

James Schuyler

(9 November 1923 – 12 April 1991)

Joseph M. Conte

State University of New York at Buffalo

See also the Schuyler entry in *DLB 5: American Poets Since World War II, First Series*.

BOOKS: *Alfred and Guinevere* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958);

Salute (New York: Tiber Press, 1960);

May 24th or So (New York: Tibor de Nagy Editions, 1966);

Freely Espousing (Garden City, N.Y.: Paris Review Editions/Doubleday, 1969; New York: SUN, 1979);

A Nest of Ninnies, by Schuyler and John Ashbery (New York: Dutton, 1969; Manchester, U.K.: Carcanet, 1987);

The Crystal Lithium (New York: Random House, 1972);

A Sun Cab (New York: Adventures in Poetry, 1972);

Hymn to Life (New York: Random House, 1974);

The Fireproof Floors of Witley Court; English Songs and Dances (Newark & West Burke, Vt.: Janus Press, 1976);

Song (Syracuse, N.Y.: Kermani Press, 1976);

The Home Book: Prose and Poems, 1951–1970, edited by Trevor Winkfield (Calais, Vt.: Z Press, 1977);

What's For Dinner? (Santa Barbara, Cal.: Black Sparrow Press, 1978);

The Morning of the Poem (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980);

Collabs, by Schuyler and Helena Hughes (New York: Misty Terrace Press, 1980);

Early in '71 (Berkeley, Cal.: The Figures, 1982);

A Few Days (New York: Random House, 1985);

For Joe Brainard (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 1988);

Selected Poems (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988; Manchester, U.K.: Carcanet, 1990);

Collected Poems (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1993);

Two Journals: James Schuyler, Darragh Park, by Schuyler and Darragh Park (New York: Tibor de Nagy, 1995);



James Schuyler (photograph © the Estate of Thomas Victor)

Diary of James Schuyler (Santa Rosa, Cal.: Black Sparrow Press, 1996).

PLAY PRODUCTIONS: *Presenting Jane*, Cambridge, Mass., Poet's Theatre, 1952;

Shopping and Waiting: A Dramatic Pause, New York, American Theatre for Poets, 1953;

Unpacking the Black Trunk, by Schuyler and Kenward Elmslie, New York, American Theatre for Poets, 1964;

The Wednesday Club, by Schuyler and Elmslie, New York, American Theatre for Poets, 1964.

RECORDING: *Hymn to Life & Other Poems*, Watershed Intermedia, 1989.

OTHER: "Poet and Painter Overture," in *The New American Poetry*, edited by Donald M. Allen (New York: Evergreen-Grove, 1960), pp. 418–419;

Appearance and Reality: October Third to Thirty-first, 1960, introduction by Schuyler (New York: David Herbert Gallery, 1960);

Robert Dash: November 11–December 5, 1970, introduction by Schuyler (New York: Graham Gallery, 1970);

Penguin Modern Poets 24, edited by John Ashbery (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1973) – includes poems by Schuyler;

Broadway: A Poets and Painters Anthology, edited by Schuyler and Charles North (New York: Swollen Magpie Press, 1979);

Broadway 2: A Poets and Painters Anthology, edited by Schuyler and North (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Hanging Loose Press, 1989).

The career of James Schuyler has often been associated with the New York School of poets, John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, and Barbara Guest. Like any significant movement in the arts, such collocation of talent tends not only to define and anneal the achievements of the writers through their interaction but also to de-emphasize the individual successes or limitations of the group's members. The group dynamic of the New York School is also complicated by the influence of the Abstract Expressionist painters whose careers, by the mid 1950s, were significantly more advanced and gaining international attention, especially Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Larry Rivers, Franz Kline, and Willem de Kooning. Schuyler's work has been strongly influenced by painterly vision and techniques. Like O'Hara, he worked for the Museum of Modern Art organizing exhibitions that circulated throughout the United States and Europe; like Ashbery, he was on the staff of *Art News* as a critic for ten years.

Schuyler is quick to point out in an interview published in the fall 1992 *Talisman* that Ashbery, O'Hara, and Koch might just as well have been known as the "Harvard Wits," since their friendship was established during their college years in Cambridge. "I didn't meet Kenneth when I first met John and Frank [by 1952]. He was then in California. When he came back I had the feeling that he wasn't too crazy about what the cuckoo had laid in his nest." Profoundly shy (Schuyler avoided public

readings and interviews until the last decade of his life) and lacking Koch's circus-master's talent for promotion, not nearly as prolific as O'Hara, and missing the cosmopolitan polish that won Ashbery the Yale Younger Poets Prize in 1956, Schuyler's secondary role in the formation of the New York School aesthetic has led many to overlook the casual brilliance of his life's work.

Schuyler was a sometime cotenant with O'Hara in an apartment on East Forty-ninth Street during the mid 1950s. During a period of several years he collaborated with Ashbery on a novel, *A Nest of Ninnies* (1969), satirizing the uneventful lives of two families in a suburban New York town, an experience that Ashbery, from Rochester, New York, and Schuyler, who spent his teens in East Aurora, New York, knew well. In his early writing Schuyler shares Ashbery's interest in the experimental techniques of Dadaist collage that are found in the cut-up texts of his *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962). And there is a fairly broad swath of surreal imagery in the early work that one also finds in O'Hara's long poems of the 1950s such as "Second Avenue."

