

Modernism's Limits

Patterns of Exclusion in Scholarly Reading

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Who counts?

If we set today's canon of nineteenth-century British novels at two hundred novels (which is a very high figure), they would still be only about *0.5 percent* of all published novels.

And the other 99.5 percent?

Franco Moretti, "The Slaughterhouse of Literature," *MLQ* 61, no. 1 (March 2000): 207

“Twenty thousand?” Hah!

Bowker. | Books In Print ?

All ▾ Enter your query here

Results 1- 25 of 17,352, sorted by: Relevance

You have 0 item(s) selected

[Search Results](#) » [Hardback](#)

Add to List Clear Selected Show Selected

Figure: Relevance? Books in Print hits for 1999 US fiction hardcovers

Questions of method

The literary scholar of the twenty-first century can no longer be content with anecdotal evidence, with random “things” gathered from a few, even “representative,” texts.

The study of literature should be approached not simply as an examination of seminal works but as an examination of an aggregated ecosystem or “economy” of texts.

Matthew L. Jockers, *Macroanalysis: Digital Methods and Literary History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), chap. 2, 4

The imperative to include

1. In the classroom: the opening of the canon
2. In scholarship: historicism (“*all* of literary history”)
3. In culture: the transformation of taste

Readers

A space outside the school, where the canon is selected: the market.

Clues are...the recognizable origin of the “information cascade” that decides the shape of the market. A little device—with enormous effects.

The course selected by European audiences (Conan Doyle, the canon) is only *one* of the many coexisting branches.
(Moretti, 209, 218, 227)

Consumption: the hard problem

- ▶ Modernist studies as case study

The impasse of contemporary modernist studies

- ▶ the historical period (1890–1945)?
- ▶ the aesthetics of high modernism (formal rupture or innovation)?
- ▶ a set canon (Eliot, Joyce, Woolf, Pound)?

The dream of expansion

Were one seeking a single word to sum up transformations in modernist literary scholarship over the past decade or two, one could do worse than light on *expansion*.

Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, "The New Modernist Studies," *PMLA* 123, no. 3 (May 2008): 737

But who is read?

the ongoing dominance of a core version of modernism, relentlessly unmodified by the arrival of previously noncanonical authors from a variety of national and social locations...even when most scholars agree that these new noncanonical authors *should* alter the core meaning of modernism!

Eric Hayot, "Against Periodization; or, On Institutional Time," *New Literary History* 42, no. 4 (Autumn 2011): 744

The data

- ▶ 8995 English-language hits (excluding 10 website entries) for “modernism” in the MLA International Bibliography at the end of 2013.
- ▶ Drop 671 pre-1982 and post-2012 items

| Item type | “modernism” hits |
|-----------------------|------------------|
| book | 959 |
| book article | 2664 |
| book collection | 141 |
| dissertation abstract | 1138 |
| edition | 5 |
| journal article | 3407 |
| translation | 10 |

People

- ▶ 2465 names of people in the subject headings (mostly writers).
The top 10 overall:

| Subject heading | Weighted frequency |
|-----------------------|--------------------|
| Joyce, James | 363 |
| Woolf, Virginia | 343 |
| Eliot, T. S. | 321 |
| Pound, Ezra | 244 |
| Beckett, Samuel | 209 |
| Stein, Gertrude | 171 |
| Faulkner, William | 118 |
| Conrad, Joseph | 102 |
| Yeats, William Butler | 102 |
| James, Henry, Jr. | 93 |

Other subjects: a topic model of 447 modernism articles

| topic key words | words in topic |
|---|----------------|
| modernism new literary modernist literature art | 26% |
| own even other first some time | 13% |
| modernism new modernist aesthetic form historical | 11% |
| world human life experience history nature | 8% |
| novel narrative woolf writing women war | 5% |
| new little joyce review literary stein | 5% |
| political social cultural culture national modern | 5% |
| poetry poem poems eliot poet poetic | 4% |
| american black new african cultural white | 4% |
| chinese russian jewish tian hebrew china | 3% |
| women social political sexual gender politics | 3% |
| de la que en el le | 3% |
| theatre dance shakespeare scottish james print | 3% |
| film irish cinema japanese films city | 2% |
| music musical jazz opera freak popular | 2% |
| der und art german die von | 2% |

