Relishing: James Schuyler

More than any other writer discussed in this book – more, even, than Thoreau – James Schuyler’s enthusiasm is to be found in his language. So while there are ways in which this closing discussion could be front-loaded – through Schuyler’s art criticism or his consistently exuberant correspondence, with a consideration of his more manic episodes, or in terms of the traditions he managed so gracefully to absorb – the place to start is among the words themselves: in his poems, but also in *The Diary*, a work of exceptional quality in its own right and in a very rich sense a continuation of his poetry. In presenting his enthusiasm I want to show how, in the process and experience of composing, Schuyler opened his writing up: to other voices, but also, as he was able confidently to put it in ‘Slowly’ (a poem which originated in *The Diary*) to ‘the what of which you are a part’; where ‘the what’ was, as Schuyler called it, ‘life’ – as distinct from a Romantic ‘nature’, or, say, from a Heideggerean sense of ‘being’ – and with which he understood himself to be continuous.

What an enthusiastic reading of Schuyler should also bring to the fore, however, is pleasure, the sheer pleasure that can come of combining, or mouthing, or transcribing, words; a pleasure of which criticism is currently well advised not to speak. It is difficult to think of a word more alien to the current British Higher Education learning environment than pleasure: Aims and objectives? Pleasure; Transferable skills? Joy. Clearly what we are talking about here is a different language. A language, importantly, with which Schuyler understood himself to be, if not vociferously, perhaps, then subtly, combatively, in dispute. ‘Think of the people,’ he says in his *Diary* entry of 3 January 1968, ‘who do the counting: would you want your son to marry one of them?’

Thoreau-like in certain of the writing situations in which he found himself – he spent long, productive periods of his life on Fairfield Porter’s island off the coast of Maine – and also in his general disposition towards his environment, what Schuyler wanted to determine in his poetry was how that environment might be known through language, how language can be made...
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capable of showing the world. His enthusiasm consists in that attempted showing, and in the perpetual reacquaintance with the environment it entailed. But it consisted also in pleasure, Schuyler taking an exquisite pleasure both in the sound of words – his own and other people’s – and in the intensified relationship with the world that words can effect. His poems are acts of disclosure, where the disclosure is founded on an intimacy with both language and the world: an intimacy thwarted by the abstractions of administration.

‘Freely Espousing’

Schuyler was 43 when, in 1969, he published his beautifully entitled book Freely Espousing. Prior to that he had published a novel, Alfred and Guinevere, with Harcourt Brace in 1958, and two volumes of poems, Salute (carrying screen prints by Grace Hartigan) with the Tiber Press in 1960, and May 24th or So with Tibor de Nagy Gallery Editions in 1965. Freely Espousing, published by Doubleday, was thus Schuyler’s first generally available book of poems. The title poem was the first in the book, as it is now in the Collected Poems, and for this reason of presentation, but also because of the poem’s air of purpose – it offers up for consideration (and delight) ways of handling the language which are, one way or another, characteristic of Schuyler’s work as a whole – ‘Freely Espousing’ is inescapably a statement of poetic intent. Which is not to say that the poem is typical, being more loosely strung than is usually (though not always) the case. It acts as an introduction to Schuyler by dramatizing elements of the work as a whole, at the risk of overemphasis, but in the interests of clarity.

Unmistakably, what ‘Freely Espousing’ introduces is a poetry of quotation. Any number of the poem’s lines and fragments might be quotations, and most of the poem has the air of something that originated somewhere else. This, for instance, is characteristic:

“What is that gold-green tetrahedron down the river?”
“You are experiencing a new sensation.”

if the touch-me-knots
are not in bloom
neither are the chrysanthemums

Schuyler had various reasons for quoting in his poetry, but one of them, unquestionably, was pleasure. His Diary quite often consists, as Nathan Kernan, its editor, points out, of ‘fragments of conversation that Schuyler reports because he enjoys the way something is expressed’ (D, 13). Kernan cites a remark by Fairfield Porter, ‘“A dozen pair of your socks are vying with
the hawkweed”, but he might have cited any number, *The Diary* being, among other things, a repository of lumps of language enjoyed – as is the poetry, some of which is made up of remarks that first appeared in *The Diary*. The elements of ‘Freely Espousing’ are not lifted from *The Diary*, but the same impulse is at work. To get the poem, in other words, one has to appreciate that lines exist in large part, sometimes exclusively, for the pleasure of their being uttered. Witness the opening, which includes the title:

Freely Espousing

a commingling sky

a semi-tropic night
that cast the blackest shadow
of the easily torn, untrembling banana leaf.

(\textit{CP, 3})

To appreciate this beginning, one has to enjoy the way the phrases play on the inner ear, or the fact of rolling them quietly around one’s mouth: or at very least one has to appreciate that Schuyler did.

In ‘Freely Espousing’, in other words, Schuyler might well be said to savour language, where ‘savor’ is a term from Stevens’ essay ‘The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words’. Stevens’ argument in that essay is that little ‘will appear to have suffered more from the passage of time than the music of poetry, and that has suffered less’. The point of the tricksy phrasing is to observe that, as the culture has grown to disregard the music of poetry, so that music has become all the more significant to the culture. With its neglect, Stevens argues, the need has deepened for the sound of words, for ‘a finality, a perfection, an unalterable vibration, which it is only within the power of the acutest poet to give them’.\(^4\) It is difficult to prove something as generalized as the cultural neglect of the music of poetry. Anecdotally, however, Stevens’ argument would still seem to hold good. Recently I taught Schuyler to an otherwise informed and intelligent final-year class which was collectively incapable of naming ‘alliteration’. It was a subject-specific term which had slipped from the vocabulary. This might not be thought to matter very much, though certainly such a slippage mattered to Stevens, hence the fact that in ‘The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words’, as in numerous other essays and in his poetry, he sets out to show that ‘above everything else, poetry is words; and that words, above everything else, are, in poetry sounds’.\(^5\) What other reason than that words in poetry are, above all, sounds, could one have given, for instance, for the existence of ‘Bantams in Pine-Woods’, where the central figure is ‘Chieftain Iffucan of Azcan in caftan’, and where the sound of the words acts to override everything, including the poem’s ill-considered cultural politics. But if there is unquestionably something of Stevens’ fondness for the
pleasures of language in Schuyler, ‘savouring’ is not quite the word. As Stevens tells it, the poet, along with other artists, ‘transforms us into epicures’, implying, in the pleasure taken, a refinement that does not describe the way Schuyler handles language. Better, perhaps, to say that Schuyler relishes words – where relishing is a more lip-smacking response than savouring – and all words, or at least any kind of words, the way Marianne Moore did in her collage poems, and as she showed in her conversation notebooks; more organized repositories than Schuyler’s Diary, but demonstrating a similar fondness for the language as it was uttered around her. Schuyler puts flesh on the bones of Stevens’ argument. He quotes in his poetry in part simply because he relishes the sound of words, ‘very directly / as in / bong. And tickle. Oh it is inescapable kiss.’

