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**Light from Canada:
The Poetics of James Schuyler**

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**Light from Canada:
The Poetics of James Schuyler**

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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Abstract

This thesis discusses the poetics of James Schuyler as they relate to three major concepts: his “painterliness,” his technique, and his treatment of things. In the first chapter, Schuyler’s “painterliness” is argued to be a way to discuss the idea of representation in both his prose about art and his art-inspired poetry. In the second chapter, Schuyler’s technique, notable for its innovative lineation, is explored using the postmodern philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. It is argued that Schuyler’s purposeful lineation has the same ends as Deleuze-Guattari’s project to expose the artificiality of systems of signs and allow ideas to connect more freely with one another. In the third chapter, the treatment of things in Schuyler’s poetry is argued to be emblematic of Schuyler’s poetry itself, and another way that he explores in his verse the meaning of the individual sign in relationship with subjectivity.

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Introduction

*Evangeline,
our light is scoured and Nova
Scotian and of a clarity that
opens up the huddled masses
of the stolid spruce so you
see them in their bristling
individuality.*

—James Schuyler,

“Light from Canada”

There has never been a better time to come to the work of James Schuyler. With the March 2010 publication by Farrar, Straus and Giroux of *Other Flowers: Uncollected Poems*, the student of Schuyler now has every poem that survives in two thick, handsome volumes, which join his letters, diaries, and novels to form a scintillating trove of verbal treasures. As I write this, the current issue (June 7th, 2010) of *The Nation* has a feature article by Ange Mlinko, “Scoured Light,” praising Schuyler’s poetry. And now that the New York School has, against all odds, gone mainstream (hit TV series *Mad Men* used the poems of Frank O’Hara as a plot point in a recent episode), one can only hope that the sudden explosion of interest in their poetry will shed some small light on a man who has

been until recently a poet's poet, standing quietly off to the side while friends and contemporaries accepted curatorships and met presidents.

It's not that Schuyler is an unknown poet. After all, he won the Pulitzer Prize in 1981 for his late collection *The Morning of the Poem*. But, somehow, in narratives of the New York School of which he was a member, he seems overshadowed by the other primaries: Kenneth Koch, whose razor wit and affection for children made him one of America's most treasured teachers of poetry; Frank O'Hara, whose infectious joie-de-vivre and untimely death made him a folk hero; and John Ashbery, who stands within the very highest rank of poets currently writing in America. Paul Hoover characterizes the dynamic:

In the New York School ages of man, Kenneth provides the uproarious infancy; ... Frank the excitable guest perpetually in his twenties; John the eloquent philosopher deluging the Abyss; and Jimmy the baffled uncle whom the children trust and love—no card tricks, just an absorbing walk with an interesting man. Not that he's a poet of senescence; he simply grows on you, like light from Canada. (19)

Schuyler, unlike his friends, never made much of a name for himself during his lifetime. This is partially because he was rather late to the game. His first major collection, *Freely Espousing*, was published in 1969. Meanwhile, Koch saw his Glascock Prize-winning *Poems* published in 1953, Ashbery's *Some Trees* had won the Yale Younger Poets prize in 1956, and O'Hara's breakout *Meditations in an Emergency* was released in 1957.

Tardiness does Schuyler's work no harm. Even though the poems are unmistakably rooted in a place and an age—New York City in the latter half of the twentieth century—

their trademark niceness of detail combined with the breadth of their subject matter causes them to overspill their context and remain achingly relevant. It is a cliché to call poems timeless, but Schuyler’s poems seem to exist along a different plane of time entirely. They exist at the moment they are read, as in this present-tense stanza from *A Few Days*’s “Thursday”:

A summer dawn breaks over the city.
 Breaks? No, it’s more as though the night
 —the “dark,” we call it—drained
 away into the sewers and left transpicuity.
 You can see: buildings, dogs, people,
 cement, etc. The summer city, where,
 I suppose, someone is happy. Someone. (*Collected* 311)

Though the “summer city” is New York, it is at once Chicago, Washington, Southampton, Ischia, Great Spruce Head, and every other place in which Schuyler—and, by proxy, we his readers—may have worked and lived. From the specificity of his poems grows a powerful generality, and we feel that, even as Schuyler is revealing his most intimate details, it is, in fact, *our* secrets that he is revealing.

James Marcus Schuyler was born November 9th, 1923 in Chicago, and raised in the nearby suburb of Downer’s Grove, a town now famous for its large number of Sears

Catalog mail-order houses. There his father, Marcus Schuyler, ran a small newspaper before the family moved to Washington, D.C. in 1929 for Marcus to take a job with the *Washington Post*. Soon after they moved, Schuyler's mother Margaret Connor divorced his father, and two years later she married building contractor Fredric Ridenour. Schuyler describes his life in Washington as something out of "a novel by Dostoyevsky" (*Letters* xi); William Corbett relates that "the senior Ridenour so disliked his stepson's love of reading that as punishment he denied him a library card" (xi).

It was during this time, too, that Schuyler discovered both his homosexuality, the exuberant celebration of which can be found everywhere in his poems, and his desire to become a writer. He recounts the tipping point in a 1980 interview with *Contemporary Authors*:

One day in my tent in East Aurora, N.Y., when I was about fifteen, I was reading *Unforgotten Years* by Logan Pearsall Smith. He described how Walt Whitman visited his home outside Philadelphia when he was a child, and how one day when he was hearing the poet sing "Jim Crow" in the bathroom, the thought dappled his mind like reeds that he might be a writer someday, too. I looked up from my book, and the whole landscape seemed to shimmer. I realized that, rather than an architect, I wanted to be a writer and *would* be one. (445)

He studied at a small college in West Virginia, Bethany College, before flunking out in 1943 from playing too much bridge. He then joined the Navy, from which he was dishonorably discharged for homosexuality after he went AWOL in New York. The sale of

an estate left to him by his paternal grandmother gave him the money to travel, and he went to Italy where he became English poet W. H. Auden's secretary at Ischia, typing the poems that would become Auden's *Nones*. Schuyler did not find a role model in Auden; he recalls thinking "if this is what poetry is like, it is something far beyond my powers" (CA 445).

That changed upon his return to New York city in the summer of 1949. There he met the men who would eventually make up the core of the New York School, John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara, at an opening at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery. From there Schuyler launched his career as a poet and began a lifelong struggle with mental illness. His life from then on can be summarized as alternating periods of fervent artistic production and convalescence therefrom. Ashbery recalls that "though he was seldom able to hold a job for long, he had a gift for being taken care of—first by his lovers Charles Heilemann and Arthur Gold, later by the Porter family, and in his last years by a consortium of friends who helped pay his pills and his room at New York's Hotel Chelsea" (xiii). This period was punctuated by major events—notably the deaths of close friends Frank O'Hara and Fairfield Porter, and a fire caused by smoking in bed which nearly killed him and occasioned a four-year gap in his writing. Near the end of his life, Schuyler discovered religion, becoming an active member of the Church of the Incarnation, an Episcopalian congregation on Madison Avenue.

Schuyler died in 1991 at sixty-seven from complications following a stroke.

Schuyler's work is varied, comprising plays (sadly out of print), short stories, novels, diaries, letters, essays, and, of course, poetry. The suburban pastoral of his early youth is reflected in his gauzy, ethereal novels *Alfred and Guinevere*, *A Nest of Ninnies* (with John Ashbery) and *What's for Dinner?*. In his letters and diaries Schuyler is as effusive and intimate as he is in his poetry: the former sparkle with wit and kindness, and the latter with introspection and glittering, snowy landscape. It is in his poetry, however, that all these strands in his work come together. His poems are at once witty and delicate, at once as intimistic as Pierre Bonnard and as broadly experimental as Willem de Kooning. John Ashbery, in his introduction to Schuyler's *Selected Poems*, wrote that

after immersing myself in Schuyler's music I often feel it's all I need—all other poetry is somehow present there. Though he is in a sense saying the same thing again and again, it is, like the pages of one's diary, always new. The poems are seldom "about" anything in the way poetry traditionally is; they are the anything. To reread him is to live, as though life were an experience one had just forgotten and been newly awakened to ... (xiv)

I agree with Ashbery, of course: in Schuyler's poetry one gets the uncanny sense of an entire world. What then, to make of that world? In the pages to follow, I hope to explore three threads in Schuyler's work: his so-called "painterliness," his technique, and his treatment of material culture.

The first chapter, "The Bright Invisible," discusses the concepts of realism and "painterliness" as they relate to the work of James Schuyler. Taking off from ideas drawn from the work of visual artists and critics who were contemporary to Schuyler's maturation

as a writer, I ask what it is in Schuyler's poetry that makes him so uniquely difficult to explicate. I argue that this difficulty grows from his poetry's impressive multidisciplinary, as Schuyler borrows as liberally from artists and composers as he does from writers. The space between poetry and painting is frequently explored in Schuyler's verse, and in this chapter I begin to map that space in discussing the interactions between the works of James Schuyler and painter Fairfield Porter. Porter painted realistic landscape, portrait, and still life in an age of near-absolute abstraction; in this he has a great deal in common with Schuyler, who wrote "realistic" lyrics as his contemporaries were engaging in radical experimentation. I find in this interaction something messier and more complicated than the mere epigones Schuyler's critics suggest he follows.

I crib the title of my second chapter, "Revenge of the Giant Face," from a film by Quentin Tarantino. In that chapter, I argue that "painterliness" in Schuyler conceals a pervasive concern in his poetry for technique and style that comes down to the same radical experimentalism practiced by his friends, one hidden beneath Schuyler's realistic, present-tense verse. The philosophy of postmodern Frenchmen Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari guides me through an exploration of the face in the works of Schuyler and Porter, and what it might mean when that face begins to disappear.

The third chapter, "No Ideas But in Things," navigates the concepts opened up by Schuyler's idiosyncratic treatment of material culture. Schuyler's poems are littered with things, and the way he describes them—in particularly the nebulous "things" of weather and sky—reveals much about the way we interact with the world around us. In things,

Schuyler finds a mirror for the world, and I find a link between his so-called “painterliness,” his technique as a poet, and the “object matter” of his poems.

These three chapters are not a comprehensive study of Schuyler’s work. This thesis will focus almost exclusively on his shorter poetry, with brief sideroads leading towards his art writing and diaries. His searching long poems and novels are altogether ignored. This is partially by necessity: his long poems are so rich and so challenging—sounding occasionally as though they were the work of a different poet altogether—that discussion thereof would take up at least two theses more. Ashbery calls them “a high point in our poetry” (xiv), and I am tempted to agree. His novels, deceptively crystalline and light, would be another thesis further. What follows can be, I hope, a launching-point towards those other works, an extended argument not only for Schuyler’s quality—that much, after all, is assured by the company he kept—but also for his continued relevance and importance. Schuyler’s poetry is, above all things, exuberant: about life, about love, about those evanescent moments of unutterable beauty that dot our lives. As John Ashbery remarked, “to reread him is to live” (xiv). I would consider this project a rousing success if I have managed to convey even the smallest fraction of that life.

Luckily for me, his poetry speaks for itself, even if the thing it whispers be only, as Charles North claims, “look” (43).

Chapter 1

The Bright Invisible: James Schuyler, Fairfield Porter, and "Painterliness"

There exists something of a minor literature on the difficulty of writing about James Schuyler. David Lehman, the New York School's premier biographer, skirts the issue in 1980 by highlighting that "there is a quiet insistence in all of Schuyler's work on things in themselves, not the reasons for things or what they might mean" (274); Richard Howard remarks in a 1997 review of Schuyler's *Collected Poems* that "there is a certain concrescence here of qualifiers, which has yet to be philosophized by the right graduate student: the irrelevant, the childish, even the lunatic as a requisite dimension of modernity. Maybe 'simply the best we have' is the adverbial truth" (18). The finest digression on the problem, however, comes from Charles North, probably the most vocal of Schuyler's apologists, and, like many of his close friends, one of his finest critics:

Of all the poets now writing, I can't think of one less open to the usual critical advances, more needful of direct pointing. Schuyler's work is simply beautiful, his decisions are invariably inspired decisions, whether about words or about lines ... or about conclusions or whatever. He is the farthest thing from a theoretical poet (though his intelligence is formidable) and his marvels are subtly marvelous. Which makes it very hard to talk about his work. Invariably in trying to do justice to the beauty on the page, one is reduced to saying: Look. Look how tangible, how remarkably clear, how moving, how masterful, how original. (42-3)

It is therefore with more than a little trepidation that I throw my sword into this nearly-empty ring. And, besides trepidation, more than a little cursing. Why did I take on a task that better critics than I have called impossible? Why can't Schuyler have written one poem, just *one*, with a cross or a phallus (severed or not, I'll take either), or maybe some class struggle or allegory about the intolerance of homosexuality in Cold War America? Surely the latter existed, and surely Schuyler, as a gay poet in an age of repression, came face to face with it, but you can't tell it from his poems: instead he writes about toothbrushes, letter openers, hornets, flowers of all kinds, buttons, musicals, pie. It is difficult to deconstruct a pie. Harder still to see Oedipus in one, though, I imagine, still possible.

So why take on a task with tools not inadequate, but simply made for different things, like pulling teeth with a compass? For the same reasons, I think, as Messrs. Lehman, Howard, and North: Schuyler's poems are simply too beautiful to ignore. Knowing they exist is enough to compel me to write about them. To read Schuyler's poems is to become their disciple. And while simply saying "look" is indeed the first instinct of anyone writing about Schuyler—myself very much included—there is still so much to say about his work, so much that demands to be said. And that discussion, I believe, should begin and end with the poems themselves, in all their rich warmth of visual detail, in all their sometimes too-real "painterliness."

“Freely Espousing,” the first and titular poem of James Schuyler’s first collection of poetry, establishes not only Schuyler’s poetics, but also a critical framework, weaving both into a stoned mélange of recollections, free-associations, and misrecognitions:

the sinuous beauty of words like allergy

the tonic resonance of

pill when used as in

“she is a pill”

on the other hand I am not going to espouse any short stories in which

lawn mowers clack.

No, it is absolutely forbidden

for words to echo the act described; or try to. (3)

Schuyler lets out a precision-aimed opening salvo at representation, itself a ghost by the time *Freely Espousing* saw publication in 1969. American letters had long moved past the realism of its High Modernists—epitomized by poets like William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, and Robert Frost—and launched itself into an abstract poetry partially spearheaded by Schuyler’s close friend John Ashbery, who had won the Yale Younger Poets Prize for *Some Trees* in 1953. By 1969, sixteen years later, the explosion of Abstract Expressionism upon the American art scene had already settled to tasteful rubble picked over by an élite who, a quarter-century prior, had taken up arms against the movement’s extreme abstraction. James Schuyler, art critic and coterie poet of the New York School, is making a revolutionary statement about art long after the revolutionaries had been canonized.

Schuyler's and Ashbery's New York School rose to prominence in the fifties, concurrent with a sea change in American art and letters, a shift away from the dense and bookish legacy of its turn-of-the-century incarnation in the expatriate poets T. S. Eliot and Gertrude Stein. Abstract Expressionism, the "new American painting," was taking the art world by storm with the staccato and abstract works of Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, and Barnett Newman. The Beats, in San Francisco, were writing the iconic American poetry of the fifties and sixties, and promulgating as they did their own brand of drugged-out, intellectual, neo-Bohemian living. The Black Mountain poets, in North Carolina, were theorizing about the new goals poetry might court in a changed America. But the New York School, based in the heart of New York City, had neither a lifestyle nor a program associated with its poets. They, like the others, were living in an America darkened by McCarthy's long shadow; the fear of communism still pervaded the American mainstream, and surveillance of artistic production for any sign of socialist tendencies was commonplace. The New York School, of which three key members (John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, and James Schuyler) were gay, leftist poets, reacted to its antecedents and environment by writing poetry unencumbered by overt theoretical or political motivations. Their motivation was simply to write poetry for the love of it.

Its energy unmoored to a program is partially why its relative lateness does not prevent "Freely Espousing" from having the peculiar emotional impact that it does. Though he damns "any short stories in which lawn mowers clack," Schuyler is only too willing to admit that there may be some exceptions to his broad kibosh against representation. The lines immediately following allow that onomatopoeia, the closest that the individual word

will get to representation, is permitted “very directly / as in / bong. And tickle. Oh it is inescapable kiss” (3). He is not really saying anything about onomatopoeia or representation in these lines. Though “bong” certainly has something of mimesis in it, the relationship that “tickle” and “kiss” have to the concepts they denote is far more nebulous. The poet has damned representational writing only to admit immediately that actually it’s quite alright, as long as you’re getting at what you’re trying to get at. “Clacking,” Schuyler claims implicitly, has as little to do with lawn mowers as “kiss” has to do with lips, though the words might sound nice together.

So, we are tricked: he is not making a political point after all. What he is celebrating here, more than anything else, is the aesthetic magic of words, how “allergy” can be a beautiful word despite (or perhaps partially because of) its ugly meaning, how “pill” can resonate with its medicinal denotation and yet retain its semantically unrelated, and today badly deprecated, colloquial sense. Schuyler’s poetry is an attempt to get at those interstices in meaning, where what a word says brushes up against what a word sounds like it’s saying. The painter and critic Rackstraw Downes, talking about Schuyler’s longtime friend and lover Fairfield Porter, claims that Porter “[understood] the gap between what artists can consciously control and talk about ... and what actually happens in the painting—the gap, in other words, between the recipe and the dish” (307). Keenly aware of that gap, Schuyler’s poetry elaborates a “painterly” aesthetic in an attempt to translate to poetry not only the revolutionary spirit of the Abstract Expressionists, but also its cryptic methods.

