

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.

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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-



fied by clinging to “the shopworn idea of a high-low split between artists and illustrators.”

N. C.’s work brought him little satisfaction. “Letters of praise,” Michaelis notes, “stung him like a lash.” The typically poor quality of reproductions grieved him. “I would work my heart out,” he wrote, “and then it all seemed small and fleeting when transferred to the magazine page.” He seldom went a season without an episode of black despair.

Fatherhood proved his greatest source of pleasure. He was the breakfast chef—pancakes—and would wake the household by playing thunderous chords on the piano. “My art vanishes into the merest speck when suffered comparison to the one Divine and tangible sensation bequeathed to us: parent to child, child to parent,” he wrote. Andrew Wyeth would later say that it was his father’s “great willingness . . . to give and give and give” that kept N. C. from becoming a great painter. N. C. taught all five children to draw and paint, and to feel—as did he and his mother—too much. “Nostalgia,” N. C. once wrote, “is a personal experience I hallow as another might a religion.” Separation and loss, as Michaelis observes, became central to the Wyeths’ sense of themselves—and to their artistic achievement.

N. C.’s relationship with his son Nat was close but complicated. The only child who didn’t become an artist, Nat nonetheless married one, Caroline Pyle. In proper Greek tragic fashion, Caroline and N. C. fell in love. N. C. refused to own up to the relationship when Nat confronted him. Not long after, on October 19, 1945, N. C. was taking Caroline’s three-year-old son, Newell, for a ride in his station wagon when the car stalled, or stopped, on some railroad tracks. An oncoming train instantly killed both grandfather and

grandson. Was it a suicide—had the boy been not Nat’s child, but N. C.’s? Family opinion divided. Michaelis doesn’t try to decide, observing only that “fathers who die violent deaths inhabit shallow graves.”

A beautiful stylist with long experience writing for magazines, Michaelis knows how to set up a story. That he didn’t do so here—there is no introduction—suggests that he wanted the intrinsic drama of his material to speak for itself. But given the author’s incisive analysis throughout, one can’t help wishing for some discussion of N. C. Wyeth’s place in the history of American art, and for some reflections on the mythic hold the Wyeth family exercised on the popular imagination. We don’t get anything of the kind until the final page, when Michaelis terms the Wyeths “a federal family” like the Roosevelts and the Kennedys. Surely more could have been said, without compromise or hype.

—A. J. Hewat

DAWN POWELL.

By Tim Page. Holt. 362 pp. \$30

In 1940, a week before the publication of her novel *Angels on Toast*, Dawn Powell wrote in her diary: “A new book coming out no longer rouses any hope. As the day approaches, I look at the book section and think with a sudden horror that this is the last Sunday I will be able to look at a book review without sick misgiving—no review, bad review, or patronizing review . . . and after that the nervous, weary effort to pick up and begin again after another disappointment.” Powell was in her forties at the time, and had been writing for 20 years. She knew whereof she spoke.

Coming to New York at 22 from a miserable Ohio childhood, armed only with courage and ambition, she became known as a good-time drinker and a prodigious wit. From the 1920s on, nearly everyone who met her thought her the funniest woman they had ever known, and many (among them John Dos Passos and Edmund Wilson) considered her a social satirist of the first order. A great future loomed. She began to write novels—*The Tenth Moon* (1932) and *Turn, Magic Wheel* (1936), among others. Half of them provided a dark view of the midwestern small-town life she had come from, but the other half were witty send-ups of social climbers in New York. It was the big-city novels that made sophisticated readers say Dawn Powell was going to do for New York what Balzac had done for Paris.