The act and significance of quotation has featured frequently in this book, being a mark, in various cases, of the writer’s enthusiasm, of their work’s willingness to give voice to words and meanings not their own. From Walden to Lunch Poems texts have been shown to open themselves to other expressions, where the changing nature of such openings through the course of Modern American literature has been understood as a gradual reconfiguration of writerly enthusiasm. No writer was more open, in this sense, than Schuyler, ‘Freely Espousing’ being a dramatization of that happy, sometimes ecstatic, condition. Reading Schuyler, however – his Diary in particular, but also those many poems which work like diary entries – is to be reminded how quotation comes about. Schuyler, in other words, doesn’t so much quote as transcribe. This thought is not new; transcription is a word that has seemed, in general, well suited to Schuyler’s writing. He suggested it himself in conversation with Jean W Ross, observing that his work was ‘concerned with looking at things and trying to transcribe them as painting is’, a remark that Kernan takes to articulate a general quality in the poetry, where transcription fulfils something of the Emersonian ambition of finding poems in the world.  

The Diary, however, demonstrates a less transcendent sense of transcription, numerous entries consisting of remarks copied out, or written across, as on 23 December 1968, where the whole entry consists of Schuyler having typed out:

– ‘and possibly local slippery conditions’ – the weather woman, 1 a.m.
12/23/68

Because it stands alone, because it isn’t absorbed into any other text, what partly matters with an entry like this is the fact of it having been copied out; that Schuyler took the time on hearing the woman’s remark to go to his typewriter and reproduce it on the page. And typically, when Schuyler quotes in his diary, the quote goes unglossed by commentary. It just stands there, perhaps alongside another unglossed quote, as for instance the entry for 17
August 1970, which consists simply of a quote from Harriet Beecher Stowe, and then this from the Memoir of the English engraver Thomas Bewick:

From my sheep thus drawing into shelter, gave rise to an opinion I formed, and which has been confirmed by long reflection, that much may yet be done to protect the larger flocks from being overblown and lost on the bleak moors, in great snow-storms. Were long avenues made by double rows of whin hedges, planted parallel to each other at about six feet asunder, and continued in the form of two sides of a square, with the whins of each side drawn together, and to grow interplatted at the tops, so as to form an arched kind of roof, the sheep would, on instinctively [sic] seeing the coming storm, immediately avail themselves of such asylums, and particularly in the lambing season. (D, 84)

In The Diary the quote continues, heavy with the sound of detail – a whin is a form of ‘furze or gorse’ – Schuyler here, as elsewhere, demonstrating a fondness for the music of fact which led him, like Thoreau, to read extensively in natural history, in Gilbert White, for instance, and Charles Darwin.

Prior to the downloadable text, the easy cut-and-paste of which obviates the need of a physical relation with favoured or selected words, all writers who quote must have done something like this, copying words out onto some intermediary text – a notebook or file card – or sometimes directly into the work itself. A noticeable feature of Schuyler’s copying out is that often he does it into his Diary, and that sometimes his Diary consists of that and nothing else. And while sometimes, as in Moore’s notebooks, the Diary acts as an archive, Schuyler returning to it for resources for his poems, much more frequently the quoted remark has no existence in his body of work but there. The Diary, in other words, doubles as a commonplace book (as his poetry would from time to time, witness in particular ‘The Faur6 Ballade’), where remarks are quoted in large part simply because the pleasure of them is intensified in the act of transcription itself, because one way of really relishing an instance of language is to copy it out. More than that, to copy out another person’s words is to develop a more intimate relation with them; not to make them one’s own perhaps, but to take them into, to allow them to shape, one’s sensibility; as – in the act of copying, as one becomes more familiar with the shape and rhythm of the sentences – they guide one’s hand or one’s fingers. Schuyler quoted, but in order to quote, as his Diary reminds us, he had first to transcribe, his transcriptions being a way of becoming intimate with utterances he relished.

There is relishing, also, in the manner of Schuyler’s composition, in the way in which Schuyler would often collage a poem together. Many Schuyler poems are obviously collages (‘Freely Espousing’ is a case in point), but many
that don’t immediately look like collages are inconspicuously so, the transferable value and pleasure of the collage for Schuyler being the way it presented its various elements. Thus as he wrote to Miss Batie (a correspondent from Vancouver, who had written expressing an admiration for Schuyler’s poem ‘February’ and with questions about the poet’s practice):

I know that I like an art where disparate elements form an entity. De Kooning’s work, which I greatly admire, has less to do with it than that of Kurt Schwitters, whose collages are made of commercial bits and ‘found’ pieces but which always compose a whole striking for its completeness.7

It is clear how a poem like ‘Freely Espousing’ resembles Schwitters, or, for instance, Rauschenberg, in that the poem’s snatches and fragments of language, while part of the whole, remain discrete elements, the effect of which can be to make the poem more thoroughly pleasurable in that each element can be enjoyed in and for itself. What Schuyler takes from the art of collage, however, is not simply a sense that, as Burroughs grasped it, language could be cut up and rearranged, spliced and respliced to stimulating effect; but, more like Moore, that language could (and should) be understood through collage, that it should be presented with the clarity with which collaging artists present their found materials. So it is not only, in ‘Freely Espousing’, quoted phrases one is invited to relish, but their constituent elements, as in

the bales of pink cotton candy
in the slanting light

– where the alliteration serves to hold the sounds apart. Or, for instance,

Their scallop shell of quiet
is the S.S. United States

– where the first line comes from Walter Ralegh’s poem ‘The Passionate Man’s Pilgrimage’, and where it is included very largely for its qualities of sound. Schuyler made collages in order that all the elements of the poem, written and voiced, its phonemes, syllables, vowels and consonants – the language in all its detail – might be understood as pleasurable.

Which view of the pleasures of Schuyler’s poetry might seem to make it typically – and reductively – post-Modern, where the action of the writing is all in and between the words. And there is intensive action in and between Schuyler’s words, and between the constitutive elements of those words, and this is integral to the pleasure and value of his work. You do want to get your tongue around the poems. You do want to have them on your ear. You do – I do anyway – while reading The Diary, find yourself copying large chunks of it out. Stevens’ complaint that the music of poetry has suffered from the passage
of time remains true, especially in British universities, where the pressure is constantly on to convert the experience of reading into something else, some other skill or outcome. In such an environment Schuyler’s poetry exists as an education in the qualities and capacities of literary language. But there is more to the pleasure of uttering than the simple relishing of words, as a glance at another Schuyler collage, ‘An East Window on Elizabeth Street’, suggests.

‘An East Window on Elizabeth Street’ finds Schuyler in his most characteristic writing situation – the window in question looking out on part of lower Manhattan. The poem is vernacular in its quotation, in that much of the language that enters the poem comes up from the street. It is vernacular also in its music, which bears a trace of Stevens, but which has its source in the environment the poet looks out on to:

burgeoning with stacks, pipes, ventilators, tensile antennae –
that bristling gray bit is a part of a bridge.

[CP, 85]

As with any number of Schuyler poems the extraordinary thing here, as he puts it in ‘February’, is that ‘it all works in together’, that the elements the poem presents – the constituents of its manifold – don’t, in their individuality, exceed the sense of a whole. What holds this particular collage together, what makes its various elements compose a Schwitters-like entity, is the image of assemblage in the closing lines, where

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

[CP, 85]

Not to labour the point, but the bird is up to what Schuyler is up to, making himself at home in his environment with the materials the environment provides, the scraps and fragments, the torn-up letters and gum packs. Or to change the metaphor slightly, Schuyler opens his writing up to the voices of his environment, makes a poetry of what he finds, in order to be at home in the world in which he finds himself.

Only the relationship is more physiological than that suggests. Thus while there is not a voice, as such, in this poem – Schuyler does show himself speaking at one point, but only so as to make his absence elsewhere more apparent – there is, nonetheless, a mouth in the poem. Or rather, the poem has a mouth, opened wide and made physiologically vivid:

(“Rinse and spit”
and blood stained sputum and big gritty bits
are swirled away.)