The links between the artists of the Abstract Expressionist movement and the poets of the New York School are various and explicit, but it may be worth dwelling upon just

how much they had in common. The artistic movement of Abstract Expressionism is aptly named: the works produced under its banner are both abstract (in that they largely attempt to depict ideas rather than things) and expressionistic (in that they convey states of subjective emotion rather than states of reality). It was the first American movement in the arts to gain recognition on the international stage, and was responsible for shifting the centre of the art world from its longtime capital, Paris, to New York City, a title the city arguably holds today. In the work of the early Abstract Expressionists—particularly the work of its unofficial leader, Jackson Pollock—critics saw an art that was finally completely unsettled from its roots in representation, in which line and colour could be employed without needing to refer to anything else in a pure communication of the artist’s feeling. Harold Rosenberg, one of the chief apologists of the movement and the coiner of the sticky phrase “Action Painting,” observed that, at some point in the forties or the fifties,

the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, redesign, analyse or “express” an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event. ... The painter no longer approached his easel with an image in his mind; he went up to it with material in his hand to do something to that other piece of material in front of him. The image would be the result of this encounter. (25)

The shift is paradigmatic. From the concept of a painting as yielding, after however much sweat and theoretical hair-pulling, a product (the work of art), the “new American painting” took as its goal the process of painting itself. In short, the value of a work was not to be

found in the “finished” painting hanging on a gallery (or, worse, a museum) wall, but in the energy and will that fueled the creative act in the first place, and which the work of art chronicles and represents. Central to this process is that it is contingent, unplanned from the start. Jackson Pollock famously claimed that his painting “does not come from the easel” (65), but instead creates itself using the artist as its avatar:

When I am in my painting, I'm not aware of what I'm doing. It is only after a sort of “get acquainted” period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc., because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well. (65)

This is not to say that the artist has no control over his work. Pollock reminds that he “can control the flow of the paint; there is no accident, just as there is no beginning and no end” (97). The same process informs the poetry of the New York School. Schuyler, for instance, claimed in an interview with Robert Thompson that “the poem is invented as I go along, always, with anything. I never have a plan beforehand. I had no idea when I sat down to the typewriter that morning what I was going to say” (118). The “product,” whether poem or painting, emerges through the interaction of artist and materials, but does not necessarily have any antecedent in reality, whether actual or imagined.

Rosenberg’s essay is a classic of art criticism, and restraint is required to keep from quoting it in its entirety. One of its most brilliant touches, though, is that it never mentions a single contemporary artist by name. It speaks of the movement only vaguely, in its effort

to define the thorny “Abstract Expressionism” in general terms. This vagueness, according to Rosenberg, exists because “this new painting does not constitute a School”:

To form a School in modern times not only is a new painting consciousness needed but a consciousness of that consciousness—and even an insistence on certain formulas. A School is the result of the linkage of practice with terminology—different paintings are affected by the same words. In the American vanguard the words, as we shall see, belong not to the art but to the individual artists. What they think in common is represented only by what they do separately. (24-5)

Abstract Expressionism, in this rendering, is the first unselfconscious movement in American visual arts, the only one that did not begin with a program or with heroes but based itself upon being antiprogrammatical and antiheroic. The onus of responsibility for definition is not placed upon the movement to which the artists belong, but to the individual artist, who needs not even articulate his or her program (most didn’t). The movement is thus profoundly individualistic, assuming as given the primacy of the individual talent and its ability to express itself using its own means. This is partially why the depth charge Rosenberg releases in his closing sentence meets its target: “So far, the silence of American literature on the new painting all but amounts to a scandal” (39). The artists might be mute, but a silent poet is of no use whatsoever.

Fortunately, Rosenberg would not need to wait long for that silence to be broken. The poets of the New York School, in New York at the time of its meteoric ascent to worldwide prominence in visual arts, could not help but be swept along with the tide. Their

poetry very frequently refers to, and is often about, the painters and paintings that surrounded them. But, as David Lehman explains, they could revere the painters of the New York School “without the slavish fidelity of epigones” (3):

The poets found their own aesthetic notions articulated in the paintings they admired, and this makes their art criticism doubly significant. James Schuyler understood his own predilections when he was confronted with Jane Freilicher’s paintings, in which a still life may be combined with an interior and a landscape. Like Freilicher, Schuyler was determined to let order emerge from a faithful rendering of a scene rather than from an exercise of the artist’s will. He and she had in common the ability to be satisfied, aesthetically, with one view from one window at different times of day, in changing light. (46)

Schuyler is not the only poet of the New York School who participated in the art scene of New York. Frank O’Hara worked his way from the front desk of the Museum of Modern Art to a curatorship at the same museum; John Ashbery was a professional art critic for a quarter-century for high-circulation magazines like *New York* and *Newsweek*, besides taking art for a subject in famous poems like “The Painter” and “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror.” Despite the School’s paint-soaked reputation, however, the trait of “painterliness” is almost exclusively applied to Schuyler’s poetry. So commonly, in fact, that it would appear that reviews or articles about Schuyler are unpublishable if they do not address this point. Gillan Conoley, for instance, refers to what she calls his “watercolorist sensibility” (45); Richard Gray to his “painterly manner” (649); and Mark Silverberg to his

“painterly gestures” (31). Michael Hofmann calls him a “painterly poet” (np), and W. S. Di Piero, after claiming roundly that “[he doesn’t] like ‘painterly poetry,’ the sort that pants after beauty,” remarks of one of Schuyler’s “Songs” “*this is painterly*” (313-4). A consensus, then. Schuyler is a painterly poet.

What, exactly, “painterly” might mean in the context of Schuyler’s work is more difficult to say. After all, a poem is not a painting, and to say that a poem looks like a painting is not to say very much about it at all except that it is probably bad poetry (Schuyler’s isn’t.) What gives Schuyler’s poems the particular visual jolt they almost invariably contain, the rich graphic field that cannot help but be compared to the work of the artists who surrounded him? What makes his landscapes more Freilicher than Wordsworth, if that is even true? And, most importantly, what can it mean for Schuyler to be so intent on exploring the bridge between art and letters in his work? For potential answers to these questions, it is helpful to look closely at the work of Fairfield Porter, Schuyler’s friend and “favourite painter” (*SAW* i), a great exponent of Abstract Expressionism who painted landscapes and portraits, genres or forms ostensibly abandoned by the movement he championed. Like Schuyler’s, Porter’s work is inarguably different from those of his peers in its realism and relative paucity of experimental devices—Schuyler is as far from Ashbery and Koch in this regard as Porter is from Pollock or de Kooning. Both members of movements to which they can be ascribed only with difficulty, Schuyler’s poetry and Porter’s painting share a fascination with the the limits of representation, what representation looks like when it approaches the limit of abstraction. Bin Ramke remarks that “for both artists, there is a fire in the distance, either sun or

simmering hearth, which in its danger dazzles” (88). In contemplating this fire, the two artists endeavour to convey what Porter termed an “energy,” that animating force behind a work of art that no criticism, no matter how skilled, can ever fully convey.

This impossibility, of course, prevented neither artist from trying. Both worked as art critics for several decades, Porter first for *Art News* and later for *The Nation*, and Schuyler for *Art News*, a position Porter had convinced him to take. Porter’s critical *credo*—and about his aesthetics Porter is never shy—is oft-repeated and deceptively simple: “good criticism is simply good description” (Cummings 16). (He cribbed this line from Alfred M. Frankfurter, then-editor of *Art News*, but usually it is credited to Porter, who more than anyone else writing about art at the time put the dictum into practice.) Porter goes on to say that “accuracy is a weapon too” (16), making somewhat more clear what he believes the purpose of criticism to be: a weapon in a cultural war. We can be sure, for one thing, that no lawn mowers clack in Porter’s work. Porter’s brand of description, however, is not the same as cataloguing. He tends to speak in metaphor and analogy about art, skirting what the work actually looks like to talk “directly about [a painting’s] energy, which determines the character of the whole work” (Downes 307). About painter Willem de Kooning, for whom he proselytized extensively, he is particularly effusive in his “description:”

de Kooning’s abstractions ... release human significances that cannot be expressed verbally. It is as though his painting reached a different level of consciousness than painting that refers to a theory of aesthetics, or that refers to any sort of program: in short any painting that is extensively

verbalized. His meaning is not that the paintings have Meaning, like certain vast canvases notable for the difficulty of containing them in any given space. Nor is their meaning that They Have Not Been Done Before. ... The vacuum they leave behind them is a vacuum in accomplishment, in significance and in genuineness. (Porter 37-8)

Though, frankly, this is as good a description of de Kooning as I can imagine, it does little to convey the appearance of his paintings, violent and bold and colourful and strange. It does, however, begin to sketch the feeling of actually *looking* at a de Kooning. Consider, for instance, Schuyler's review of the same painter:

There is no figure, the paint is put on fast and raw: only the colors (predominantly pink, yellow, blue and white) register conventional beauty. Every stroke counts: the diagonal radius of brush marks draws a white taut as a membrane; a yellow stroke bends on itself and a shower of drippings fly off like sparks from a welder's torch; where the impasto is drawn in, the speed is that of a Sicilian knife: a flash, a permanent immediacy. Aloof, not arrogant, it is a continuous and self-contained drama about painting. (*SAW* 120)

Though this may seem better description, Schuyler is working with the same metaphorical and allegorical paints as Porter, particularly in his attempts to convey the aesthetic effects of de Kooning's colour. White is a "membrane." Yellow is "sparks from a welder's torch," an image that reinforces the procedural nature of Abstract Expressionist painting. The brushstrokes themselves are gently anthropomorphized ("bends on itself"), and the artist

presumably responsible for their being is nowhere to be seen, leaving the impasto to draw itself in and allowing the painting to exist by itself in a mutually enriching relationship with its viewer.

Most importantly, though, both critics insist upon relating the unrelatability of de Kooning's work. For Porter, the works of de Kooning produce an effect that "cannot be expressed verbally;" the lesser kind of painting is the one that is "extensively verbalized." For Schuyler, they represent a paradoxical "permanent immediacy," and the brushstrokes seem to refer back only to themselves in a "continuous and self-contained drama about painting." What makes the criticism of Porter and Schuyler so compelling to read is the struggle plainly visible on every page between the subject of their writing and its medium. Here are two artists, a poet and a painter, struggling to find some way to make words refer to paint and paint to words, some way of exploring that messy interaction between the two arts. Granted, it would be difficult to produce art criticism that engaged with its subject using its own medium (Duchamp excepted), but words—the tools of writing, and of criticism—are certainly not up to the task, as Porter and Schuyler would have it. Rather, any significance the paintings have is a "vacuum," an emptiness, a silence at the juncture of paint and words.

Why explore this desolate space? Charles North, criticizing a review of Schuyler's *Collected Poems* that appeared in the *New York Review of Books*, remarks that "it's hard to see how visual effects can be played down without doing serious harm to the critical enterprise" (93). Discussing the poetry of adherents of the New York School without mention of the artistic milieu under which they toiled would mean ignoring an element key

to their quality and appeal. The word “under” is used carefully. Schuyler, in an article he wrote for Donald Allen’s seminal 1959 *New American Poetry*, remarked that “in New York the art world is a painter’s world; writers and musicians are in the boat, but they don’t steer” (*SAW* 1). In much of Schuyler’s and Porter’s art writing, there is a sense of excitement barely hidden beneath the educated appraisals of current gallery shows, because they were participating, if sometimes peripherally, in one of the most exciting and vibrant movements in the history of American arts, one that confused and titillated critics in equal measure. The New York School’s affection for the painters who birthed their movement in poetry, though, has as much to do with the paintings themselves as it does with the “way, or possible ways”:

“Writing like painting” has nothing to do with it. For instance, a long poem like Frank O’Hara’s *Second Avenue*: it’s probably true to deduce that he’d read the *Cantos* and Whitman (he had); also Breton, and looked at de Koonings and Duchamp’s great Dada installation at the Janis Gallery. Or to put it another way Rose Selavy speaking out in Robert Motherwell’s great Dada document anthology has more to do with poetry written by the poets I know than the Empress of Tapioca, *The White Goddess: The Tondalayo* of the Doubleday Bookshops. [...] Of course the father of poetry is poetry, and everybody goes to concerts when there are any: but if you try to derive a strictly literary ancestry for New York Poetry, the main connection gets missed. (*SAW* 2)

This paragraph, appearing to anticipate the obvious critical moves that might be appropriated to shoehorn the New York School into the subgenre of ekphrastic poetry, is as concise a statement of the poetic ethos of the School as could be hoped for. Schuyler weaves a web of influences dense enough to demand decoding. The *Cantos* point to Ezra Pound's famous "make it new," fuel for the fire of Abstract Expressionism, reapplied anew to the arts once modernism had become codified. Walt Whitman may be termed either the New York School's first practitioner or at least its intellectual progenitor, from whom one can trace a line from Emerson to Stevens, and from whom Schuyler in particular seems to borrow methods of lineation. Willem de Kooning was Porter's favorite painter of his generation, and Duchamp perhaps the greatest force in unsettling twentieth-century art from its representational roots. The nascent gay culture of which the New York School was a part, with its trappings of Broadway and intellectualism, is represented by Duchamp's female alter-ego Rose Selavy and by Tondalayo, a character played sultrily by Hedy Lamarr in 1942's *White Cargo*, from which a contemporary gay-culture term for an effeminate man springs. He even works in a snipe at Robert Graves, favored poet of "campus dry-heads" (1) (the School is rarely coy about its enemies.) Schuyler, though not reticent to disclose his influences, refuses to allow them to dictate interpretation of his work. And yet, we must interpret his poems, necessarily, in reading them. They are not about language, though their language is beautiful; they are not about art exclusively, though art is figured frequently among them. They are not about poetry, though Schuyler certainly read extensively. What is left to interpret in the description of the view from one window?

The scarcity of criticism on Schuyler and Porter may simply be occasioned by their explicit critical perspectives on art. Criticizing critics is an order of magnitude more difficult than criticizing art. As a result, *Explicator*-style exegeses of their work seem to fall short of the material. Donald R. Reese's tight and cogent explication of Schuyler's "A Man in Blue" in that publication as a "poem about the process of enjoying art without consuming it" (51) is both true and convincingly argued, but it seems to me to miss elements central to the effectiveness of the poem: its dreamlike tone, its rich allusiveness, its rollicking sense of joy. Mr. Reese argues that the speaker of "A Man in Blue" is quite literally listening to Brahms's Second Symphony while sitting in a "resonant plump easy chair" (*Collected* 17). To me, however, the poem is a liminal parable, an attempt to describe the drowsy feelings of falling asleep on an autumn afternoon by recourse to images of that space between media. In this poem, art, music, and poetry together enable the speaker to reach some kind of epiphany, all set to the tune of a writer falling asleep in an easy chair. From this intersection of waking and sleeping grows another, as the vocabulary of music melts into the speaker's poetic daydream:

A round attic window
 in a radiant gray house waits like a kettledrum.
 "You got to start..." The Brahmsian day
 lapses from waltz to march. The grass,
 rough-cropped as Bruno Walter's hair,
 is stretched, strewn and humped beneath a sycamore (16)

Our speaker sits “under the French horns of a November afternoon” (16), internalizing the information around him: a “man in blue” raking leaves, children playing soccer, and he himself beginning to fall asleep. In this alpha state of early sleep, the speaker’s keen observational powers (he remarks, for instance, that the rake’s pegs are not pegs but “dowels”) are gradually replaced by free-association. A window becomes a kettledrum, the kids’ shouts become tempo markers, the grass begins (not implausibly) to take on the aspect of Brahms conductor Bruno Walter’s hair. All this to the (mental) tune of the first movement of Brahms’s second, the exposition of which incorporates the theme from his famous and sleepy *Lullaby* with a somewhat darker tonal twist that matches uncannily the drowsy, meditative tone of the poem. Then, a hypnagogic hallucination of a conversation between Brahms and Walter, in which the conductor offers the following interpretation of the first movement:

“Let me sing it for you.”

He waves his hands and through the vocalese-shaped spaces
of naked elms he draws a copper beech
ignited with a few late leaves. He bluely glazes
a rhododendron “a sea of leaves” against gold grass. (17)

Walter’s solution to the interpretative problems of Brahms’s Second is to paint a picture, answering one medium with another. These lines are rife with paradox: “vocalese-shaped spaces,” “copper beech.” Better still, he paints the portrait by “wav[ing] his hands,” using his powers as a conductor to conjure a colourful autumn landscape. The result of Brahms’s

“material ecstasy, / subdued, recollective” (17) mixed with the speaker’s poetic consideration of it and Walter’s conductor-painting is, of course, a *numen tremendum*:

“Life,” he cries (here, in the last movement),
 “is something more than beer and skittles!”
 “And the something more
 is a whole lot better than beer and skittles,”
 says Bruno Walter,
 darkly, under the sod. I don’t suppose it seems so dark
 to a root. (17)

David Reese reads this section of the poem as an analysis of the possibility for Schuyler’s immortality via Brahms; that immortality is, he says, “depend[ent] on a host of contingencies, including the interpretation of Bruno Walter, and both of their immortalities depend most importantly on the fact that one man is sitting on a particular porch listening to a particular recording” (51). The poem in this reading becomes a story about the “changing and tenuous nature of artistic immortality” (51), like a “small, dusty, rather gritty, somewhat scratchy / Magnavox from which a forte / Drops like a used Brillo pad” (17). However, though artistic immortality is one theme of the poem—and of Brahms’s allusive Second—the poem does not have a “purpose” quite as clear as that. It courts an aesthetic rather than a programmatic tone, one born, as in most of Schuyler’s poetry, from the record of things truly observed, in this case the liminal pastiche of early sleep. In this poem, for instance, the soporific melding of three media—poetry, music, painting—leaves the speaker considering something very vague indeed, an uncanny

“something more,” that same pure artistic energy that Porter attempted to relay in his “descriptive” review of de Kooning. This renders “A Man in Blue” effectively uninterpretable in my view. Since the poem builds its foundation upon something by its nature unrelatable, the vague “something more,” there is no description of the poem—mine, above, included—that would be able to approximate the effect of the work itself. As Robert Frost is rumored to have said to someone asking him to explain the meaning of his poems, “you want me to say it worse?” (Adams 13).

