

In the Wake of Trains

Maria Arena

‘Pardon?’

The man in the natty bow tie and small, round glasses tilted his head in his customary manner; a sure sign of his annoyance. He waited for the rumble of the train to pass and then repeated his question. ‘I said, “Why do we have to play down here?”’

‘I like the trains,’ his companion replied, centring the chess pieces on the board. ‘Marvels of invention. Wish we’d had them in the sixteenth century.’

‘Too damn noisy, if you ask me. And look at the grime, and the smell, *ekelhaft!*’

‘Yet, what better place to observe humanity?’

‘A garden might be nice for a change.’

‘Like Eden, eh Freddy? Are you going to move?’

‘First off, don’t call me Freddy. I find it demeaning.’

The man opposite Friedrich lifted his gaze from the board, distracted by two young women hurrying across the platform. How impressive they were with their open expressions and eyes flashing with intelligence; so different from the women of his time. He turned his attention to his friend, a hint of mischief in his face. ‘Look, Freddy, she doesn’t find it demeaning; she’s smiling at you.’

‘Mein Gott! *She* can’t see us, Baruch. Why must you insist on such nonsense? And, I’ll move when I’m good and ready, you philistine.’

‘Some part of her sees you. “*Mein Gott*” in everything, remember? But, come now, old friend, what has gotten that fine moustache of yours in a twist today?’

‘Bah! What always vexes me?’

‘Humankind? Still? Really, Friedrich, I admit their little intrigues and caprices are interesting to observe, but why get yourself so worked up over them? As I posited all those centuries ago: people are irrational and always will be. Nice opening gambit, BTW. We haven’t played that old favourite in a while.’

Friedrich glanced up from the board. ‘BWT?’

‘No, BTW. You know, “by the way.” It’s that shorthand they use in place of real language. You must have heard it: CSL, IMHO, ROFL, WTF?’

‘I’ve heard it.’ Friedrich sniffed and his brow wrinkled with disdain. ‘But I refuse to use it.’

‘Oh come now, don’t such an elitist. If we don’t move with the times— yaddah, yaddah, yaddah. What are the odds of me checking you in three moves today?’ Baruch asked, sliding his king’s pawn forward.

‘Slim, *mein gelehrter freund*. I may be preoccupied, but the game will not be so easily won,’ Friedrich replied, as the men rapidly advanced pieces.

‘So it would seem, Freddy. Cagey, very cagey,’ Baruch said, his hand retreating as he contemplated the imposition of his friend’s knight. ‘But, tell me, what foible of humanity has you so preoccupied?’

‘Their deaths.’

‘Ah, that old conundrum. Strange how after all this time, they remain unreconciled to the fact of their demise.’

A train glided into the station, pushing a drift of grit and swirling paper their way. Friedrich affected a cough, then said, 'I agree, and their latest attempt to avert the inevitable only illustrates their denial further.'

'How so?'

'It's complicated.'

'What isn't complicated about humanity? Come on, talk me through it while I begin your annihilation,' Baruch said, drawing down his bishop.

'That's what I like about you, Spinoza. You're the eternal optimist.'

'Indeed, and not without reason when one analyses your game.' He raised an eyebrow at Friedrich's pawn before moving one of his own. 'But, to the problem at hand.'

'It's the scientists,' Friedrich replied, with a manoeuvre in kind.

Baruch sat back from the board. 'Oy vey! That lot again. They're always messing with things. What have they 'fixed' now?'

'Death,' Friedrich said and, as if to mock the drama of his statement, a flood of passengers swept past them, alive with the sounds of conversation and the sharp tap, tap of feet. The philosopher, who'd never been a fan of humanity – especially in its feminine form – pressed his shoulder against the subway wall, even though he knew none of them could touch him.

'Huh, of course, the Immortality Pill, right?' Spinoza said, returning his mind to the game. 'I've heard whisperings about that over the years, although I understand it doesn't actually give them immortality. Check.'

'True, but the scientists have extended life beyond what anyone ever imagined.' A grimace that had nothing to do with the potential demise of his king pinched Friedrich's face.

'To a thousand years, they say.' Baruch shook his head. 'Who would've thought it possible: a 'cure' for death, as I live and breathe.'

‘You don’t live and breathe.’

