THE NEW WINAWER REPORT

Editor: Seán Coffey

Acid Test

Emanuel Berg's recent book on the 7 ♕g4 Winawer devotes considerable space (Chapters 11-13) to what he terms 'the ultimate main line' of the Poisoned Pawn variation, a new approach for White that has yielded excellent practical results, and yet is still greatly unexplored, with around fifty games in all. Instead of the usual 12 ♕d3, virtually universal and indeed unquestioned since the modern Poisoned Pawn's first appearance in 1936, White varies with 12 h4.

Black's best response is still under debate. John Watson recommends 12 … b6 in his *Play the French, 4th edition*, with analysis leading to equality; but after considerable analysis and discussion Berg concludes this is not sufficient for Black. This issue examines the line with a very recent game, a spectacular success for Black. Though White could have done better …

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Poisoned Pawn main line: 12 h4 b6

J. Geller–Bellahcene
Meurthe-et-Moselle IM 2014
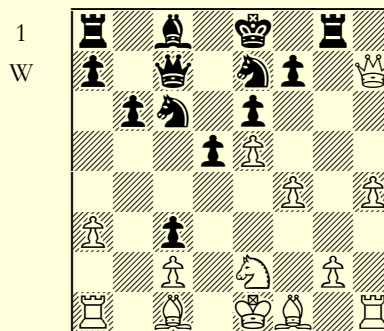*TWIC 1009*

1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 ♞c3 ♝b4 4 e5 c5 5 a3 ♝xc3+ 6 bxc3 ♞e7 7 ♕g4 ♕c7 8 ♕xg7 ♖g8 9 ♕xh7 cxd4 10 ♞e2 ♞bc6 11 f4 dxc3

       12 h4

'!' Berg *GMR-2 p. 147*, making a strong case that this represents the new cutting edge of the entire Poisoned Pawn. White sidesteps 12 ♕d3 d4, which continues to hold up well for Black.

       12 …   b6?!(1)

'!?' Berg, but with further analysis that

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casts it in a dubious light, compared to his recommended 12 … d4 '!'. These verdicts are very new, though.

13 ♘xc3!

Berg devotes an entire chapter *pp. 152-67* to intensive scrutiny of the 12 h4 b6 line. For present purposes it's enough to note that he concludes that the text is significantly better than the alternatives 13 ♖h3 and 13 h5. Instead 13 ♕d3 d4 transposes to 12 ♕d3 d4 13 h4 b6 ('!' Berg *p. 97*).

13 …   ♘d4

And here the major alternative is 13 … ♘xe5, which Berg concludes leaves White with a slight initiative in all lines: see **Lupini–Cuccumini, EU/WS/M/049 ICCF corr 2013** (1-0, 50) for a recent example.

After the text, the next few moves reach one of Berg's main lines, but via transposition after some inaccuracies on both sides.

14 ♗b2   ♘df5!
15 ♘b5?

Much better 15 0-0-0 according to Berg, with extensive analysis leading to a clear advantage to White. Cf. **Perry–Whaley, CCO20/S3 USA-New Zealand ICCF corr 2012** (1-0, 34).
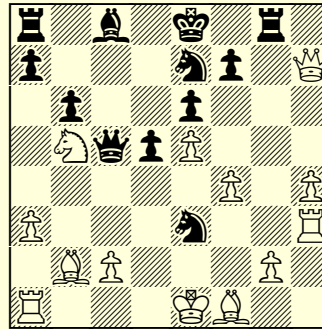
15 …   ♕c5?

On 15 … ♕xc2 White must take the perpetual (cf. Berg again).

16 ♖h3

This position is also reached after the more critical move order 14 ♖h3 ♕c5 ('!?' Watson *PtF-4 p. 236*, with no further analysis) 15 ♗b2 ('!' Berg) 15 … ♘df5 16 ♘b5 ('!' Berg).

16 …   ♘e3?(2)

Not considered by Berg, who gives instead 16 … ♖g7 17 ♕h8+ ♖g8 18 ♕h5±, or 16 … ♕xc2? 17 ♘d6+. In this latter line White is winning after 17 … ♔d8 18 ♘xf7+ ♔e8 19 ♘d6+ ♔d8

20 ♖d1!.

The text should lose but it poses some problems, which White was unable to solve.