The New York School as a movement suffered an irrevocable loss when O'Hara was struck down and killed by a dune buggy on Fire Island in 1966. Schuyler's elegy for O'Hara, "Buried at Springs," appears near the end of his first major collection, *Freely Espousing* (1969). Schuyler's style subsequently becomes more autobiographical in nature, adopting something of the epistolary character of a text between two intimate, identifiable friends – one feels the speakers could be looked up in the telephone book – as first promoted in O'Hara's mock manifesto, "Personism" (1959). Although this manner suggests the illusion of intimacy, Schuyler deplores the shocking personal revelations of confessionalism: despite many years of psychoanalysis and several traumatic experiences (including his near death in a fire caused by smoking in bed), he withdraws the essentially private self from the poem.

In her essay included in the spring 1990 special issue of the *Denver Quarterly* devoted to Schuyler's work, Barbara Guest calls Schuyler an "Intimist": "for me Jimmy is the Vuillard of us, he withholds his secret, the secret thing until the moment appears to reveal it. We wait and wait for the name of a flower while we praise the careful cultivation. We wait for someone to speak. And it is Jimmy in an aside." This understated, indirect revelation distinguishes Schuyler from his peers. More particular in person and place than Ash-

bery's abstract meditations and more pained and much less gregarious than O'Hara's work, Schuyler in his later poetry – *Hymn to Life* (1974), *The Morning of the Poem* (1980), and *A Few Days* (1985) – speaks with a voice that is both intensely present and reticent, a fulfillment of the personism that O'Hara heralded and far more supple and moving than the poetics of the New York School could have achieved.

James Marcus Schuyler was born in Chicago, the son of Marcus James (a reporter) and Margaret Daisy Connor Schuyler. The family moved first to Washington, D.C., and then to East Aurora, New York, outside of Buffalo. His mother and brother settled in this small town (known for its Roycroft crafts guild and retaining something of the air of nineteenth-century gentleman farming), and it figures as a locale for "The Morning of the Poem" and "A Few Days," an elegy for Schuyler's mother. As Schuyler recalled in a 1981 interview, he experienced an almost Wordsworthian calling to be a writer "while in my tent in East Aurora, New York, when I was about fifteen." Reading an account of how a visit by Walt Whitman inspired Logan Pearsall Smith to literary ambition in his *Unforgotten Years* (1939), Schuyler says that "I looked up from my book, and the whole landscape seemed to shimmer." The personal epic of Whitman's "Song of Myself" and the vital force of landscape become major concerns of Schuyler's mature poetry.

Schuyler attended Bethany College in West Virginia from 1941 to 1943, where, he recalled in an interview published in spring 1992, he did poorly: "I just played bridge all the time." Unlike Koch, Ashbery, and O'Hara, who were active in creative writing classes while at Harvard, Schuyler wrote no poetry at that time. "I didn't have anything academic to be loyal to, or to be academic about," which partly explains his detachment from academia in his professional life and his later disdain for most literary criticism beyond the work of Harold Bloom and David Kalstone. He served in the navy during World War II on a destroyer in the North Atlantic doing convoy duty. Moving to New York City for the first time in the late 1940s, he worked for NBC and befriended the poet W. H. Auden. When he inherited a farm in Arkansas from his paternal grandmother, he sold it and moved to Italy with the intention of writing. There he became Auden's typist and lived in his house in Forio d'Ischia, an island in the Bay of Naples. He recalled in 1981 that he found Auden's elaborate formalism "inhibiting," which suggests his later preference for a conversational style and proselike line. Between

1947 and 1948 Schuyler attended the University of Florence.

When Schuyler returned to New York his life took shape around his associations with the art world. From 1955 to 1961 he was a curator of circulating exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art. As an editorial associate and critic for *Art News* he wrote a substantial amount of art criticism, though he was paid little for his contributions. He recalled in the interview published in spring 1992 that "I did learn an awful lot during those years, and then went on in the 60s writing occasional articles about specific artists and their specific strategies. Partly it was to make money, and partly because I wanted to write about painting, about art." More important were the attachments to poets and painters made at galleries such as the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, or through the Artist's Club and the Cedar Tavern in Greenwich Village. These friends were Willem and Elaine de Kooning, Jane Freilicher, Alex and Ada Katz, Larry Rivers, and especially Fairfield Porter.

Schuyler lived with Porter and his family in Southampton, Long Island, and at their summer home on a coastal Maine island for twelve years from 1961 to 1973, a time he described in 1981 as "much the happiest period in my life." He appears contented, usually seated reading, in several of Porter's domestic paintings. Porter contributed dust jackets for *The Crystal Lithium* (1972) and *Hymn to Life*; he also illustrated Schuyler's *A Sun Cab* (1972). Although many knew him as a resident of the Hotel Chelsea in lower Manhattan, he claimed to be happiest and most productive when living in the country or in small villages. Schuyler received the Longview Foundation Award in 1961, the Frank O'Hara Prize from *Poetry* in 1969 for *Freely Espousing*, and the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1981 for *The Morning of the Poem*. He was a Guggenheim Fellow, and a fellow of the American Academy of Poets. He died in Manhattan at the age of sixty-seven following a stroke.

