

“Let’s Make a List”: James Schuyler’s Taxonomic Autobiography

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A few sound[s] are embedded in the fog – a gull mewing, different far off fog horns – like unset polished stones laid out in cotton wool.

Tuesday, March 5, 1985

At six AM the heavy gray burns a heavier blue. Rain, water drops clinging to the balcony.

There is an ethical consideration in James Schuyler’s *Diary*. While we have spent the last fifty years grappling with the aesthetic problems of how to represent the unrepresentable, how to present the unrepresentable, and how to signify the significant, little time has been spent considering the status of representations of the unremarkable. There is a whole history in American poetry and literature of validating the everyday, making it special, but Schuyler never really does that. Are things special just because we say so, or rather because we note them down? Do we *name* things into being, at least linguistic or literary being? The *Diary* asks these questions and in doing so it broaches the kind of postmodern ethical questions that one finds in the recent work of Lyotard, Derrida, and Nancy.¹ These questions are significant not in the normal sense of the reasons for such interrogations or the answers expected, but rather because they represent

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¹ I am referring in particular to Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. George Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), a diversity of texts by Jacques Derrida including *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 1997), and *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), and Jean Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

a desire on the part of Schuyler to ask after otherness, to try to elicit a response from the other while respecting that such a response may not be comprehensible even if it is forthcoming. I would like here to posit a desire to ask after the other first before one asks after oneself, to enquire without any hope of a satisfactory answer as such as the postmodern ethical position, and to suggest that the autobiographical slant of Schuyler's work is, paradoxically considering the nature of autobiography, just such a positioning of his self in relation to the world.

Despite critics' attempts to the contrary, it has to be said that the overall feeling one gets from the *Diary* is that of the mundanity of ordinary existence. The two excerpts above are a case in point. The details noted are notable because they are noted; they have been denominated, which is not a simple thing after all. The "few sounds" start out vague. Their number is unknown, more than *one* less than *many*, and they are lost in fog. Sounds cannot be lost in fog, so the things in question have been reduced to their aural synecdoches: a gull's voice stands in for the gull proper, horns stand in for an uncertain number of boats. Nor can sounds be "embedded" in fog. However hard Schuyler tries to get at these things and name them, he can't. There are no ideas but in things; things as they are changed "upon my blue guitar," yes certainly, but there are no things in writing. So when he tries to render the sounds more physically for us, he has to compare them to unpolished stones, perhaps semi-precious, but this seemingly objectivist gesture is nothing of the sort. They are stones because these sounds were embedded like stones. They are like stones because they are unlike themselves. They are more like stones, in fact, than they are like themselves. They once were set but now they are not, were once a part of the fog's blanching continuum, now they rest on top like exhibits or samples. They seem nude and vulnerable these things. What things? There are no things, only words, motifs, tropes, and half-hearted aspirations after something that never even existed.

Was it worth it? The second, later entry begins the day in the realm of the object and of everyday specifics, and gets no further. We have time, and we have date. The place, by way of interest, is Schuyler's room in the Chelsea Hotel on New York's 23rd Street. The poet is assiduous in his attempt to render the actual colour of the sky at this time of day and how it is changing, but he succeeds no more than Turner or Monet, and they had the right materials to hand. In fact one might wonder whether any artist has ever been able to render even the nature of an actual atmosphere, let alone those liminal times when light and humidity are at their most evanescent, lustrous, and strange. Speaking personally, I have never seen

or read a convincing representation of the subtle modifications that are inherent within our climate. All climate is change and people talk of the current climate because that’s the only climate there is, this one. Art has no chance of presenting the unrepresentable or the actually present, nor does it have any chance of presenting the not very presentable, such as the tatty gray edges of another polluted early March Manhattan morning. Perhaps less chance, for there is no motivation. The rain is rendered, but it isn’t rain’ raising questions like what do you call rain after it has, and are these grounded drops really rain? Anyway, they don’t touch the ground as something has intervened on the descent of these other things, again we don’t know how many exactly, so the drops are suspended in mid air. They cling to the balcony, midway between the noun “rain” and the absent noun “puddle,” both strangely singular and collective nouns. It is not clear if they cling there to stop being rain anymore, or to stop them becoming nothing as some dirty puddle subsumes their very being.

