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The Matrix of Poetry: James Schuyler's Diary

Abstract: In his essay Mikołaj Wiśniewski presents an unpublished 1962 diary entry and two chapters from an unfinished novel found by the author when conducting research in the James Schuyler archive of the Mandeville Special Collections Library at UCSD. Wiśniewski goes on to show how Schuyler experimented with the diary form long before he started keeping a diary in the late 1960s (the published *Diary of James Schuyler* starts with 1967) and how the practice always served him as a starting point or "training ground" for other projects, be it a novel or the late long poems of the 1970s and 1980s. The author also comments on Schuyler's poetics of the quotidian and the boring, contrasting it with Frank O'Hara's focus on moments of exceptional emotional and perceptual intensity.

Keywords: James Schuyler, Frank O'Hara, New York school, diary, everydayness

In his book *The Last Avant-Garde*, David Lehman stated (somewhat provocatively perhaps) that O'Hara's death enabled James Schuyler to "take over [his friend's] poetical project and to adapt it to his own sensitivity" (45). I would like to consider Lehman's proposition by looking at Schuyler's long poems—all of which were written after O'Hara's death and seemed to have been inspired by Schuyler's growing fascination with "the art of the diary," with everydayness, the quotidian and the boring. Conversely, O'Hara was always interested in the electrifying detail, the surprising diversity of city life, and in avant-garde experimentation, or, as Tadeusz Pióro puts it, in "various forms of rhetorical excess" (31), from "Second Avenue" to his late masterpiece "Biotherm." Everydayness and the language of everydayness made O'Hara uneasy, anxious. As he often stressed, he wrote *against boredom*. In the prose-poem "Meditations in an Emergency" he states for instance: "I am bored but it's my duty to be attentive" (*Collected* 197). When asked whether he thought it was "important to be new," he answered: "No, I think it's very important not to be bored, though" (Pióro 99). O'Hara seems to be dismissing here the Poundian „make it new" slogan—perhaps because he was aware that *novelty* is too often fetishized and commodified, and (to quote Walter Benjamin) that it "is a quality independent of [any] intrinsic value"—but there is little doubt that O'Hara was devoted to making things new in poetry, specifically in the sense of the avant-garde ethos of constantly probing the limits of form and language. In fact, when O'Hara compliments Kenneth Koch what he says is: "Mr. Koch intends to 'make it new'" (Pióro 99). Similarly, he praises Pollock's action paintings because they are something "new in the history of Western civilization" (*Chronicles* 26).

Returning now to the relationship between the poetry of O'Hara and Schuyler, I think the simplest way of juxtaposing the two would be to say that, whereas in O'Hara's

poetry "Everything / suddenly honks" ("A Step Away from Them" *Collected* 257), in Schuyler's "Everything chuckles and creaks / sighs in satisfaction" ("Today" *Poems* 26). What I mean by this is that, in contrast to O'Hara's focus on moments of exceptional emotional intensity (the elation of "everyone and I stopped breathing" (*Collected* 325), but also profound anxiety, for example in the poem "On Rachmaninoff's Birthday" which ends with the following sudden interjection: "Shit / on the soup, let it burn. So it's back. / You'll never be mentally sober" *Collected* 159), Schuyler tends to be emotionally more subdued, or perhaps more ironic about his own feelings; at least, this is what "chuckle" seems to imply. Elation in Schuyler is *quieter,* so to speak (it's just a sigh, not "breathlessness"); similarly, desperation is more resigned (as in Schuyler's exquisite poem "Afterward"). What is more, the verb "creak," as opposed to "honk" in O'Hara's "A Step Away from Them," suggests a preoccupation with things (or emotional states) which are not *singular*, but repetitive and in fact slightly tedious. Schuyler (especially in his later poems) is bent on articulating the experience of everydayness; on representing "things as they are," and not making them new.

In an early piece (from 1954) called "Four Poems," dedicated to Frank O'Hara, Schuyler unabashedly imitates O'Hara's style. At one point, in fact, he says: "Oh shit (excuse / me, Frank, for stealing your stuff*)*" (*Poems* 68). Indeed, the similarities are striking: the opening of the poem, in which the lyrical subject is precisely located in time and place, brings to mind the first lines of O'Hara's famous elegy for Billie Holiday (although "The Day Lady Died" was written seven years later). Schuyler writes: "It's 4:30 in Cambridge // and I have a slight headache / on one side only just / enough for a drink" (*Poems* 67). The poem then develops in a characteristically O'Haraesque rhythm of free associations, reminiscences, fleeting impressions and trivial sensations (Schuyler is slightly hung-over; O'Hara is sweating in the July sun). Both poets focus on what O'Hara called "my personal / mess" ("A Poem in Envy of Cavalcanti", *Collected* 35); on simple occurrences of everyday life (such as having a drink, a "malted" in O'Hara's case, in Schuyler's—"malt whisky" is more likely). The dominant tone of both poems may be described as "local and intimate" (to use another O'Hara phrase, from "You are Gorgeous and I'm Coming"). What interests me here most, however, is a curious declaration in Schuyler's "Four Poems" which seems to point to a later development in his writing. He states: "Anyway what I really like best / I guess is just driving in a car / the turnpikes are simply grand / and so BORING" (*Poems* 68).