Like Ashbery's *Turandot and Other Poems* (1953), Schuyler's early poetry was published by the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in *May 24th or So* (1966), providing one measure of the importance of the art world to the sustenance of New York School poets. Schuyler's first major collection, *Freely Espousing*, is dedicated to Anne and Fairfield Porter. It did not appear until he was forty-six years old. John Koethe remarked in his October 1970 review in *Poetry* that "Coming upon a mature body of work without much prior warning is always a perplexing experience requiring an effort of accommodation."

In the title poem, "Freely Espousing," Schuyler's rapid shifts in sound, shape, and color give the

poem the effect of a collage. His tone and subject change dramatically, from the initial Stevensian reverie of "a commingling sky" to the urban snobbery of "Quebec! what a horrible city / so Steubenville is better?" In the midst of this adhesion of snipes and snippets, one is reminded that the essential subject here is language:

the sinuous beauty of words like allergy
the tonic resonance of
pill when used as in
"she is a pill"
on the other hand I am not going to espouse any short
stories in which lawn mowers clack.
No, it is absolutely forbidden
for words to echo the act described; or try to.

The separation of sound and sense, in which the woe of an allergy is divisible from the beauty of the word, is for Schuyler an "inescapable kiss." Like the artist who deploys paint and brushstroke, he wishes to work in the pure medium of sound without the bondage of reference. Still he contents himself with a kind of mixed media, "Marriages of the atmosphere," that allow him to pass from speech to evocations of shape and color: "What is that gold-green tetrahedron down the river?"

In the special issue of the *Denver Quarterly* Guest remarks that Schuyler "translates the vagaries of inhabitancy, of wherever he is, his locale, particularly *his* into poetry. So that if you are already acquainted with a particular house he has lived in, you come to know it even better." Schuyler's "February" offers a view from his Manhattan apartment that is at once recognizably descriptive and an evocative composition that depends entirely for its success on the aura of the poet in that place, in that season:

A gray hush
in which the boxy trucks roll up Second Avenue
into the sky. They're just
going over the hill.
The green leaves of the tulips on my desk
like grass light on flesh,
and a green-copper steeple
and streaks of cloud beginning to glow.
I can't get over
how it all works in together[.]

Only to record the "vagaries of inhabitancy" makes for a passive and vacant realism. Schuyler's talent rests in the perception of the scene's intrinsic composition, "how it all works in together." He recognizes the collaboration that must arise between the random presentation of elements and the sensibility

of the poet. In the transient and the merely ordinary the poet must discover an immanent grace: "It's the water in the drinking glass the tulips are in. / It's a day like any other."

Freely Espousing and *The Crystal Lithium* are notable for their effortless movement among poetry, painting, and music: the arts available in such profigate array to a resident of Southampton and Manhattan and the practitioners so continually on the scene account for the natural, never forced, cross-fertilization of media and community. Schuyler's work takes place within or among the performance of the artist or the musicians, sometimes relishing it, sometimes emulating it, as the act, not the "source," of the poem. Such is the case in "A Man in Blue," which achieves the synesthesia of color, tonal register, and atmosphere that the French poet Arthur Rimbaud proposed:

Under the French horns of a November afternoon
a man in blue is raking leaves
with a wide wooden rake (whose teeth are pegs
or rather, dowels). Next door
boys play soccer: "You got to start
over!" sort of. A round attic window
in a radiant gray house waits like a kettledrum.
"You got to start . . ." The Brahmsian day
lapses from waltz to march. The grass,
rough-cropped as Bruno Walter's hair,
is stretched, strewn and humped beneath a sycamore[.]

The nineteenth-century German composer Johannes Brahms intervenes to offer the famous twentieth-century conductor, Bruno Walter, interpretive advice on "the first movement / of my Second, think of it as a family planning where to go next summer / in terms of other summers." In words that capture the essence of Schuyler's poetics, he describes the effect he envisions as "A material ecstasy, / subdued, recollective." The promise of immortality held up by the arts cannot be dissociated from the materiality of the man in blue (denim clothing; the mood of late fall; George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue"; Pablo Picasso's blue period; and Wallace Stevens's "The Man with the Blue Guitar"). The conductor with his baton and the neighbor raking leaves are one:

He waves his hands and through the vocalese-shaped
spaces
of naked elms he draws a copper beech
ignited with a few late leaves. He bluey glazes
a rhododendron "a sea of leaves" against gold grass.
There is a snapping from the brightwork
of parked and rolling cars.
There almost has to be a heaven! so there could be
a place for Bruno Walter

who never needed the cry of a baton.
 Immortality –
 in a small, dusty, rather gritty, somewhat scratchy
 Magnavox from which a forte
 drops like a used Brillo Pad?

More important for Schuyler than the lyrical phrase of great beauty or the pointed thought held with conviction is the movement of the poet's sensibility through sight and sound, through the material world and the mood of a moment – the true interdisciplinary nature of his craft.

