

Revolution. These students were the best and brightest of China, and starved for knowledge. In the countryside, the people's communes, which had brought untold suffering to China's peasants (somewhere between 27 million and 43 million people died during the famine that followed the formation of the communes in 1958), were being dismantled. The land was being returned to family control.

Carter's single term of office coincided with what many Chinese called their second "liberation." For the United States to have suddenly elevated human rights to the decisive issue would have made a mockery of the suffering from which so many Chinese were recovering. This time, American policymakers got it right.

Since the Tiananmen Square incident of 1989 and the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, the United States has had difficulty formulating a new policy toward China. No longer are a handful of elites defining the rela-

tionship. One leading China specialist and former government official describes the process today as "policymaking by franchise," with business interests, human rights groups, Congress, and the broader public all pushing to make their voices heard.

If the American relationship with China is one of the strangest in this century, it will surely be one of the most important in the next. Mann notes a lingering Cold War mentality in the United States, a continuing need for an enemy, and the possibility that China might qualify. But new enmity is not in the interests of the United States, China, or the rest of the world. If Mann's book engenders not merely controversy but serious public debate on the nature of the U.S.-China relationship, we may actually learn something from history.

> ANNE F. THURSTON, a former Wilson Center Fellow, is the author of the recently published monograph, *Muddling toward Democracy: Political Change in Grassroots China (U.S. Institute of Peace)*.

Cedar Tavern Days

THE LAST AVANT-GARDE:

The Making of the New York School of Poets.

By David Lehman. Doubleday. 433 pp. \$27.50

by Martha Bayles

The classic New York School poem is probably Frank O'Hara's "The Day Lady Day Died." Written on the afternoon of July 17, 1959, the date of jazz singer Billie Holiday's death, it begins with a lazy stroll through Manhattan: a shoeshine, a malted, a stop in a bookstore for "a little Verlaine," buying some Strega and Gauloises for friends on Long Island, and finally seeing "a NEW YORK POST with her face on it." In the final stanza, the vague, insouciant warmth of the previous 25 lines focuses to a burning intensity: "and I am sweating a lot by now and thinking of / leaning on the john door in the 5 SPOT / while she whispered a song along the keyboard / to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing."

In the last four decades, countless poets have imitated O'Hara's casual, tossed-off style, making it hard to imagine its original freshness. In fact, one cannot walk into a poetry reading (or "slam") these days without hearing echoes of O'Hara and his friends John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, and James Schuyler. For that reason alone, this fascinating but flawed book about the "New York School" of poets is welcome.

O'Hara once described his style of writing as "I did this, I did that." The formula may work for poems such as "Lady Day," but "this one did this, that one did that" proves to be a poor approach to organizing the first 90 pages of an ambitious literary study. Lehman, the author of *Signs of the Times*:

Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul de Man (1991), one of the few nonacademic books to deal a body blow to postwar French literary theory, hardly intends to “deconstruct” the lives of his four appealing subjects. But that is the effect when, in this opening section, Lehman fails to stick with any one narrative, to conjure any one milieu, or to portray any one personality. Fragments of ideas and anecdotes float in space, and the reader who does not already know the essential work of these poets may decide that it is not worth knowing.

The persistent reader—that is, one who already admires these poets and is resigned to the dismal fact that even books about literature are no longer polished by an editor’s hand—eventually will be rewarded by Lehman’s portraits of the individual poets. Writing about Ashbery, for example, Lehman shows how the poet’s youthful enthusiasm for the French surrealists and their Freudian-Marxist theories of “unconscious” or “automatic” writing led him to experiment with bold “verbal disintegrations,” while at the same time his work as an art critic fostered clear perception and logical argument. The result, in Ashbery’s best poems, is a crackling tension between the centrifugal and centripetal powers of language.

Yet even here, the editor’s hand is missed. Among those claiming to inherit Ashbery’s legacy are the “Language school” poets, Charles Bernstein and others, who were inspired by deconstruction during its academic heyday in the 1970s. As Lehman reports, Ashbery has expressed a reluctance to shift his mantle to a group of writers whose poetic purpose is to undermine “hegemonic discourse.” In a speech in acceptance of the 1995 Frost Medal from the Poetry Society of America, he distanced himself from the Language poets, saying, “I wanted to stretch, not sever, the relation between language and communication.” Since this passage is essential to understanding Ashbery’s position as the most eminent and influential of the New York poets, why is it buried in the epilogue?

