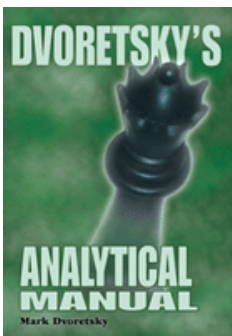




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## From the Archives...

Since it came online many years ago, [ChessCafe.com](http://ChessCafe.com) has presented literally thousands of articles, reviews, columns and the like for the enjoyment of its worldwide readership. The good news is that almost all of this high quality material remains available in the [Archives](#). The bad news is that this great collection of chess literature is now so large and extensive – and growing each week – that it is becoming increasingly difficult to navigate it effectively. We decided that the occasional selection from the archives posted publicly online might be a welcomed addition to the regular fare.

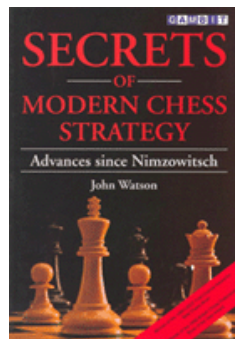
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## Talking Back to Nimzowitsch

by Larry Tapper

*Secrets of Modern Chess Strategy: Advances since Nimzowitsch*, by John Watson, Gambit Press 1998, Softcover, Figurine Algebraic Notation, 272 pp., \$24.95.

Nowadays it's not unusual for grandmasters to make moves that look like misprints. Consider some of the openings we've been seeing lately. World-class players have been experimenting with lines such as **1.e4 Nf6 2.Nc3 e6 3.Nf3 Bb4 4.g4!?** and **1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 g6 3.Nc3 d5 4.cxd5 Nxd5 5.Na4!?** and GM Kozul has tried **1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 Na5**. In this year's Hungarian championship GM Varga played **1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Qe7** and won. What's going on here? Hasn't anyone warned these players about loose flank pawns or knights on the rim? Has the lore of our grandfathers become a standing joke among today's grandmasters? In a way, yes, says John Watson in his remarkable book *Secrets of Modern Chess Strategy*.



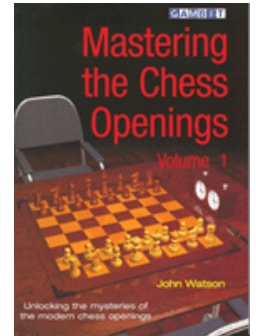
Watson's thesis, put more soberly, is that chess strategy has changed significantly over the last sixty years or so, but in many areas the customary rhetoric has yet to catch up. Of course control of the center still matters; doubled pawns can still be weak; rooks still belong on open files; but such familiar maxims do not begin to do justice to the complex tactical struggles that characterize modern grandmaster practice.

What is new about *Secrets of Modern Chess Strategy* is not Watson's main point, which has been stated casually by many writers, but rather the extraordinary energy and thoroughness he brings to the subject. In preparing this book the author has reviewed dozens of books on strategy and scoured his databases for thousands of examples and statistics. The result is a massive and many-layered work, 272 double-column pages packed with interesting content from start to finish.

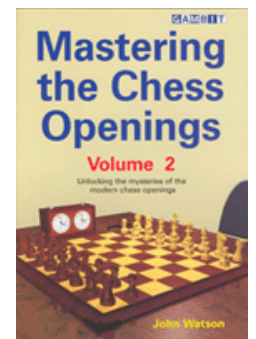
The author of *Secrets* is a genial and scholarly IM who has been a steady source of high-quality analysis over the last twenty years. His best-known books are *Play the French* and a path-breaking four-volume series on the English Opening. Web-surfers may know him mainly through the book reviews he's been writing recently for *TWIC*.

It is a big jump from opening theory to a general treatise on strategy, but readers who are familiar with Watson's work will recognize a few common threads. As theoreticians go, Watson has a distinctively philosophical, truth-seeking bent, which has always led him to promote a skeptical attitude toward facile generalizations. When a writer discovers that Line A is doing better in GM practice than Line B, it's usually easy enough to come up with some plausible *ex post facto* explanation. But Watson reminds us that the real truth is in the variations. He knows as well as anybody that tomorrow someone will find a tactical resource on move fifteen, suddenly Line A won't look so good any more, and writers

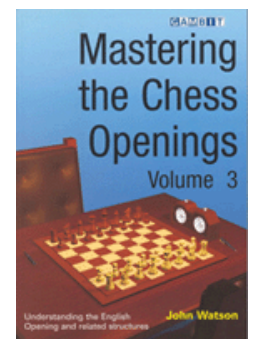
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will have to scramble for words to explain why that bishop is better placed on e2 than d3, after all.