Schuyler's fondness for the BORING is reflected in his life-long fascination with diaries, not necessarily diaries of famous people and writers (for example Virginia Woolf's *Diary* which was one of Schuyler's favorite reads), not only diaries affording insight into a creative artist's mind, or those dealing with remarkable events, but in particular those which simply recorded the monotonous flow of everyday existence, for instance James Woodforde's *Diary of a Country Parson: 1758-1802*, the diary of the reverend Francis Kilvert, 1870-1879, or—Schuyler's favorite book—*The Diary of George Templeton Strong*. Schuyler's own diary will no doubt disappoint anyone interested in the poet's opinions on art and other writers. It eschews confessionalism,

intellectual analysis, and instead carefully registers such BORING phenomena as the weather or everyday chores. It is full of *ad hoc* remarks pointing to the moment of inscription, repetition of day-to-day events, observations of humdrum occurrences. The vehicle of the occasional metaphor is always some mundane phenomenon (say, the sound of the ocean may be compared to the sniveling of someone who has a runny nose). Here is a characteristic entry from the very beginning of Schuyler's diary: "Snow, enough wind to rattle the shutters, cold, rather bitterly so. A few minutes ago there were bright blue shadows—Prussian blue, I think—and the forsythia, which in dull winter weather has a rich hibernating glow, looked like a lifeless snarl of hair from someone's comb" (*Diary* 27).

The Diary of James Schuyler, published in 1997 and edited by Nathan Kernan, is in fact comprised of two separate diaries: one kept between the years 1967-1971, and the other between 1981-1990. Kernan explains the long break between the two diaries by saying that the seventies were a difficult decade for the poet who had serious health problems, suffered mental breakdowns, found himself in financial dire straits, lived in shelters and shabby hotels. However, during the same decade, he published three volumes of poetry, a novel (*What's for Dinner?*) and finally the Pulitzer prize winning, 50-page long "The Morning of the Poem." It seems then that Schuyler did not abandon his diary, but channeled its energies into other artistic projects. The diary served Schuyler as a sort of training ground for the ideas, themes and formal solutions he would pursue both in his poetry and prose. We can see this on the example of a diary entry which is not included in the published *Diary of James Schuyler*, but which survives in the Schuyler Archive of Special Collections at UC San Diego. Schuyler tried keeping a diary before he started doing so more systematically in the late sixties. The first page of an earlier diary (from 1962) in the UCSD archive reads as follows: "This is the third diary I have started but it is the first one I will not slip up on, i. e. I will write in it every day and if I slip up and miss a day due to having to go to bed or a prior social engagement that will not stop me. I will plunge on ahead and bring it up to date. / First about me. On the other hand first about the diary" (Schuyler Papers Box 6 Folder 23). The gesture at the end of this passage is quite typical for Schuyler's poetry: although it is very personal, he tries to keep himself out of the picture, refuses any sort of confessional disclosure, and instead he focuses on the objects around him. He goes on, in the diary, to describe in detail the notebook he is writing in and other notebooks in which he kept his previous diaries. The entry ends in another evasion. Schuler says: "Who I am will have to wait until tomorrow." The diary breaks off here, but not necessarily because Schuyler "slipped up" so soon.

If the arrangement of the unpublished papers in the archive folder is not coincidental (and it seems that it is not), Schuyler used the diary entry as a starting point for an unfinished novel. The title of its first chapter, "The Next Day," suggests that it is a continuation of the first page of the diary. Indeed, certain descriptions in the chapter are very similar to the observations of "weather effects" in the later diary, for example: "Gray under gray, clouds, clouds, or the bottoms and frayings of clouds

dangling wetly" (Schuyler Papers Box 6 Folder 23).