Similar sorts of things are going on in the paintings of Fairfield Porter. Though deeply sympathetic to—and friends with—the Abstract Expressionists, Porter’s painting is invariably representational. His favorite subjects are his friends, his homes, and the New England landscape surrounding him. As a result, his critics have a tendency to downplay his involvement in the movement, either viewing his work as representative of an American maverick attitude towards art or of an inability to interact meaningfully with the new movement. That Porter did not paint Abstract Expressionist paintings seems to me obvious—if de Kooning or Pollock ever painted a tree, it certainly didn’t resemble one. The question of whether or not Porter *was* an Abstract Expressionist, at least in spirit, is altogether different. Robert Hughes says flatly that Porter had “no link to Abstract Expressionism” (556), but he describes Porter’s *Island Farmhouse* (1969) as if it were an abstract painting:

the white weatherboard asserts itself in a blast of light like a Doric temple;
the lines of shadow are a burning visionary yellow; everything, from the
angular dog in the shade to the ragged trees, is seen in sharp patches, and yet

one's eye seems bathed in atmosphere, all the way out to the blue island on the remote horizon. (556)

“Bathed in atmosphere”—or, in other words, in nothing at all. The house in the painting, despite this “abstract” description, recalls nothing more than the works of Hopper and even the serene austerity of David Hockney’s exteriors, all straight lines and square windows, frankly and almost unnervingly realistic. But the world around the house, existing apparently apart from the house in its formlessness, is all colour: a curved patch of green for the grass, a different green for the shadow; blue for the water, a different blue (but not much) for the sky. The boat in the left background is simple, iconic, more the idea of a boat than a boat itself, like the black-and-white “angular dog” reclining in the shade. Most interesting are the house’s two windows, though, because they show that the house, too, is more the idea of a house than a house. The bottom window seems to show the lower half of the tree behind the house; the top one is a field of various blues, echoing the sky. There does not appear to be anything inside the house. It is either paper-thin or unusually (and selectively) reflective. The overall effect, combined with the strict front-facing perspective, is that the house becomes unidimensional, a false front, unnaturally flat, another field of colour in the painting.

And so we come to a net effect not all that different from the works of the Abstract Expressionists that Porter helped idealize and canonize. We have fields of colour; we have abstracted, iconographic figures; we have a pervading sense of irrealism. That Porter painted figures instead of abstracts, then, is perhaps not as important a point as it appears. What he seems to be gesturing towards in some of his work, as Schuyler does, is the visual

abstraction to be found in the mundane and the everyday, the sorts of shapes our eyes perceive without thinking.

Most telling in this regard is Porter's utter fascination with effects of light, as can be seen not only in *Island Farmhouse* but in other luminous canvases like *October Interior* (1963) or *July* (1971), both of which feature light as a sort of actor in itself, delineating spaces of shadow as so many abstract forms. Light is not just the medium but the subject of many of Porter's paintings, as it is of Schuyler's poems. Schuyler argues of Porter that

He paints air as light that shatters on surfaces in a spectrum that is, unlike a rainbow, consistent only to itself. One may know that the trunk of a sycamore scales off and discloses a creamy underbark, and that its shadow is stretched on grassblades whose myriads only a computer could tabulate, but the paint sees trunk and shadow as a continuity, a brown-violet beam which has no existence out of its context, but which is the thing truly seen. (*SAW* 14)

As I argued before, both Schuyler's and Porter's critical writing takes as its subject the unrelatability of the work of art, and the necessary presence of a viewer to make sense of it. One might attempt to describe a painting in criticism, but nothing can replace the experience of seeing the painting for oneself; to replicate a painting in prose is as impossible as conveying a novel with a sketch. In the paragraph above, Schuyler explains how Porter put this precept into action on the canvas. He achieves this by using paint to relate the unrelatable: light—the “thing truly seen” which, Schuyler says, “the eye so much more readily grasps than does a camera” (14). One of the ideas that Porter's paintings

explore, then, is the same as the field of “A Man in Blue:” process rather than product. In an article called “Appearance and Reality,” Schuyler says that “Bowden, Dash, Koehler, Burckhardt, Button, Katz, Porter, know the fogs and water of Maine and/or of Sausalito: the new reality that abstract painters create they find already there, in changing light and weather; in seeing” (52). Not the seen but the seeing is the subject of Porter’s figurative painting, and in this way his work is aligned much more closely with the works of his Abstract Expressionist peers than it might seem. They share an attitude rather than an aesthetic, a focus on immediacy that tends towards abstraction and generality.

Perhaps nowhere is this more apparent than in Schuyler’s diaphanous “Light Blue Above.” In the prose paragraph that begins the poem, Schuyler’s “painterliness” is on full show:

Light blue above, darker below, lightly roughened by the stirring air and with smooth tracks on it. There goes Reynald Hardie’s lobster boat, taking a colorful load of pleasure-seeking shoppers to Camden. (92)

This is as Porter-esque as can be found, in only two evocative sentences. There is a perception of colour based on relationships rather than absolutes (the juxtaposition of the vague “light blue” and the vaguer still “darker”), the vocabulary of paint (“lightly roughened,” “stirring,” “smooth tracks”) commingled with the symbols of the New England idylls (“Reynald Hardie’s lobster boat”). Schuyler’s concern with detail, too, is apparent: his boat, less than the iconic boat of *Island Farmhouse*, is specific, discrete. It has an owner (Hardie) and a destination (Camden.) From this short paragraph, the poem launches into an apostrophe to one of Porter’s and Schuyler’s favourite subjects—air:

O Air

the clear, the soot-bearer, the unseen that rips

that kills and cures, that keeps

all that is empty filled, the bright invisible (92)

Schuyler's lineation is always purposeful, and the opening line of his ode to air is no different: it is suspended alone, surrounded by white space, the sound of the juxtaposed vowels ("O Air") uncannily conjuring the sound of wind. We see, too, Schuyler's recurring fascination with paradox, with the unrelatable. Air "kills and cures," is "empty filled," is "the bright invisible." The rest of the poem investigates those abstract spaces that air haunts, imbuing air with personality but never with anthropomorphic volition: air "in silent laughter in a glass pushed down / into a basin at retreating puzzled water" (92), "clinging to arm hair in mercurial bubbles" (92), "the quick to heal / that wriggles up from hot / heat-wave pavement like teased hair" (92). In this poem that is unabashedly about "nothing," we find a lot of "something."

That something, the poem seems to argue, is the space in between, the enormous creative potential to be found where things are empty, as with his closing image of air

in a nest between twigs, among eggs

and we go on

with it within us

upon a dust speck

in bubble air (92-3)

Air is everywhere as it is nowhere, and therefore participates deeply in the genesis of objects: air is “between twigs, among eggs,” “within us.” Like the light of Porter’s paintings, air in Schuyler embodies what might be called a positive emptiness, one that yearns towards creation, yearns to be filled—thence, perhaps, Schuyler’s fascination with sky, weather, light. In “Light from Canada,” air (and light, “scoured and Nova / Scotian” [100]) “opens up the huddled masses / of the stolid spruce so you / see them in their bristling / individuality” (100). Light can also confuse rather than reveal, as in the night of “Freely Espousing,” the building apperceived as a “gold-green tetrahedron” (3). These are poems about the unrelatable, about air, light, the process of their apprehension and the importance of emptiness to creation. It is in this sense, perhaps, that they are most “painterly.” In a Schuyler poem, one can almost invariably perceive swatches of canvas behind the paint.

Schuyler’s “painterliness,” however, is less that than a general concern with art in all its forms and how that art is made. Take, for instance, these lines from “An East Window on Elizabeth Street:”

Out there

a bird is building a nest out of torn up letters
and the red cellophane off cigarette and gum packs.

The furthest off people are tiny as fine seed
but not at all bug like. A pinprick of blue

plainly is a child running. (85)

Like much of Schuyler's poetry, the source of these lines is the view from a window. The bird, a metaphor drained of its potency by centuries of acting as a poet-surrogate, is here invested with new life by exploring a new medium. Instead of singing, the typical parallel to poetic creation, this bird is a mixed-media visual artist, building a nest out of "torn-up letters" and "red cellophane," recalling the collage paintings of Jasper Johns or Robert Motherwell. More poignant, though, is the "child running" in the last line of the poem. The lines at once dismiss the clichéd simile of faraway people to insects and convey the deceptive nature of the human sensory apparatus. Like a master painter, all Schuyler needs to evoke his child is the smallest touch of paint: a "pinprick of blue" is enough, which also functions as a reminder of the artificiality of representation in poetry as in visual art, just as the iconic and unreal boat of *Island Farmhouse* made us question the reality of its surroundings. Schuyler's child is abstract, made not of limbs and features but of a patch of pure colour. This has the effect of drawing the reader into the process of composition itself. Poetry is made out of words, Schuyler says implicitly, as surely as paintings are of paint. In both, a single stroke is often enough.

Typical, too, is the poem's deceptive simplicity, its sure command of its material. David Lehman, whose *Last Avant-Garde* is the definitive survey of the New York School poets, remarks that "the remarkable thing about [Schuyler's] writing is how clean it is—not a word out of place—and how seemingly simple; only if you try to imitate Schuyler do you see that it is not simple at all" (244). In this poem, Schuyler paints layers of detail to convey his aerial view of New York City: "dulled sparkling mica lights of tar roofs" punctuate a bleak landscape of "junky buildings, aligned by a child" that are "the color of

weak gums” (84). The city is “toned, like patched, wash-faded rags. / Noble and geometric, like Laurana’s project for a square. / Mutable, delicate, ugly, mysterious” (84). The poem is coated thick with colour, but in ugly, muted tones that refer only vaguely to the colours they describe, “feeble blue” (84) and “bristling gray” (85); these draw the eye inevitably to the last lines of the poem, a patch of pure red cellophane and a sharp blue child. This technique—the juxtaposition of differences—was a favorite technique of the New York School poets and of the Abstract Expressionists. John Ashbery, praising a new volume of Gertrude Stein’s, commented that it was

made up almost entirely of colorless connecting words such as “where,” “which,” “these,” “of,” “not,” “have,” “about,” and so on, though now and then Miss Stein throws in an orange, a lilac, or an Albert to remind us that it really is the world, our world, that she has been talking about. The result is like certain monochrome de Kooning paintings in which isolated strokes of color take on a deliciousness they never could have had out of context, or a piece of music by Webern in which a single note on the celesta suddenly irrigates a whole desert of dry, scratchy sounds in the strings. (Hoover 21)

The cellophane and child have what Ashbery calls “deliciousness,” what Porter would call “energy,” an eddy of meaning in the poem in which the collage of the imagery of New York City streets and snatches of overheard conversation coalesce in a deeply evocative final image that is both verbal and visual. Perhaps, then, Schuyler is being disingenuous when he claims that “writing like painting” has nothing to do with it. He is certainly appropriating some of the artistic methods of the Abstract Expressionists: a freedom of form and spirit, a

fascination with unusual combinations of colour, an ability to distil the beautiful from the ugly. His gift, apparently, is not in aping the methods of visual art, but rather in so accurately transposing its spirit to a different medium, an alchemist aboard the paint-slick boat.

Parsimony, however, is likely much more useful as an interpretative mechanism: probably the bird is not a metaphor for poetic creation, probably the bird is a bird, one Schuyler saw and described. It's easy to see, then, why Schuyler may have been frustrated with his near-constant characterization as a "painterly" poet, what Gillian Conoley calls his "watercolorist sensibility" (45). To assume that his poems refer to anything other than their very real subjects, paintings included, is to deny the real achievement of his poetry. David Lehman illustrates the problem of metaphor in Schuyler best:

The severe restriction Schuyler placed on himself, the disciplined refusal to "take such license" as poets customarily seize, the resolute determination to praise what is tangibly present and only that, is connected to the sense one has of the tremendous psychic repression that Schuyler endured in order to write so convincingly about happiness, which is to be found not in grand flights but in the celebration of ordinary pleasures. Probably no other poet of our time has written so convincingly of the pleasures of rain, snow, a shampoo, the application of after-shave lotion, flowers of all kinds, a smoke in the backseat of a cab. A cup of coffee was a lyric occasion. (265)

This is a poetry of the beauty of the everyday. Never are the objects of human apprehension sanely reducible to metaphor. Indeed, Schuyler claimed in an interview that symbols are

“all horseshit! Not the way things are, at all” (Thompson 122). To analyze the physical world in terms of its potential symbolic meaning is not to open one avenue of inquiry but to close several others, erasing the lines connecting things to their infinity of objective and subjective meanings. Schuyler’s “painterliness” is one way to translate the mystery of his poems to criticism, but to focus on this particular feature is to shut down exploration of his other lines of influence—classical and jazz, Breton and Bataille—that contribute to his uniquely holistic verse.

It’s also easy, though, to see why the “painterly” epithet is so frequently used to describe his work. There is a great deal of raw colour in his poems. Though this is one of the first tools in the documentarist’s toolbox, Schuyler’s colour is not rough paste smeared on his lines. It is not colour for the sake of colour: it is colour deployed to produce effects. To call him a “painterly” poet, then, is somewhat to misunderstand the aims of his “painterly” methods, or even what it might mean to write “poetry like painting.” There is a gap, after all, between the two disciplines, one so obvious and unbridgeable that it hardly needs to be said: paintings are made of paint, and poems of words. What business does a painter have writing poetry, even though Fairfield Porter’s poems are of uniformly high quality? And what business does a poet have criticizing art, though Schuyler’s criticism is among the most erudite and perceptive about a notoriously difficult movement in American painting? Of course, the New York School did their best to see the two media mixed as literally as possible. Jasper Johns’s famous *Flag* (1954-55) looks like paint from a few feet away, only to reveal a foundation of newsprint when examined up close. Frank O’Hara collaborated with Norman Bluhm on a series of “poem/paintings” in which action painting

and action poetry met on the same canvas. There is something happening at the intersection of painting and poetry, subject and object, that these artists feel drawn to.

As Schuyler himself reminds in “Hudson Ferry,” “you can’t get at a sunset naming colors” (21). This discussion, so far, leaves the critical reader of Schuyler’s poetry on uncertain ground, that treacherous crag called “interdisciplinary studies.” Schuyler’s writing incorporates elements of the works of those artists, composers, and poets he liked best—no surprise, particularly when one considers that T. S. Eliot is among the “precious little” (*Contemporary Authors* 445) criticism he felt was valuable in the interpretation of his work. Sometimes, as in “A Man in Blue” or “East Window on Elizabeth Street,” the elements of his influences are easier to trace. Most of the time, however, they are obfuscated by deft linguistic zigzagging and an almost preternaturally transparent poetic style, as in “Letter to a Friend: Who Is Nancy Daum?” from his 1972 *The Crystal Lithium*:

All things are real
 no one a symbol:
 curtains (shantung
 silk)
 potted palm, a
 bust: flat, with pipe— (125)

Paul Hoover argues that “for Schuyler, shantung silk is shantung silk” (25). Symbol and metaphor, mainstays of poetic (and painterly) explication, are largely absent from his poetry, transmuted into the objects of “mere” description. Without metaphor, though, Schuyler invites us to perceive objects ourselves: instead of being told what the curtains of

shantung silk mean, we are invited to look at the silk itself and divine its end on our own. His fascination with air, light, and space are not for nothing—his verse is spacious, allowing its reader the chance to luxuriate, reflect, and build something of his or her own.

We come, then, to something of a conclusion, if perhaps one as gauzy as a reflected Fairfield Porter landscape. Schuyler raises description to the level of art, makes the surprisingly bold assertion that Sidney's brazen world has always been beautiful enough, is loath to decorate a world so filled already with decoration: "What is, is by its nature, on display" (*Collected* 47). In painting that world for us, he alerts us to the colour, the light, the air, and the sound of the world around us. These are poems that urge their readers to take a closer look at the things around them; more still, they urge us to *make* things of the world around us, not to take a sky or a pie or a bit of cellophane for granted but really to consider them, and thereby to make them our own. In description—in "painterliness"—Schuyler demonstrates that the world around us is what we make of it. Whether a lawn be Bruno Walter's hair or chopped by the insufferable clacking of lawnmowers, whether a landscape resemble a Porter, a Pollock, or a Breughel, is ultimately up to the individual. And it is in this notion that Schuyler shows himself to be truly a painter's poet. Making something from nothing, he urges us only to see.

And yet there must be something behind Schuyler's elaborate façade of colour and shape, sky and weather, even if that "something" be, as Schuyler and Porter explore in their work, "nothing." In the next chapter, I hope to provide something of a critical framework for exploring Schuyler's work, a work that seems—no matter how one looks at it—to be deeply resistant to criticism. What is there to criticize, after all, in the view from one

window? Perhaps, in the end, “shantung silk” is not merely shantung silk, as Paul Hoover argues, but something more: the *words* “shantung silk,” or a stroke of blue paint that through some strange metamorphosis becomes a child. In asking us to look more closely at the things around us, Schuyler also appears to be asking us to look more closely at his poems. But what if all we find there be approximation, illusion, mask?

Chapter 2

Revenge of the Giant Face: Nothingness and Faciality

The mask is the central metaphor that I will use in an attempt to construct a critical framework for understanding Schuyler's poetry. I am stealing the term outright as it is used in Natalie Kosoi's perceptive article about Mark Rothko's signature paintings, "Nothingness Made Visible: The Case of Rothko's Paintings." Rothko's signature paintings present a legendary critical problem: composed of square-like fields of colour superimposed upon other square-like fields of colour, they are as close to pure abstraction as is possible. They are, like Schuyler's poems, ostensibly devoid of metaphor or symbol, and are seemingly about nothing. Even Barnett Newman—whose works most resemble Rothko's among his immediate contemporaries—seems to refer to something in his paintings: there is a firm relationship between the bands of colour and their background, even if it is only one of proportion and complementarity. But Rothko's squares are not even squares. Their edges are rough-hewn, allowing the colour in the foreground to bleed into the colour in the background. The fields of colour seem to share no relationship to one another other than their accidental superimposition by the artist's brush, held by someone who, from the point of view of the audience, appears to be completely invisible. What is most notable about the paintings, I think, is what might be called their "luminescence": they seem to glow with an immanent light, a trait they share with Porter's paintings and with Schuyler's poems.

It is difficult, however, to hang critical apparatus upon luminescence. Kosoi manages to do this by arguing that the absence of symbols is what evokes the spiritual exaltation of Rothko's signature paintings. According to Kosoi, the exaltation is linked to Heidegger's concept of "nothingness," which "points to the impossibility of any salvation, as our impending nothingness is also what constitutes us" (25). Nothingness, then, is a duality: death and life in one. But it needn't have grisly connotations. The enterprise of nothingness is one of self-recognition, the "slipping away of the whole":

When things "slip away" from us, they do not disappear and ... the difference between us and the world is *not* obliterated and we do not become one with it. Instead, the world and its entities, to which we escape in order to avoid facing up to our being, remain, while our connection to them is severed, leaving only ourselves and our being, which is being-toward-death. It is not a state in which we are absorbed into the world, nor is it one of either self-forgetfulness or a shuttered consciousness ... It is rather a state in which we touch the deepest core of ourselves, the finitude that constitutes us. (27)

I believe Schuyler's poems court the same ends: to expose the "deepest core of ourselves" in revealing the apparently contradictory "sublime-nothingness" of the everyday, what Kosoi and Heidegger term the "being," a third term apart from either object or subject. Unlike Kosoi, however, I do not believe that what she terms the "deepest core of ourselves" is by any means a finitude. Schuyler and Porter both articulate a vast interior network of meaning, an infinite zone of possibility opened up by their paradoxical melding of realism

and abstraction. In telling us that the “real” world is as abstract as the entirely new worlds wrought by the Abstract Expressionists, Schuyler and Porter point towards the same turning-inwards that Kosoi finds in Rothko. But their project is not, like Rothko’s, about teasing the death out of life. It is instead about drawing life out of the “finitude” of the objects of the world.