17 ♘d6+?

Throwing away the win and even any advantage. The refutation is 17 ♗d4!, when 17 … ♘xc2+ 18 ♔d1 ♘xd4 is met by 19 ♘d6+! (*19 ♖c1? ♕xb5 20 ♗xb5+ ♘xb5∞/±* leaves Black with three minor pieces for the queen and prospects of survival) 19 … ♔d8 20 ♖c1±±, e.g. 20 … ♕a5 21 ♘xf7+ ♔e8 22 ♘d6+ ♔e8 23 ♖xc8+ or 21 … ♔d7 22 ♖hc3. Also grim is 17 … ♕xc2 18 ♕xc2 ♘xc2+ 19 ♔d2 ♘xd4 20 ♘xd4±/±±.

17 …   ♔d7!

Instead 17 … ♔d8? 18 ♔d2 favours White, e.g. 18 … ♘xf1+ 19 ♖xf1 ♖xg2+ 20 ♔c1±.

18 ♗b5+?

Now 18 ♔d2? is worse, even losing, after 18 … ♘xf1+ 19 ♖xf1 ♗a6!, e.g. 20 ♖c3 ♖g1 21 ♖xc5 ♖xf1+ 22 ♔d2 bxc5∓∓, since there is now no back-rank check available.

White is still no worse after 18 ♕d3, e.g. 18 … ♘xc2+ 19 ♔d1 ♘xa1 20

♗xa1 ♘f5∞/= or 18 … ♘xg2+ 19 ♗xg2 ♖xg2 20 0-0-0=.

| 18 | … | ♔c7 |
| 19 | ♕xf7? | |

The losing move. Strangely White is still not too badly placed after 19 ♗f1, e.g. 19 … ♔b8 20 ♔d2 d4 21 ♕e4 ♘f5∓. After the text White can avoid an immediate mate, but only with massive material losses.

19	…	♖xg2
20	♕xe7+	♔b8
21	♗e2	♘f5

<p align="center">0-1</p>

<p align="center">*   *   *</p>

A spectacular win indeed and a vivid illustration of the possibilities, but it leaves Black with major repairs to carry out. After 13 ♘xc3! ♘d4 14 ♖h3**(3)**, where can Black improve?
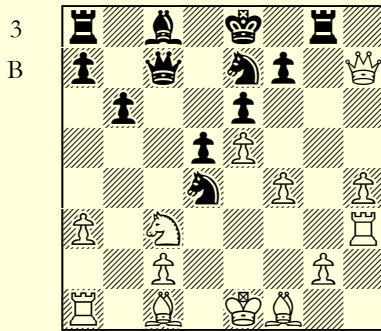
a) On **14 … ♕c5** 15 ♗b2 ♗d7 (instead of *15 … ♘df5* transposing to the main game), **Romanov–Zill, Bestlogic-Remote ICCF corr 2013**, continued 16 ♕d3 (*16 0-0-0?! ♘df5=*) 16 … ♘df5 17 h5 ♔f8 18 0-0-0 ♕f2± when Black did not have enough for the pawn (1-0, 27).

If 15 … ♗b7 instead, Berg gives 16 0-0-0 as favouring White; here 16 …

♘df5 is met by 17 ♘b5 followed by 18 ♖c3±.

b) Watson's main line runs **14 … ♗b7**. Practical tests have seen White respond 15 ♕d3 (± Berg, with no further analysis), e.g. 15 … ♘ef5 16 ♗b2 ♔f8 17 0-0-0 ♖g4 18 ♕d2 ♕c5 19 ♔b1 ♔g8 20 ♘a2± and 1-0, 57, **D. Morozov–Delizia, CL/2012/BL, Magnitchess-Vesuvian, ICCF corr 2012** or 16 … 0-0-0?! 17 0-0-0 (another good solution, here or on the next move, is *♘b5±*) 17 … ♔b8 18 h5 ♖g4 19 ♕d2± and 1-0, 34, **Jones–Anderson, BFCC-50 C corr 2012**. As in Romanov–Zill above White is able to consolidate, after which the only question is the scale of the advantage.