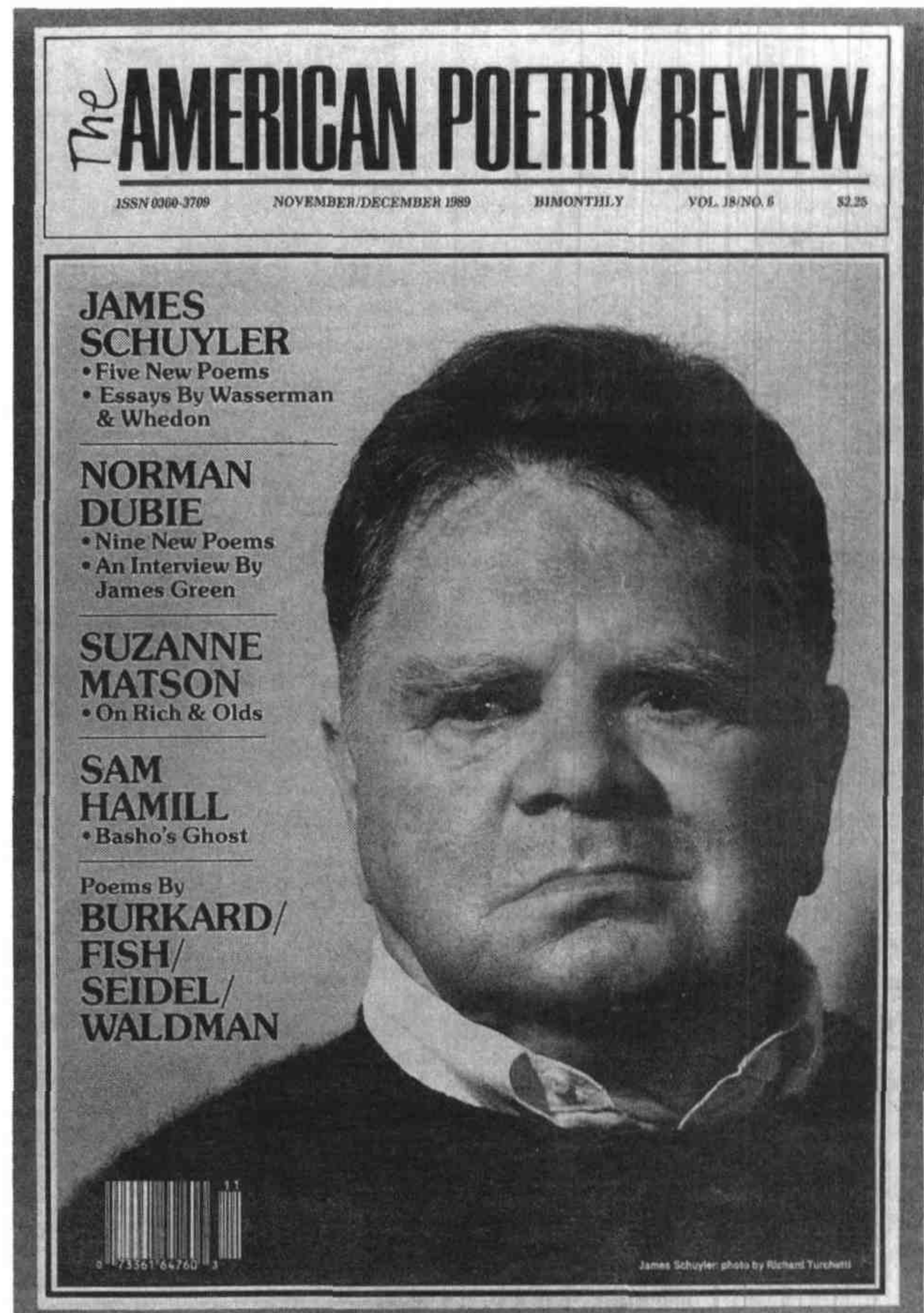
Schuyler's early work comes to a close with his elegy for Frank O'Hara, "Buried at Springs." As he remembers in the fall 1992 *Talisman* interview, "It was written in Maine. The things described in it are what I was seeing out the window in the house in Maine. You know, Frank died in the summer . . . and it was shattering. The elegy was originally two poems; nothing seemed adequate so I had to sort of put them away."

Schuyler's complex emotional reaction to the tragedy, a combination of anguish and a guilty awareness of artistic rivalry, is obliquely filtered through the Maine locale. In a gesture reminiscent of Ralph Waldo Emerson's transcendentalism, Schuyler uses nature to reflect his mood:

There is a hornet in the room
 and one of us will have to go
 out the window into the late
 August midafternoon sun. I
 won. There is a certain challenge
 in being humane to hornets
 but not much. A launch draws
 two lines of wake behind it
 on the bay like a delta
 with a melted base.

O'Hara's frenetically busy, short life and prolific career are contrasted to the quieter determination of the speaker. Schuyler maintains the tense composure of this elegy almost entirely through his use of line breaks, such as "I / won," and "humane to hornets / but not much." Their lives, intertwined in jobs, apartments, social gatherings, and especially avocations, are now like the irrevocably divergent and melting "lines of wake." The first section closes with a traditional meditation on the mutability of life: "Frank sat at this desk and / saw and heard it all / the incessant water the / immutable crickets only / not the same: new needles / on the spruce, new seaweed / on the low-tide rocks."

