

Poetry Magazines & Women Poets

Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young's "Numbers Trouble" (which appears on page 88 of this issue) counts men and women in various poetry media to determine gender representation in "innovative" poetry communities. Intrigued by their findings, we decided to look at a medium they did not count, periodicals.

Our counting project had two aims: to determine the gender ratios in different types of magazines and to chart the changes in these ratios over time. Accordingly, we looked at the number of men and women in twelve magazines, counting one full year every five years between 1970 and 2005. We examined a range of publications: university-affiliated journals, independent little magazines, and mainstream outlets. With their long runs and contributor rolls, these magazines provide excellent data for charting gender distributions over time. They provide a real-time history of the art: not only by introducing poetry to the public, but by contextualizing, categorizing, and sometimes canonizing it as well. Our results are summarized in the table and graph on pages 227 and 228 and briefly analyzed below.

We are extremely grateful for the help of Rachel Weiner, who did the actual counting for this project.

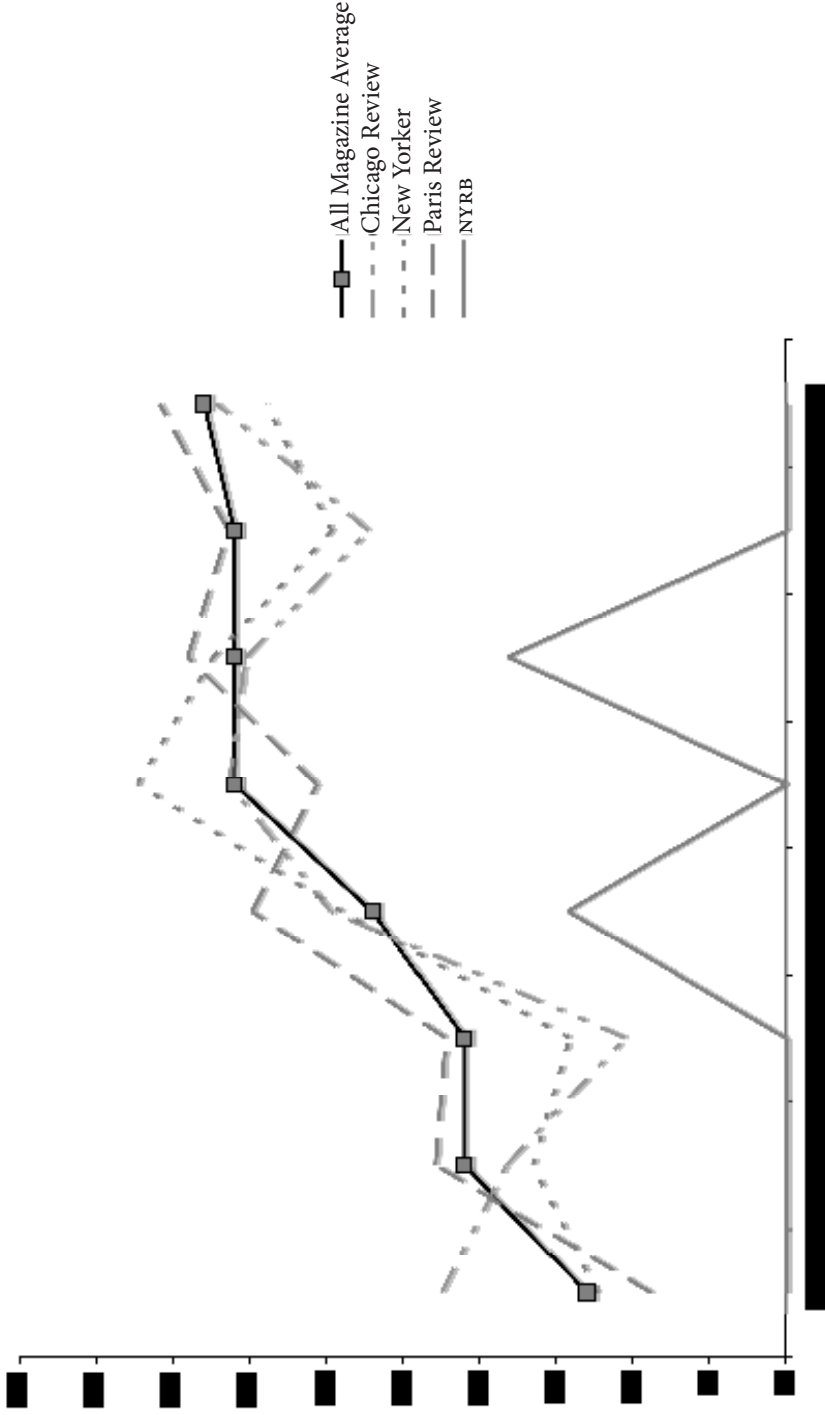
§

The first significant feature of our data is an increase in the percentages of women published through the 1970s and 80s—an increase that occurs (with the exception of the *New York Review of Books*) in all the magazines, independent of size, affiliation, or (presumed) political or poetical orientation. Around 1990, however, these percentages tend to level off around 37%. The real story of our survey, therefore, may not be the gains of the 70s and 80s so much as the fact that gender inequality persists.