Watson considers only the more enterprising 15 ♘b5, continuing 15 … ♕xc2 16 ♕d3 (!; *16 ♘d6+ ♔d7 17 ♕d3 ♘ef5* is no better than equal, and alternatives lose) 16 … ♕xd3 17 ♘d6+ ♔d7 18 ♗xd3 ♗c6 19 ♗e3 ♘ef5 20 ♘xf5 ♘xf5 21 ♗xf5 exf5 'with a drawn position'; Berg gives 22 g3± or earlier 19 ♔f2±, as does Houdini 3.0.
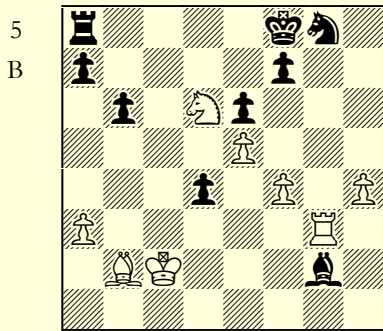
Watson also gives the alternative 17 … ♔f8**(4)** as '!?', with no further analysis.
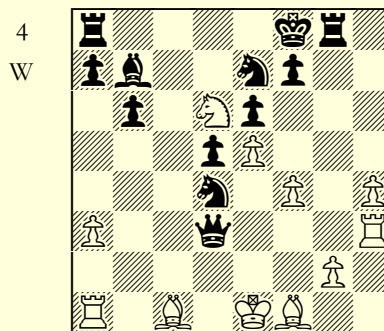
After 18 ♗xd3, the difference is that

Black has the resource 18 … Nb3!?, after which 19 Rb1 Nc5= is fully satisfactory.

The critical line is the long forcing sequence 19 Bh7 Nxa1 20 Bxg8 Nxg8 21 Bb2 Nc2+ 22 Kd2 d4! 23 Kxc2 Bxg2 24 Rg3**(5)**.

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White may now make progress with the plan of a4 and Ba3 followed by running the h-pawn. After 24 … Bc6 25 a4!? Bxa4+ 26 Kd2 (to keep the bishop out of d1), for example, Houdini 3.0's initial choice 26 … Ne7? loses quickly to 27 Ba3!, e.g. 27 … a5 28 h5 b5 29 Bc5 b4 30 f5!.

The sternest resistance is offered by activating the king: 26 … Ke7! 27 Rg7 Kd7 28 Rxf7+ Kc6, when White has much the better of it but Black may be able to hold. Of course this is unappetising for Black, who is better off avoiding the line with 18 … Bc6, though the black king would be better placed on d7 and the entire idea of 17 … Kf8?! is undermined.

* * *

Conclusion: After 12 Nxc3 the response 12 … Nd4! is thought to be best, so after 12 h4 b6 13 Nxc3! it is natural to consider the same reply. But after 13 … Nd4?! 14 Rh3 White enjoys an advantage in all lines, and this is even before considering 14 Bb2, which Berg finds even stronger. Black should take his chances with 13 … Nxe5, or better still avoid 12 … b6?! in favour of 12 … Bd7 or 12 … d4. ▶

**1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 Nc3 Bb4 4 e5 c5 5 a3 Bxc3+ 6 bxc3 Ne7 7 Qg4 Qc7 8 Qxg7 Rg8
9 Qxh7 cxd4 10 Ne2 Nbc6 11 f4 dxc3 12 h4 b6?!(1) 13 Nxc3!**

13 …	14		15		16		17		
Nd4?!	Bb2	Ndf5!	Nb5?	Qxc2					=
…	…	…	0-0-0						±
…	Rh3(3)	Qc5	Bb2!	Ndf5	Nb5	Qxc2?	Nd6+		++
…	…	…	…	…	…	Ne3?(2)	Nd6+?	Kd7!	=
…	…	…	…	…	…	…	Bd4!		±/++
…	…	…	…	…	…	Rg7	Qh8+		±
…	…	Bb7	Nb5	Qxc2	Qd3!	Qxd3	Nd6+	Kf8?!(4)	±/±
…	…	…	…	…	…	…	…	Kd7	±
…	…	Qd3	Nef5	Bb2	Kf8	0-0-0			±
Nxe5	Nb5	Qb5	h5						±

GMR-2   BERG, Emanuel, *The French Defence 2* (Grandmaster Repertoire 15) (Quality Chess 2013) —see issue 13.
PtF-4   WATSON, John, *Play the French,* 4th edition (Everyman 2012)—see issue 13.