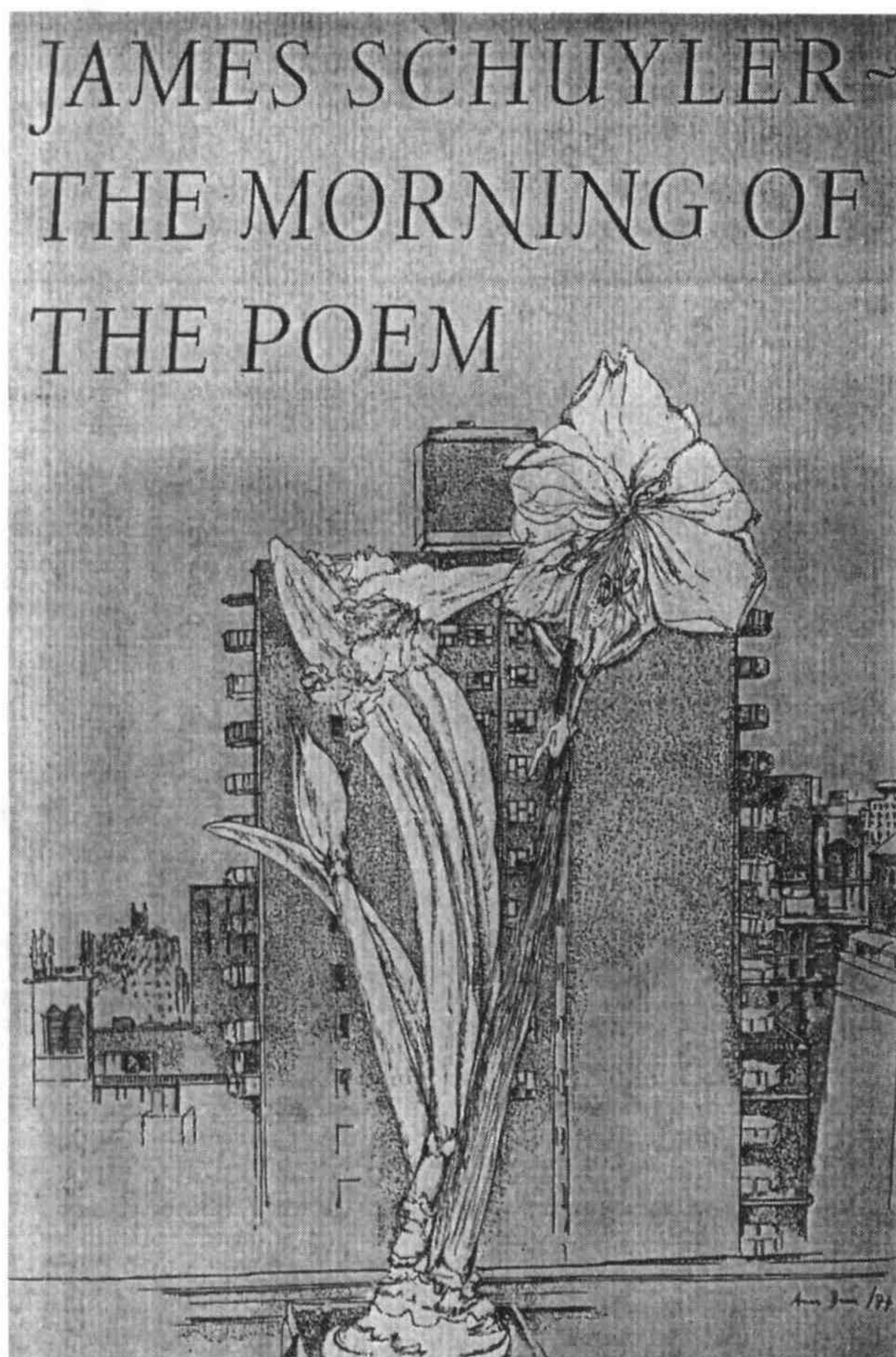
In "Grand Duo," a poem from *The Home Book: Prose and Poems, 1951–1970* (1977) that wends its



Cover for an issue of *The American Poetry Review* that includes previously unpublished poems by Schuyler

way through reflections on composer Franz Schubert, Schuyler provides something of a statement on his method: "Art is formality, courtesy, passion, control, practice, / rehearsing the unrehearsed." The paradox of the latter phrase is essential to an understanding of Schuyler's work, which so often gives the appearance of informality, as if it were the product of an idle moment or casual observation or a passing mood. In Coleridgean terms this would be "form as proceeding," in which the exercise of form must be intrinsic to the act and process of composition.

Schuyler's poetry is busy with nothing to do. He attends lovingly to unoccupied moments, and lavishly records hours of leisure; there are spring mornings in Chelsea, summer afternoons in Southampton, and fall evenings in Vermont. In the more than four hundred pages of his collected poetry, there are few remarks (and those are usually disparaging) regarding any sort of gainful employment; positions such as that of bookstore clerk or log keeper for the Voice of America broadcasts distract from the true work of one's



Cover for the book that many critics consider Schuyler's best work

own writing. Largely exempt from the daily grind, Schuyler vastly prefers attending to the unrehearsed incident and the play of the mind as it moves with its intrinsic vigor through observation, association, and reflection. Such variegated activity of the mind serves to direct, if not precisely to organize, the poem on scales both fine and large.