Chicago Review, for example, jumps from publishing 11% women in 1980 to 36% in 1990, and remains in the mid-thirties to the present. *Paris Review* and *Poetry* display a steadier rise before leveling off

MAGAZINE	1970		1975		1980		1985		1990		1995		2000		2005	
	W:M	%	W:M	%	W:M	%	W:M	%	W:M	%	W:M	%	W:M	%	W:M	%
Conjunctions	—	—	—	—	—	—	13:38	25	16:17	48	11:6	65	44:47	48	10:12	45
Chicago Review	9:31	23	17:76	18	2:17	11	11:26	30	8:14	36	12:22	35	18:48	27	16:27	37
Fence	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	28:17	62	17:21	48
The Nation	14:68	17	38:81	32	16:22	42	23:28	45	17:18	49	9:24	27	9:12	43	3:7	30
New American Writing	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	13:21	38	25:28	47	14:20	41	32:50	39
New Yorker	13:92	12	19:96	17	17:103	14	31:76	29	61:83	42	49:82	37	27:64	30	36:70	34
NYRB	0:13	0	0:12	0	0:9	0	2:12	12	0:4	0	2:9	18	0:13	0	0:11	0
Paris Review	3:31	9	19:64	23	10:35	22	15:28	35	19:43	31	41:64	39	59:103	36	9:13	41
Poetry	22:116	16	26:89	23	43:98	30	48:116	29	66:125	35	73:121	38	85:142	37	67:101	40
Southern Review	9:36	20	19:36	35	12:35	26	9:20	31	22:51	30	27:57	32	23:66	26	48:51	48
Sulfur	—	—	—	—	—	—	4:24	14	14:22	39	10:30	25	28:63	31	—	—
TriQuarterly	4:32	11	—	—	—	—	9:48	16	12:15	44	13:21	38	34:40	46	10:9	53
AVERAGES	13%		21%		21%		27%		36%		36%		36%		38%	

Percentage of Poems by Women 1970–2005



in the high thirties around 1990. Meanwhile the mainstream magazines—*The New Yorker* and *The Nation*—reach their peak in 1990 and then begin to decline.

The one major outlier in the study is the *New York Review of Books*, which displays neither the initial increase nor the final plateau of the other magazines. In the eight years we surveyed, the *NYRB* published poems by women four times. (Patricia Storace appeared twice in 1995; April Bernard and Elizabeth Vreeland appeared in 1985.) A full survey of the *NYRB* from 1970 to 2005 revealed a similar pattern: men appeared 382 times, women thirty-five times (8% women).¹

§

The data do not tell us anything about the causes of these changes, so what follows is speculative. The increase in the number of women published coincides with an increase in general female employment in the same period—an increase usually attributed to the success of second-wave feminism. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, women composed 38% of the US workforce in 1970 and 46% in 2005. Likewise the American Medical Association reports that in 1970 8% of physicians were women, a number that increased to 24% by 2000. It seems likely, then, that the increase in our numbers reflects broad social changes, which probably had several local effects within poetry communities: editors became aware of their biases, anti-discriminatory practices gained favor, and, most significantly, women gained access to careers in poetry and publishing.

Assuming that second-wave feminism is the cause of the increase in our numbers, there are at least two plausible explanations for the graph's plateau, a pattern that also occurs in the general workforce data (where the plateau is 46%). First, we can hypothesize that around 1990 external factors interfered with the steady gains of the previous two decades. (One may speculate about the anti-feminist backlash signalled by the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings in 1991.) Second, we could attribute the plateau to structures of inequality that survived the interventions of second-wave feminism. ("Consciousness raising," for example, may not have been able to eliminate the glass ceiling.)

This second explanation raises a significant question: should we expect gender parity in our numbers? What if 37% accurately reflects the number of women poets? (This question does not, of course, deny

that some form of inequity keeps women from careers as poets in the first place.) It is probably impossible to accurately survey the gender ratio of active poets; nevertheless, there are a few helpful proxies available. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that 63% of professional “writers and authors” in 2005 were women. Similarly, the Iowa Writers Workshop enrolled 65% women in 2005. (The IWW reached parity around 1980.) A third, though less comprehensive, proxy complicates this picture: from April to July of this year, *Chicago Review* received 136 unsolicited submissions from men and seventy-four from women (35% women).

NOTE

1 / Marjorie Perloff challenged the significance of these numbers. (The editors of the *NYRB*, whom we also contacted, did not comment.) She wrote:

I have subscribed to the *NYRB* for thirty-some years, but I never think of it as a place to read poetry, by men or women.... The point is that *NYRB*, like many other good general critical journals, has never, to my mind, made the slightest difference when it comes to poetry, or even poetry criticism, so the real issue is not counting heads but trying to understand why our leading literary/cultural journals like *NYRB*, *London Review of Books*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, etc. care so little about poetry in general.... The very putting of a poem in a little box or at the bottom of a page that features a long political article is a way of downgrading poetry as a serious form of discourse.

Leaving aside the fact that insignificance is no excuse for discrimination, Perloff is correct that the *NYRB* has had little impact on the history of poetry, especially when compared to *Poetry*, *Sulfur*, others. (Still, Ashbery, Logue, Muldoon, Walcott, Heaney, and Seidel deign to publish there.) It's also probably correct that the *NYRB*'s presentation of poems marks its relegation of the art. (*The Nation* marks their dismissal more directly: see the table for the decrease in the total number of poets published after 1975.)

Yet the *NYRB* still matters in its way. Its intellectual prestige (which *Time*, say, could never attain) certifies poets for audiences unfamiliar with contemporary poetry (hiring committees, for example). And their circulation (which no little magazine can approach) provides exposure: the “little box” at the bottom of the page may be dismissive, but it's also worth over \$6000 as ad space.

We would like to thank David Galenson for his advice, and Connie Brothers, Tara Kramer, and Jordan Agnew at the University of Iowa for the enrollment data.