The point I want to make is that, whenever Schuyler started keeping a diary, he would attempt to develop it into an independent project (whether poem, novel or short story), in which, however, he wanted to preserve the diarist's "flat style" (as he called it in reference to his novel *What's for Dinner*? The same urge to poetically utilize the diary took hold of him soon after he had started keeping one again in 1967. This is the moment when Schuyler began writing *long* poems, written in lines *longer* than anything he had tried before. In one of those, called "A Vermont Diary," he actually included excerpts from his diary entries for November 1970. At the time, however, Schuyler's method was limited to interjecting short lyrics (in the style of William Carlos Williams) into the prose passages. Later on, in his three major long poems: "Hymn to Life," "The Morning of the Poem," and "A Few Days," he accomplished a deeper fusion between poetry and diaristic prose. All three poems are accounts of particular days or periods in the poet's life. Their time frame is always indicated. In "Hymn to Life," it is early spring, March 1972, to be exact, when Schuyler went on a trip to Washington D.C. with John Ashbery and Anne Dunn. In fact, the poem is, among other things, an account of that trip. The 50-page long piece "The Morning of the Poem" was written during Schuyler's visit to his mother in July and August of 1976. Schuyler therefore wrote, on average, one page a day, and the rhythm of the diary, the scrupulous day-to-day account of his visit, is what gives the poem its unity. "A Few Days" might be seen as a continuation of "The Morning of the Poem." It too was begun when Schuyler was staying with his mother three years later, in late 1979, and it ends when Schuyler receives the news of his mother's death in March 1980. Although there is quite a lot of reminiscing in the poems, Schuyler constantly returns to the temporal horizon of dailiness—the DAY is the basic component of time, perhaps its only dimension, and Philip Larkin's "Days are where we live" would serve as an adequate epigraph for all three of Schuyler's long poems. This, of course, is connected with a typically diaristic gesture which we find in the poems, one which insists on the simultaneity of poetic inscription and feeling, observation or reflection. Time and again Schuyler draws attention to what is happening at the moment he is writing the poem, or, to put it differently, it is the moment, or the course of the day, that determines what finds its way into the poem. Here are three such instances: "[a] phone calls and a door slams / A couple passes, jogging. A dog passes, barking / And running. My nose runs, a little" (from "Hymn to Life"); "Sit down to coffee and the news: the Republican Convention, rapes / and muggings" (from "The Morning..."); (from "A Few Days") "I / started this poem in August and here it is September / nineteenth" (from "A Few Days") (*Poems* 214-223).

Schuyler's long poems might also be described as intimate inscriptions of the fleeting moment. In one of the first reviews of "The Morning of the Poem," Stephen Yenser wrote that "Schuyler could call many of his poems *I Sit Down to Type*" (120), in reference to O'Hara who said that he *liked playing on his typewriter after breakfast*. A less enthusiastic reviewer, Hugo Williams, put it differently: "Schuyler—he says—

has no qualms about writing down the first (or last) thing that comes to his mind" (707). The critic suggests that Schuyler's peculiar chronicles of everyday life lack any sort of unity; that poetry is reduced to a sterile accumulation of random observations and that, in Andrew Motion's words, "it transforms nothing." Therefore, instead of "the well-wrought urn" the reader is handed "a jotter by the ashtray" (the title of Hugo Williams's review). Andrew Motion's assessment of Schuyler's poetry is the most severe: "Schuyler," he says, "has always sought to make a virtue of observing random details and attitudes as simply as possible . . . The point of this style is that it transforms nothing. And that . . . is also its problem. Sentimentality, mawkishness, stupidity and boastfulness are all writ large—so much so that they dwarf the occasional intelligent remark or moment of lyrical intensity. . . . The consequence," Motion adds, "is . . . pulverizing boredom for the reader" ("Some New Strain" 20). No doubt, one of the things that Motion must have found BORING, and, at the same time, one of those diaristic aspects of Schuyler's long poems, is their repetitive character. Instead of introducing something new in each part of his poem, Schuyler returns to the same: the same events, the same daily occurrences, the same (or almost the same) descriptions of commonplace objects or sights. The fact that the poet repeats himself so often might be seen as a proof that he indeed writes down the first (or last) thing that comes to his mind, or that he is distracted and does not remember that he has already said something very similar. In "Hymn to Life," for example, Schuyler describes the various ailments he and his friends suffered from in adolescence: "One of us / Had piles, another water on the knee, a third a hernia—a strangulated / Hernia is one of life's less pleasant bits of news" (*Poems* 214), and, only two pages later, he writes about „pain, ordinary household pain, / Like piles, or bumping against a hernia. All the signs are set for A OK / A day to visit the National Gallery—Velázquez, Degas—but, and / What a but, with water on the knee 'You'll need a wheelchair'" (217).