Watson's long-held view that actions speak louder than words turns out to be a central theme in *Secrets of Modern Chess Strategy*. In this book he argues that the skeptical lessons we learn from opening theory apply with equal force to many widely accepted but superficial generalizations about middlegame play. So according to Watson, the modernist revolution is not a matter of new dogmas replacing old ones, which was essentially what happened when Nimzowitsch and Tarrasch crossed pens back in the 1920s. The most successful modern players are pragmatists who feel free to apply or ignore strategic principles as specific circumstances warrant. In fact Watson goes so far as to speculate that "the days of easily expressible guidelines are over. Thus, there is very little possibility that players or researchers will ever undertake to extend the project begun by Steinitz, Tarrasch, and Nimzowitsch, that is, the codification of chess principles on a large scale."

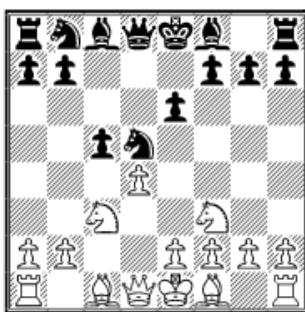
Watson is not the first writer to cast doubt on the usefulness of systematic codification, but he may be the first to make this skeptical argument and then go on to write a big, comprehensive book on modern strategy anyway! This has to be a tricky undertaking, and there must have been times in the course of this project when the author felt he was writing on sand. For the purposes of this book, the "modern" era begins with the death of Nimzowitsch in 1935, but, as Watson admits, nothing particularly revolutionary happened that year. The strategic themes selected are based on the chapters in *My System*, but again, these choices are somewhat arbitrary and a different selection might have done as well. Finally, the secret of modern strategy is that there is no secret, at least none that any writer is ever likely to put into words systematically.

Fortunately there's no need to dwell on these paradoxes. The point of this book is not to promote any particular definition of modernity, but rather to show specifically how modern players handle various types of positions. So Watson lets the concrete examples do most of the talking, and the end result is a book that may have been difficult to write, but is remarkably easy to read.

*Secrets of Modern Chess Strategy* is divided into two parts. Part One (entitled "The Refinement of Traditional Theory") outlines Nimzowitschian strategic principles and shows how modern players depart from them, sometimes subtly and sometimes radically. Part Two ("New Ideas and the Modern Revolution") ventures into deeper waters, exploring some strategic themes that would rarely have occurred to players before the modern era. There is really no hard and fast distinction between Part One and Part Two topics, but the structure works well enough to hang the examples on.

Early in Part One the author unveils a research instrument that gives this book a special flavor: the use of advanced [ChessBase](#) features to assemble data on the kinds of positions favored by different players in different eras. This serves two broad purposes: to verify claims about the evolution of style, and to find out what results have actually been achieved over the years with supposed advantages such as a bishop-pair or a superior pawn structure.

More often than not, the historical searches yield interesting surprises. In the Semi-Tarrasch, for example, White is at a crossroads after **1.d4 d5 2. e4 e6 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.Nf3 e5 5.cxd5 Nxd5**.



Would you have guessed that in this position, the pre-modern masters hardly ever dared to play **6.e4**? For similar reasons, the Grünfeld Exchange Variation seems also to have fallen into long periods of relative neglect. Watson suggests that such widespread timidity about seizing the center tended to play into the hands of the hypermodernists. Today's masters are more willing to take either side of this old debate and let the chips fall where they may.

Also interesting is Watson's statistical analysis of outcomes, which he takes a few steps further than the winning percentage charts we see in opening surveys like the *NIC Yearbooks*. For example, everyone "knows" that in the endgame it's better to have a queen and knight than a queen and bishop, but statistics show that the truth of this generalization is by no means clear. In general the knight does have a very small edge, which

seems to disappear when we add a rook or two; and in any event there are numerous practical cases in which the bishop is better for one reason or another, initiative or king safety or the lack of convenient squares for the knight.