‘I was speaking metaphorically.’

‘Yes, well, I’m a literalist,’ Friedrich replied, removing the threat to his king.

‘As I’m well aware. “God is dead” and all that.’

‘Precisely. Are you sure you want to move there?’

‘Yes.’

‘But—’

‘All part of the plan, Freddy.

‘Fine. It’s your funeral.’

‘Humour? How quaint.’ Baruch looked at his friend over the top of the chess pieces and smiled, the expression softening the sharp angles that defined his face in a most pleasing way. ‘Why do you see curing death as a problem? Isn’t that good news for humanity?’

‘Nein! Have you forgotten so readily the words of Silenus to the “wretched ephemeral race, the children of chance and misery”? Clearly, the air down here is affecting your faculties, Baruch. Shall I refresh your memory?’

‘Please do.’

‘He said, and quite rightly, “What is best of all is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to be, to be nothing. But the second best for you is— to die soon,”’ Friedrich said, advancing his queen with a flourish.

Baruch leaned over the board and raised his hand to his chin in that thoughtful way of the philosophers of his time. ‘Silenus, eh? Now there’s a name that’s as archaic as your chess game.’

‘You know, for an Orthodox Jew, you can be downright disrespectful.’

‘What can I say? *Herem* has its consequences,’ Spinoza replied, castling his king. ‘So, if I understand your quandary correctly, you are nonplussed at the prospect of extended human life. Is there a small measure of envy in such a stance, Friedrich?’

‘Hardly. You know my position on the horror of existence, and I cannot for a moment countenance the idea of a human animal desiring to live for a thousand years. One existence of fifty-five years was enough for me, and I am not even certain how I endured that limited epoch. No, it is the contradiction that confounds me.’

As he spoke, a small drama opened on the platform beside them. A dark-haired woman dressed in an outfit that shouted ‘tourist’ gave a shrill cry as she went sprawling across the ground. The crowd of commuters parted around her, and opened an avenue for the thief who had torn her handbag from her shoulder.

‘Stop him,’ the woman called, pointing after the thief, but the arrival of the 8:45am train drowned out her plea. Commuters flowed past her, intent on catching the train, but one woman bent to help the traveller to her feet. Together, they searched the throng and, when they caught a glimpse of the man, the women raced off in pursuit.

Disgust flickered across Friedrich’s face. ‘Oh yes, a thousand years of *that*,’ he muttered, and moved his bishop.

Baruch tutted sympathetically and brought his knight into the attack. ‘The contradiction?’ he prompted, steering the conversation back into the groove that interested him.

‘Of free will, of course.’

‘Right, yes, free will. Or is it the “Will to Power”? I always get those confused. Tell me, my old foe, if I win this contest, will that make me a *Übermensch*?’

‘Sometimes I wonder why I play this game with you at all. Oh that’s right, because you are so easy to anticipate!’

‘Bravo, my friend, a masterful stroke and, yet, I counter.’

‘Why, you—’

Baruch cupped a hand around his ear. ‘Sorry, can’t hear you. Super-train coming,’ he said cheerfully, as a growling rumble shook the subway.

‘That’s why you insist on this hellish venue, isn’t it, you wily old heretic. Anything for the advantage,’ Friedrich said, when the train had disgorged its cargo and thundered on.

‘Don’t pout, Freddy. The contest is neither won, nor lost. Tell me more about this contradiction.’

For a moment, Friedrich considered calling the game; there was a headache lurking at the base of his skull and the proximity of the living was making his stomach queasy. But, he *was* in a winning position and – even better – Spinoza had given him permission to wax lyrical on his favourite topic of the day, which didn’t often happen since his friend was usually the deep thinking, silent type. Encouraged on both fronts, he pressed on with his argument.

‘It is simply this: the human animals have no compunction about wilfully extending life well beyond the natural order, yet they prohibit the exercise of free will by those among them who wish to choose the nature and timing of their death. Does that not strike you as contradictory?’

Baruch frowned. ‘I wish you wouldn’t call them that, Freddy, but yes, it does sound contradictory, although perhaps not so much as the wilful sacrifice of a useful pawn, eh?’

‘So you are paying attention.’

‘I am riveted, as you can see.’