People in modernist studies

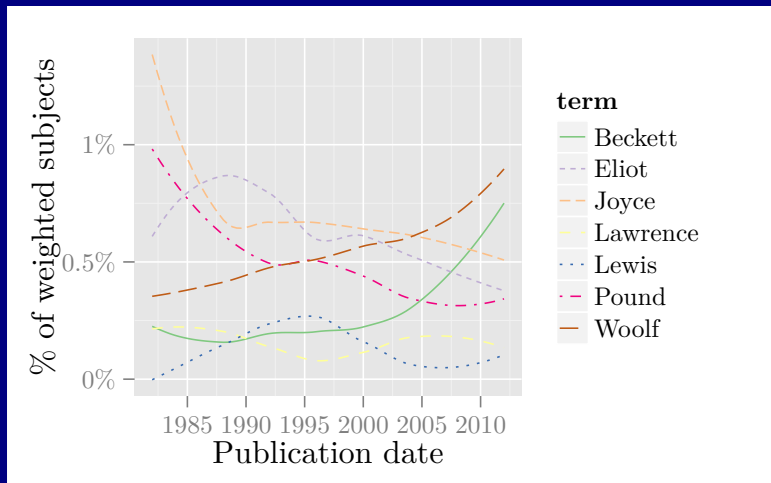


Figure: Frequency of subject headings over time, smoothed

Brands (I)

| date | top authors as subjects |
|------|--|
| 1982 | Joyce, Pound, Eliot, Darío, Marx, Stevens, Woolf |
| 1984 | Pound, Joyce, Lawrence, Woolf, Yeats, Williams, Eliot |
| 1986 | Eliot, Pound, Joyce, Williams, Yeats, Stein, Adorno |
| 1988 | Eliot, Pound, Woolf, Joyce, Adorno, Williams, Chesterton |
| 1990 | Eliot, Joyce, Lawrence, Woolf, Pound, Mann, Beckett |
| 1992 | Joyce, Pound, Eliot, Woolf, Nabokov, Beckett, Conrad |
| 1994 | Joyce, Eliot, Pound, Woolf, Nabokov, Marinetti, Faulkner |
| 1996 | Eliot, Lewis, Woolf, Beckett, Joyce, Pound, Faulkner |
| 1998 | Joyce, Eliot, Woolf, Stein, Pound, Conrad, Faulkner |
| 2000 | Joyce, Pound, Woolf, Eliot, Kafka, Faulkner, Stein |
| 2002 | Eliot, Joyce, Woolf, Pound, Stein, Doolittle, Conrad |
| 2004 | Woolf, Joyce, Beckett, Eliot, Stein, Kenner, Lawrence |
| 2006 | Woolf, Joyce, Eliot, Pound, Beckett, Lawrence, Barnes |
| 2008 | Woolf, Joyce, Eliot, Stein, Beckett, James, Pound |
| 2010 | Beckett, Joyce, Woolf, Pound, Eliot, Stein, Faulkner |
| 2012 | Woolf, Beckett, Joyce, Eliot, Pound, Stein, Barnes |

Brands (2)

| date | top author names in titles |
|------|--|
| 1982 | joyce, james, pound, williams, eliot, browning, darío, duncan |
| 1984 | pound, yeats, williams, james, ford, newman, stevens, wallace |
| 1986 | eliot, williams, pound, yeats, joyce, darío, hemingway, stein |
| 1988 | eliot, pound, woolf, joyce, williams, chesterton, hemingway, james |
| 1990 | joyce, eliot, thomas, woolf, lawrence, pound, moore, faulkner |
| 1992 | joyce, eliot, pound, woolf, williams, stevens, stein, james |
| 1994 | eliot, joyce, pound, woolf, williams, nabokov, faulkner, marinetti |
| 1996 | eliot, lewis, stein, pound, conrad, woolf, faulkner, joyce |
| 1998 | woolf, stein, eliot, pound, james, joyce, faulkner, conrad |
| 2000 | woolf, pound, joyce, james, stein, eliot, faulkner, kafka |
| 2002 | eliot, joyce, woolf, pound, stein, james, ford, lawrence |
| 2004 | woolf, eliot, joyce, stein, beckett, james, kenner, lawrence |
| 2006 | woolf, joyce, eliot, pound, beckett, west, williams, stein |
| 2008 | woolf, joyce, eliot, stein, james, beckett, yeats, lawrence |
| 2010 | beckett, joyce, woolf, eliot, james, pound, moore, samuel |
| 2012 | woolf, james, beckett, joyce, ford, eliot, conrad, hemingway |

An “economy” of few winners (I)

