uncertainly, but the color was slowly coming back to his cheeks.