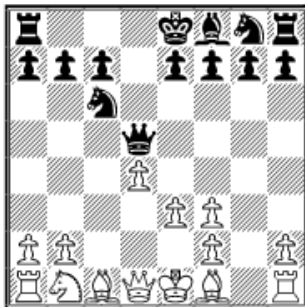
*Secrets of Modern Chess Strategy* covers a few dozen strategic themes, each one illuminated by a series of well-chosen examples. Throughout the book Watson remains true to his skeptical credo by providing a wealth of instructive detail but very few neat and firm conclusions. For example, there's a nice exposition of how Nimzowitsch came to overestimate the weakness of the isolated queen's pawn, and how modern players handle IQP positions arising from openings such as the Queen's Gambit Accepted and the Tarrasch French. Readers hoping for a final assessment will have to look elsewhere, however. According to Watson, "no one cares any more whether it's good or bad to have an isolated queen's pawn; they just care about how good or bad a particular pawn is in a particular position."

The author comes closest to actually spelling out new strategic principles in his discussion of minor piece play, which takes up five full chapters. His sources for this topic are Steve Mayer's book *Bishop versus Knight: The Verdict*; Watson's own considerable experience analyzing openings like the Chigorin and the Nimzo-Indian; and as usual, lots of recent games.

The minor piece chapters provide the starkest contrast between Watson's approach and the standard treatment one finds in many traditional primers. We've all read books explaining why bishops are better than knights: in the typical example, a bishop on c5 dominates a knight on c8, there are mobile pawns on both wings, and Black watches helplessly as he's slowly pushed off the board. Then we have the typical counterexample, which the author constructs by putting the knight on c5 and the bishop on c8 hemmed in by fixed central pawns.

The problem, of course, is that few games between evenly matched players actually turn out this way and when they do, there's nothing particularly illuminating to say about them. As GM Mihai Suba puts it, "one plays, the other applauds." So in contrast to the usual parade of one-sided examples, Watson presents several minor piece positions in which the right plans for both sides aren't visually obvious.

Typically the question is what the player with the extra knight can do to counteract the long-term superiority of the bishop-pair. Most traditional texts recommend aiming for closed, static positions; but Watson argues persuasively that this strategy often backfires and maintaining the initiative is usually far more important. A case in point is the Chigorin variation **1.d4 d5 2.c4 Nc6 3.Nf3 Bg4 4.cxd5 Bxf3 5.gxf3 Qxd5 6.e3.**



Here **6...e5**, quickly opening lines, has fared better in practice than **6...e6**, even though the more passive move seems more in accord with classic Nimzowitschian principles.

Considering all the research apparatus and high seriousness of purpose, it's amazing how much fun this book is to read. The author's irrepressible enthusiasm makes the driest subjects come alive. Throughout the book Watson reminds us that he is a passionate fan as well as an analyst: a good example is his warm tribute to Petrosian's artistry in the section on positional exchange sacrifices.

And of course there's always the slightly wicked pleasure of watching the world's best players break all the rules. At times *Secrets* reads like the life story of a revolutionary: in Part One we find the rebellious young scholar playing little pranks on his stuffy professors, and sure enough, by the time we get to Part Two he's grown up to be a wild-eyed, bomb-throwing anarchist.

If anarchic thrills are what you're after, the high point of the book may be Watson's presentation of the following *avant-garde* miniature:

**Suba-Sax, Hastings 1993/4**

**1.c4 c5 2.Nf3 Nf6 3.Nc3 d5 4.cxd5 Nxd5 5.e4 Nb4 6.Bc4 Nd3+ 7.Ke2 Nf4+ 8.Kf1 Ne6**



**9.Ne5!? Qd6 10.f4 Nc6 11.Qa4 Nd8 12.d4! cxd4 13.Nb5 Qb8 14.Nxd4  
f6 15.Ndxc6 bxc6 16.Bf7+! 1-0**

Watson insists that if you want to understand this game, you need to forget what Tarrasch or Nimzowitsch might say and immerse yourself completely in concrete variations. The first eight moves are strange enough: “White dances around with his king and ignores weaknesses, whereas Black moves the same knight for the sixth time, when no other piece has been touched!” But the real point of Watson’s analysis emerges when we take a look at the alternatives on move nine. This position actually occurred in a few master games in the 1930s and 1940s, back in the days when people automatically played sensible-looking moves like 9. d3 or 9.g3. Since then, however, high-level play has focused entirely on Suba’s choice 9.Ne5 and the even woolier alternatives 9.b4 and 9.h4. There is no simple explanation for this, it’s just a long story that has more to do with trial and error than with any application of general principles. “In modern chess,” the author concludes, “the analysis and work come first, and the supporting verbiage comes later (if at all) for the sake of closure, or more often, for the sake of the popular audience.”

Watson’s thoroughgoing distrust of verbiage makes him reluctant to promote *Secrets* as an instructional book. If the author has no grand system to offer, at least he can help us clear out the cobwebs that have gathered in the musty corners of classical theory. As Watson says in the introduction, he just wants to get the reader to “think freshly about modern chess.”

Modest as this goal may seem, the truth is that for most of us, being able to think freshly about modern chess would be no small accomplishment. In a way this is just what aspiring players in the West have been trying to do for decades, with varying degrees of success. We’ve known all along that there was a certain constellation of attitudes that made the Soviet players so formidable, something to do with a “concrete” or “dynamic” style of play. And though there have always been plenty of available sources, most of them have been hard for English-speaking readers to assimilate, for one reason or another.

To amplify this point a little, I’ll mention a few examples from the experience of my own peer group amateur players who grew up in the 1960s reading Nimzowitsch and all the Dover paperbacks. One relatively early Russian export was Kotov and Yudovich’s *Soviet School of Chess*, which presented many dazzling examples of dynamic play, but was a bit too breezy and propagandistic to take entirely seriously. In the 1970s, we all read *Think Like a Grandmaster* and tried to navigate decision-trees in the disciplined way Kotov recommended. Most of us found this too strenuous, however, and eventually fell back on our old haphazard ways. We learned a little Russian and got the latest opening analysis from *Shakhmatny Biulletin*. That certainly helped, but it didn’t tell us much about how to play complex middlegames. For enlightenment on this topic, we had to rely mostly on game annotations, but these varied widely in quality and helpfulness. And even in the best annotations, there were aspects of Soviet-school rhetoric that some of us found obscure: for example, the way writers such as Kasparov use the term “technical phase” (with a hint of condescension, like Botvinnik’s “every schoolboy knows...”).

In my case, I have to admit that the upshot of all this uneven exposure is that while I’ve learned a few modern tricks, I’ve remained at heart an unreconstructed Nimzowitschian. Of course I admire the boldness and creativity of today’s players, but I’ve never really learned to see chess through the eyes of a true modernist. The styles of positional players like Karpov and Kramnik make sense to me, but Kasparov’s games, brilliant as they are, often seem to me like violent brawls, contests of wills rather than ideas.

I am sharing these confessions because I suspect that many readers have experienced similar ups and downs in their attempts to understand modern play. I’m also trying to muster the courage to make an extravagant claim about the subject of this review. This may sound a little crazy, but I’m convinced that *Secrets of Modern Chess Strategy* has done more for my understanding of chess than any other book I’ve read in the last thirty years! After reading *Secrets*, I entered a weekend Swiss and found myself playing better and enjoying it more than I had in a long time. Also I’ve been playing over the latest games from Hoogovens and

Linares, and suddenly I'm seeing Watsonian themes everywhere. I'm even beginning to like the way Kasparov plays.

So, brethren in chess, I am ready to testify: I have heard John Watson preach the gospel of dynamic play, and I have felt the spirit descend upon me. I don't know exactly how to explain it: perhaps the book works especially well for readers like me who have a generational outlook similar to the author's. I suppose that the effect might not be quite so dramatic on alumni of Camp Botvinnik, or younger players who have grown up in the age of instant information. Still, it's hard for me to imagine any student of the game who wouldn't get a lot out of this rich and fascinating book.

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[Order](#) *Secrets of Modern Chess Strategy*

by John Watson

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