What I wish to steal from Kosoi is her idea of the “mask,” which she identifies as the salient element of Rothko’s signature paintings. They are, however, masks of a particular sort, “masks that show what they hide” (31). She asks, with Barbara Novak and Brian O’Doherty, “what is behind the mask? Another mask, a fallible human presence—or nothing” (274)? The work of art is figured as a symbol mediating between artist and audience, something that at once conceals the face and *is* the face. By “mask” I do not mean that Schuyler is concealing anything in his poetry, or Porter in his paintings. I believe that the strength of both artists’ work rests on its clarity, transparency, and relative freedom from the sometimes-burden of metaphor. Despite the absence of metaphor in their works, however, both Schuyler and Porter seem to have found its use indispensable to the practice of criticism, as they both employ it in their writings about “nonverbal” or “vacuum” works. The metaphor of the mask is appropriate to criticism of Schuyler and Porter, I think, because the poetry and painting it hopes to describe is so resistant to interpretation, or, perhaps more accurately, calls for different interpretative tools. Bruno Latour says that “there is no greater intellectual crime than to address with the equipment of an older period the challenges of the present one” (157). To this end, I turn to the theory of Gilles Deleuze

and Félix Guattari, more specifically the concept of “faciality” they outline in their landmark *A Thousand Plateaus*.

Faciality—in the world of *A Thousand Plateaus*, the exploration of the ways the human face can produce meaning—works as an interpretative mechanism. When we describe a poem or a painting, we are describing what makes that poem or painting different from all of the others, what, in short, makes it particular. Every face, according to Deleuze-Guattari, is particular, but the ways that we draw meaning from the multitude of faces that surround us can be varied as well as particular. For instance, as discussed above, the term most frequently employed to describe Schuyler’s poetry is “painterly.”

Painterliness, then, is the way in which Schuyler’s poetry makes itself different from the poetry that surrounds it, that thing which constitutes the “face” of his work.

I feel, however, that the term “painterly” is flawed in the sense that it is usually employed. For one thing, “painterliness” is a damnably vague term, apparently meaning that the poems resemble paintings (which they cannot). Furthermore, no matter how much it is meant as a compliment, “painterly” seems to me inherently dismissive: it reduces the possibilities for meaning in Schuyler’s works to one, the visual field. Perhaps worse, it says nothing about Schuyler’s poetry that is not immediately apparent to any attentive reader. Schuyler worked as an art critic and ran in circles filled with artists: no surprise, then, that art should make itself pervasive in his verse. To analyze those links is not fruitless, and I have and will explore them, as they (particularly those to Porter’s work) constitute rich metatexts to the poetry. However, Schuyler is no more a “painterly” poet than Porter was a landscape artist; Schuyler employed “painterliness” to a specific end, as Porter did the

landscape. The term “painterly,” however, remains useful. It points the reader towards that element of his poetry that I feel Schuyler is most intent on exploring. It’s telling, for instance, that the most widespread description of his verse has nothing to do with poetry, but with another medium altogether. His work, quietly as it may insist upon it, is about breaking down boundaries, exploring the spaces in between, and it is in mapping those spaces that Deleuze-Guattari and their concept of the face make themselves most useful.

The agenda of *A Thousand Plateaus* as I read it is not to call for a program of readings, but merely to provide a set of tools for expansive analysis. The book’s politics are far from usual: in their essays about nomads, television, plant biology, Freud, and the face, Deleuze-Guattari appear to be discussing everything and nothing at once. The “nothing” in their toolbox that I find most useful to the understanding of New York School poetry and Abstract Expressionist art is the concept of faciality. The idea of faciality grew, in the pseudochronological “plateaus” of the book, in the “Year Zero.” It constitutes the first concept and the first interpretative mechanism, the ancestor of criticism. Faciality exists at the intersection of two semiotic systems, signification and subjectification, the former figured as a “white wall” upon which information can be projected (in their metaphor, a film screen) and the latter as a “black hole” which receives information (in their metaphor, a camera). They argue that “a very special mechanism is situated at their intersection” (167):

Oddly enough, it is a face: the *white wall/black hole* system. A broad face with white cheeks, a chalk face with eyes cut in for a black hole. Clown head, white clown, moon-white mime, angel of death, Holy Shroud. The

face is not an envelope exterior to the person who speaks, thinks, or feels. The form of the signifier in language, even its units, would remain indeterminate if the potential listener did not use the face of the speaker to guide his or her choices. (167)

Deleuze-Guattari posit a third entity in the speaker/listener (or artist/audience) relationship: the face. Without the face, the signifier itself risks nonsensicality or misinterpretation. When one speaks, the expression upon one's face might not only add to the meaning of one's words, but could alter that meaning completely, leaving the word to exist in a quantum state somewhere between signifier and signified. If the Deleuzian project is partially about unsettling the dominance of binary relationships in philosophy—male/female, straight/gay, subject/object, signifier/signified—this third term, the face, is the important one, the one that takes the place of that dividing backslash.

Signifiante and subjectification are the twin processes whose combined workings produce the abstract machine of faciality. They seek to describe the twin functions of the human face: to produce and to receive meaning, respectively. This intersection is interesting in Schuyler because he deals so much with issues of signifiante and subjectification; ruminations upon both occur to a significant extent over the course of his oeuvre. Both terms, however, require significant elaboration if their applicability to Schuyler is to be clear. The first half of faciality, signifiante, is one Deleuze-Guattari borrow from French structural linguist Émile Benveniste, a student-by-proxy of Saussure's. It is not to be confused with signification. Where signification has to do with the meanings or definitions of words, signifiante is the process by which that meaning or definition is

formed. Benveniste took issue with signification in Peirce's vision of language as a system of signs whose signifiers were all, ultimately, still more signs. There must, after all, be some difference between sign and signifier:

Mais finalement ces signes, étant tous signes les uns des autres, de quoi pourront-ils être signes qui *ne soit pas* signe? Trouverons-nous le point fixe où amarrer la *première* relation de signe? ... Pour que la notion de signe ne s'abolisse pas dans cette multiplication à l'infini, il faut que quelque part l'univers admette une *différence* entre le signe et le signifié. Il faut donc que tout le signe soit pris et compris dans un *système* de signes. Là est la condition de la *signifiance*. ... On devra constituer plusieurs systèmes de signes, et entre ces systèmes, expliciter un rapport de différence et d'analogie.

In the end, what can signs, signifying each other, be that is not a sign? Will we find a fixed point to anchor the first sign-relationship? So that the concept of the sign does not disappear in this multiplication to infinity, the universe at some point must admit a difference between sign and signifier. This is the condition of signifiance. We will need to build several systems of signs, and between these systems elaborate a relationship of difference and analogy. (45, translation mine)

We have therefore another “third term,” signifiance, occurring itself at the intersection of sign and signifier. Signifiance becomes not about what words mean, but the process of

becoming-meaningful in relationship to the words they are put into conjunction with. It constitutes a meaning in process. Significance, as one half of the nesting-doll of faciality, is itself a term in constant flux. It is indefinite, uncertain, a minor deity of negative theology.

Why side with Deleuze-Guattari, then, instead of Roland Barthes or Julia Kristeva or even Benveniste himself, who popularized (so to speak) the notions of significance and the “third meaning?” Barthes, in clever analyses of stills from Eisenstein, posits that there are three meanings to any image: the first, informational, consists of the literal meaning of the image; the second, symbolic, contains the “obvious” meaning of the image as it relates to a “common, general lexicon of symbols” (54); and the third, which he terms the “obtuse meaning,” is that subjective meaning that seems to be in addition to the informational and symbolic levels of the image. The term “obtuse” he feels is entirely justified:

Obtusus means *that which is blunted, rounded in form*. ... Do [these traits] not give the obvious signified a kind of difficultly prehensible roundness, cause my reading to slip? ... it belongs to the family of pun, buffoonery, useless expenditure. Indifferent to moral or aesthetic categories (the trivial, the futile, the false, the pastiche), it is on the side of the carnival. *Obtuse* is thus very suitable. (55)

Some adjustments are necessary to fit this bit of Barthes into the context of Schuyler’s poetry. Because the second term (the symbolic) is so often missing in Schuyler, the meanings of his poems are much more than otherwise caught up in what Barthes calls the “obtuse meaning,” and its definition must be widened to fit. It would be difficult for me to agree, for instance, that the “third term” in Schuyler is “indifferent to moral or aesthetic

categories.” By process of accretion, the ethics and aesthetics in his poetry become clear, though they are never explicitly elaborated. In my view, the third term—in Deleuze-Guattari’s constellation, faciality—is unrestricted in its potential for meaning precisely because of its subjective nature. To claim that the third term cannot encompass the moral or the aesthetic, that it can only be blunted or rounded in form (what makes an idea round? Could the third meaning not be wave, hexagon, pyramid, tesseract?), is to ignore the infinite network of meanings subtending that term and the infinite network of individuals interpreting it.

Barthes’s “obtusus” is not perfect, then. He identifies that there is something aside from the “informational” and “symbolic” levels of a text, but insists on delimiting it, giving shape (however “difficultly prehensible”) to something that is by its nature undefinable, formless, protean, and strange. What interests me most in Barthes’s definition, though, is his idea of “useless expenditure,” a superfluity of meaning contained in the third term. Signifiante is composed of this superfluity, unbound by the meaning of the individual word and therefore surpassing it, like water overflowing a vessel and spreading in all directions, as in Schuyler’s gorgeous prose poem “Milk” from *Freely Espousing*:

On the highway this morning at the go-round, about where you leave New Hampshire, there had been an accident. Milk was sloshed on the gray-blue-black so much like a sheet of early winter ice you drove over it slowly, no matter what the temperature of the weather that eddied in through the shatterproof glass gills. There were milk-skins all around, the way dessert plates look after everyone has left the table in the Concord grape season.

Only bigger, unpigmented though pretty opaque, not squashed but no less empty.

Trembling, milk is coming into its own. (32)

Unconstrained and fluid, meaning cannot help but flow everywhere. If “obtuse” will not do, we need another word. “Superfluous” works. It contains the connotation of “unnecessary:” this will do, as the third meaning is unnecessary. More importantly, it contains “overflowing:” the cup of meaning runneth over. Significance, then, is this “superfluous meaning,” a meaning-in-progress that exists in addition to the “stable” meanings of words, difficult to constrain or define but nevertheless real, the process that in its cogwheels engenders sign, signifier, and signified in the reader or viewer.

Subjectification is the second half of faciality. Put simply, it is the process by which human beings construct themselves: a process of capture and assimilation, of building oneself in layers. Deleuze-Guattari’s metaphor of the movie camera (168) is useful: by the combination of individual frames, one eventually produces a film. And, like the film, the movement of subjectification is necessarily linear, moving as it does with time: Deleuze-Guattari argue that subjectification “essentially constitutes finite linear proceedings, one of which ends before the next begins: thus the cogito is always recommenced, a passion or grievance is always recapitulated” (133). Subjectification is to the subject as significance is to the signifier: process rather than product. And so, inevitably, significance and subjectification, twin processes, must meet: for the work of making ourselves to progress, we must at some point encounter and process words and their superfluous meanings which

we assimilate for ourselves. A human being is not a mute receptor of data. It captures, assimilates, synthesizes, builds. Ideas are not merely added to our memories but added in relationship to other ideas to form a network of possible ideas. As Deleuze-Guattari would have it, a camera is of little use without a screen.

And so we come to faciality, that strange plane where signification and subjectification come together. The face is an abstract machine that both produces and dissimulates information: it both projects and receives meaning. An abstract machine, like a real machine, is something that receives input and produces some kind of output. Deleuze-Guattari use an analogy to a synthesizer to explain how an abstract machine might function:

By assembling modules, source elements, and elements for treating sound (oscillators, generators, and transformer), by arranging microintervals, the synthesizer makes audible the sound process itself, the production of that process, and puts us in contact with still other elements beyond sound matter. It unites disparate elements in the material, and transposes the parameters from one formula to another. ... Philosophy is no longer synthetic judgment; it is like a thought synthesizer functioning to make thought travel, make it mobile (343)

The machine, then, always reveals its methods in its functioning; its product is inextricable from the process that produces it. The machine never exists in a vacuum, but relates to other machines in a vast network of mutual meaning. The machine of a synthesizer is worthless without the machine of the musical scale, itself connected to the machine of the human ear which is a smaller part of the machine of the human body, that most emblematic

of Deleuzean machinic assemblages. At another point in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze-Guattari use the example of a book, itself a “little machine” (4), its individual parts (letters, words, sentences, chapters; ideas, symbols, metaphors, characters) without meaning until they are put into conjunction with other concepts to produce another thing altogether (“book”): “we will never ask what a book means, as signified or signifier; we will not look for anything to understand in it. We will ask what it functions with, in connection with what other things it does or does not transmit intensities” (4). No machine exists in a vacuum; each and all are interconnected.

Faciality, then, is one such machine, composed of eyes, mouth, nose, ears, brows (knitted, high, soft): protuberances and cavities. A person “does not speak a general language but one whose signifying traits are indexed to specific faciality traits” (168). Faces “define zones of frequency or probability, delimit a field that neutralizes in advance any expressions or connections unamenable to the appropriate significations” (168). What we have, then, is a sort of quantum mechanics of linguistics. Meaning becomes “probable” rather than definite, and the meaning of any term is produced by two entirely different but eerily related processes, signification and subjectification, both of which occur upon that most commonplace arrangement of symbols, the human face. It is a screen both constantly changing and necessarily unreliable: smile or smirk? It captures information, too, but that information is subject to the machine of subjectification, which alters, synthesizes, and reorganizes even as it captures. “A horror story, the face is a horror story” (168): one must, like Dr. Frankenstein, dismantle the face into its component parts in order to piece together its intentions.

This process of dismantling works in deterritorializations, another element central to the argument of *A Thousand Plateaus*. Deterritorialization is a process by which machines change functions in their relationship to other machines. Deleuze-Guattari's example is what they call the wasp/orchid complex: "the orchid deterritorializes by forming an image, a tracing of a wasp; but the wasp reterritorializes on that image. The wasp is nevertheless deterritorialized, becoming a piece in the orchid's reproductive apparatus. But it reterritorializes the orchid by transporting its pollen" (10). Such an assemblage they call a rhizome, a machine productive of multiplicities. There is an exchange between wasp and orchid that enriches them both within a web of connections. The same is true of the face. To perceive a face, an abstract machine, one must deterritorialize the human head, cease to perceive it as a system of protuberances and cavities and see it instead as a single and unified machine productive of meaning. Eyes become monstrous when excerpted from the face, made into "cogwheels" in the machine of faciality. The Cheshire cat's smile, disembodied, is more unsettling than friendly. Put into combination, though, the elements of the face are able to convey an enormous variety of information that, individually, they are relatively powerless to do. Extrapolating from there, not only the face is subject to facialization. The entire body can be facialized, and, by extension, any system of signs:

If the head and its elements are facialized, the entire body also can be facialized, comes to be facialized as part of an inevitable process. When the mouth and nose, but first the eyes, become a holey surface, all the other volumes and cavities of the body follow. ... *It is precisely because the face depends on an abstract machine that it is not content to cover the head, but*

touches all other parts of the body, and even, if necessary, other objects without resemblance. (170)

The tendency of faciality to overcode those things that are ostensibly simple is the mechanism that allows faciality to be used as a tool for interpreting Schuyler's poetry. It allows for a reading of his poems based on their individual parts, but also seeks to understand how those individual parts contribute to the whole.

Deleuze-Guattari note that the dismantling of the face is not the affair of the French novel. But, they claim, the Anglo-American novel has taken strides in that direction: "From Hardy to Lawrence, from Melville to Miller, the same cry rings out: Go across, get out, break through, make a beeline, don't get stuck on a point. Find the line of separation, follow it or create it, to the point of treachery" (186-7). American poetry, beginning from Whitman's ecstatic explorations of the self in *Leaves of Grass*, follows a similar programme, perhaps most dramatically in the case of Schuyler and his New York School contemporaries. The dismantling of the face is among the affairs of art, specifically, in the eyes of Deleuze-Guattari, American art:

It is through writing that you become animal, it is through color that you become imperceptible, it is through music that you become hard and memoryless, simultaneously animal and imperceptible: in love. But art is never an end in itself; it is only a tool for blazing life lines, in other words, all of those real becomings that are not produced only *in* art, and all of those active escapes that do not consist of fleeing *into* art, taking refuge in art, and all of those positive deterritorializations that never reterritorialize on art, but

instead sweep it away with them toward the realms of the asignifying, asubjective, and faceless. (187)

Faciality is a step “on the road to the asignifying and asubjective” (171), but only if the face “is destroyed, dismantled” (171). That the face must be destroyed is clear. For a literature and a painting that celebrates variety and multiplicity as much as the New York School does, the face is a dictator, culling the multiplicities engendered by signification and subjectification and replacing them with a single, “real” meaning, which cannot be other than the face itself.

Though the theoretical unpacking above is not perfectly synchronous with the oeuvres of Schuyler and Porter—their work is much too varied and rich for generalizations—it provides a rough scaffolding for the exploration of the paradoxes of realism and abstraction in Schuyler’s poetry and Porter’s painting, which operate, too, along the lines of deterritorialization described above. Deleuze-Guattari’s system of faciality reveals the mechanism that produces the superfluous third meaning, and that mechanism is more dizzying and complex than can be fully understood.

