

POUND vs. STEVENS: The Rematch

A Preliminary Research Report

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THE PROBLEM

In her important 1982 essay “Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?” Marjorie Perloff gave presiding form to one of the dominant antinomies of twentieth-century poetics, and in so doing marked out what has come to be understood as a kind of fork in the road for the student of Modernism.¹ Down the Stevensian path, arm in arm with Helen Vendler and Harold Bloom, the aesthetico-priestly pilgrim pursues the *deus absconditus* of the subject in all his/her/its evanescent transcendence, and achieves, perhaps, small on the horizon, some hoary-luminous peace in that long retreat called reference. Whereas the other way, guided by Hugh Kenner and his epigones through the *Cantos* of Pound, the willing wanderer is offered the opportunity to unlearn what is diagnosed as the reflexive-neurotic quest for the real-beyond-the-real, and, in the process actually reeeced *ein* POE-UM (however maddening/unsatisfying that may prove).

So whose era is it? More than thirty years of scholarship has failed to resolve the question. A new approach is needed.

METHODS

Using the Novelchess engine devised by Burnett and Walter in 2009, we set to the task of staging a formal *paragone* between these paradigmatic titans of twentieth-century letters.² Using a basic stylometric analyzer, Novelchess converts identifiable and characteristic lexical elements of a given text into a “style of play” in the historically significant board game chess, thereby permitting a given literary work to confront another on an even playing field. The works in question are literally “read” by the Novelchess application (www.novelchess.org) as a series of moves, using an emergent coding system detailed elsewhere.³ For the purpose of this investigation, we selected Stevens’ sovereign and intricately self-reflexive masterwork, *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* (1942), which we pitted against the demanding, rebarbative, and nearly contemporaneous *Pisan Cantos* (1948).⁴

¹ Marjorie Perloff, “Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?” *New Literary History* 13, no. 3 (1982): 485-514.

² D. Graham Burnett and W.J. Walter, “Reading to the Endgame” *Cabinet* 35 (2009): 40-44.

³ For a full account of the algorithm driving Novelchess, see Burnett and Walter, *supra*, at pp. 40-41.

⁴ We omit, here, in view of the provisional nature of this report, any significant engagement with the textual problems raised by the latter work, which are legion. Novelchess cannot meaningfully process Chinese or Greek characters, and the emendations (“pre-processing”) that was therefore necessary to run the software raise non-trivial technical as well as interpretive questions.

RESULTS

It is to be lamented that the showdown proves, in some sense, inconclusive (see Appendix A). Playing White, *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* opens with the notorious “Drunken Knight” to a dim h3, followed by inscrutable f3, mirroring the *Pisan Cantos*’ oblique c6. Unable to deliver on the promised Paris Gambit (itself anyway dubious), *Notes* appears to hesitate, adopting a defensive posture and castling short at 18. A rally in Part IV of Section I (Rook to e2+ on the strength of “comic color of the rose” in “It Must Be Abstract”; move 61 *et seq.*) is not enough, and Black parries the reckless Queen to d4 at 96. Neither side can close the deal, and the game trails off into a touching two-hundred-and-five-move draw that ends on a clear board, the two weary combatant Kings eyeing each other, prostrate, at d2 and e4 (Black).

This in itself, however allegorically charming, cannot be considered especially significant from a statistical point of view (about 60% of Novelchess games end in draws). The Pound-Stevens matchup is longer than the Novelchess average, to be sure, but one must be properly cautious not to overdraw in sketching the larger literary-historical or theoretical implications of the bout’s bruising indeterminacy.

It is, however, difficult to retain one’s cool complacency on reviewing the data of a full-scale twelve-game match between the two texts: this produces *twelve sequential draws*, one of which (game eight) is, at 283 moves, the *longest Novelchess match ever recorded* (see Appendix B). We are very definitely in new territory.

CONCLUSIONS

Whose era, Pound or Stevens? It is still too early to tell. But these initial investigations strongly indicate the importance of further work. It should be noted, for instance, that this is the first time Novelchess has been deployed on long-form poetry, and it is possible that specific features of prosody are responsible for some or all of the anomalous results reported above. Additional controls are needed. Moreover, until Novelchess is brought into line with full Unicode standards, Pound’s polysemous/ideographic works will remain incompletely digested by information-intensive and quantitative approaches. Nevertheless, we believe we have marked out a promising avenue for continuing research. One can easily imagine, for instance, devotees of the respective authors undertaking the subtle revisions to the texts that can encode stronger play. In fact, one of us (Flores) has already made small steps in that direction, lightly touching Section II of *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* (“It Must Change”) in such a way as to ensure victory over *The Pisan Cantos*—though only when *Notes* plays Black. What would these two significant texts look like as they evolved, though the loving attention of their defenders, across an iterative arms race of chess-directed edits?

Different, we suspect. We hope to have set this process in motion.