[CP, 84]
This image extends a metaphor Schuyler has just before introduced, the buildings he is looking at being thought of, in their alignment, as dental. But as the continuation of a metaphor the image of the mouth is gratuitous in that the scene does not require it to appear. Except that in another sense it does, because in this poem of quotation and vernacular music, the scene comes about through the implied mediation of the mouth, Schuyler composing the scene and, as he does so, relishing the way the words he utters play in and around his tongue. And again, it would be wrong to make too much of this, to fixate on a particular image, except that what Schuyler provides here is an image of the poem being mouthed, where mouthing is different from, or at least an inflection on, voicing. To set the argument out: Schuyler relishes words not simply as they afford pleasure, but because the words he finds – as with the bird and its torn-up letters – constitute, in some sense, a way of being at home in the world, and where the contact and continuity implied by that statement comes, naturally (which is to say physiologically) enough, to focus on the mouth – the opening from which the words flow. Which brings one back to ‘Freely Espousing’, which has its own vivid mouth action: ‘bong. And tickle. Oh it is inescapable kiss.’ To understand the full enthusiasm of Schuyler’s writing, one has to register the kinds of intimacy he thinks words are capable of; and to understand that intimacy one has to appreciate the intercessions of his mouth.

**Kissing**

Like another Schuyler collage, “‘The Elizabethans Called It Dying’”, ‘Freely Espousing’ is, in one sense, a love poem. “‘The Elizabethans Called It Dying’” is a poem of the upper East Side, in particular the stretch of Manhattan that looks across the East River to Welfare Island, now called Roosevelt Island. Digressing through the expressions, spoken or written, that emerge from that location – its capacity for acquaintance with the neighbourhood extending with each new incorporated detail – the poem concludes by announcing itself a love poem:

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not to be in love with you
I can’t remember what it was like
it must’ve been lousy
(CP, 11)
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This comes as a surprise, because nothing that went before seemed to speak of love, except that on reflection love was the condition of the poem’s writing, the state in which the generous intimacy of the collage was made possible. ‘Freely Espousing’ wraps up in a similar fashion:
It is not so quiet and they
are a medium-size couple who
when they fold each other up
well, thrill. That’s their story.

(CP, 4)

Here the concluding lines are more of a piece with the whole poem – one can think of the couple as freely espoused, as each retaining their individual identities even as they ‘fold each other up’. Which happy image of a relationship replicates the relations the poem identifies in language, disparate elements existing independently and within a whole. ‘Freely Espousing’, in other words, also has as its condition of composition a particular intimacy, between the ‘medium size couple’, an intimacy brought to the fore earlier in the poem by the expression, ‘Oh it is inescapable kiss’. But it isn’t the couple in ‘Freely Espousing’ who kiss. The statement arises as Schuyler is reflecting on language, on words which ‘echo the act described’. ‘Oh it is inescapable kiss’, in other words, is trying to say something about language, something that seems central to Schuyler’s poetry.

It seems central partly because there is a good deal of kissing in Schuyler. To press the point, because it is important to register the frequency of the image and the consistency of its use, in ‘In January’

a leafless beech stands wrinkled, gray and sexless – all bone
and loosened sinew – in silver glory

And the sun falls on all one side of it in a running glance, a licking gaze, an eye-kiss.

(CP, 81)

‘The Crystal Lithium’ records

A promise, late on a broiling day in late September, of the cold kiss
Of marble sheets to one who goes barefoot quickly in the snow

(CP, 116)

‘Await’ thinks of time as

hours compressed into
a kiss, a lick, or
stretched out by a
train into an endless
rubber band.

(CP, 133)

‘So Good’ – an elegy for Schuyler’s Grandmother, who taught him the names of flowers and birds – kisses twice, the second time presenting snow and rain going
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as Granny went
embarked in flowers
so long ago, so
cold a cheek to
ask a child
to kiss.

(CP, 180)

While early in ‘Hymn to Life’ a ‘Gull coasts by, unexpected as a kiss on the
nape of the neck’, the poem later remarking how

“When I
was born, death kissed me. I kissed it back.”

(CP, 216, 220-1)

The most significant kiss poem in Schuyler, however, is ‘Going’, the kiss
there clearly aiming to articulate something about the way Schuyler’s poetry
disposes itself towards words. ‘Going’ consists of five sentences, the first and
fifth being quite exhilarating presentations of phenomena that exemplify
‘October’, their detail equalling anything one might find in Thoreau. Thus, to
hear the first, which runs across eleven lines, and builds powerfully through
its syntax:

In the month when the Kamchatka bugbane
finally turns its strung-out hard pellets white
and a sudden drench flattens the fugitive
meadow saffron to tissue-paper scraps
and winds follow that crack and bend without breaking
the woody stems of chrysanthemums so the good of not disbudding
shows in smaller flights of metallic pungency,
a clear zenith looks lightly dusted and fades to nothing
at the skyline, shadows float up to lighted surfaces
as though they and only they kept on the leaves
that hide their color in a glassy shine.

(CP, 32-3)

Compelling as it is, as it presses towards its conclusion, a sentence such
as this deserves a commentary. Happily, the poem itself proceeds to provide
one, the second, third and fourth sentences each, separately and more or less
figuratively, articulating the relation to the world that the opening sentence
stands to exemplify. Thus the second sentence presents an instance of limited
but fervent communication, as ‘A garnering squirrel makes a frantic chatter at
a posse of cats/ that sit and stare while their coats thicken’. The fourth
sentence presents a more successful transmission, though again it is wordless,
as
the light slants
into rooms that face southwest: into this room
across a bookcase so the dead-brown gold-stamped
spines look to be those to take down now.

The cats don’t get the squirrel’s chatter, but here the light stamps itself
decisively onto the books, as if the world could make its way directly onto the
page. The poem doesn’t believe this exactly, but it does want to assert an
intimacy of sorts between language and the world, and the intimacy it has in
mind is that proposed by the third sentence, where

Days
are shorter, more limpid, are like a kiss
neither dry nor wet nor on the lips
that sends a light shock in rings
through all the surface of the skin.

We have come across part of this metaphor before, the light shock in rings
being how, in Ion, Plato presented inspiration, and how Melville recapitulated
it when presenting the relation between major writers. The question is, how
does Schuyler’s ‘kiss’ supplement the metaphor, and how is this poem’s
relation to the moment it presents explicable as such?

What we are invited to think by the poem is that language, or at least,
language used as well as Schuyler can use it, is capable of taking the
impression of a day, is capable of being kissed. But what does this mean? One
way to answer this question is to think again of how Stevens thought of the
sounds of words. Thus, while lamenting in ‘The Noble Rider and the Sound of
Words’ that the music of poetry has suffered greatly from the passage of time,
Stevens makes the case for such music beyond the pleasures inherent to it: ‘I
repeat that [the poet’s] role is to help people live their lives. He has had
immensely to do with giving life whatever savor it possesses. He has had to do
with whatever the imagination and senses have made of the world.’ The
argument as to how the poet gives life its ‘savor’, how he or she helps ‘people
live their lives’, unfolds across the essays, lectures and academic pieces of The
Necessary Angel. What Stevens wants to establish there is a relation of
‘intensification’ between the poet’s handling of the sound of words and the
lives people live. One word for that relation is analogy – analogy, as Stevens
argues it, being central to poetry, or rather, as he puts it: ‘Poetry is almost
incredibly one of the effects of analogy’. There is, he suggests, ‘always an
analogy between nature and the imagination’, and poetry is ‘the outcome of
the operation of one imagination on another through the instrumentality of
the figure’. Or to put the sentiment at its most enthusiastic, analogy is ‘a
rhetoric in which the feeling of one man is communicated to another in words of the exquisite appositeness that takes away all their verbality’.