What fruits does this approach yield when attempting to understand Schuyler’s verse, or Porter’s painting? Deleuze-Guattari’s concept of faciality provides the reader of Schuyler with a method for understanding how the poems *work*, how their individual parts create a net effect his critics have been content to call “painterliness.” In their attempt to

destroy the face, they are rife with misrecognition, misunderstanding, misapprehension. They are concerned deeply with words, and how they mean, as in the “unintelligible shapes of phrases” (23) of “Today,” one of the factors that results in their eerily detached and crystalline tone. In their focus on the processes of signification and subjectification rather than the products of those processes, Schuyler succeeds in dismantling the face and replacing it with something else altogether. Take, for example, these lines from “Freely Espousing,” which I identified earlier as the closest we shall get to an artistic credo in James Schuyler:

where Tudor City
 catches the sky or the glass side
 of a building lit up at night in fog
 “What is that gold-green tetrahedron down the river?”
 “You are experiencing a new sensation.”

 the bales of pink cotton candy
 in the slanting light
 are ornamental cherry trees.
 The green around them, and
 the browns, the grays, are the park. (3)

Here are signification and subjectification writ large. The poem is partially about the process of seeing: a “building lit up at night in fog” is mistaken for a “gold-green tetrahedron,” and the choice to put the product before the perception—the “building” before the

“tetrahedron”—serves to reinforce the conceptual space between the two. As if to strengthen his focus on perception, Schuyler places a second misrecognition immediately following: “bales of pink cotton candy” are “ornamental cherry trees,” and, in a particularly “painterly” touch, he sketches in the fields of colour composing the park before telling his readers that it is a park. Here are lines that read almost like a mystery story. The reader is given the materials to assemble the scene, and, at the end, the mystery is revealed: not a tetrahedron but a building, not colours but a park. And, as in any good mystery story, the magic here is in the process. Like the slow falling-asleep described in “A Man in Blue,” the hazy coming-together of perceived shapes gives the poem its almost mystical tone. But what sorts of shapes do we have? Schuyler does not arrange his colors. Because of the nature of his medium, he must be content to list them, which gives these lines their Rothkoesque sensibility. They exist as blotches of colour not on the page but in the mind, with words standing in for paint. So, there is the signifiante: providing his readers with the materials, he leaves us to do the painting. Subjectification, here, is even more directly addressed. The second-person pronoun helpfully informs the reader that he or she is “experiencing a new sensation.” Schuyler is involved in the politics of identity-building after all.

And, as at any intersection of signifiante and subjectification, we find a face—not the face of the despot-leader or of the mother, but the face of the poem or the painting, pulled apart and reorganized. In poetry, the face can be difficult to detect, though it is invariably present. It is perceivable only peripherally, in constructions like rhyme, rhythm, and cliché, machines that tend towards fixity rather than expansiveness, though their fixity

is heavily dependent upon their employment. When it comes to painting, however, the metaphor of the face is much easier to digest, particularly since Fairfield Porter's paintings so prominently feature the faces of those dear to him. Take, for instance, Porter's *The Mirror* (1966), featured on the cover of Justin Spring's biography of the painter, *A Life in Art*. Like many of Porter's paintings, it appears uncomplex and even inviting at first. Considering the picture more closely, however, reveals layers of conflict and paradox. In the foreground sits Porter's daughter Lizzie in fall colours. Behind her is a mirror which reflects the back of her head as well as her father, standing a few feet further back, considering his composition. A jug of liquid—water, or turpentine—is also reflected, sitting under a window that overlooks a diaphanous autumn scene. Between the reflected window and the reflected Porter are photographs and sketches hanging on the wall, one of which looks uncannily like a mirrored detail of Mona Lisa's face. As in *Island Farmhouse*, the conceit of a frame within a frame is used to great effect. The painting is a portrait of Porter's daughter, the mirror a self-portrait of Porter himself, the reflected window the sort of gauzy suburban pastoral for which he is best known. Reflected along the back wall are several other works of art: the inclusion of the Mona Lisa, shrunk and powerless, gives the picture some tongue-in-cheek humour.

Despite this brief flash of comedy, the picture is a serious one, even severe. Lizzie seems to stare straight ahead at the viewer, her face still, her eyes unfocused. As is frequent in Porter's paintings of figures, there is something awkward and even iconic about the daughter sitting on the stool. Her knees bend at slightly unnatural angles, her left arm a little longer than her right. Eerily, though, the reflection tells a different story. The reflected

Lizzie is looking a little to her right at her father, instead of straight ahead at the viewer. The reflected Fairfield Porter is much more accurately rendered, but his face is without detail, blank and eyeless. Perhaps most oddly, the table against which the mirror is propped seems to continue into the right side of the mirror, an impossible confluence of angles that serves to reinforce the unreality of the reflected world. If the mirror is facing the viewer directly as perspective would indicate, why is Lizzie's reflection off-centre? And where is Porter standing, anyway? The window, too, seems to overspill the edges of the mirror, blurring the edges between reality and its reflection.

It is possible to see something of Deleuze-Guattari's faciality in this painting. After all, in the conjunction of the mirror and the "real world" outside it, Porter presents us with a series of differences. For one thing, where the universe outside the mirror prominently features a symmetrical face—and the face operating as power, the familial power of the daughter's face—the world within the mirror has "effaced the face," most obviously in the treatment of the Mona Lisa. The image of the Mona Lisa had been a fixture of avant-garde art for the last several decades (usually in attempts to discredit it), from Duchamp's frankly hilarious *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919) to Dalí's bizarre self-portrait (1954) to Warhol's dismissive serigraphs (1963). Hers is inarguably the second most famous face in Western art (after, of course, Christ's.) And Porter, like Warhol, seeks to efface rather than to deface her face: her eyes, that most legendary part of the painting, are missing. She is also truncated, curtains surrealistically substituted for her hair. She is rendered in black-and white, made to be only one of a series of pictures. Her face, in short, is stripped of its signifying (Deleuze-Guattari

would say “despotic”) identity piece-by-piece. It is recognizable, but only enough for us to know that it is being attacked.

And what, then, to make of the artist’s face, stripped of its cavities and protuberances and therefore its powers of signifiacance and subjectification? For one thing, confusing the distinction between artist and viewer appears to be one of the explicit themes of the painting: daughter Lizzie is at once staring at the viewer and at her father, who is wielding the phallic, promethean paintbrush. Her gaze ties together viewer and artist in a relationship the painting is content to leave unclear. The artist’s face becomes blank, a bit like the ideas we have of our own heads, that single region of the body which we can only ever see reflected. But dismantling the face is also about dismantling subjectivity, Deleuze-Guattari argue, and is therefore a political philosophy:

If the face is a politics, dismantling the face is also a politics involving real becomings, an entire becoming-landestine. Dismantling the face is the same as breaking through the wall of the signifier and getting out of the black hole of subjectivity. Here, the program, the slogan, of schizoanalysis is: Find your black holes and white walls, know them, know your faces; it is the only way you will be able to dismantle them and draw your lines of flight. (188)

If *The Mirror* demonstrates anything, it’s that Fairfield Porter knows his faces. He has a famous one (Mona Lisa), a familiar one (Lizzie), and his own (effaced). And the project of this painting is at least partially about “breaking through the wall of the signifier and getting out of the black hole of subjectivity.” The jug, the couch and pillow in the

background, and the window do not signify: they simply are. The black hole of subjectivity is deeply complicated by the conflation of artist, subject, artwork, and viewer: who is Lizzie looking at? Are the contents of the mirror the work of art? And what of the window, that potential for escape from the signifying face, secreted away in the parallel universe of the mirror? Like the face, the asignifying painting is a “horror story.” Pulling its meanings apart provides no guarantees that one will be able to stitch it back together again.

Though faciality and painting seem made for one another—Deleuze-Guattari say as much when they discuss the French expressionist painters Bonnard and Vuillard (175), both of whom were enormous influences on Schuyler and Porter—its applicability to poetry, and particularly to Schuyler, may seem a bit more nebulous. It may be worth recalling that Deleuze-Guattari’s metaphor of the face was itself split into a twin metaphor: the “white wall” of signifiante and the “black hole” of subjectification. The reason for the former metaphor is clear in their analogy to the film screen. Projection involves moving light from the projector to the screen, and the film-image exists in various states between projector and screen. This metaphor is easily transposable to the printed page of poetry. Between the “white wall” of the page and the mind reading it, meaning is mutated, transformed, pressed to fit the available apertures of the individual mind.

The black hole, however, is a thornier metaphor. As subjectification is an apparatus of capture, one that receives but does not project, the metaphor of the black hole makes perfect sense. It is a dense, dark, unimaginable space into which information is pulled unwillingly. The challenge lies in finding that messy, complicated thing on the inarguably static and permanent page. To grant consciousness to a poem is a leap into the truly

fanciful. We say that poems have a life of their own if they are good poems, but they certainly aren't writing themselves. How, then, can a poem really engage in the process of subjectification? It does so by working in tandem with the necessary companion of the poem, the wasp to the poem's orchid: the reader. Reader and text participate together in the creation and/or dismantling of the textual face, with the text providing the white screen and the reader the black holes. It would, of course, be disingenuous to claim that every reader has subjectification in mind when he or she approaches Schuyler's poetry. Though his is admittedly a small audience, it seems unlikely that most of his readers are gazing upon the poem with analytic black-hole eyes. But it remains that one must attempt to make sense of a poem in reading it. That critical gaze on the part of the reader is what constitutes the "black hole" of the poem in an attempt to integrate the meaning of the poem into the reader's own consciousness.

For this reason, Schuyler's verse finds itself so resistant to the explicatory aims of criticism, and effortlessly disarms attempts to imbue it with political or philosophical meaning. Because Schuyler, like Porter, is so adept at the Deleuzean project of dismantling and dissimulating the face—because his poems are about process rather than product, beauty rather than politics—he effectively immunizes his poetry against "literary criticism." Criticism, after all, is an interaction between two systems of thought: the critical method itself, and the text that is its subject. In this sense, criticism is a system of power that seeks to delimit the meaning of a particular text by emphasizing certain elements at the expense of others, in the same way that criticism of Schuyler's poetry as "painterly" makes that "painterliness"—instead of its prosody, musicality, or any of its other traits—the most

important element of his work. Dismantling the face comes down to dismantling systems of power: what system of power, what despotic face, stands over contemporary poetry more prominently than the system of criticism? The project of faciality, like the rest of Deleuze-Guattari's work, is at the root anti-critical, allowing things to mean on their own without recourse to a system. The poetry of Schuyler and the New York School, a poetic school without a programme, is also engaged in the same anti-critical enterprise.

Schuyler's peers were less coy in their attacks against the critical enterprise. The relationship is illustrated well by Frank O'Hara's acidic "The Critic:"

I cannot possibly think of you
other than you are: the assassin

of my orchards. You lurk there
in the shadows, meting out

conversation like Eve's first
confusion between penises and

snakes. Oh be droll, be jolly
and be temperate! Do not

frighten me more than you
have to! I must live forever. (48)

The critic is figured as deceptive Satan, tempting the poet with immortality. The relationship, it would appear, is parasitic. The poet needs the critic to guarantee his immortality, but at a price: “orchards,” the fruit of poetic labour. The tone, though, is genuinely sad and supplicatory: “Do not / frighten me more than you / have to,” a patient’s plea. To illustrate the feeling further, here are some lines from Kenneth Koch’s hilarious anti-critical (and anti-poetic) “Fresh Air: ”

Why should we be organized to defend the kingdom
Of dullness? There are so many slimy people connected with poetry,
Too, and people who know nothing about it!
I am not recommending that poets like each other and organize to fight
them,
But simply that lightning should strike them. (122)

Funny, but vitriolic. There’s also John Ashbery, now the godhead of the New York School and without question its most prolific member, who deals with the critics by keeping one step in front of them, as Nicholas Jenkins argues:

Although he has won almost every major literary honor, perhaps no other
20th-century American poet has been more subtly attuned to the dulling
effect of canonization than Ashbery. For him, such prizes and fame seem
little more than sweetly scented warning signs that his strategies have
become too easily legible, that his poems are in danger of being embalmed
as what W. H. Auden once called “Poetry with a capital ‘P.’” Certainly no
other poet has been more diligent about finding new ways of “starting out”

again—of continuously emerging from the shadow of his previous work.

(14)

This hostility towards the critical reader is not entirely misplaced. This was a generation whose struggle was against power, and, to a poet, the critic exerts the most dangerous kind of power, the ability to make or ruin a career with a word. The poets of the New York School, therefore, had no choice but to react to criticism, as they knew that with literary fame would come inevitable scholarly exegeses from literary critics and, worst of all, graduate students. Schuyler's terse interview for *Contemporary Authors* is telling:

CA: Is there any poetry criticism that you feel is valuable reading for information?

*SCHUYLER: Precious little. T. S. Eliot, Colerige [sic], the *Biographia Literaria*. William Hazlitt. Matthew Arnold. (Anon 445)*

The criticism he feels is valuable is ancient, foundational, written before the ground was broken for most English departments. He later cites Harold Bloom and David Kalstone as contemporary critics he enjoys; their reviews of Schuyler's volumes were invariably encomia, and Kalstone in particular was a personal friend.

So: the reader/critic represents the black hole of subjectification into which the white wall of Schuyler's poems tumble, that thing against which his poetry stands. His strategy, however, is not interpellation as it is in O'Hara's and Koch's invectives. Schuyler's resistance to exegesis is, in fact, what his critics notice most about his poetry. They call it "painterliness." Here are the first few lines of "February," probably his most frequently anthologized poem:

A chimney, breathing a little smoke.
 The sun, I can't see
 making a bit of pink
 I can't quite see in the blue.
 The pink of five tulips
 at five p.m. on the day before March first. (4)

Painterly, to be sure. A still life in pink and blue. But even these few lines are littered with red herrings, the poem dissimulated behind the smoke of the first line; the colours, and therefore the “painterliness,” are there apparently only to throw the reader off the textual scent. These lines are, like the rest of his poetry, rich in contradiction and paradox: the sun is invisible, and pink, the wrong colour. The strangely specific coincidence of fives occurs not really in the February that the title of the poem seems to indicate, but somewhere between February and March, “the day before March first,” either the 28th or the 29th. James Schuyler is not only a painterly poet, then. He is much more technical and abstract—more concerned with words, and the spaces around and between them—than his poetry would let on. Like Fairfield Porter, he only appears to be a realist until one looks more closely. The surrealist details then emerge.

Do critical projects actually resemble one half of the machine of faciality? It should be remembered that faciality does not necessarily operate through literal faces, though this is its most common (and most potent) mechanism of power. Faces are

engendered by an *abstract machine of faciality (visagéité)*, which produces them at the same time as it gives the signifier its white wall and subjectivity

its black hole. Thus the black hole/white wall system is, to begin with, not a face but the abstract machine that produces faces according to the changeable combinations of its cogwheels. Do not expect the abstract machine to resemble what it produces, or will produce. (*Plateaus* 168)

Deleuze and Guattari go on to say that the “abstract machine can be effectuated in other things besides faces, but not in any order, and not without the necessary foundation” (169). When Schuyler builds his textual landscapes, it is this “necessary foundation” that he is building, providing the individual elements (word, line, image, paradox) that engender the abstract machine of faciality only to enable the reader to pull them apart as he or she sees fit. The reader or critic generates the face of the poem, a face that Schuyler has helpfully made into a mask for anyone to wear.

The abstract machine of faciality can be engendered by anything that is, itself, made up of smaller parts: a book, a building, a continent. These are things that we do not perceive as their thousands of constitutive parts but as one uninterrupted whole, which is undoubtedly a boon to our collective sanity. The poem, with its variety of pieces—the letter, the word, the phrase, the line, the stanza, rhyme and white space—is the ideal machine to examine in miniature. Schuyler’s poetry textually urges his readers to pay attention to those individual parts of the poem. The poem is deterritorialized in its rocky relationship to its reader, made various, broken into pieces before his or her eyes.

Schuyler's "skinny poems," which appear so fragile on the page, reveal a surprising strength in the combination and juxtaposition of words, as in "Afterward":

Then it snowed. I
 saw it when I let
 the dog out into
 the dark yard, fat
 damp flakes, ag-
 glomerations of
 many flakes. (204)

In "Afterward," Schuyler taps into the potent image of snow, one that recurs throughout his work. Snow is among the most simple of the "faces" built by the abstract machine of faciality. Each flake is different, but the individual flake is invisible among the mass. In combination, it contributes to "snow," which Schuyler accurately describes as "ag- / glomerations of / many flakes." His ability to break a poem up into its constituent parts—or flakes, if you will—is on view in this short passage. The pronouns ("it") in the first and second lines appear to refer to the same thing—snow—but both are confused. The former is that vague and referent-free "it" that English speakers use when talking about the weather. The second, according to the sentence, refers to "flakes," rendering "it" grammatically nonsensical. Schuyler also calls attention to the way individual words are made: "agglomerations" is put into sharp relief by its split, dividing the word into its latinized intensifying prefix ("ag-") and the rare word "glomerations" ("the process of forming into a ball or rounded mass"). Schuyler typically does not end-rhyme his lines—

that would make the dismantling of the face of the poem even more difficult, as their patterns must then be broken—but deploys the internal rhythm of these lines with able beauty: the alliterative, semantic and spondaic pairings of “dog out” and “dark yard”; the movement from a short “a” to a long “a” over the course of the three words “fat / damp flakes”; the slight difference in stress between the first and second repetitions of “flakes,” which also serves to multiply the flakes further.

Those same rhythmic repetitions recur a few lines later in the consonance of “four- / wheel drive” and “mud slick hill” (204). In these recurrent patterns of stressed words bunched together, there emerges some impression of how slow-going the drive to Northfield must have been. The stresses literally slow the poem down with a series of mealy monosyllables that stick in the mouth. As a result of this calculated verbal slowness, an emphasis upon these smaller parts grows. In urging us to take our time, Schuyler insists too that we look more closely at the way the poem is made. Bin Ramke, in an article about Schuyler and Porter, agrees with me that Schuyler is not as “painterly” as he appears. He argues that the “painterliness” is negated by Schuyler’s focus on process, noting that in Schuyler’s “skinny” poems “the one- or two-word increments by which [the poem] accretes itself have a certain visual effect, but they work not the way a painting *looks* but the way a painting *works*” (84). Schuyler’s language emphasizes, as always, process rather than product.

Besides the language, carefully erected to keep the thin structure of words standing, we have the same kinds of tricks of signifiacance that Schuyler used in “Freely Espousing.” The process of perception is once again dramatized. First, a vague impression (“I saw it” in

“the dark yard”); then, a more accurate picture (“fat damp flakes”); finally, a more complete impression (“ag- / glomerations of many flakes. A / white awakening”). These all build an image of “early, thawing snow.” That image is refined a few lines later:

The branches bent
 under their first
 winter weight: it
 wasn't pretty, a
 thawing snow seldom
 is, but it wasn't
 ugly, too. (205)

The ear expects to hear “either” at the end of those lines instead of “too,” but in that single choice of word Schuyler suggests that the trees are simultaneously “not pretty” and “not ugly.” The combination of these two negations necessarily engenders a kind of superfluity in meaning. The two apparently irreconcilable images of the thaw force the reader to imagine a thaw, and therefore to decide for him or herself where along the spectrum of beauty that thaw lies.