‘*Ach du liebe Güte*, Spinoza, you are as slippery as an eel.’

‘So they’ve been telling me for five hundred years.’ Baruch laughed, tucking his king out of harm’s way. ‘Do you know what the problem is?’

‘With your chess?’

‘No, Freddy, with humanity.’

‘I know precisely what their problem is. Despite our best efforts, they cling to an antiquated doctrine that has long ceased to be relevant in the face of science and the lessons of history.’

Spinoza nodded, knowing where this line of thought would take them, and shifted his queen into an attacking position. ‘I assume you’re speaking of “Thou shalt not kill.” Is such an edict truly antiquated?’ he asked.

‘Ja!. “Thou shalt kill thyself,” is far more appropriate.’

‘Zarathustra again?’

‘He’s a wise man.’

‘I agree your literary alter-ego may be brilliant,’ Baruch replied, contemplating the white queen. She was as difficult as Friedrich’s argument and needed rebuffing in the same manner. ‘But I’ve seen little evidence to convince me that people have an innate inclination towards suicide. In fact, just the other day, Mill was telling me about a man with terminal cancer, who held off his own death for nine months until his great-grandchild was born.’

There, he thought, that should do it, for the argument at least.

But Friedrich’s blood was on the rise. He snapped up the sacrificial pawn and countered Spinoza. ‘I heard the story. Yet, touching as it may be, you’ll also be aware that the man had decided to end his life two days before hearing he would be a great-grandfather, which only proves my point.’

‘Which is?’

‘Simply that, in the face of meaningless existence, the human animal will choose to end it, if that choice is available.’

‘Ah, but give a man a reason to live,’ Baruch said, forcing the white queen to retreat. ‘And he will fend off death with every ounce of his being. Just as you fight to save your queen, although you know she must succumb eventually.’

‘My loss will match your own, my friend, if you are willing to take the risk.’

‘Sometimes difficult choices must be made.’

‘Such boldness, yet do you see where this course will lead us?’

‘I do, my friend, and it is the path I choose to follow.’

‘And I accept your choice, for to refuse you that, even though I believe it is to your detriment, is absurd.’

Spinoza glanced up from the board. ‘Are we talking about your human animals again?’

‘Indeed. Just look at them. How can they deem it moral to ‘play god’ in one direction, but refuse each other the *choice* to play god in the other, tell me that, Baruch? Is that not the height of absurdity?’

Abiding his companion’s request, Spinoza turned his gaze to the passing crowd, searching their faces as they hurried about their business. In many, he saw the clear light of intelligence and integrity. In others, the qualities were a mere flicker, and he wondered: *Have they reached a point of maturity where they could be trusted to make the ultimate choice about their fate? Are they responsible enough?*

The questions made him feel like the father he had never been, worrying over children he’d never had, who were teetering on the cusp of adulthood; children who were old enough to drive, but not old enough to vote; children who were old enough to choose to live forever, but not old enough to choose when to die. The paradox was, indeed, perplexing, but he saw no reason to confess this to Friedrich, especially when it was much more interesting to play the Devil’s Advocate.

‘Since when has choice been the providence of simple folk?’ he asked, hunching over the board again as Friedrich castled his king behind a wall of pawns, headed by his queen. Baruch circled his hand above the configuration. ‘Choice, as you well know, has always rested in the hands of higher powers.’

‘Huh! Now you’re being facetious. Higher powers. *Quatsch!* And, don’t think I can’t see you over there smirking, even though the opportunity to besiege my king was lost to you an age ago.’

‘Caught out again, eh? Well, you can’t blame an old man for trying to find a way out of this bind.’ Baruch replied, with a wink at his opponent. ‘But, come now, do you honestly think humanity has the maturity to make choices about such matters?’

‘I believe they have the capacity, but the maturity? I don’t know. So many of them still place their faith in an invention, and refuse to take responsibility for their lives. Yet, we know what happens when the human animal is afforded choice. How they advance!’

‘Unlike this game, eh *mentsch?*’

‘An inevitable stalemate, it would seem.’

‘Like conversations about human morality.’

‘But we *must* discuss such things. Have you considered—’ Friedrich broke off as Baruch held up a hand. ‘What?’ he asked in exasperation.

The philosopher smiled. ‘Can’t hear you; train coming.’