

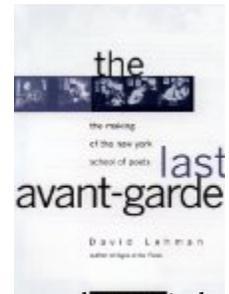
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



David Lehman. *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets*. New York: Doubleday, 1998. 433 pp. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-385-47542-6.

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David Lehman's *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets* is "a study in friendship, artistic collaboration, and the bliss of being alive and young at a moment of maximum creative ferment" (p. 1). Lehman blends literary criticism, biography, and cultural history in a manner that should appeal to a wide audience, particularly to those readers who are interested in the history of American culture or of avant-garde movements in general. In addition to its popular appeal, the book is a thoughtful contribution to literary criticism and aesthetics.

The Last Avant-Garde chronicles the beginning of the New York School of poets, analyzes its impact on contemporary poetry and poetics, and discusses the continuing viability of the idea of the avant-garde. The first part of the book describes the New York School in general and then considers each of its "core members," John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, Frank O'Hara, and James Schuyler. The chapters in the first section describe the poets themselves as well as with their particular contribution to the aesthetics of the New York School. Lehman explores the commonalities among the poets as well as their distinctive characteristics, both personally and as poets. According to Lehman, "remarks and anecdotes can assist in the practical task facing a poet's interpreter" (p. 94), and he draws widely from a variety of sources, including letters, interviews, and personal reminiscences.

The second part of the book considers "whether the avant-garde as an abstract concept or a practical idea is finished" (p. 11). According to Lehman, avant-garde movements are oppositional and must necessarily meet with resistance. "If we are all postmodernists," he writes,

"we are none of us avant-garde, for postmodernism is the institutionalization of the avant-garde" (p. 11). Lehman stops short of dismissing the avant-garde as an aesthetic impossibility. Although he considers the New York School to be "the last authentic avant-garde movement that we have had in American poetry" (p. 1), Lehman also insists that it is "not the last avant-garde movement we will ever have" (p. 10).

An established poet and critic, Lehman makes no effort to disguise either his own aesthetic or his enthusiasm for the New York poets. At the same time, he also does not ignore the critics and controversies of the New York School. The accomplishment of *The Last Avant-Garde*, however, has less to do with scholarly objectivity than with intellectual spirit. Lehman masterfully recreates the excitement of the time when New York replaced Paris as the creative center of modernist art. In his discussion of Frank O'Hara, Lehman writes, "O'Hara was very much the poet as critic, who wrote with enthusiasm and spirit and employed lyric means rather than argumentation and analysis" (p. 178). Although *The Last Avant-Garde* lacks neither analysis nor argumentation, Lehman's description of O'Hara's critical writing also applies to his own. In *The Last Avant-Garde*, Lehman is very much the poet-critic, and he succeeds brilliantly at capturing the enthusiasm and spirit of the New York poets.

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