"A Vermont Diary" in *The Crystal Lithium* is one of several seasonal sequences in Schuyler's work. It records a week in which the New York poet is both exquisitely conscious of nature and tracking the nature of his own consciousness:

A frail gray flower
flies off, an insect
that escaped the first
combing frosts. It's
not — "the fly buzzed"
finding moods, reflectives:
fall
equals melancholy, spring,
get laid: but to turn it all
one way: in repetition, change:

a continuity, the what
of which you are a part.

This sequence combines the observation of a camouflaged and soon-to-die insect, an allusion to Emily Dickinson's poem in which a fly signifies her fetish for mortality, and the romantic association of natural setting and human emotions; it illustrates the sundry and often remarkable ways in which the unoccupied and unrehearsed mind encounters the world and accounts for itself.

Schuyler continually rejects the impulse to symbolism and extravagant metaphor in order to convey "the what / of which you are a part," the struggle to express being and cognition as a continuum rather than as a dichotomy. In some instances he employs a notational style, as in "Verge," which closes the "Vermont Diary" sequence:

All the leaves
are down except
the few that aren't.
They shake or
a wind shakes
them but they
won't go oh
no there goes
one now. No.
It's a bird
batting by.

One finds here Marianne Moore's attachment to the natural emblem, her casual rhymes as they occur in speech, and a tendency to restrain figural language within a single category of reference; that is, both the tenor and the vehicle of the metaphor are winged creatures ("bird / batting"). Schuyler's choice of an almost monosyllabic minimalism and his instantaneous revision that corrects but does not expunge the prior perception of leaves fallen, falling, or not, reminds the reader that the practice of immediacy was common to Projective Verse and Action painting. Schuyler attends to the incidental and allows experience to lend shape to cognition.

"The Crystal Lithium" is the first of several long poems written in an expansive line, relatively free of full stops or conceptual divisions. Perhaps because lithium was widely prescribed as an antidepressant, the alternately languid and surging pace of the poem indicates the poet's search for an emotional and psychological equilibrium:

The smell of snow, stinging in nostrils as the wind lifts
it from a beach
Eye-shuttering, mixed with sand, or when snow lies
under the street lamps and on all

And the air is emptied to an uplifting gassiness
 That turns lungs to winter waterwings, buoying, and
 the bright white night
 Freezes in sight a lapse of waves, balsamic, salty,
 unexpected:
 Hours after swimming, sitting thinking biting at a
 hangnail
 And the taste of the – to your eyes – invisible crystals
 irradiates the world
 “The sea is salt”
 “And so am I.”

Schuyler uses the scene of the beach at the onset of winter to articulate the proximity of liquid and crystal, the organic and the inorganic, the mind and the world. The crystals of lithium, like those of salt, are necessary for the speaker, but they are also inorganic stabilizations that blind and numb. Equally essential is the fluidity of awareness, the waves and gusts of experience that carry the mind through periods of turbulence. As reflected in his extended lines and irregular patterning of thought, Schuyler searches – perhaps in vain – for an emotional balance between the crest of ecstasy and the trough of depression, between moods of “uplifting gassiness” and “sitting thinking biting at a hangnail.”

The best work of Schuyler’s fourth major collection, *Hymn to Life*, is contained in the section “Evenings in Vermont” and in the long title poem. One can read the former as an example of Schuyler’s homage to the cognate relationship of domestic tranquility, friendship, and the reassurances of natural beauty:

That one maple by the house now
 is almost bare. The pond
 turns greenish-black. Downstairs
 someone (you) shuts a door. Evenings
 in Vermont, the fire dies in the sky,
 the pond goes altogether black,
 and indoors all is coziness. I study
 the pattern in a red rug, arabesques
 and squares, and one red streak
 lies in the west, over the ridge.

“Hymn to Life” celebrates the return of spring, enabling Schuyler to address at length one of his favorite subjects, flower gardens. He observes “the sun which seems at / Each rising new, as though in the night it enacted death and rebirth, / As flowers seem to. The roses this June will be different roses / Even though you cut an armful and come in saying, ‘Here are the roses,’ / As though the same blooms had come back, white freaked with red / And heavily scented.” In the ritual of renewal the poet observes both the pain and the joy, the same-

ness and difference, the definite article and the indefiniteness in the cycle of life. These longer poems become the ideal vehicle for Schuyler’s meditations on the flow of time. “Time brings us into bloom and we wait, busy, but wait / For the unforced flow of words and intercourse and sleep and dreams / In which the past seems to portend a future which is just more / Daily life.” Very much concerned to map the quotidian, Schuyler has the courage to do so in an “unforced flow of words” that risks boring the reader with the uneventful or unremarkable – because, simply, that is the way time passes. For the persistent if sometimes unaware individual, however, the unremarkable may still convey its meager message: “A window to the south is rough with raindrops / That, caught in the screen, spell out untranslatable glyphs. A story / Not told: so much not understood, a sight, an insight, and you pass on, / another day for each day is subjective and there is a totality of days / As there are as many to live it. The day lives us and in exchange / We it.”

