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Davis Schneiderman

SEND IN THE CLOWNS, THEY'RE ALREADY HERE*

Explicit through the interlocking sinews of David Lehman's new biographical/theoretical homage, *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets*, the practiced muscular definition of all potent avant-garde movement is repeatedly flexed: newness over novelty, originality over mimesis, change over stasis, and combativeness over docility. Like a knot of ingenious circus clowns locking the gaze of spectacle-hungry crowds, the avant-garde must always augment definition with showmanship, keep politics from tripping aesthetic stilts, stop compact cars from blurring each harlequin into the larger, comic mass, and perhaps most tellingly, juggle a plentitude of unevenly weighted objects in the air, ostentatiously manipulating the forces of resistance. Eventually, the next act will charge the spotlight with equally fantastic flourishes—frenzied lions intent on the kill, trapeze artists whirling in the thick air, motorcycle daredevils revving across tightropes—and the no-longer provocative avant-garde will be forced to drop its metaphoric balls.

According to Lehman, the New York School avant-garde, a loose continuum of even more loosely associated poets, mingling in weaves of loose, mutual appreciation societies with Abstract Expressionist painters (Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, Fairfield Porter, Jane Freilicher, Larry Rivers, *et al.* . . .), lets loose its meta-linguistic loop-de-loops and anti-establishment arabesques through the antics of four very different performer-poets. Biographical vignettes of the New York School principals—Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, and James Schuyler—characterize *The Last Avant-Garde* like four different gem-cuts decorating the same stone. Through a prolonged meditation on the viability of a retrospective avant-garde appraisal for the New York School, Lehman entices the reader with a plan for assembling facets, a glimpse at microscopic patterns, and a call to enter the poetic mines.

Enthusiastic throughout, *The Last Avant-Garde* attempts the hat-trick of biography, textual analysis, and cultural criticism to proffer a thesis mingling the disparate strands of a bygone American era: that the first virile generation

**The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets*, by David Lehman. New York: Doubleday, 1998.

of New York poets (from which Lehman claims descent) considered themselves in the beginning to be the only ones who had anything to offer; that their visionary similarities histrionically transcended difference; and that as a group, viewed collectively, their output outshone poetry present in no less a revolutionary manner than an older jewel of the avant-garde—the French Surrealists.

Lacking the Bretonian stomach for perpetual annunciation, lacking a manifesto to allow easier public digestion of their jagged *objets d'art*, Lehman's closest New York School corollary is O'Hara's mock manifesto "Personism":

. . . a spoof of a manifesto that nevertheless achieves the effects of a manifesto—the announcement of a new style, the declaration of an antiprogrammatic program. It should be read as a . . . triumph of irony and wit, but the jokey manner should not blind us to its serious import (185).

Merging triumph and wit, synthesizing high and low culture, and fusing the spirit of both news items and casual cultural commentary to the indirect strands of "The Day Lady Died" (for Lady Day) or "I do this I do that" poems such as "A Step Away from Them," showcases O'Hara's fierce transmogrification of quotidian objects into poetic subjects. Lehman assumes the "friendly critic" guise, and ironically acts throughout his book as vanguard for the avant-garde.

Commenting on the poem "Mayakovsky," Lehman cements O'Hara's position as catalyst of the New York School: "O'Hara's distinctive tone—two parts melancholy, three parts joy—is necessarily absent from the myths that by monumentalizing O'Hara's death obscure his life" (170). Occasionally, this brand of proselytizing threatens to overrun the text and sacrifice the critical souls of its gifted children, like Kierkegaard's God of Abraham, to the actualization of a higher telos.

In the lovingly written section "John Ashbery: the picture of little J.A. in a Prospect of Flowers," the revered and reviled author of *The Tennis Court Oath* and the Parmigianino-inspired *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (and art critic for the decidedly anti avant-garde *Newsweek*), receives some thirty pages more of biography/critical analyses than his New York School classmates. For all of Lehman's claim to avoid treating Ashbery as an "isolated case," but "without wishing to diminish Ashbery's great singularity," the poet still escapes with

the star treatment (10).

While far from being directly antithetical to his project of group canonization, Lehman's inability to ultimately dissolve Ashbery's eclectic mark on the world of poetry is one of the necessary pratfalls of his avant-garde definition: "acting collectively goes against the grain of that insubordinate individual, the modern artist" (286). Yet, it is in the interstices of all-important collaboration (for which Koch is ubiquitously famous) and in whose pursuit Ashbery and Schuyler co-wrote the novel *A Nest of Ninnies* over the course of two decades, that Lehman sees a "style of arch ventriloquism" that allowed the novel to be authored by "a third entity fashioned in the process of collaboration" (82).