Stevens’ quasi-historical discussion of analogy is, for the most part, concerned with the poet’s use of figure. Crucially, though, as he brings the idea up to date, he reverts from figure in language to the music of language, asking the question, ‘What has this music to do with analogy?’ The answer he offers is that the sound of words ‘carries us on and through every winding, once more to the world outside of the music at its conclusion’. This is suggestive, but doesn’t quite nail the point. Where Stevens nails it instead, where he gets to the crux of the proposition that there is analogy in the sound of words, is in ‘The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet’:

The pleasure that the poet has ... is a pleasure of agreement with the radiant and productive world in which he lives. It is an agreement that Mallarme found in the sound of

\[ \text{Le vierge, la vivace et le bel aujourd'hui}. \]

There is, Stevens argues here, and as he wants to demonstrate in a late poem such as ‘Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas’ (a poem written after he had ceased to relate to the world according to the mechanisms of Kant) there is an agreement with the world to be had in the sound of words. Language used with due attention to the sound of words is not so much a medium in which analogies with the world might be made, but an analogy itself. In the sound of words, to say it again, as Stevens suggests, there can be an agreement with the world.

Schuyler is a maker of analogies, numerous major poems proceeding through what one might call an analogical enquiry. Persistently he asks how one thing can be put in terms of another – how the squirrels’ chatter might be rendered by the cats. ‘A Man in Blue’ works like this: the November afternoon being presented in terms of the Brahms Schuyler listens to as he looks out on to it; Brahms telling Bruno Walter to think of his second symphony ‘as a family / planning where to go next summer / in terms of other summers’ (CP, 16-17). ‘February’ works in a similar way, Schuyler trying to get at the day’s defining quality through a series of likenings: ‘like the UN Building on big evenings’, ‘like grass light on flesh’ (CP, 4). The moments of real agreement in Schuyler, however, occur when the poetry’s sound is most clearly to the fore, as in the opening sentence of ‘Going’, where October – in ‘its strung-out hard pellets’, and ‘meadow saffron’ flattened to ‘tissue-paper scraps’, and the ‘crack and bend’ of ‘the woody stems of chrysanthemums’ – finds its expression, and agreement, in Schuyler’s extraordinarily supple and extended handling of sound.

One way, then, Schuyler wants us to think about the relation the poem has to the environment it presents is in terms of the impression promised by
a kiss. This takes us back to collage. The object of Schuyler's various poetry – where the variousness lies largely in the writing's brilliantly fluent separation of sounds – was, as he put it in the poem with which, late in life, he always began his readings, to 'salute' the 'various field' which was invariably, as he looked out on it, his subject. So likewise in 'Going', where the sounds of Schuyler's composition are held apart and heard in order that the scene they present can be apprehended in terms of its constitutive elements. In Schuyler names don't agree with things in any simple way, but language, in its internal relations, can resemble, or, rather disclose, arrangements of things. Or so Schuyler thought. As he wrote to the painter John Button: 'one important reason for making drawings, I imagine, is not to draw a likeness of what one sees but to find out what it is one sees' (SL, 33). Schuyler finds out what he sees in 'Going', his emphasis on the sound of words at the beginning and the end of that poem allowing him to see better the elements of his environment.

Likewise in 'Light from Canada', where the 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.

(CP, 100)

The light opens the spruce up, but so does Schuyler's language, which in its facility for sound, in its free-verse, alliterative attention to each of its elements, provides an analogue for, or achieves an agreement with, 'the stolid spruce ... in their bristling individuality'. Which means that, as Schuyler understands it, language is capable of intimacy with the world, that the page is capable of presenting the world's impression; where the impression is to be found not in language's figures and representations, but in the arrangements of its elements, imprinted in the distribution of its various parts: 'Oh it is inescapable kiss'.

**Voicing**

Although when finally he performed his work he was a 'fucking sensation' – Schuyler's own, uncharacteristically immodest words, but a judgement shared by many who heard him – for most of his life he declined to do so. A reason he gave for this, over and above terror at the prospect, was a suspicion of the effect the intervention of his voice would have on the sound of the poems. As he told Robert Thompson: 'Very often, if you hear a person read a poem, you
don’t hear what the poem sounds like at all. It goes by too quickly, and their voice distracts you from all the inner sounds of a poem.¹² What is obscured in the poetry reading, in other words, is, as he puts it, ‘the voice of the poem’.

He expressed such a dissatisfaction with voice on a number of occasions. In his *Diary* entry for Thursday 8 December 1988, he reports on the not-fun of having one’s words yelled at one, in duet with the clanging of a Steinway. Poems, for the most part, meant to be read at a glance, journal jottings, almost unsingable, and certainly not like this. If the voice is treated as another instrument, then it must sound as well played as the piano [or whatever]: and it did not, oh no, not either of them. (D, 244)

The unhappy event in question was a performance of two song-cycle settings of Schuyler’s poems by the composer Gerald Busby. In part his complaint is against the particular singers – hence the suggestion that if the voice is to be treated as an instrument it must sound as well played as any other. The meat of the complaint, though, is against the idea of the poems being sung at all, and so quite likely no rendition could have satisfied Schuyler, for whom the best kind of voice was not, in fact, one played like an instrument, but one, as it were, that knew how to efface itself. Thus in the entry of a few days before, Monday 5 December 1988, Schuyler reports attending the Church of the Incarnation, at Madison Avenue and 35th Street, remarking that ‘Father Ousley [the Rev J. Douglas, that is] has a fine voice which he uses with equally fine lack of affectation – no Episcopal throat there, (D, 243). It is intriguing to contemplate the Episcopal throat in the context of a discussion of Schuyler’s enthusiasm, the implication being that an Episcopal voice would too thickly overlay and intervene on its text; which would seem to imply in turn that Schuyler preferred the unintrusive voice, the voice which gave itself over to another’s agency.

I will come on to the religious aspect of Schuyler’s enthusiasm at the end of this essay. What I want to concentrate on here is the suggestion Schuyler gives of the relative voicelessness of his writing, where voice, in that sense, means the voice of the poet, the poet’s voice. In that sense, Schuyler’s writing barely has a voice, doesn’t conform to the imagined contours of the speaking voice, but is, as he puts it, unsingable. The writing does, however, so he suggests, have a voice of its own, being the ‘voice of the poem’ that the reading obscures. This would seem true, in that there are relations internal to a Schuyler poem that are available to the silent listening of the inner ear, but which a reading would, however sensational, fail to bring out. Still, though, to speak of the voice of the poem is to place a certain construction upon it, as if the point of reading were to identify that mediating tone. What I want to suggest, instead, taking on board Schuyler’s own suspicion, is that his best
writing doesn't so much have voice but that it voices, that what one hears is not voice but a voicing.