To the extent that he is a poet of meditative immediacy, Schuyler’s best work coincides with the longer poems in which he increasingly gave himself room to ramble, congenially, through all colors of the cognitive spectrum. The sixty-page title poem of *The Morning of the Poem* is certainly his masterwork and among the best long poems of the postmodern era. Schuyler explained in the spring 1992 interview that the poem is written in “very much the style of my letter writing” to Ashbery, Joe Brainard, and Darragh Park – an intimate, gradual account. There is no grand structure: “I never have a plan beforehand. I had no idea when I sat down to the typewriter that morning what I was going to say, beyond the title.” In retreat at a family home in East Aurora, Schuyler administers a poet’s own best treatment for the breakdown of mind and body. It is a poem of recovery – of the self, of one’s family and friends, of a meaningful existence – and as such it must be slow, and tender, and caring.

Though wry and funny in a self-deprecating manner, the poet offers a painful testament that is presided over by the image of “Baudelaire’s skull,” which “Stands for strength and fierceness, the dedication / of the artist,” but also the specter of a too-early death. Taking a country farmhouse during July 1976 as his main setting, Schuyler nevertheless shifts readily in time and place, between the open fields and the cityscape of West Twenty-second Street, from the present self-absorption of the convalescent to memories of a deceased father and departed friends. Yet the poem is seamless and comfortable in its associative transitions. Like the all-

over composition of a large Jackson Pollock canvas, this long poem is almost impossible to excerpt, to point to one part, one musing, as somehow detachable and any more telling than another:

yesterday I tripped on a scatter
rug and slam fell full length,
The wind knocked out of me: "Shall I call a
doctor?" "Please don't talk"
"Are you hurt? Can I help you?" "Shut the fuck
up" I thought I'd smashed
My kneecap – you know, like when you really
wham your funny bone, only
More so – but I got up and felt its nothing-
broken-tenderness and
Hobbled down this everlasting hill to distant
Bell's and bought
Edible necessities: small icy cans of concentrated
juice, lemon, lime, orange,
Vast puffy bags of bread, Smucker's raspberry jam,
oatmeal, but not the good,
The Irish kind (travel note: in New York City you
almost cannot buy a bowl
Of oatmeal: I know, I've tried: why bother: it
would only taste like paste)
and hobbled home, studying the for-sale house
hidden in scaly leaves
The way the brownstone facing of your house is
coming off in giant flakes: there's
A word for that sickness of the stone but I
can't remember it[.]

Kaleidoscopic in effect, "The Morning of the Poem" twists the lens of observation and reflection, continually revealing still another pattern no less fascinating than the last. The poet takes a pratfall, picks himself up, and though there's no permanent damage done, recognizes in his own body, and in the world's body, a slow and irreversible decay. "The Morning of the Poem" is a single morning in which premonitions of death, "my death, over fifty years and that is / What I am building toward," and memories of childhood, "I wish it was 1938 or '39 again / and Bernie was sleeping / With me in the tent at the back of the yard," are filtered. The epistolary mode nevertheless demands, as Schuyler asserted, "a certain lightness of tone, gaiety" that admits friends, relatives, and neighbors. The poem also becomes a compendium of anecdotes, landmarks of western New York, and extended "stories" from the poet's life (such as furtively reading *Ulysses* for the first time in an American history class) and others' (Fairfield Porter painting in the nude on his private Maine island when an uninvited couple arrive). Ultimately Schuyler maintains this mélange of the poignant and the ephemeral on the strength of his personal voice, his innate love of

How the thing said
Is in the words, how
The words are themselves
The thing said: love,
Mistake, promise, auto
Crack-up, color, petal,
The color in the petal
Is merely light
And that's refraction:
A word, that's the poem.

In all its myriad refractions, "The Morning of the Poem" must be measured alongside such introspective American long poems as Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," Hart Crane's "Voyages," John Berryman's *The Dream Songs*, and Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror."

Schuyler's last completed volume of poetry, *A Few Days*, ranges between specificity, that which is singular and thus transient, and what Schuyler calls in "August first, 1974" the "*Qualunque*: / commonplace," that which is pervasive and invisible. These poems are replete with details of place, personal conversations and encounters, the weather on a particular day, and flowers described with botanical precision. Among the best short poems in the volume are those that capture the aura of place, as in "Beaded Balustrade":

The balustrade along my balcony
is wrought iron in shapes of
flowers: chrysanthemums, perhaps,
whorly blooms and leaves and
along the top a row of what look
like croquet hoops topped by a
rod, and from the hoops depend
water drops, crystal, quivering.
Why, it must be raining, in Chelsea,
NYC!

As in the previous two volumes, the title poem of *A Few Days* is a significant contribution to the autobiographical epic. Similar to "The Morning of the Poem" in its conversational style, double-length lines, and blend of copious observation and apparently unmotivated recollection, "A Few Days" shifts slightly from an epistolary to a diaristic mode. Sometimes listless, sometimes playful, and finally elegiac, the poem suggests that even ordinary days are essential and must be attended to:

A few days

are all we have. So count them as they pass. They pass
too quickly
out of breath: don't dwell on the grave, which yawns
for
one and all.

Will you be buried in the yard? Sorry, it's against
the law. You can only
lie in an authorized plot but you won't be there to
know it so why worry
about it? Here I am at my brother's house in western
New York: I came
here yesterday on the Empire State Express, eight hours of
boredom on the train.