If the third entity rises from the nodules of poetic collage like a progressive chimera, then the New York School is rooted not only to the Olympian-liver firebrand that was Frank O'Hara (as Lehman claims throughout), but also in the "madcap spirit" and unabashedly heterosexual persona of Kenneth Koch, poetry instructor par excellence at Columbia. Koch invests his energies equally in the vagaries of academia as well as the beauties of a sublime comedic temperament worthy of Sterne. Unfortunately for Koch's critical reception, the professor acts as a minister of tragicomedy in the age of the solemn lyric, which Lehman calls the "poetry of humorless self-involvement" and to which Koch inimitably refers as the "kiss-me-I'm-poetical-junk" (205).

Nonetheless, Lehman distinguishes Koch the Ur-poet as much as his three peers, and never squanders the opportunity to excavate a guiding principle of his avant-garde city from individual poetic monument:

(Koch's) work is like an amusement park of the imagination, full of wild rides and spooky fun houses and a tunnel of love where the girl in braids with the cotton candy will be kissed by a handsome stranger. Politics in the conventional sense plays no role in his work, except as part of the American decor, a motive for metaphor . . . (208-209).

As above, Lehman waves the apolitical placard of the New York School's uncompromising aesthetics whenever the continually rolling spheres of analysis and praise collide, slammed purposely under his direction as befits the pronunciations of "happiness" as the "central preoccupation in the work of these poets" (35) who "pursued an aesthetic agenda that was deliberately apolitical, even antipolitical" (9).

Perhaps this is Lehman's only misstep, for *explicitly*, the direct critical analyses of the poetry in *The Last Avant-Garde* (discussions surrounding the New York Schools formal and thematic innovations), including manipulation of the *blague* (or insolent jest), Koch's one-line poems, the catalogue poems, O'Hara's telephone call poems, etc. . . . always conform to Fairfield Porter's dictum "Art does not stand for something outside itself" (31). However, despite the art for art's sake bias, Lehman's plentiful cultural analyses remain *implicitly* antithetical to this position: "The flowering of Schuyler's poetry took place in the decade of gay liberation, the 1970s, and the steadily climbing rise in his readership has something to do with his unflinching portrayal of homosexuality" (259).

It is discomfiting that the aesthetic impulses of the New York School so easily subsume the susurrus of political subject matter that formulates the *poetic* subject so solidly in the world of social change, and while Lehman valiantly attempts to uphold the stated intent of the New York School towards political ambivalence, each dip into the quotidian reservoir of these poets' lives, whether for biographical or emblematic reasons, adds fodder to the implicit argument that all art is inextricably political. If Schuyler's popularity grew partially by virtue of his subject matter in the decade of "liberation" for that subject, Lehman's overtures toward the cultural inspirations for his poets keeps blurring his imaginary line between their art and the politics of the world.

Accordingly, Schuyler's emblematic use of homosexuality as subject matter from the mid-70's on (in contrast to Ashbery's relative silence on the matter) is but one reason among many to separate him from the other New York poets. Lehman writes that Schuyler felt the "Fourth Musketeer" amid the "Harvard Wits" whose popular success prefigures and largely overshadows his own late bloom. Largely, the Ivy Leaguers valued Schuyler's editorial skills on the magazine *Locus Solus*, agreeing that Schuyler was the "one you wanted to show your poems to first . . . because he expressed his views with tact and skill" (74). Along with the Beats, the Black Mountain poets, the poets of the San Francisco Renaissance and other assorted "counter-establishment" personas, Schuyler and his New York School brethren were included in Donald Allen's seminal 1958 anthology, *The New American Poetry* (certainly a political document), but Schuyler remains the only figure of the School absent from more mainstream assurances of literary "value" (re: *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*). If that weren't enough, the physical ar-

rangement of *The Last Avant-Garde* conspires to keep Schuyler subaltern (which as a device would not have failed to excite the School's artistic sensibility). For Schuyler's 40 pages of autobiography is disrupted after only two pages by the requisite package of black-and-white photos, visions of the principals in a variety of writerly settings—a fitting *blague* for poetry that subsists in such symbiosis with the visual arts.

Ultimately, *The Last Avant-Garde* postulates just that, a prophecy that the hallmarks of The New York School (“a flair for comedy [as opposed to satire], the habit of irony, and the conviction that the comic and the serious are far from mutually exclusive”) (368) renders itself ultimately obsolete under the heteroglossic, polyphonic banner of a postmodernism already growing drowsy in its own canonization (re: *Postmodern Fiction: A Norton Anthology*). The situation is therefore insoluble as it stands, perhaps temporarily, until some new visionary becomes (in O'Hara's words) the “one individual who is tired of looking at something that looks like something else” (379).

Lehman's goal in *The Last Avant-Garde* is as much to glorify the New York School he draws strength from as to set forth the bright searchlights to “sooner help quicken a new avant-garde than pronounce the demise of an old one” (11). The avant-garde, we are told, should do both, as “destruction is essential for creation” (285). So Lehman peppers his re-constructive homage with tour-de-force vigor and inspirational prose, and while trying to press four oft-associated poets and their “movement” into an even more closely regarded relation to each other, the whole project captures an ameliorative circus set reeling *inside* the stodgy literary city, where Technicolor showmanship may prolong the aesthetic appeal of an act, but the fumes of the big top still waft softly political.