Some of Schuyler's best work — some of the later poems of *Freely Espousing*, and the environmental lyrics, including the title poem, of *The Crystal Lithium* — are without voice in the explicit sense that there is not, in the poem, an T speaking. His most voiceless writing, however — and therefore, as he points out, his most unsingable — is to be found in his *Diary*. There are, roughly speaking, three phases to Schuyler's *Diary*. He started to keep it — a single entry in 1967 notwithstanding — at the suggestion of Fairfield Porter on 1 January 1968, writing it more or less regularly until the summer of 1971. Then, after a handful of entries in 1981, he took it up again in October 1984 — when he and the artist Darragh Park decided to collaborate on a diary of words and pictures for publication — stopping in December 1985. He then resumed the diary in June 1987, keeping it up sporadically until near the end of his life, in February 1991. The three sections of the diary differ in various ways — in terms of preoccupation (mortality towards the end), setting (Long Island and Maine, where Schuyler lived with the Porters through the 1960s and early 1970s, and Manhattan where he lived through the 1980s until his death), but also address. Written with publication explicitly in mind, the middle section of the diary clearly has a voice: Schuyler engages in exchanges with the diary itself, with future readers, and sometimes stages rhetorical banter between a private and a soon-to-be-public self. All of which is something of a shock when one comes upon it, the clarifying virtue of the shock being to show just how peculiarly without voice had been the early phase of *The Diary*:

**November 29, 1969, Amherst**

Morning. There's half a moon a quarter ways up the clear faded sky. In the shadows the fallen leaves are pale with frost and those in the light look toasted. Inside the woods, behind the wild white scratches of the bare branches, there is a dark warm green of a single pine: a homely, inviting glow.

**August 17, 1970**

The rain falls in rods, pinning everything in place.

**September 1, 1970**

A wonderful freshness, the air billowing like sheets on a line, and the light with a clarity that opens up the huddled masses of the spruce and you can see their bristling individuality.

There are three things one might notice in entries such as these. The first is that, really to enjoy Schuyler's *Diary* one has to enjoy weather, or writing
about weather, which is to say writing constantly attuned to change. The second thing to acknowledge straight away is that, obviously, there is a consciousness at work in such diary entries. There is a composing self and, plain as the writing can be, it does run, quite freely at times, to analogy and metaphor. But the third thing to notice is Schuyler’s intention in writing. ‘Some days,’ he wrote on 27 April 1971, ‘I have an almost irresistible urge to write.’ The diary itself was conducive, instrumental even, to that urge. The keeping of it would seem to have enabled him to become more of a writer, in that judging by his publication history he wrote more continuously after he had started it. The Diary, that is, facilitates the urge to write, giving Schuyler a form in which he might always be composing, which would always be readily available for his writing. To put this another way, the urge to write invariably amounted to an urge simply to get things down, where things are not aspects of the reflective self – Schuyler’s Diary is almost never a vehicle for self-expression – but things of the world, where the object in writing was to get some aspect of the world onto the page.

Once started, The Diary quickly became integral to Schuyler’s whole writing practice. The Crystal Lithium, published in 1972, and the book that emerged through the most vigilant period of Schuyler’s diary-keeping, is a markedly different book from Freely Espousing. There are various reasons for this, including the differing nature of the two books’ composition: Freely Espousing gathered together work dating from the 1950s to the late 1960s; The Crystal Lithium showed the overall cogency of work produced in a quite concentrated burst. Which is not to say that the latter book diverges radically from the former, continuing, as it does, Schuyler’s twin habits of observation and collage. The difference, felt in the longer title poem of The Crystal Lithium, but apparent also in a number of the book’s shorter pieces, lay rather in the intensification of the writing in response to environment, and – because it is only partly true to call that writing observational – in the shifting relation it presented between the self and the world. These differences, it seems safe to say, were to do with the writing of The Diary, the effect of which was to permit in Schuyler a new intimacy with the conditions of his inspiration.

Partly this is true in that certain poems, or lines from poems, come directly through or out of The Diary. Schuyler demonstrated this by publishing a section of his diary as such – he called it ‘A Vermont Diary’ – in The Crystal Lithium, where the poems ‘Slowly’, ‘A Gray Thought’ and ‘Verge’ are shown to have had their first existence as diary entries. Better instances than these, though – because ‘A Vermont Diary’ might possibly have been written with publication expressly in mind – are the cases where unversified lines in The Diary become parts of poems. As Kernan notes, the opening of ‘Light Blue Above’ has its first existence as part of a diary entry, as do the
defining phrases of ‘Light from Canada’. To take this kind of effect as an instance of Schuyler becoming intimate, through the Diary, with the condition of his inspiration is to say that through writing in the journal he arrived at – or located, or found – poetry; The Diary being a medium through which Schuyler could access a quality of language which became the sound of his new poems. Not to over-egg this, but in the quietness and relative unselfconsciousness of the early phase of The Diary he found a means of producing – one might say catching the sound of – what he termed ‘the voice of the poem’.

There is another sense, however, in which The Diary permitted in Schuyler an intimacy with the condition of his inspiration, where what is at issue is not the voice of the poem, even in the sense Schuyler means it, but its own relative voicelessness, where the writing is given over to a voicing of things in the world. Thus the urge to write which often defines the diary – the urge, simply, to get things down on paper – is apparent in a number of poems in The Crystal Lithium. But what also shows in those poems is the consequence of the continuous recording The Diary consists of. Schuyler grew more closely acquainted with his environments – Maine in particular, but also Long Island and Vermont – through the act of writing them down; thus the poems of The Crystal Lithium pay a still more local and particular attention than anything in Freely Espousing. The poems vary in the degree of authority they want to attribute to the relation they have with the environments that give rise to them. Thus in ‘Verge’, written in Vermont, Schuyler all but ascribes words to the world:

An unseen
something stirs
and says: No
snow yet but
it will snow.
The trees sneeze:
You bet it
will, compiling
a white and wordless
dictionary
in which brush
cut, piled and
roofed with glitter
will catch and burn
transparently
bright in white
defining “flame.”

(CP, 111)
Schuyler is fond of the Emersonian illusion – though it is only ever used for rhetorical effect – that nature supplies words (or at least meanings). ‘Hymn to Life’ ends in a similar fashion, the poem, having dwelt beautifully on the phenomena of May, giving itself over, in the last lines, to the month’s own voice: ‘May mutters, “Why ask questions?” or, “What are the questions you wish to-ask?”’ Elsewhere the poetry is less rhetorically confident, not finding its words in the world, but, as in ‘A Gray Thought’, discriminating between similar things in a way that is possible because, through the keeping of his Diary, he has arrived at a language capable of registering the finest of distinctions.