The task of the intellectual historian is similar to that of the biographer: to weave a compelling human story together with a narrative of how certain ideas germinated,

developed, and matured. Lehman struggles with this task, sometimes in vain. Why does he call the New York poets “the last avant-garde”? His answers vary with the context. For instance, when quoting Koch’s praise of O’Hara’s work as “the last stage in the adaptation of twentieth-century avant-garde sensibility to poetry about contemporary American experience,” Lehman admits that the New York poets learned many tricks from such European avant-garde movements as Italian futurism (before World War I) and Dadaism, the 1920s movement that mocked the pretensions of high art and is still very much present in so-called postmodernism. But Lehman also argues that his poets added a uniquely light touch of their own as well as a genuine appreciation for things American, from hamburgers to Hollywood movies. In other contexts, however, Lehman credits the New York poets with radical originality. At one point he writes that “Koch’s experimentalism counters the establishment view that poems arise out of experience and express irreproachable sentiments in an earnest manner.” Koch’s first collection, *Thank You and Other Poems*, was published in 1962; what “establishment” does Lehman have in mind?

Lehman’s uncertain grasp is even more evident in his treatment of the painters who inspired and often befriended the New York poets. Indeed, the label “New York School” was originally applied to the abstract expressionists who seized the artistic initiative from the French after World War II. While offering many fascinating anecdotes—for example, that O’Hara “was one of the few in the art world of the 1950s who refused to choose between Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning when everybody else had chosen sides as if at a stickball game in the street”—Lehman finds it no easier to define the avant-garde in painting than in poetry. At the outset, he asserts that in the visual arts the only true avant-garde in the 1940s and 1950s was the abstract expressionists, and that their artistic practices were closely akin to those of his poets. Yet when it emerges that his poets were personally closer to certain figurative painters—notably Jane Freilicher, Larry Rivers, and Fairfield Porter—Lehman shifts gears and asserts that

the latter were the true avant-garde. This shift would be far less confusing if Lehman's explanation of the continuities and discontinuities between figurative and abstract painting were presented coherently instead of scattered throughout the text.

Also scattered about are Lehman's often foolish enthusiasms. "Personism" was O'Hara's tongue-in-cheek name for a one-man literary movement that he claimed to have invented while writing a love poem to a young male dancer: "While I was writing it I was realizing that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem, and so Personism was born." There is really no more to Personism than the notion that a poem can be as spontaneous and intimate as a phone call. Lehman's problem is that he takes this wispy of an idea more seriously than O'Hara did. "The jest conceals an important insight," says Lehman. "Poetry—avant-garde poetry at any rate—is conditioned by the most technologically advanced means of communication of the time. . . . When Elizabethans addressed sonnets to each other, there was no faster means of communication." Does he mean to say that the

Elizabethans wrote sonnets because they did not have telephones? Once again, a careful editor would have caught this silliness (and suggested, perhaps, that Lehman update his discussion to include e-mail).

Among the painters Lehman discusses, perhaps the most appealing figure is Porter. After all, he had the insight to see in the heavy-handed art criticism of the highbrow former Trotskyist Clement Greenberg "the technique of a totalitarian party on its way to power." Muddled perhaps by his own wobbly definitions, Lehman confesses to being attracted by Porter's definition of the avant-garde as "those people with the most energy." In an age characterizing itself as postmodernist, and therefore presumably post-avant-garde (what is more modernist than the idea of the avant-garde?), this definition has the virtue of simplicity, at least. Perhaps Lehman should have stuck with it.

> MARTHA BAYLES, *the former literary editor of the Wilson Quarterly, teaches humanities at Claremont McKenna College. She is the author of Hole in Our Soul: The Loss of Beauty and Meaning in American Popular Music (1994).*

Arts & Letters

N. C. WYETH:

A Biography.

By David Michaelis. Knopf.

576 pp. \$40

Like the Irish painter John Butler Yeats, the American painter Newell Convers Wyeth is known chiefly as the father of a famous son. Unlike John Yeats, N. C. Wyeth (1882–1945) doesn't deserve the slight. Starting in 1902, he dominated the field of book and magazine illustration for 43 years, producing landscapes, still lifes, portraits, and murals. He vivified the great children's classics: *Treasure Island*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, *The Yearling*. He won every possible award. Without ever asking for a raise (to his publishers' delight), he managed to support five children and various in-laws. Yet for all that, N. C. Wyeth considered himself a

failure—which, of course, makes him a fascinating subject for biography.

The Wyeths are often perceived as the quintessential American clan, East Coast pioneers holed up at the "Homestead" in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania. In truth, the elegiac vision that made their artistic work so powerful had its source, as Michaelis shows, in an immigrant's experience of America. N. C. Wyeth's mother, Hattie, born to Swiss farmers, romanticized her parents' homeland, finding in it all that was lacking in America and in her very American husband, Andrew Wyeth, Jr., a dealer in livestock feed. In becoming an illustrator, N. C. fulfilled his mother's artistic aspirations (while also satisfying his bean-counting father). The price of maternal dependency, the author suggests, was a need for failure, which N. C. satis-