These things—imagery, theme, lineation, rhyme, and the rest—make up what I have been calling the “face of the poem.” Of course, a face and a poem are very different things, and to confuse the two does no-one any good. For this reason I recur to the metaphor of the mask, for which I believe there are three relevant justifications. The first has to do with a fundamental difference between the face and the poem: the former is mutable, the latter static. A face is by its nature constantly changing, providing through musculature

information that can be captured and assimilated by its viewer. Its ability to change is what gives the human face its ability to express the superfluous (or “obtuse”) meaning. This constantly-shifting face also means that the superfluous meaning is itself evanescent and fleeting; it exists for a moment, only to disappear into the folds, protuberances and cavities of the face. The work of art, on the other hand, is necessarily static. Once printed it cannot smile, or frown, or wince. Its expression is fixed. The mask, like the poem, succeeds in triggering the abstract machine of faciality without recourse to the necessarily-conscious element of signifi-ance—that is for the reader to provide, after all. This is a benefit to the critical reader of poetry. Though the superfluous meaning of a given work always differs from reader to reader, the work itself does not.

The second justification for the metaphor of the mask is because it provides an easy vehicle for the relationship of reader to poem and poem to reader. If the poem is a mask—some distillation of the mind of the author—that mask can be taken off, exchanged, worn. The reader can take up that mask, use it to cover up his or her own face. In gazing upon the face of the poem, the reader takes on that face in the process of subjectification. He or she must identify with the poem, enter into it. According to Artaud, the viewer of the mask experiences “a passionate overflowing, a frightful transfer of forces from body to body” (qtd. in Derrida 250). The mask is exchanged.

The third justification is the rich weight of the mask as a metaphor, particularly in relation to the Dionysian mask. Ginette Paris remarks that “Dionysus is not the God behind the mask. He *is* the mask” (49); Tsu-chung Su adds that “the mask of Dionysus is its own double which imitates nothing, a double that nothing anticipates” (3). The mask of

Dionysus, like the poem, cries out for interpretation. According to Su, “Dionysus’s mask is said to have risen from the depths of the sea. It looks strange and foreign representing an enigma to be deciphered, an unknown power to be identified. In other words, the mask demands an interpretation, a fiction-making enterprise” (Su 4). The mask plays on the nature of process and illusion even as it burlesques reality:

The fascinating gaze of Dionysus plays with the tension between presence and absence. It is the gaze of “schizophrenic” nature in the Deleuzian sense, able to see beyond “paranoiac” unity and conformity. In the hollow, empty gaze, blindness is vision and ecstasy is the surplus of vision which is characterized by multiplicity, proliferation, flowing, becoming, a dissolution of boundaries, and is constituted by partial objects, fragments of experience, memory and pathos, linked in chance and unexpected ways. Whoever is fascinated by the gaze of Dionysus loses the power to make sense. (Su 15)

In Schuyler’s poetry, too, do we find “multiplicity, proliferation, flowing, becoming;” there especially do we find a world “constituted by partial objects, fragments of experience, memory and pathos, linked in chance.” The shifting mask of Dionysus is the erased face of his poems.

At the beginning of this chapter I promised an interpretative mechanism to assist in the understanding of James Schuyler’s various verse. The tools of the mask and faciality provided by Deleuze-Guattari still leave our toolbox pretty empty, though; we are no closer to “figuring out” what Schuyler’s poetry means than we were at the outset. I’d very

much like to believe, though, that this was at least partially the poet's intention. Donald Revell remarks that

The poetry of James Schuyler avers that the gorgeous harmonies of the world are a music of circumstance, not destiny, of transience, not eternity. Schuyler honors variousness, credits it as though it bore a human face and name, and so it is simply just and candid here to observe how variousness honors him in return. [...] In the delicate, handsome gestures of his short poems, he reconfirms the dignity of particularity, of the small, habitable sites of clarity in which phenomena and events may receive and return our human affections, however injured, however injuring. (7)

The variousness, the complex web of possibilities engendered by faciality and the mask, the superfluous meanings of the poem—all of these are to provide the reader with the ability to build him or herself into the universe of Schuyler's verse. His poems allow us to engage with the text as the black hole of subjectification while subverting that function, making of the mute apparatus of capture an active enterprise of meaning-making in which both ourselves and Schuyler are involved. And they promise, though gently, to help us dismantle the face, to discover the more insidious and hidden apparatus of power in words. He provides us with so much room in his poems—so many skies, so much weather, so much white space blanketing his thin lines on the page—that we ought to feel comfortable stretching our imagination within them, putting on the mask for ourselves, and, if the weather should happen to be nice, taking a short stroll. This profusion of space, like the holes in the mask allowing us to seep into the poems, reminds us that the world that

Schuyler describes is not merely his world but ours too. And his world, like ours, is filled with things, objects that guide and alter our lives in immutable, tiny, often incomprehensible ways.

Chapter 3

It Is Just the Thing: "A Stone Knife" and Object Matter

"Every object tells a story , if you know how to read it."

—Henry Ford

Gary Hustwit's documentary about industrial design, *Objectified*, opens with a still shot of plastic shavings on a factory floor. The next shot shows an enormous winch holding up steel chains; then, a pressure gauge flanked by waving, cream-coloured plastic tubing. As the series of shots progresses, we see that these things are parts of a larger machine, and that the machine is manufacturing something. Eventually, of course, the game is given up: a sleek Swedish plastic chair emerges from the machine and is gently deposited on the factory floor by a robotic arm. A worker approaches and begins to shear off the seams of the chair with an X-Acto knife. That, at least, explains the shavings.

The central argument of *Objectified* is that people do not pay much attention to the multitude of objects that constitutes the material environment of the modern age. They spend less time still considering the human hands that formed that multitude. As Apple electronics designer Jonathan Ive remarks early in the film, "every object, intentional or not, speaks to who put it there." But the thing itself is a remarkably slippery construction. If a thing works well, after all, we hardly notice it: we use it, put it away, and go on with our day. It is only when our things stop working, as Bill Brown explains in his introduction to

an issue of *Critical Inquiry* titled “Thing Theory,” that we begin to notice that they are things at all:

[There] are occasions of contingency—the chance interruption—that disclose a physicality of things. ... As they circulate through our lives, we look through objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture—above all, what they disclose about us), but we only catch a glimpse of things. We look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts. A thing, in contrast, can hardly function as a window. We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. (4)

Things serve a function. When that functionality is arrested either by design, catastrophe or time, the relationships that things have with the world that conceived, produced, and used them are altered, and they begin the long, slow process of becoming either garbage or art.

The latter contingency is best illustrated, as Brown notes, by the sculptures of Claes Oldenburg. Oldenburg’s large-scale reproductions of everyday objects—from his forty-one-foot *Clothespin* (1976) to his eleven-foot-wide *Pool Balls* (1977)—require attention in a way the objects they represent do not. Simply by increasing their scale, Oldenburg forces us to take in the forms of objects that we may otherwise never have considered. In stripping

them of their potential for use, he forces us to confront their thingness first and their (potential) meaning second. Perhaps the most interesting of his sculptures is *Typewriter Eraser, Scale X* (1999). An enormous red typewriter eraser is made to seem dynamic, or perhaps in use, by the smooth arcing movement of the blue steel bristles angling from the top. The date of its creation, however, is long after the last typewriter eraser saw commercial production: the object is not only frozen, monumental, and useless, but has also become literally nonsensical, referring to another object (the typewriter) which itself is no longer in common use.

The broken chain of signs to signifiers in Oldenburg resembles the anticritical “dismantling of the face” that I argued was taking place in the paintings of Fairfield Porter and the poems of James Schuyler in the previous chapter. The machine of the typewriter eraser, severed of its connection to the machine of the typewriter of which it was a part, is deterritorialized, but having no other machine onto which it can reterritorialize, it becomes an object whose meaning is in constant process. Its face, in short, has been effaced. Oldenburg’s preoccupation with the thing, and with thing-ness, is what gives his *Typewriter Eraser* its force. It is one thing for a word, a conceptual construction to begin with, to be considered a word-in-progress, and quite another for a thing—a physical, concrete thing—to be a “thing-in-progress.” That seems impossible—a thing either is or isn’t. Oldenburg’s things, however, explore the limits of what happens when things and signs brush up against each other, the confusion generated when a thing is a thing as well as something else.

This confusion is shared by James Schuyler. Schuyler, like Oldenburg, has a more than ordinary preoccupation with things, from the “Polly Red Top Thermos” (5) of “With

Frank and George at Lexington” to the “wrappers off Blue Goose oranges” (6) of “A Reunion.” Things populate Schuyler’s world, give it depth and a typically Schuylerian whiff of the specific and the tangible. At the same time, however, Schuyler’s things are complex along the lines traced by Bill Brown and his fellow essayists. Instead of littering his poems with “things,” Schuyler deliberately addresses issues of “thing-ness” in his poetry, revealing in his work the complex relationships that we can form with inanimate matter.

Schuyler’s most concise and direct engagement with the concept of the thing is *The Crystal Lithium*’s “A Stone Knife.”¹ In this epistolary poem, he writes to his friend, collaborator, and frequent roommate Kenward Elmslie in thanks for the Christmas gift of a letter opener:

Dear Kenward,

What a pearl

of a letter knife. It’s just

the thing I needed, something

to rest my eyes on, and always wanted,

which is to say

it’s that of which I

felt the lack but

¹ For an alternate reading of “A Stone Knife” using Bill Brown’s *Thing Theory*, please see Mark Silverberg’s “Schuyler’s Poetics of Indolence” in *Literary Imagination* 11.1 (2008), pp. 28-42.

didn't know of, of no
 real use and yet
 essential as a button
 box, or maps, green
 morning skies, islands and
 canals in oatmeal,
 the steam off oyster stew. (111-2)

Leaving aside for a moment the slight cognitive dissonance of an epistolary poem about a letter opener, the genre of this poem has an interesting place in poetic history. Daniel Tiffany, in his essay “On Riddles, Materialism, and Poetic Obscurity” in Brown’s anthology, claims that the “object-” or “riddle-poem” potentially represents the origin of lyric poetry in English: “Archaeological evidence reveals that the earliest poetry in English displays an affinity for objects whose rarity and eccentricity was signaled by a peculiar verbal identity. Indeed, it may be possible to claim that lyric poetry first emerged in English as the enigmatic voice of certain highly wrought objects” (73). In particular, he cites the *Dream of the Rood*, perhaps the best-known “riddle-poem” in Old English, in which a crucifix discourses on theology with the speaker of the poem. (Sections of that poem are also inscribed on the famous Ruthwell Cross, making even more literal the talkative crucifix.) In these riddle-poems, an object is allowed to describe itself. The object is invested with personality, and becomes the hero of its own story.

“A Stone Knife” incorporates from the beginning elements of the riddle. Its title does nothing to reveal that the subject of the poem is to be a letter knife—if anything, it

conceals it, as the semantic difference between “knife” and “letter knife” is considerable. And the first line, too, intentionally obfuscates in casting the knife as a “pearl.” It’s also an object he defines quickly as notable by absence, a thing of which he “felt the lack” but “didn’t know of.” That the knife is also a phallus—or, as Schuyler puts it later in the poem, “manly as a lingam” (112)—makes only vaguer this mysterious and unnameable “lack.” The poem’s resemblance to a riddle grows as Schuyler presents us with the list of things that the knife resembles, none of which resembles a knife: “a button / box, or maps, green / morning skies.” As in a riddle, Schuyler attempts to describe the object diagonally, attesting to the things it is like rather than the thing it “is.”

The next issue raised by the poem is the question of use-value, the question of whether or not a particular object is valuable-as-useful or merely valuable-as-beautiful. Schuyler is not saying that the stone knife materially resembles any of those “things.” Instead, they resemble the knife in terms of their usefulness. It should be noted, probably, that a letter opener was emphatically not a gift “of no / real use” to James Schuyler. He was an inveterate letter-writer, as attested to by the volumes of his letters currently in print, and would certainly have used a letter-knife daily. What he means, of course, when he says that the knife is “of no / real use” is that he can just as easily open letters with his hands: the letter knife replicates an existing function of the human body without considerably improving upon it. In saying the knife has no “real use,” however, he quietly establishes three use-value categories that an object can fall into: an object is useful, “of no / real use,” or useless. He proceeds to list some things that might fall into the central category, among

them “maps” and “islands and / canals in oatmeal.” As before, it is the central category that Schuyler finds most interesting, that class of things that are useful and useless at once.

The riddle of the knife is expanded in the next section of the poem, in which Schuyler beautifully describes the physical appearance of the knife:

Brown

agate, veined as a woods
 by smoke that has to it
 the watery twist of eel grass
 in a quick, rust-discolored
 cove. Undulating lines of
 northern evening—a Munch
 without the angst—a
 hint of almost amber:
 to the nose, a resinous
 thought, to the eye, a
 lacquered needle green
 where no green is, a
 present after-image. (112)

In this passage, Schuyler evokes the knife as graphically as possible, with the specificity of detail that gives his poetry its force, without ever naming it or using any word semantically related to “knife” (say, “edge” or “handle” or “keen”). In this way he keeps from facializing the knife into a serial object with a fixed meaning (“knife”). Instead of being content with *a*

knife, Schuyler takes pains to characterize *this* knife, forcing the reader to imagine the knife as singular rather than plural.

Keeping faciality from colonizing the knife is accomplished by sweating the details: the knife is made of “brown agate,” but, as it happens, the agate is much more than simply brown. It is also “veined as a woods / by smoke” with “Undulating lines of / northern evening”; so, too, is it “almost amber” and “green / where no green is.” It is figured in those lines as a microcosm of the earth itself, partially evoked through his palette of browns and greens. Schuyler also employs his trademark paradox to attempt to describe this admittedly strange object: it is a “Munch / without the angst,” a “present after-image.” He is interested in the object *qua* object, in its physicality and sensuousness, even describing that it evokes the scent of “a resinous / thought.” The knife, in short, is without question a *real* agate knife—at least within the universe of the poem, which is constituted entirely of the knife and its apprehender. Its solidity, its “matter,” is at least partially what Schuyler admires about it.

The matter of the knife, however, is much complicated by the end of the poem. Schuyler shifts his descriptive eye from the way the knife *looks* to what the knife *is*:

Sleek as an ax, bare
and elegant as a tarn
manly as a lingam,
November weather petrified ... (112)

Just as Schuyler provided some things that resembled the use-value of the knife, here he identifies things that resemble, in his view, the knife itself: it is an “ax,” a “tarn,” a

“lingam,” and “November weather petrified.” The relationship of the knife to nature is strengthened a little; now it can count geography (“tarn”) and meteorology (“November weather”) among its domains. The lingam, however, seems not quite to fit. Though it is likely the popular phallic connotations of the word were fully intended by Schuyler—it is a knife, after all, and “lingam” is preceded by the phrase “manly as a”—the word has a richer denotative history than that. In Hindu practice, the lingam is a cylindrical representation of Shiva intended as an object of worship. The word means “sign” or “symbol,” and the lingam itself is often perceived as aniconic rather than representational (Britannica). With this single, strange word, Schuyler intimates much about his knife, couching it in the language of (potentially phallic) idol-worship—the worship of what he terms “the un- / recapturable” (112). The poem, therefore, is also taken up with the issue of the sign, most visibly in the case of the hazy lingam.

If Schuyler’s knife is a riddle, it is a riddle without a solution. The knife itself, a machine that typically interacts with only one other machine (the envelope), becomes as deterritorialized as Oldenburg’s typewriter eraser. There is no sign in “A Stone Knife” that the knife will be used for actually opening letters, no lines apostrophizing its skill at smoothly tearing paper when the appropriate amount of manual force is applied. Instead, the meaning of the knife is allowed to flow: into geology, into religion, into memory. In severing the connection of the knife to its mate, the envelope, the knife grows richer in potential meaning, signifying something other than itself.

The poem is itself a sign for something else: the knife, “an / object, dark, fierce / and beautiful.” It ought, perhaps, to go without saying that the poem is not a knife in the

same way that Magritte's *La trahison des images* was not *une pipe*. Images, as Magritte so forcefully and succinctly argued in his painting, are treacherous. But it is clear, in his attempts to represent the knife in words, that Schuyler, like Magritte, is interested in the intersection of matter and representation. This is the same intersection he courted in his "painterly" poems, that space between the poem and its subject, those things lost (or added) in transmutation. But, as suggested by Magritte, the line between matter and its representation is not as firm as common sense would hold. Matter is constantly revealed to be much more complicated than it was thought to be, and its representation is certainly more accurate to our senses than the quarks and gluons that subtend it in actuality. W. J. T. Mitchell complains that

The physical is a thoroughly metaphysical concept. The concrete is (as Hegel points out) the most abstract concept we have; bodies are spiritual entities, constructions of fantasy. Objects only make sense in relation to thinking, speaking subjects, and things are evanescent, multistable appearances; and matter, as we have known since the ancient materialists, is a "lyric substance" more akin to comets, meteors, and electrical storms than to some hard, uniform mass. (231)

Despite his best efforts at evoking the knife, Schuyler's "A Stone Knife" will never really resemble the knife he received as a Christmas gift from Kenward Elmslie, if that knife is real at all. But Schuyler's knife has its own strange sort of life, and one that is not altogether different from the mental life a real knife would have. And yet, the knife is multiple: through the machine of the poem, the knife that Schuyler took such great pains to

render as unique is made serial by reproduction. Merely by reading the poem, we come into contact with some aspect of the physicality of the original knife. Moreover, as Mitchell remarks, the thing is “multistable” and therefore multifunctional. Schuyler’s knife is a thing with a clearly defined function—it is a letter knife, designed and intended to open letters—but for him

it is just the thing
 to do what with? To
 open letters? No, it
 is just the thing, an
 object, dark, fierce
 and beautiful in which
 the surprise is that
 the surprise, once
 past, is always there:
 which to enjoy is
 not to consume. The un-
 recapturable returns
 in a brown world
 made out of wood,
 snow streaked, storm epi-
 center still in stone. (112)

For Schuyler, then, the knife is “just the thing,” a phrase that paradoxically denotes that it is at once the “ideal” thing (“this knife is just the thing for opening letters”) and “just a thing.” (Every object, ultimately, represents this duality. Every object we own is unique because it is “ours,” at the same time that that object is one in a series of similar objects.) The pleasure of the thing, he continues, is that it can be enjoyed without destroying it, that “the surprise, once / past, is always there.” It also represents the “unrecapturable,” and evokes a “brown world / made of wood.” The knife, in short, has become the poem itself.