Schuyler also returns to the same images, quite ordinary ones, as if he wanted to grasp them in a more accurate way, but never in 13 different ways (as was the case with Stevens's blackbirds). One such recurring image in "Hymn to Life" is that of raindrops on a window screen. Schuyler offers three different versions of it (four, if we include one more description in which rain and raindrops are substituted for sunlight and particles of dust): 1) "A window to the south is rough with raindrops / That, caught in the screen, spell out untranslatable glyphs"; 2) "The wind shakes the screen / And all the raindrops on it streak and run in stems"; 3) "It rains again: the screen / And window glass are pebbled by it"; 4) "light becomes entrapped in a dusty screen, masking out / The view into the depths of the garage" (*Poems* 214-223). In "A Few Days," the recurrent image is that of a balcony (at Chelsea Hotel where Schuyler lived in the 80s) with a "wrought iron [balustrade] in shapes of flowers" (*Poems* 323).

Repetition in Schuyler's long poems is definitely NOT a matter of distraction or sloppiness. It is a *method*: Schuyler is probing the limits of repetition, so to speak.

He is doing so in order to capture in his poetry the diarist's mode of attention, that careful registering of monotonous everydayness. In this he resembles a painter who returns to the same landscape, the same set of objects, in order to polish his technique by tackling (over and over again) a well-known theme or motif. His intention is to make things more intimately familiar, not to make them new, i.e. *defamiliarize* them.

Schuyler never commented on his poetic pursuits, or on the philosophical outlook behind his poetry, in any comprehensive essay or manifesto. He was even more evasive and reticent than O'Hara when it came to explaining what it was that he was *after* in his poetry ("it's all in the poems," O'Hara said famously in his mock manifesto "Personism"). But just like in O'Hara's case, certain clues can be gathered from Schuyler's art writings.

That is why, to conclude, I propose to consider two passages from Schuyler's essay "An Aspect of Fairfield Porter's Paintings" as veiled statements about his own poetics. In fact, the first may be seen as referring both to painting *and* poetry, because Schuyler is invoking (and at the same time—distancing himself from) Ezra Pound's famous pronouncement: "[Fairfield Porter's] natural subjects [are] the people and places he knows best. It is doubtful that he would paint well a subject with which he was not well acquainted. . . . He once said to a painter who was thinking about moving away from a familiar landscape to an unknown one: 'Any place becomes interesting when you get to know it.' He is very much an artist for whom art is *not* (to lift one of Ezra Pounds's chewier *bonnes-bouches* from a current ad) 'news that stays news'" (*Selected* 13).

In the second passage, by substituting the word "poems" for "paintings," we get as close to a Schuyler manifesto as possible: "What we are given [in these poems] is an aspect of everyday life, seen neither as a snapshot nor an exaltation. [Their] art is one that values the everyday as the ultimate, the most varied and desirable knowledge. What [these poems] celebrate is never treated as an archetype: they are concentrated instances. They are not a substitute for religion, they are an attitude toward life" (16).

Schuyler does not wish to exalt the mundane and the quotidian in a manner which may be associated with the early poetry of William Carlos Williams (hence, I believe, the rejection of the term "snapshot," often used to describe Williams's of imagism). The emphasis is not so much on the poetry of dailiness, as on the dailiness of poetry: poetry understood as an everyday practice required to sustain that attitude to life which Schuyler has in mind—one of sustained attention. The only dogma it adheres to is the one formulated by Frank O'Hara in an essay on Edwin Denby: "attention equals Life, or is its only evidence" (*Standing* 184).[1]

1 Attention in Schuyler is also, of course, a mode of resistance, "the last antidote," says Douglas Crase, "to organized informational thuggery" (235). Andrew Epstein's recent book, whose title, *Attention Equals Life*, is taken from the O'Hara essay I quote here, offers a compelling reading of Schuyler's poetry as a "response to the crisis of attention roiling contemporary culture" and looks at the way "it forces us to think about the ways in which power and capitalism shape and affect tiny details of everyday life, the micropolitics of daily interaction and economic equality, the reality of everyday sexism

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and racism, the effects of consumerism and advertising on our minds" (11). Similarly, Wayne Koestenbaum notes that although "Adorno would have deplored Schuyler's gorgeous sentimentality, [he] would have appreciated his resistance to the received and the manufactured" (99). The most interesting discussion of Schuyler's camp attention to the refuse of consumer culture is to be found in Christopher Schmidt's brilliant study *The Poetics of Waste*. I wrote about these issues in an essay analyzing Schuyler's novel *What's for Dinner?* (see: "Prozac życia rodzinnego" ["The Prose(ac) of Family Life"] in *Literatura na Świecie*, no. 11-12, 2012, p. 339-356). Within the limited scope of this essay, I did not go into the possible philosophical readings of Schuyler's everydayness, but it is important to note that such interpretations, in the light of Wittgenstein's philosophy of ordinary language or Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, have been put forward, for example by Epstein in *Attention Equals Life*.