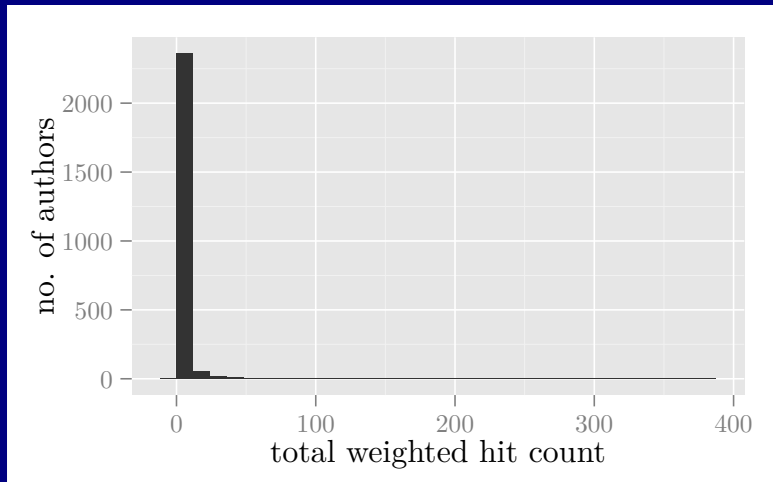


Figure: Distribution of author-subject hit counts

An “economy” of few winners (2)

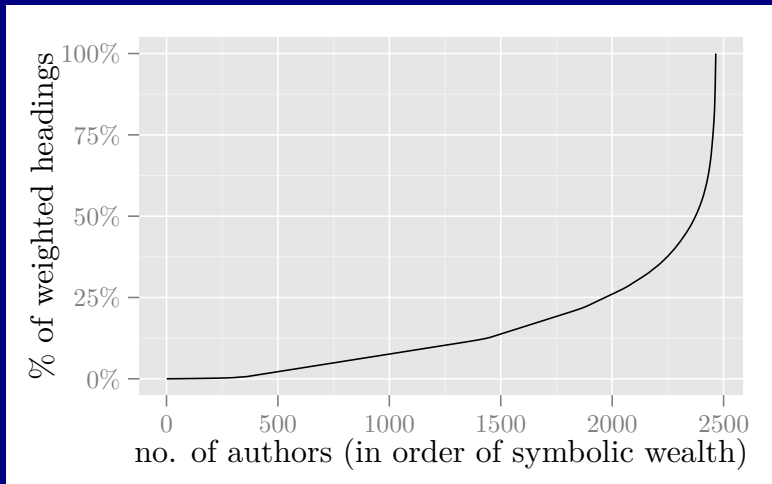


Figure: Cumulative sums of author-subject headings

Possibly a *little* more diverse over time...

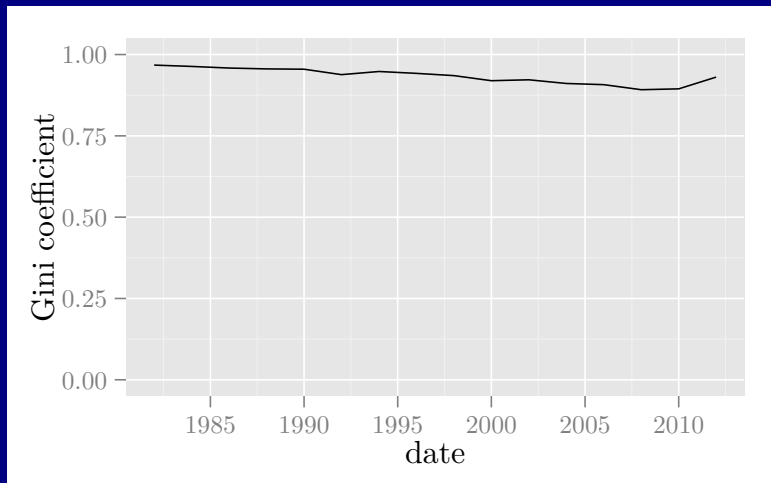


Figure: Inequality in the biyearly authors-as-subjects distribution

Appreciation

Consequently, critics must manoeuvre strategically between following the *communis opinio* and adding their own distinctive yet positively rated contributions to the discourse, in order to obtain a positive reputation for themselves.

Marc Verboord, "Classification of Authors by Literary Prestige," *Poetics* 31, nos. 3-4 (June 2003): 264

Beyond inclusion: premises

Reception

1. We should study reception.
2. There are a lot of readers.
3. Most of them aren't us.

Mediation

1. The literary world is not flat.
2. Its hierarchies are produced and reproduced by mediators.
3. There are a lot of mediations.
4. Some of them are us (acting through institutions).