Perhaps the best articulation of the strange ability of things to transmute themselves in our minds is Jean Baudrillard’s *The System of Objects*. In this book, Baudrillard establishes a system for understanding the ways in which the objects around us affect us, and why we seem so curiously attached to our things. He begins by separating objects into two broad and (rarely) overlapping categories: “functional” objects and “marginal” objects. Functional objects comprise essentially any object that serves or complements a function of the human body, a category he extends to chairs and interior decoration. In short, they are useful. Marginal objects, on the other hand, are those whose value is not tied to their potential or actual functionality. They “answer to other kinds of demands such as witness, memory, nostalgia, or escapism” (77). The latter kind of object is not entirely able to avoid the trap of “usefulness,” but marginal objects are useful in a different way: “*historicalness in the case of the antique object* (or marginality in the baroque object, or exoticism in the primitive object” (77). Historicalness is not just an ancillary function of the antique object; it is in fact the primary function of the antique. Schuyler’s knife—with its attendant

vocabulary of temporality and its overtly “antique” appearance—can be easily ascribed to this category.

That leaves Baudrillard to define “historicalness,” and what it might mean for an object to signify it. He argues that

the way in which antiques refer to the past gives them an *exclusively* mythological character. The antique object no longer has any practical application, its role being merely to *signify*. It is astructural; it refuses structure, it is the extreme case of the disavowal of the primary functions. Yet it is not afunctional, nor purely “decorative”, for it has a very specific function within the system, namely the signifying of time. (78)

By “mythological” Baudrillard does not mean that the objects are connected to any system of mythology. Instead he means that they exist in the “perfect tense,” “that which occurs in the present as having occurred in a former time, hence that which is founded upon itself, that which is ‘authentic’” (79). Antique objects are involved in the creation of the myth of the self, the process of subjectification, and allow their owners to revisit and rewrite their own histories through the medium of the object.

As a result of its inevitable connection with individual myth, the antique object takes on a second, much stranger function. By occasioning reminiscence, the ultimate function of the antique object is to signify the moment of birth or creation, the furthest point to which memory can conceivably regress: says Baudrillard, “I am not the one who *is*, in the present, full of *angst*—rather, I am the one who *has been*, as indicated by the course of the reverse birth of which the antique object is the sign, a course which leads

from the present far back into time” (80). In this way, all antiques become secularized crucifixes, sacred objects “called upon to exude their sacredness (or historicalness) into a history-less domesticity” (90). Schuyler’s image of the knife-as-lingam begins to grow less hazy. Could it be that the object itself, pregnant with genitive power, acts as a metonym not only for the poem but also for the act of poetic creation that generated it? And what happens when the face of the genitive antique is effaced?

It is only when the antique object is considered in juxtaposition with the functional object that the machine of faciality begins to appear more clearly. Where the antique object exists in the past and the present, the functional object exists in the present and the future. A functional object—say, a letter knife—is useful both because you are opening a letter with it right now and because it promises to open any future letter you might receive. It evokes therefore the process of signifiante: the use of a tool always constitutes a meaning-in-progress as the tool and its task deterritorialize and reterritorialize upon one another. The letter knife described in “A Stone Knife” straddles the two categories. It is at once unique and serial, beautiful and useful, “marginal” and “functional.” Schuyler’s recurrent images from visual art thus serve as a link between the machine of faciality and the process of artistic creation. His objects further reinforce that link.

The relationship of objects to the process of poetic genesis is not exclusive to Schuyler, Baudrillard, and Deleuze-Guattari. It is instead endemic to modern American poetry. William Carlos Williams, in his gemlike “A Sort of a Song,” calls for writing

—through metaphor to reconcile

the people and the stones.

Compose. (No ideas
but in things) Invent! (55)

While Schuyler, as I have argued, does not favour the “metaphor to reconcile,” his aim—in “A Stone Knife,” at least—is somewhat to unite “the people and the stones,” to bring people closer to the incredible variety and number of things that surround them. Williams’s imperative is a paradox in itself. He urges poets not only to draw their ideas from the environment but to “compose” and “invent,” to create the environment for themselves. Because of this, “No ideas / but in things” is neither exaggerated nor particularly surprising. The time we spend during our daily lives in conversation with objects greatly outstrips the time we spend in conversation with people. Schuyler is merely interested enough to record what is said.

The tradition of American writing that wound up at “No ideas / but in things” finds its root in Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, perhaps the most immediately perceptible of Schuyler’s influences. Miles Orvell, in *The Real Thing*, writes of the photographer’s instinct everywhere present in Whitman’s verse, the urge to catalogue accurately and wholly the objects of one’s apprehension. This urge results, according to Orvell, in the birth of a new genre of poem unique to American letters, the “free-verse catalogue”:

a series of unrhymed lines of varying length, sometimes numbering over a hundred at a stretch, each of which names some single, concrete, complete

image of a person or thing or place; it is a form that stands classical epic poetry on its head, making what used to be an extended pause in the action into the main substance and structure of the poem. (3)

The thing is given primacy in this new genre through lineation. Each thing is made to be celebrated in itself by occupying a line of its own, and the thing's connections to other things are made vivid by the flow of lines into a poem.

What makes Whitman's free-verse catalogue so special—and so much an inversion of the traditional epic, whose themes are invariably lofty and grand—is that Whitman draws no distinctions between “low” and “high” in his celebration of the things around him. “Doorknobs, cups and saucers, dishes, pitchers, doorplates, piano keys, clock faces—nothing was too humble for Whitman to celebrate” (33), Orvell remarks. Take, for instance, this passage from canon staple “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”:

The sailors at work in the rigging or out astride the spars,
 The round masts, the swinging motion of the hulls, the slender serpentine
 pennants,
 The large and small steamers in motion, the pilots in their pilothouses,
 The white wake left by the passage, the quick tremulous whirl of the wheels,
 The flags of all nations, the falling of them at sunset,
 The scallop-edged waves in the twilight, the ladled cups, the frolic-some
 crests
 and glistening,
 The stretch afar growing dimmer and dimmer, the gray walls of the granite

storehouses by the docks ... (129-30)

The rest of the poem proceeds in more or less the same fashion: in each line, an object is described, each one contributing to Whitman's perception of New York from the ferry. It is not a question of deciding whether a thing is "worthy" of inclusion in his list. What is important is that the things were there, and that he described them, and that their arrangement into lines allows them to exist in themselves as well as in complex relationships to the other "humble" things around them.

This celebration of the "humble" thing signals somewhat of a sea change in American perceptions of material culture. When Whitman was composing the first sections of what would become *Leaves of Grass*, the activity that most consumed his time was touring the 1853 Crystal Palace exposition in New York City. At this time, trade fairs and expositions were the major centres for display of consumer and industrial goods. Expositions and similar shows had not yet been supplanted by the department stores and shopping malls of the twentieth century. Both places—the exposition and the department store—deify the object, the exposition by raising it to the level of art and the department store by transforming it into the potential for social mobility. However, Orvell argues, it is not so much the individual object but the *idea* of the object that was hallowed by the exposition:

Like the public gallery, the exposition was a nineteenth-century invention that combined education and entertainment, framing within its halls an encyclopedia of objects, a dictionary of technological miracles that subsumed the individual thing under the aggregate spectacle. ... if there was

a democratic, an American aesthetic, it was more visible in the rhetoric of the catalogue than in the objects on display. (25)

The list of objects, then, takes on a kind of primacy all its own. By evoking objects serially, one gets a sense not of a thing but of “things,” the infinite panoply that serves eventually to constitute the individual human imagination.

Whitman makes the identity-building agenda of the free-verse catalogue most clear in “There Was A Child Went Forth Every Day.” In this poem, he describes the working of a procession of things on the imagination of a child:

There was a child went forth every day,
 And the first object he look'd upon, that object he became,
 And that object became part of him for the day or a certain part of the day,
 Or for many years or stretching cycles of years. (292)

Whitman vividly illustrates Deleuze-Guattari's subjectification. The child acts as an apparatus of capture (or “black hole”) that takes in, and thereby becomes, the things around it. Through this process of taking in the objects of his apprehension—from “early lilacs” (293) to “the light falling on roofs and gables of white or brown two miles off” (294)—Whitman's child changes, alters, grows. The child is not the objects around him. Instead, he “becomes” them, a word that indicates process rather than stasis. Each object is deterritorialized in sequence to contribute to this process of subjectification by reterritorializing on the child. Serially and together, the connections between the objects and the child grow, until there is a part of the child in the objects and a part of the objects in the child.

Most staggering, perhaps, are the closing lines of the poem, which describe meteorological phenomena:

The strata of color'd clouds, the long bar of maroon-tint away solitary by
itself,
the spread of purity it lies motionless in,
The horizon's edge, the flying sea-crow, the fragrance of salt marsh and
shore
mud,
These became part of that child who went forth every day, and who now
goes, and
will always go forth every day. (294)

These lines—and others like it in *Leaves of Grass*—are an obvious source of inspiration to Schuyler. Descriptions of sky and weather take up a great deal of both his *Collected Poems* and, notably, his *Diary*. The latter treats skies as a grand subject worthy of digression at epic length; nearly every entry in the twenty-three year span of the *Diary* mentions the current condition of the sky in some way. The concept of the diary melts seamlessly into Whitman's vision of subjectification, of "building oneself in layers." In recording and juxtaposing the events of discrete, single days, the form of the diary achieves in a potentially limitless scope the encyclopedic promise of the free-verse catalogue.

It is precisely because of this limitless potential that Schuyler's choice in his *Diary* to focus so much on the sky is a meaningful one. The weather is, in the class of things, of

the most protean and unstable stuff. William Watkin asks, when considering Schuyler's fastidious attempts to describe the sky, "was it worth it?":

The poet is assiduous in his attempt to render the actual colour of the sky at this time of day and how it is changing, but he succeeds no more than Turner or Monet, and they had the right materials at hand. In fact one might wonder whether any artist has been able to render even the nature of an actual atmosphere, let alone those liminal times when light and humidity are at their most evanescent, lustrous and strange. (44)

When Watkin says that Schuyler "succeeds no more than Turner or Monet"—without question the two greatest painters of "atmosphere" in history—he gestures at once towards the "painterliness" of Schuyler's work and towards Schuyler's success at evoking effects of light, a rather remarkable quality given the poet's medium of words. Watkin also means to suggest that it is impossible to render the appearance of sky in art regardless of medium. The effects of light (and, indeed, the sky itself) are constantly changing and therefore inaccessible to static representation. However, I think a case is to be made for Schuyler as American poetry's foremost renderer of skies. Though it is true that individual entries in the *Diary* must fail at conveying the effect of an individual sky, their repeated description makes for an uncanny simulation of "skies."

In the discussion above and below I make the claim that "sky" and "weather" can be "things." This observation is not immediately obvious—we tend to think of a thing as discrete, probably small, and usually useful. We rarely refer to very large things, like buildings or mountains or whales, as "things," even though the difference is one of scale

alone. This is the space of Claes Oldenburg's large-scale sculptures: a clothespin made very large is no longer a clothespin but "art," a category whose thingness is always open to question. I contend that the weather and the sky, like Oldenburg's sculptures, are things *par excellence*, things that best exemplify the notion of the thing as a mutable and changeable construction. Much like the subtle stone knife, it is the sky's combination of mundanity and uniqueness that makes it ideal as a study of the way objects function in Schuyler's poetry. The frequent rain and ever-changing skies in Schuyler's diary and poems act as a constant reminder of the contingency and mutability of things, and their presence in Schuyler's poetry is not incidental (or merely "diaristic") but actively connected to the "poetics" of things he explores in his poetry.

Of particular interest is the way that Schuyler renders rainy skies. William Watkin considers rain the epitome of the unrepresentable object:

what do you call rain after it has, and are these grounded drops really rain?
 Anyway, they don't touch the ground as something has intervened on the
 descent of these other things, again we don't know how many exactly, so the
 drops are suspended in mid air. They cling to the balcony, midway between
 the noun "rain" and the absent noun "puddle," both strangely singular
 collective nouns. (45)

Rain, as Watkin demonstrates, is potentially among the strangest of things. The word is able to stand both for the action and the thing itself, as well as naming both the individual and the collective drops. Rain is always necessarily both a thing and a thing-in-progress,

becoming itself in the act of falling (water that doesn't drop from the sky is not rain, though as things a drop of water and a drop of rain are hardly distinguishable.)

Because of this considerable potential for varied meaning, rain plays an important part in Schuyler's meteorology of things. Consider, for instance, two of the several poems about rain from the last collection Schuyler published in his lifetime, *A Few Days*. One, called "Poem," is terse in its dismissal of pathetic fallacy.

I got my hair cut
 and it rains
 I'm waiting for the papers
 and it rains
 I'm waiting for pretty Helena
 and it rains. (350)

The repeated and offset phrase "and it rains," with its two close alveolar consonants ("and it") followed by the sibilant "s" of "rains," admirably stands in for actual rain in the poem by reproducing its sounds. The rain in this short poem also has no discernible effect on the world around it other than the fact of the rain itself. Schuyler steadfastly, even ascetically, refuses to link the rain to any negative occurrence or any particular drama. The rain simply adds atmosphere to the events of the day: a haircut and some waiting. The poem also refuses to date its events. Though the three things described in the poem—a haircut, waiting, and more waiting—presumably occur on the same day, they could just as well have happened decades apart, linked together by the common factor of rain.

The second poem from *A Few Days* says many of the same things, if more complexly. “Fauré’s Second Piano Quartet” twins rain with music in the same way that sleep was twinned to music in “A Man in Blue,” discussed in the first chapter:

On a day like this the rain comes
 down in fat and random drops among
 the ailanthus leaves—“the tree
 of Heaven”—the leaves that on moon-
 lit nights shimmer black and blade-
 shaped at this third floor window.
 And there are bunches of small green
 nobs, buds, crowded together. (327-8)

Combined with his usual predilection for specificity in detail—the tree in this poem is not any tree but an ailanthus tree, a New York invader, the determined tree of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*—this poem insists, too, on discrete moments: “on a day like this,” “on moon-lit nights.” Schuyler is without a doubt a diaristic poet, but so many of his poems reach forward as well as backward in time. “On a day like this” implies a continuum of days, and places the ailanthus among not only the “random” variety of the rain Schuyler is currently documenting but among all the rain that has fallen before the poem opens, confusing the unique with the serial.

As Schuyler listens to the patter of the rain and the related movement of the leaves, he finds that they are melting into the piano quartet of the poem’s title:

The

rapid music fills in the spaces of
 the leaves. And the piano comes in,
 like an extra heartbeat, dangerous
 and lovely. Slower now, less like
 the leaves, more like the rain which
 almost isn't rain, more like thawed-
 out hail. (328)

The rain, of course, “isn't rain.” As Watkin argued, rain is the most evanescent of things: it exists only for a moment though it falls continually. This rain takes on the character of music for Schuyler, of the world around him, as it did in “Poem”: colour rather than substance. The continuity between the weather, nature, and human activity is explicit. Rain, aiantus, and quartet are continuous and coterminous as the music becomes “less like / the leaves, more like the rain.” The objects deterritorialize and reterritorialize upon one another, becoming one another in the process, and by the process much widened in the scope of their potential meaning. The raindrops are now more than already-complex rain: they are also music and tree.

This counterpointing of things finds its fullest expression in Schuyler's descriptions of clearer skies. Schuyler's diary contains few entries that do not in some way mention or describe the sky or its effects, usually at the opening of the entry. Repeated in this way, Schuyler's skies act as overtures or abstracts of the day that follows, a curtain softly opening. All have an eerie beauty, the persistent echo of memory. Take, for instance, this one dated “Wednesday, September 1985”:

Yestereve the sunset shone briefly—a long while it seemed—causing an effect on loft-style stately building across the way: a glow that reminded me of what happens in Venice when buckets of rain, including hail, fall upon Istrian stone: an inner pinkness that goes on and on until... (176)

Or “November 16, 1970”:

After a week of rain, late this afternoon the sun shone out under pigeon colored clouds and turned the elm twigs red, the last leaves on the plane tree glowed like dark red glass and the house, freshly painted white, became the color of the sun. (98)

Or “Palm Sunday, March 19, 1989”:

Cold, clear, a scatter of cloud scraps, the sky intensely blue as California where, at Bolinas, it seemed so much bluer, so much more Californian, than it ever does here. In the late afternoon clarity all colors have their beauty: the window frames of the building across the street are a rich and satisfying brown. (253)

These few entries, chosen at random, still give some impression of the overall effect of Schuyler’s *ostinato* skies. Most, like the stone knife, have some link to a memory or a place: in the first entry a memory of his time in Venice as English poet W. H. Auden’s secretary, in the third a memory of Bolinas. All three of these skies, though, are very different. Schuyler gives each sky the same attention and care he gives to individual flowers and individual trees, attempting to capture that thing that made them characteristic of the day they in some way represent. These three random entries also illustrate the

remarkable continuity between Schuyler's poetry and his diaries. Schuyler evidently agreed with this sentiment—he published several excerpts from his diaries during his lifetime, most notably the creaky and light-soaked *Early in '71*. But for lineation, the entries above read remarkably like Schuyler poems, both in their impressive and paradoxical visuality (“inner pinkness,” “pigeon colored,” “a rich and satisfying brown”) and in their subject matter.

In another entry dated June 27, 1968, Schuyler characteristically begins by describing the conditions of the weather and his immediate surroundings: “Differences from yesterday: the overcast sky is streaked with yellow, Isle au Haut is bluer, and, though only the most feathery of the grasses sway, the surface of the water is crinkled and running” (37). Here the mundanity of his subject risks overwhelming the material; he opens the diary entry by making small talk with himself about the weather. Even in this short entry, however, Schuyler manages to say something important about skies: they are characterized primarily by difference. This difference is why the mechanism of diaristic repetition functions so well in the *Diary*. A sense of movement and change is possible in tracking the movements of the sky over a period of years in his diary that would be impossible to render in the description of a single sky.