Most striking, though, in respect of the intimacy Schuyler achieves through his diary, with the environments that are the conditions of his inspiration, are the poems that catch and voice process. As in ‘Evening Wind’, which first describes wind as an effect in trees, and which concludes by presenting it as an effect in language:

```
Wind, you don’t  
blow hard enough, though  
rising, in the smoky blue  
of evening, mindless and in love.  
Or would be if the wind  
were not above such thoughts,  
above thought in fact  
of course, though coursing,  
cool as water, through it.  
   [CP, 103]
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Wind won’t be caught by thought, this poem suggests, not as thought characteristically voices itself, won’t respond to thought’s address. Rather, language must somehow be given over to wind, to its coursing through. The sound of its coursing runs through thought and its locutions, through ‘though’ and ‘of course’, until what one hears is ‘coursing’ ‘through’. Where the assonance is not the sound of the wind exactly, but sound is the overwhelming effect, language having made itself available to what is heard.

A better example still is the title poem itself, whose object is not to present a particular phenomenon, but to catch, in its extraordinarily extended sentences, the multiplicity of phenomena. The self is not an observer of these phenomena, but it is buffeted by and circulates among them, and all the power of the poetry is in its carrying on, and on:

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Where kids in kapok ice-skate and play at Secret City as the sun  
Sets before dinner, the snow on fields turns pink and under the hatched  
icce
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The water slides darkly and over it a never before seen liquefaction of the sun
In a chemical yellow greener than sulphur a flash of petroleum by-product
Unbelievable, unwanted and as lovely as though someone you knew all your life
Said the one inconceivable thing and then went on washing dishes ...

(CP, 118)

Schuyler was an avid reader of diaries. He mentioned in interview, and in The Diary itself, the diaries of, among others, Francis Kilvert, George Templeton Strong, Gilbert White and Virginia Woolf. But he also mentioned Thoreau, whose diaries, as he told Carl Little, he was ‘always reading in’, and whose Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers he finds – as he reports, late in his own diary, when he turns up a yellowed scrap of paper – he once transcribed from in the early 1950s. What his own Diary most resembles, however, in the extended intimacy of its meditation, is Walden itself. Except that in Walden, given Thoreau’s polemical gesture – the gesture of setting up house by the pond in the first place, but also the political gesture implicit in his writing – the voice of the author is more to the fore. Thoreau was there by design, and he had a design on the reader, and his relation with the world is inevitably mediated as such. Schuyler’s acquaintance with the environments of Maine and Long Island was, by contrast, accidental, and his writing of them was, relative to Thoreau, un-rhetorical. His urge, as often as not, seems to have been simply to get the world down. Which is not to say that Schuyler’s environments speak through his Diary. Rather, The Diary takes great pains to voice its world, where what is meant by such a voicing is not direct transmission, but that, to echo a Schuyler phrase, he gave a shape in language to that of which he was a part.

One can think of Schuyler’s Diary, therefore, as in some sense equivalent to O’Hara’s reconfiguration of the act of writing, of his situating the typewriter in the middle of the conversation. It was a relation with environment Schuyler himself thought of enthusiastically, hence the entry for 22 February 1971, which reads as follows:

Creepily misty morning, dank, dark, disheveled and rather ominous, like a destroyer just gone into dry dock. But how beautiful it was at the first light to hear the repetitious song of a cardinal – my pleasure in it is more than just that I can recognize it: it is not unlike that which someone who doesn’t ‘know’ music takes in the songs he does know. Simple and right from the heart to the heart – or perhaps from the throat to the ear is enough, but in that way in which hearing is itself suddenly a kind of singing. (D, 109)

The claim, as in Thoreau, is not to immediacy, but to nearness, to the proximity to things achievable in the act of voicing. In Thoreau the effect was
Relishing: James Schuyler

Relishing: James Schuyler

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crowing; here, that which Schuyler hears is suddenly a kind of singing, words forming in the act of listening. In his Diary, this is to say, Schuyler understood himself, sometimes, as arriving at a form of writing only minimally intervened upon by voice and its effects. Or to put it another way, he approaches, in the growing absence of his voice, a voicing of other agencies, a precarious mode of utterance given the name, historically, of enthusiasm.

Showing

In Schuyler’s 1950s poem ‘April and its Forsythia’, published in Freely Espousing, the census taker turns up. ‘She had on’, the poem reports, ‘transparent overshoes, coat and / hat’ and, naturally, had a few questions she needed to ask. Schuyler doesn’t report the conversation, but some of its content is made apparent. ‘That census taker,’ he observes, a few lines after having introduced and then seemingly forgotten about her – ‘I’m the head of a household. / I am also my household. Not bad’ (CP, 23). But not, as the poem doesn’t overlook to imply, good either. Schuyler doesn’t make too much of it, but what sense can it really make to designate him the head of something which consists only of him? That would be to make him the head of himself, which is a nonsensical proposition, and a conclusion, so the poem allows one to think, that could only arise out of bureaucratic stupidity. Whatever it was the census was designed to establish, it hasn’t done an effective job in Schuyler’s case, its mode of questioning garbling the situation of the single, one might say – because what this poem of 1950s New York partly has in mind is homosexuality – unmarried man.

But the woman does show something. She shows, by her clothing – those transparent overshoes, coat and hat (are they all transparent? Schuyler declines to determine that implicitly comic detail) – that outside, in the world, it is snowing. Which is what the poem means to show also; not that it is snowing – he could just tell us that – but what this particular snowfall is like. This is not, as the poem is careful to observe, something we can take for granted:

What variety snow falls with and has: this kind lays like wet sheets or soaked opaque blotting paper: where a surface makes a natural puddle, its own melting darkens it, as though it had lain all winter and the thaw is come. (CP, 23)

This description distinguishes it from the snowfall Schuyler observes in ‘Empathy and New Year’, where it ‘isn’t raining, snowing, sleetiing, slushing’ but is, in fact, ‘raining snow’. ‘Raining snow’ is quite a good description, but is also deficient in the way description is, the words failing, quite, to make clear
what the snow is like, which is why in ‘April and its Forsythia’ the emphasis is firmly on ‘showing’, on the fact that, as the poem says, ‘Snow isn’t secret, showing further aspects, how small / cast lions would look if they grew maned’. Only even as he makes this point, quietly establishing that it isn’t by describing a thing that one brings it into view, he seems already to have moved away from his subject, not showing snow, but indicating what snow shows. Except that actually that is his subject. Thus, it is not clear from ‘April and its Forsythia’ whether the census taker established what she needed to – though the suspicion freely offered is that her bureaucratic approach to the world is hardly likely to issue in anything of worth. Despite herself, however, she does help to establish that it is snowing. ‘April and its Forsythia’, in other words, is a gentle comedy of knowledge, where the butt of the joke is administration.

How things can be known, how they show themselves, was an ongoing question for Schuyler. Quite often, as in ‘April and its Forsythia’, what results is comedy, a burlesque on the way things are thought to be known but, as he wants very much to assert, aren’t. As in ‘Sorting, wrapping, packing, stuffing’, where the joke is in the present participles which name ways of containing and organizing the world, but which in their ongoing grammatical nature show that such organization is a hopeless pursuit. Thus in the poem nothing will stay packed, like, for example, the ‘blue fire escape’ Schuyler notices as he fills up his suitcase:

But how do you pack a blue fire escape – even if the man
          got off it out of the 97 degree sun
          and blizzards, then sullied snow that left
          disclosing no car where one was.

          (CP, 27)

This looks like a conceptual error, in that nobody, surely, would want to pack a blue fire escape, except that what is at issue in the poem is not a category mistake, but the mistakes categorical thinking – with its inclination to sort, wrap, pack and stuff – makes. Here, then, the butt of the joke is Kant, as Schuyler concludes the poem with a list of books he can’t, in his packing, contain:

My Heart Is like a Green Canoe
The World Is a Long Engagement Party
The Great Divorce Has Been Annulled
Romance of Serge Eisenstein
Immanuel Kant, Boy Detective
Emma Kant, Mother of Men
Judy Kant, R.N.

The great spruce have stopped shrinking
they never began and great hunks of the world will fit

          (CP, 26)
What prevents hunks of the world fitting, which is a nonsensical statement unless understood as an operation of mind – hunks of the world fit in the world, they just don’t always fit points of view – is invariably, in Schuyler, the category. This is the gist of those many poems of his which take as their title or subject a month or a season, the names of which indicate knowledge on the part of the user, but where the point of the poem is always to establish that nothing is permanently known. What is necessary is an active knowing, a knowledge always going back into the world, revisiting its formulations and qualifying its findings, as in ‘Standing and Watching’, with its minimal but crucial variations between stanzas, and whose title implies passivity but whose tense is active.

But then the question is how, if not through the practice and nomenclature of the category, do things come to be known, how do they show themselves? In response to which fundamental enquiry, in his poetry and prose, Schuyler provides a rich and suggestive vocabulary of knowing. ‘December’, for instance, a poem which insists on reacquainting with that most clichéd of months, proposes a series of terms: ‘Having and giving but also catching glimpses / hints that are revelations’ (CP, 14). The poem doesn’t settle for a single term, on the grounds, perhaps, that to do so would be to replicate the inactivity of the category, but in its sequence of suggested names it hones in on a recognizable epistemological relation. Another term to set against inadequate modes of knowledge, and which stands behind much of Schuyler’s writing, is ‘display’, to the implications of which for poetry he gave careful thought. Reflecting in his Diary on the process of going back through his books to prepare his Selected Poems, he notes that ‘a lot of thought and affection went not only into writing the damn poems, but also their, uh, display’ (D, 191). The way work was displayed mattered to Schuyler in the sense that it matters how paintings are hung, the miscellaneous quality of a number of his books serving, in the spirit of collage, to show individual elements at their best. What he didn’t do was just plonk a bunch of poems together, as if their arrangement didn’t matter, as if the way items are displayed doesn’t contribute to what they are capable of disclosing. Which term was, as ‘Empathy and New Year’ shows, another of Schuyler’s words for the way things come to be known, all twigs after snow, as that poem has it, being ‘emboldened to / make big disclosures’ (CP, 79).

Such words – revelation, display, disclosure – steer us back into Heideggerean territory, though this time to ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’, where Heidegger asks, of the work in question ‘What happens here? What is at work in the work? Van Gogh’s painting is the disclosure of what the equipment, the pair of peasant shoes, is in truth. This being emerges into the unconcealment of its Being.’ And where in asking how things, in their being,
might be known he asserts: ‘Only, certainly, by granting the thing, as it were, a free field to display its thingly character directly. Everything that might interpose itself between the thing and us in apprehending and talking about it must be first set aside.’\textsuperscript{14} It is foundational to the work of art that, as Heidegger asserts, it responds to a problem from Kant, where the problem is the idea we have, or have been given, of the thing, and where the world is understood as a set of such things. Thus: ‘According to Kant, the whole of the world, for example, and even God himself, is a thing of this sort, a thing that does not itself appear, namely ‘thing-in-itself’’.\textsuperscript{15}

This non-appearing thing is a function of the thinking that produced it, man transposing ‘his propositional way of understanding things into the structure of the thing itself’; where the propositional structure is deeply imbricated with conventional grammar, and what it says about things is that they are essences which bear attributes, and that the essences can’t be known. For Heidegger the origin of the work of art – where work implies not an object but an activity; he is talking, crucially, about the \textit{work} of art – lies in this flawed sense of things, it being art’s function to ‘open up in its own way the Being of beings’. ‘This opening up, i.e., this revealing, i.e., the truth of beings, happens,’ he asserts, ‘in the work’. Just exactly \textit{how} it happens he declines to say, partly because it is precisely the purpose and privilege of art to effect the revealing. Thus, when it comes to the essence of the work of art, ‘Each answer remains in force as an answer only as long as it is rooted in questioning’. (‘May mutters, “Why / Ask questions?” or, “What are the questions you wish to ask?”’) Which can sound as if Heidegger is dodging the bullet, except that the seeming evasion is in accordance with the thinking of the piece, because what is at issue is not naming an essence but the work art does of showing things. From which it follows that art is known when it shows itself as such: shows itself, if one can say so, in the act of showing. In part this is a question of the work’s own display, Heidegger noting that a work placed in a collection lacks the revelatory qualities of work set up in a situation – a temple, for instance – meant for consecration or praise. In part, also, the work of art’s revelatory potential has to do with the nature of its relation to its truth; the way in which, in the work, truth happens. But crucially the \textit{work} of art lies also in the sense of intimacy it must effect, such that poetry should be thought of as a ‘projective saying’, the object of which is ‘unconcealment’, the saying, as he puts it, of the ‘nearness and remoteness of the gods’.\textsuperscript{16}

All of which should, I hope, sound both quite like and quite unlike Schuyler. Thus when Schuyler wrote his letter to Miss Batie, he wanted to establish that in some sense the origin of the work had to do with the way it happens.
It seems to me that readers sometimes make the genesis of a poem more mysterious than it is (by that I perhaps mean, think of it as something outside of their own experience). Often a poem ‘happens’ to the writer in exactly the same way that it ‘happens’ to someone who reads it. (SL, 240)

Equally, though, Schuyler’s writing is very largely unburdened – if not quite totally so – by any concept so total and overdetermining as Heidegger’s idea of Being. Crucially, though, what Heidegger sketches is a relation between the work of art and the world which is rooted in showing, where the showing amounts to a kind of intrinsic allegory, and where allegory, it is worth recalling, derives from the Greek meaning ‘other speaking’. Schuyler is always showing. Always in his writing – it is axiomatic – one thing is in the process of disclosing something else.

*The Diary* demonstrates this constantly. Thus, just as Thoreau was forever noting forms of circulation, so Schuyler is forever noting how things show themselves in and on and through one another.

**January 2.1969**

A maple against the light has the dark thin substance of a shadow How well the grime on the windows shows up in this winter light.

**March 4.1971**

The speed of the wind is seen more in the length of the stroke a branch makes than in the quickness with which it moves – how strong the wind must be that that tree moves at all!

**Wednesday. July 20.1988**

Thunder and lightning last night, rather near at hand, but not right here – did it rain? Such heavy fog this morning, the universal wetness proved nothing: but the tall pale delicate cups of the hostas flattened (almost) on the ground do: it rained alright.

**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.

One might go on, and especially one might mention the fascination the late *Diary* has with the Empire State Building, which is shown repeatedly and beautifully taking the impression of something else. Or one might point to any number of poems whose dynamic consists in one thing showing up in another, sentences moving on as effect gives way and passes into further
effect. The great statement of this, however, this proliferating showing of things showing things, is ‘Hymn to Life’.

As with ‘April and its Forsythia’, the drama of ‘Hymn to Life’ has, in part, to do with administrative ways of knowing, against which bureaucratized view of the world – the poem is set in Washington and is punctuated by the to-ing and fro-ing of civil servants – Schuyler presents his own way of bringing the world into view. This amounts in the writing, as he puts it in the poem, to a constantly ‘restless surface’, in which sentence by sentence something is always happening. This being May, things are everywhere blooming and coming into display, and at every turn something is showing itself in and through something else. As when, in one of any number of shimmering passages:

The sky
Colors itself rosily behind gray-black and the rain falls through
The basketball hoop on a garage, streaking its blackboard with further
Trails of rust, a lovely color to set with periwinkle violet-blue.
And the trees shiver and shudder in the light rain blasts from off
The ocean. The street wet reflects the breakup of the clouds
On its face, driving over sky with a hissing sound.

(CP, 216)

Or as when, in what is perhaps the poem’s emblematic passage:

Far away
In Washington, at the Reflecting Pool, the Japanese cherries
Bust out into their dog mouth pink. Visitors gasp. The sun
Drips, coats and smears, all that spring yellow under unending
Blue.

(CP, 222)

Which mouthing, producing a gasp, steers the attention back to the poet himself, who in showing things as always themselves showing things, presents himself at various points in the poem as crucial to the whole process. As when, for instance, he suggests that: ‘Time brings us into bloom and we wait, busy, but wait / For the unforced flow of words’. Or: ‘The day lives us and in exchange / we it’ (CP, 215).

All of which amounts to what? What sense of knowledge does Schuyler present here? What I want to suggest is that there is in his poetry a quite unforced, undogmatic sense of ‘showing’, in which ‘life’ (in all its variety), not ‘Being’ (in its oppressive singularity), is understood to be in a constant state of revelation, things showing themselves in other things all of the time, one thing always being the medium for the disclosure of another. One such medium, though it has a special status – being the form of disclosure of all
other disclosures – is the page, and especially the poet’s page. Thus at the end of ‘April and its Forsythia’, the census taker having taken her leave, the poet takes his leave also:

Ugh. The head of this household is going out in it. 
Willingly nor not, I’ll check up on Central Park 
where branches of sunshine were in bloom on Monday.

(CP, 23-4)

According to this, and according to Schuyler’s poetry as a whole, it is the poet’s appointed task – not the bureaucrat’s – to show things as they are; a task he is equal to by dint of the fact that he understands himself as continuous with things, with the ‘what of which you are a part’. He is confident of this continuity because, in his writing, with its restless surface, its ceaselessly processive syntax, and its often voiceless subject position, the great divorce of self from world has, in a manner of speaking, been annulled. Which is to say that Schuyler’s poetry can perform its function of showing because his language is premised not on what Heidegger called a propositional structure, but on a way of thinking about things which takes them always to be showing themselves. Not as themselves, as such, not in their essences, but in and on other things, and especially – through the intercession of the poet’s language – on the page. As when, in the Diary, allegorically and suggestively:

the house, freshly painted white, became the color of the sun.

Enthusing

There is an aspect of James Schuyler’s enthusiasm it is sad to contemplate. On 23 October 1951, as Nathan Kernan puts it in his detailed chronology of the life:

Schuyler visited his friends Donald Windham and Sandy Campbell in a manic and ecstatic state, claiming to have talked to the Virgin Mary who told him that Judgement Day was at hand. The next day Schuyler entered Bloomingdale mental hospital in White Plains, New York. (D, 283)

This was the first of numerous similar episodes in Schuyler’s life. His mental health was quite frequently fragile, such that, as William Corbett observes in the Selected Letters, he was unable, after 1961, to hold down regular employment, and such that through the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s, he was several times hospitalised (SL, 135). During one such period of hospitalization in 1975, he wrote ‘The Payne Whitney Poems’, subsequently published in his 1980 collection The Morning of the Poem. In that short, deeply moving, diary-like cycle, Schuyler presents in miniature many aspects
of his work: the importance of observation, a fascination with the vicissitudes of weather, a fondness for the collage-like list (as in ‘Sleep’), and, throughout the cycle, a sense that in writing one might better make oneself at home in one’s world. Also, though, not surprisingly, there is in the poems a more than usually urgent enthusiasm, as in ‘Linen’, when Schuyler presumes identity with the situation he is trying to present: ‘Now, this moment / flows out of me / down the pen and / writes’ (CP, 254). ‘What’, the last poem of the cycle, consists of a series of borderline paranoid questions: ‘What’s in those pills?’, ‘Why are they hammering / iron outside?’ The last of which, ‘What is a / poem anyway’, prompts a statement likening poetry to madness:

The daffodils, the heather
and the freesias all
speak to me. I speak
back, like St. Francis
and the wolf of Gubbio.

I have no interest, in this essay, in pathologizing Schuyler’s poetry. What he wrote when his mental health was robust is demonstrably different, in detail and quality, from the few works – often jottings – that survive from his periods of breakdown. Unquestionably, however, such that it would be false not to observe it, there was in Schuyler’s structure of thought a propensity to externalize speech, such that agencies incapable of words were imagined to voice themselves. There is a tendency towards this, I think, in the last phase of *The Diary*, much of which dwells on Schuyler’s conversion to Episcopalianism. Considered doctrinally, a turn to Episcopalianism does not, of course, show a propensity towards the more extreme implications of enthusiasm, as was indicated in the discussion of Evert Duyckinck’s differences with Melville. In Schuyler’s case, however, the religious turn in his thinking produced a certain simplification, not least in his positioning of voice. One hears this in part in the way the diary is given over, increasingly frequently, to passages transcribed from scripture, where as often as not the meaning is an uncomplicated discourse with the divine. As in, for instance, from Isaiah: 44, ‘Sing, O heavens, for the Lord has done it; Shout, O depths, of the earth; break forth into singing, O mountains, O forest, and every tree in it!’ (D, 248). Of a piece with this is a slide, from time to time, in the prose of the *Diary*, towards the transcendental, where what is being shown, as in Emerson and also Heidegger, is not life in its various effects, but the world as sign:

After the days and days of heat going higher and higher, the torn and dirt-soaked gray pressing down and down into the streets, into rooms, in
muggy, hugging haze ... an ascending depth into which to rise, infinity: and if that is the look of the Infinite, the Creator, the Unseeable and Unknowable, who, indeed, would not love him? (D, 194)

And then finally, as Schuyler continues his practice of transcription in his Diary, cobbled bits and pieces from his reading together, the quotes start to lose something of their miscellaneous quality, and start instead to operate according to some kind of design, where the purpose seems to be to assert an easy interchange with things. Thus the entry for Monday, 23 November 1987 consists of a quotation from Pasternak’s Memoir Safe Conduct—, ‘an indifference to the immediacy of truth, is what infuriates him. As though this is a slap in the face of humanity in his person’ (D, 202). The entry for 4 July 1988, meanwhile, is a quote from Freud that Schuyler came across in the New Yorker. ‘I learnt to restrain speculative tendencies and to follow the unforgotten advice of my master, Charcot: to look at the same things again and again until they themselves begin to speak (D, 228-9).

Schuyler’s best writing steadfastly resists a drift towards the transcendental, whose simplifying of the world into signs is what, in many respects, his poetry exists to counteract. A voracious reader, capable of brilliant developments of major Modern writers – not least Thoreau, Stevens, Moore and Pound – Schuyler arrived at a poetry which, in its qualities of sound and syntax, constituted a constantly deft acknowledgement of the way things happen. At his best he achieved a language for the relation between the self and his or her environment, where the self could be appreciated as just another effect; an intimacy with the world in writing which understood itself as entirely provisional. One can well call this poetic enthusiasm, with all the tensions of experiment, mediation and immediacy that phrase implies, with its complications and richnesses of voice; but it is also well to identify it as ‘Freely Espousing; where what the phrase implies is an unfettered utterance, and where the cause is language and its capacity to disclose.

Notes

2 After a breakdown in 1961, Schuyler lived with Fairfield Porter’s family for the best part of twelve years, spending his summers on Great Spruce Head Island, off the coast of Maine. Prior and subsequent to that he mostly lived in Manhattan.
3 James Schuyler, Collected Poems, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998, p. 3; hereafter referred to in the text as CP.
5 Ibid., p. 663.
9 Stevens, *Collected*, p. 661.
10 Ibid. pp. 714, 720.
11 Ibid., p. 678.
14 Ibid., p. 151.
15 Ibid., p. 147.
16 Ibid., pp. 150, 165, 195, 197, 198.