Even if the predominant mood is one of ennui,
there are still worthy observations to be made:

A pretty blond child sat next to me for a while. She
had a winning smile,
but I couldn't talk to her, beyond "What happened to
your shoes?" "I put them under the seat." And
so she had. She pressed the button that released the
seat back and sank
back like an old woman. Outside, the purple loosestrife
bloomed in swathes
that turned the railway ditch and fields into a
sunset-reflecting lake.

Like all diaristic writing, the intent here is the re-
cording of the passing of days, which for Schuyler
are made all the more precious by his awareness of
their fast-approaching limit. This diversionary
child-woman prefigures his reunion with his eighty-
nine-year-old mother, who "has little to do but sit
and / listen to the TV rumble." And though he
assures himself of her longevity while doubting his
own, it is her death that closes the poem. No subject
dominates, however; "this isn't about my family,
although I wish it were."

As Mark Rudman points out in his essay in
the special issue of the *Denver Quarterly*, Schuyler's
long poems resist the didactic, the epiphanic, or the
impulse to self-improvement: "he defines things by
their unimportance and resists psychologizing why
one memory, one perception, is connected to an-
other." For Schuyler the poem allows him to gain
some purchase on time:

Today is tomorrow, it's that dead time again: three in
the afternoon under scumbled clouds,
livid, that censor the sun and withhold the rain:
impotent as an old man ("an
old man's penis: limp as a rabbit's ear"). It's cool
for August and I

can't nail the days down. They go by like escalators,
each alike, each with its own
message of tears and laughter.

Schuyler's poetry has a cumulative power that
seizes one only after the reading of many leisurely
pages. Since its significance is more recognizable
when read in the aggregate than when one reads
with the expectation of being dazzled by any one
lyric, one suspects that the publication of Schuyler's
Selected Poems (1988) and *Collected Poems* (1993) will
confirm his status as a major poet. The multifaceted
sensibility and engaging, supple voice evident in
these works certainly belong to one of the important
American poets to emerge in the last decades of the
twentieth century.

Interviews:

Jean W. Ross, "CA Interviews the Author," in *Con-
temporary Authors*, volume 101, edited by Fran-
ces C. Locher (Detroit: Gale Research, 1981),
pp. 445-447;

Mark Hillringhouse, "James Schuyler: An Inter-
view," *American Poetry Review*, 14 (March/April
1985): 5-12;

Robert Thompson, "An Interview with James
Schuyler," *Denver Quarterly*, 26 (Spring 1992):
105-122;

Carl Little, "An Interview with James Schuyler,"
Talisman, 9 (Fall 1992): 176-180.

References:

Philip Auslander, *The New York School Poets as Play-
wrights: O'Hara, Ashbery, Koch, Schuyler, and the
Visual Arts* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989);

William Corbett and Geoffrey Young, eds., *That
Various Field: For James Schuyler (1923-1991)*
(Great Barrington, Mass.: The Figures, 1991);

Denver Quarterly, special issue on Schuyler, edited by
Donald Revell, 24 (Spring 1990);

Geoff Ward, "James Schuyler and the Rhetoric of
Temporality," in his *Statutes of Liberty: The New
York School of Poets* (New York: St. Martin's
Press, 1993), pp. 10-35.

Papers:

The major collection of Schuyler's papers, covering
the years from 1947 to 1991, is held in the Mande-
ville Department of Special Collections at the Uni-
versity of California, San Diego.

Anne Sexton

(9 November 1928 – 4 October 1974)

Diane Wood Middlebrook
Stanford University

See also the Sexton entry in *DLB 5: American Poets Since World War II, First Series*.

- BOOKS:** *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960);
All My Pretty Ones (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962);
Eggs of Things, by Sexton and Maxine Kumin (New York: Putnam, 1963);
More Eggs of Things, by Sexton and Kumin (New York: Putnam, 1964);
Selected Poems (London: Oxford University Press, 1964);
Live or Die (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966; London: Oxford University Press, 1967);
Poems by Thomas Kinsella, Douglas Livingstone and Anne Sexton (London: Oxford University Press, 1968);
Love Poems (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969; London: Oxford University Press, 1969);
Joey and the Birthday Present, by Sexton and Kumin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971);
Transformations (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971; London: Oxford University Press, 1972);
The Book of Folly (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972; London: Chatto & Windus, 1974);
The Death Notebooks (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974; London: Chatto & Windus, 1975);
The Awful Rowing Toward God (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975; London: Chatto & Windus, 1977);
The Wizard's Tears, by Sexton and Kumin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975);
45 Mercy Street, edited by Linda Gray Sexton (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976; London: Secker & Warburg, 1977);
Words for Dr. Y.: Uncollected Poems with Three Stories (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978);
The Complete Poems (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981)
No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews, and Prose, edited by Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985);



Anne Sexton, summer 1974 (Collection of Linda Gray Sexton)

Selected Poems of Anne Sexton, edited by Diane Wood Middlebrook and Diana Hume George (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988).

PLAY PRODUCTION: *Mercy Street*, New York, American Place Theater, 3 October 1969.

Anne Sexton began writing poetry at age twenty-eight as a form of psychotherapy during treatment for a clinical depression. By the time of her suicide at age forty-five she had become a major figure in postwar American poetry. Her work was intimate, confessional, comic, formally complex, psychologically acute, and disruptively female; and her popular public readings were spectacles of performance art. Admired by peers for her technical