The repeated sky, then, stands as a sort of metonym for another thing. In the same way that the stone knife functioned as an analogy to the individual poem, the skies in Schuyler's work come to stand in for his poetry. Like the poetry, the sky is always in flux though rooted in the present moment, intensely visual, and intensely subjective. The sky is more than just atmosphere: it also stands for several threads in Schuyler's work, like

contingency and happenstance, mutability, light, and diarism. The sky remains emphatically a *thing* in Schuyler’s poetry and diaries, an object that is without rather than within, but Schuyler encourages us to internalize the sky, to see some of ourselves in it, to efface our faces and replace them with skies. In doing so through the medium of a diary—another rather messy “thing”—he illustrates the dominion that things can have over the individual human life. The inclusion of things in his diary to such a vast extent gives things pride of place in the network of the human mind, the mapping of which is the ostensible end of diary-keeping.

Skies and things converge in one of the most affecting poems of *The Morning of the Poem*, the diaristically titled “Dec. 28, 1974.” The poem’s date occurs in the centre of a hole in Schuyler’s diaristic writing. There is a decade-long break in the *Diary* between 1971 and 1981, a period which coincided both with Schuyler’s greatest stretch of personal turmoil (Fairfield Porter’s death, repeated hospitalizations, and near-fatal burns caused by smoking in bed) and his greatest poetic output. The poem begins with a by-now expected description of the ambient conditions of its composition:

The plants against the light
 which shines in (it’s four o’clock)
 right on my chair: I’m in my chair:
 are silhouettes, barely green,
 growing black as my eyes move right,
 right to where the sun is.

I am blinded by a fiery circle:

I can't see what I write. (233)

Schuyler's persistent employment of the present tense in his poetry says something about his engagement with ideas of temporality, and it also distinguishes the atmosphere of his diary from the atmosphere of his poems. In his diary he is always discussing yesterday's sky; in his poems, invariably today's. In the opening of "Dec. 28, 1974," the sky is not described but its effects upon the objects in Schuyler's room are. And, perhaps more notably, what is described here is not just the effect that the light has upon objects but the effect that it has upon the speaker's apprehension of objects. Green plants become "barely green" and then "growing black" as Schuyler's eye moves towards the sun. He is then "blinded by a fiery circle." "I can't see what I write" takes on a double meaning as a result, both literal ("the sun has caused me temporary blindness") and, well, literal ("I have written about my houseplants, but I can no longer see them"). The literal dimension engages, too, with Schuyler's recurrent fascination with the problems of language: "I can't see what I write" is self-evident, as the things in his poems are no longer matter but words.

As a result of this temporary blindness, Schuyler's perception shifts to the sounds around him:

A man

comes down iron stairs (I
don't look up) and picks up brushes
which, against a sonata of Scriabin's,
rattle like wind in a bamboo clump.

A wooden sound, and purposeful footsteps
softened by a drop-cloth-covered floor. (233)

The sounds around Schuyler are also tied up with things, as they must be: “iron stairs,” “brushes,” “a drop-cloth-covered floor,” “a Chinese rug.” As with the effects of light in the poem’s opening section, though, Schuyler is less interested in the things themselves than the effects they have upon his senses—that is to say, what the things have become now that they have reterritorialized onto Schuyler himself, become a part of him as he becomes a part of them. The drop cloth softens “purposeful footsteps,” a “sonata of Scriabin’s” makes brushes “rattle like wind in a bamboo clump.” This difference between the objects and their effects—the space of signifi-ance—is indicated partially by his repeated use of the word “against.” In the first section, plants are “against” light, in the second, brushes “against” a sonata. He exploits the double meaning of that word in this context. “Against” is both “opposed to” and “supported by,” and it is unclear which of the two he means (if he means either and not, as I suspect, both.) All that is sure is that “light” and “plant” are as somehow conjoined as “sonata” and “brushes,” two words relating to sense conjoined to two things.

The present tense lapses momentarily (“last night I did wish—” [234]), enough to allow a memory to seep through:

“Your poems,”
a clunkhead said, “have grown
more open.” I don’t want to be open,
merely to say, to see and say, things
as they are. (234)

“Merely,” indeed, as though the project were easy and casual and not one that constitutes the vastest portion of Schuyler’s efforts in his poetry and diaries. Even this impossible project—“to say, to see and say, things / as they are”—is not quite accurate. As he demonstrates in the poem where these lines appear, Schuyler’s project is as much about describing things “as they are” as it is about chronicling things as they aren’t. Subjectivity becomes changed when it comes into contact with things. This change is partially suggested by his choice of verbs. To “say” things as they are—that is, to write about them—is difficult enough. As Schuyler’s fascination with the methods of painting demonstrated, things cannot survive the process of transformation into words unscathed. Schuyler’s wish, however, and his exhortation to his audience, is also to “see” things as they are—that is, to perceive the objects for himself apart from their description in verse, to make the objects a conscious portion of his ongoing subjectification. His interest is not only in things, those physical objects around which his (and, according to William Carlos Williams, all) writing orbits. It is also in the Zen-like search for mindfulness about things, to examine things closely and to reflect upon how and why they affect us, to take control of the process of subjectification and therefore to begin to efface the face.

His verse is also, of course, about the things themselves. During his brief reverie, time has jumped forward about half an hour, and the objects in his room have grown visible again in the waning sunlight:

That at my elbow

there is a wicker table. *Hortus*

Second says a book. The fields

beyond the feeding sparrows are
 brown, palely brown yet with an inward glow
 like that of someone of a frank good nature
 whom you trust. (234)

Here we have Schuyler's fascination with things *qua* things in plain view. These lines consist of little more than a catalogue of the objects of his apprehension. The "wicker table" is of the purest type of thing, a functional object. "*Hortus Secund*" is a catalogue of North American plants in cultivation, by 1974 badly out of date though still considered a classic, and one of Schuyler's favourite sources of information about plants. In his catalogue of the objects around him, one of the items is itself a catalogue. The occurrence of the catalogue within the poem partially calls into question the thingness of the poem itself: *Hortus Secund*, the printed book, is inarguably a "thing," but what of the individual entry in the catalogue, or the individual catalogue-poem? And what becomes of its status as a thing when it becomes only the idea of itself, a line in a poem?

Schuyler, as we might have expected, ignores these questions entirely, turning his mind and his pen back to reverie about ambiance:

I want to hear the music
 hanging in the air and drink my
 Coca-Cola. The sun is off me now,
 the sky begins to color up,
 the air in here is filled with wildly flying notes.
 Yes, the sun moves off to the right

and prepares to sink, setting,
beyond the dunes, an ocean on fire. (234)

Here, Schuyler deals with a different category of thing altogether. The vaguely-things in this final section of the poem seem to have an agency of their own: notes are “wildly flying,” “the sky begins to color up,” and “the sun moves.” All three of those things are difficult to conceptualize as things: notes are waves of sound, the sky is unfathomably big, and the sun unfathomably bigger. And they are nevertheless included with a wicker table and Coca-Cola in Schuyler’s catalogue of “things / as they are,” as in Whitman neither ignored nor given pride of place.

The poem, I think, becomes the ultimate case-study for the nature of the thing: existing like Watkin’s idea of rain in some liminal state, it becomes real for a moment on the printed page only to evanesce once more into the apparatus that contains it, becoming subsumed first by the thingness of the page and then reterritorialized onto the reader. Like the things that affect Whitman’s child, the poem has an ability to insinuate itself into the individual consciousness. Schuyler’s fascination with the thing—particularly those things made of the most protean and gaseous stuff—consists of a further exposition of the ideas he drew from visual art. As with his interest in painting, Schuyler’s interest in objects and the material—in teacups and storms—is an interest in process. A thing, his poetry argues, is not stable and permanent. Like the Coca-Cola in “Dec. 28, 1974”, which is not “Coca-Cola” but “*my* Coca-Cola,” it exists only for a moment in the scope of the poem, but that moment is one that is both individual and one that can be endlessly iterated.

Schuyler's vision of things, then, is much more radical than it appeared at first. Much more than matter, his things become a part of his internal environment merely by their apprehension. In an echo of Baudrillard, Schuyler's objects are not objects but, ultimately, mirrors—for where else but from within ourselves could our ideas of things spring? Objects, according to Baudrillard, become in their interactions with subjectivities “no longer simply material bodies offering a certain resistance” (91). They become instead “mental precincts over which I hold sway, they become things of which I am the meaning” (91). Objects in verse are revealed to be much more than objects: instead, they are of the class of the most intimate confession.

But does Schuyler succeed in revealing himself through the mirror of thingness, “to say, to see and say, things / as they are”? His challenge is echoed by Wallace Stevens's “The Man with the Blue Guitar:”

They said, “You have a blue guitar,

You do not play things as they are.”

The man replied, “Things as they are

Are changed upon the blue guitar.”

And they said then, “But play, you must,

A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,

A tune upon the blue guitar

Of things exactly as they are.” (165)

“Things as they are” are changed, inevitably, in their transubstantiation from matter to neuronal pattern, and then again from neuronal pattern to poetry. The thing is a “tune beyond us, yet ourselves,” infinite in its possibility for meaning and yet saying *something*, as Jonathan Ive said in *Objectified*, about “who put it there.” But one also gets the overwhelming sense that Schuyler’s attempt is a success. His genuine affection for things, however small, is always surprising and heartening. Schuyler is the “scholar of darkness” of Stevens’s “O Florida, Venereal Soil,” who searches, too, for

A few things for themselves,
 Convolvulus and coral,
 Buzzards and live-moss,
 Tiestas from the keys,
 A few things for themselves,
 Florida, venereal soil,
 disclose to the lover. (47-8)

That quiet disclosure from Florida’s “venereal soil” are those secrets that Schuyler whispers to us constantly in his verse: that the things around us speak constantly; that they are impermanent; and, perhaps most importantly of all, that impermanence is what their conversation is about. As Mark Rudman remarks, “the process of telling is what compels him” (101); Schuyler’s poems are “studies in perception,” and “focus on the quiet spaces, the interstices, between the turbulence” (90). In some sense, his poetry about things has a

didactic element: “examine more closely the things around you,” he seems to be saying,
“and you stand a shot at becoming them—and they you.”

Conclusion

Convergences

First, the obligatory anecdote: when I was just launching upon this thesis project, our then-apartment flooded in the night because someone upstairs had been careless with a toilet. All night water poured from light fixtures and between the walls. In the morning we awoke to a nightmare. There was six inches of water on the floor, and everything in the apartment was destroyed—books, furniture, everything. Chief among the victims—at least in my mind—was my pullulant research on James Schuyler. My laptop was sitting on the kitchen table with my notebooks and papers, under one of the fixtures-cum-fountains. My copy of James Schuyler’s *Collected Poems*, lying face-down on top of the computer, did its best to protect the helpless thing: it had soaked up its share of the water pouring from the lamp hanging a few feet above. Its efforts, unfortunately, were in vain. A book is a poor sponge, and the laptop and the data it contained were irrecoverably destroyed by the water.

Though the laptop was not recoverable, the poems were. An hour of alone time with a blowdryer and several days under a stack of bricks were enough to restore it to usable condition, and my marginal notes, at least, were rescued. But the book, besides being stained an ugly brackish colour, now has an intractable kink from *The Morning of the Poem* forwards, a firm wave that time has not evened. Which is why, when I discovered Stephen Sandy’s wonderful poem “Falling Asleep over James Schuyler” in *The Paris Review* while just beginning the laborious process of recovery, I was somewhat heartened. Sandy recalls

falling asleep while reading Schuyler, and accidentally leaving the book outside during a downpour. Having failed to rescue the book from “damp midsummer” (90), he remarks that

Now when I open your book
 the edges are rippled. That rain
 had pinched and crimped the pages
 like a pie crust: the little waves
 were permanent—mild ruffles
 firmly set—when I read them,
 flaky now, cracking faintly,
 dry like an excellent pie crust. (90)

Schuyler, Sandy remarks, had the ability to take “isolation and turn it / to solitude” (90), just as rain had the ability to turn Schuyler’s poetry into “excellent pie crust.” Schuyler’s skill at taking the materials of his life—from the seventies onwards, almost relentlessly tragic, a litany of deaths, breakdowns, hospitals, poverties—and turning them into something beautiful is, as Donald Revell remarks, “among the most decent things I know, his voice one of the few voices I shall never learn to distrust” (9). My waterlogged copy of the *Collected Poems* remains the one I use for reference to Schuyler, even though at this point I have most of his work in other editions. It’s something about the way the paper feels, I think.

As I mentioned above in my introduction, the three chapters this thesis comprises are nowhere near the limit of potential for Schuyler criticism, or even near the limit of this particular thesis project. For the project, I had sketched out four chapters; only two made the cut, as the proposed first chapter on “painterliness” was expanded and rearranged to form the two first chapters as they appear here. In addition to the elements of painterliness, faciality, and thingness explored in this thesis, I intend to expand this project at the doctoral level to include discussion of Schuyler’s “urban pastoral” novels and of his encyclopedic long poems.

The novels of James Schuyler, his earliest published works, form interesting relationships with his poetry. They are invested in issues of suburban living, childhood, language, and addiction recovery. It is the last item that I find most interesting. Schuyler’s *What’s for Dinner?* is about American housewife Lottie Taylor’s treatment for alcoholism at a local mental hospital. In addition to the obvious biographical links to Schuyler’s own life—Schuyler, after all, spent a great deal of his life in mental institutions, though not for alcoholism—the novel interacts with a contemporary novel by John Berryman, *Recovery*. Though Schuyler had no friendship for Berryman—he claimed in an interview with Robert Thompson that he “never read any of that” (116) (“I only read *good* poetry!” he quips)—his novel and Berryman’s tackle the issue of recovery very differently. Schuyler’s Lottie, though perpetually good-natured throughout the novel, nevertheless hides a darker edge: her alcoholism is at least partially caused by her “double life” as an alcoholic and a model housewife. Berryman’s *Recovery*, too, is wrapped in issues of doubleness and multiplicity. Dr. Severance, the hero of the text, is described by Berryman as “intermittent and

double” (23). The links between these two texts—and the things they have to say about alcoholism and recovery—are vital, and I’d like to explore them further.

Schuyler’s long poems are a bit of a tougher nut to crack. Every one of his major collections from his second onwards is named after the long poem that closes it: “The Crystal Lithium,” “Hymn to Life,” “The Morning of the Poem,” and “A Few Days.” These constitute perhaps the most important element of Schuyler’s work, and ignoring them in the present thesis was necessary, but nevertheless irresponsible. These poems could be approached in much the same way as I did his shorter poems. They contain, too, the poet’s trademark visuality and verbal ingenuity. The poems would profit more still, however, from a reading of them in comparison to some works of the other principals of the New York school, in particular to Barbara Guest. Guest is often omitted from narratives of the New York School. Her poetry is difficult and inaccessible, and it is not easily shoehorned into gender-based narratives of literary history. But her work is an easy fit with Schuyler’s longer poems. They share a predilection for surrealist details, a sense of purposeful lineation, and a deep interaction with visual arts (Guest, like Schuyler, worked for *Art News* in the early fifties). These commonalities merit further study.

“Salute” was James Schuyler’s first published poem, appearing in *The New Yorker* after Schuyler finished the first of many tenures at Bloomingdale mental hospital in White Plains, New York in early 1952. As Mark Silverberg notes, “that particular scene of writing

is totally absent, as is any self analysis. It is a poem that tries neither to explain nor change the past but which rests indolently with it” (30). Despite its brevity, the poem is the perfect example of what Ashbery called “the anything” (xiv) in Schuyler’s poems:

Past is past, and if one
 remembers what one meant
 to do and never did, is
 not to have thought to do
 enough? Like that gather-
 ing of one of each I
 planned, to gather one
 of each kind of clover,
 daisy, paintbrush that
 grew in the field
 the cabin stood in and
 study them one afternoon
 before they wilted. Past
 is past. I salute
 that various field. (44)

Schuyler wished for the poem “to appear as first or last poem in my *Selected*” (Letters 420), and it appears as the first. As Schuyler’s big break into poetry, it is an effective summary of many of the trends in his work that I have been discussing: it is painterly, “defacialized,” and concerned with thingness. The speaker of this poem asks a pointed

question: is the memory of a thing enough to substitute for that thing? The gathering and study of flowers never occurred, but “to have thought to do” is enough; as Schuyler opines in *The Morning of the Poem*,

“the thing said / Is in the words, how / The words are themselves / The thing said” (268).

Instead of the “gather- / ing of one of each,” the poem is written, and the plan is now not only Schuyler’s but his readers’ as well.

In an echo of Deleuze-Guattari, the poem has a considerable textual emphasis on the parts of things, and how those parts fit together. Schuyler’s lineation in “Salute” is purposefully fragmented. Each line taken on its own forms no cogent grammatical unit. Some lines (“daisy, paintbrush that,” “enough? Like that gather-”) are frankly surrealistic. Each line, individually, is deliberate nonsense, but together they make a simple, beautiful poem about memory and variousness. Most interesting is the first line of the poem. “Past is past” occurs unbroken the first time it is uttered, but by its second repetition at the end of the poem it has been fragmented into “Past / is past.” Silverberg comments that the past, repeated in this fragmented fashion, becomes “a semiotic mirror image, a repetition, a four letter flash that returns in the very moment it is discarded” (30), and that

In Schuyler’s hands repetition is both a device of incompleteness and a mechanism of attention—one that demands a certain kind of concentration. ... Throughout the poem, line breaks drive us forward and pull us back. Enjambment ensures that no line is complete in itself, that each requires readers to move ahead and / then turn / back to remember / what the line meant / to do. (30)

The movement of the poem is therefore elliptical. Its lineation requiring rereading, the past surfaces and resurfaces. It is that conceptual space in which the poem plays. Past, in the poem, is past, but it is also present.

And then we are brought to what is probably the most important “thing” in all of Schuyler’s poetry: the “various field.” The “various field” plays host to all of the themes of Schuyler’s work. It is painterly in its pastoral detail (“clover,” “daisy,” “paintbrush,” “cabin”), and is engaged with “thingness” in the terms expounded by Baudrillard in its discourse between the real and the imagined and between the past and the present. A volume of tributes by Schuyler’s friends published soon after his death—*That Various Field for James Schuyler*—illustrates the centrality of the image of the field. Ultimately, though, it is Schuyler’s poetry itself that constitutes the “various field:” exuberance, multiplicity, lushness, and potency.

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