Perhaps I was wrong to say these entries are mundane, it could be that these diary entries are the most gentle, the most profound, the most ethical, and so the most human of all documents. Who cares what the sound does to the thing proper when the thing is withheld from sight? Who worries about the specificity of gray versus dark blue at six A.M.? Who dares speak out on behalf of the status of individual raindrops encountered at the very limits of their hardly-even-being? James Schuyler is one of the few modern poets who ever bothered to do this, let alone who could. He cares about objects not because he valorises the banal or hokey, he loves Fabergé eggs just as much as dirty rain, nor to make a point about objects in general: that they are important, or that they are not subjects. I don’t think he is ever really depressed about the passing of things, but then he need not be because he did the right thing by them. He dealt with them when they were there, in their current climate. Schuyler cares about things as they are, even if they are hardly anything. His *Diary*, along with his poetry, explores the ethics of the presentation of the hardly remarkable thing, and in doing so he never makes it more remarkable than it actually is. Which really *is* remarkable. This article sets out simply to remark on how the objectivist poetry of James Schuyler is conveyed through the forms of selfish subjectivity, such as the *Diary*. Not so much how he deals with the object, which I don’t think he really does because he realises that he can’t as language cannot directly treat the thing, but how he deals with his own sense of self through discourse with the object; any and every object. The poet as maker and namer, of making through naming, a process of naming things as a form of making space

for a certain sort of self-effacing poetic subjectivity, this is what I mean by Schuyler's taxonomic autobiography.

The taxonomic aspect of James Schuyler's work from the fifties on, seems to present this already modest poet at his most minimal agency, relinquishing his subjectivity in favour of the material of signification, and reducing his modes of interposing with empathy on the real world in favour of the novelty of naming. In contrast to this, the diaristic tendency of another strain of Schuyler's work, culminating in the *Diary* of 1997,² seems to operate in a manner of maximum agency. A tendency much more apparent in the later pieces, Wayne Koestenbaum speaks for a number of critics in noting the similarity between the famous Schuyler *Diary* and his poetry:

It is possible that Schuyler considered his prose diaries to be mildly broken into poetic lines but lacked the energy to decide about all the breaks so left the entries in prose paragraphs whose arrangement on his typed page was nonetheless fastidious. Evidently he perceived continuity between his prose and poetry ...³

And indeed Schuyler notes the poems tend themselves to appear chronologically in his various collections, which gives them a diaristic continuity as one reads through them.⁴ The diary, the journal, the almanac, and the home book; all these are forms of autobiographical writing used in the Schuyler *œuvre*, and seem to contravene the apparent objectivist aspect of his poetry, as well as producing a very basic tension between the process of naming and the process of being. In fact the two tendencies develop in a parallel fashion as the two extremes of the more integrated poems, tending either to be removed from the published canon in the case of the more extreme list poems,⁵ or relegated to the *Diary* in

² Schuyler died 12 Apr. 1991. The last diary entry is 1 Jan. 1991.

³ Wayne Koestenbaum, "Epitaph on 23rd Street: The Poetics of James Schuyler," *Parnassus*, 21 (1996), 39.

⁴ Responding to Mark Hillringhouse's comment that his poems are arranged seasonally Schuyler notes: "I tend to arrange them ... in the order in which they were written as best I can just because there is a sequence of time. I also divide them up into the various places where they were written" Mark Hillringhouse, "James Schuyler: An Interview," *American Poetry Review* (Mar/April 1985), 9.

⁵ The best example of this is the unpublished "Catalog" which begins: "blood-root and shy hepatica / ball violets / in thin grass / at the edge of a wood ... / what other flowers are there?" (James Schuyler, Mandeville Special Collection, UCSD, San Diego ms. 78). However, there are actually a number of unpublished pieces in the Mandeville Special Collection archive at UCSD, which indicate that perhaps Schuyler experimented very consciously with taxonomy as a major poetic practice, only to later relegate it to being an aspect of a more integrated approach. For further reference see poems such as "Nozema Sensodyne," "Marbelize, thru-way, orlon, howdy, musculature, pinkie, / troglodyte, petting, asonal, snipe, muck, crimp"; "Mr. Honey's Cuff Notes,"

the case of diaristic tendencies. Both return back into the canon in numerous forms, but they are generally seen as lesser poetic modes of expression.

A median position in this little history of taxonomy and autobiography is a poem like Schuyler’s “An East Window on Elizabeth Street.” The poem manages to be both taxonomic and diaristic, establishing a sense of how the object and subject can be given equal emphasis in what one might call a taxonomic autobiography: the self as list. The poem opens in detailing the external world:

Among the silvery, the dulled sparkling mica lights of tar roofs
lie rhizomes of wet under an iris
from a bargain nursery sky: a feeble blue with skim milk
blotched
on the falls ...⁶

It should be immediately apparent, however, that this is much more an attempt to represent the observed real thing than to simply name it, favouring connotation over denotation. In contrast to this we also get a number of small lists within the fabric of the “painted” scene: “trucks, cabs, cars,”⁷ “mutable, delicate, expendable, ugly, mysterious,”⁸ and “stacks, pipes, ventilators, tensile antennae.”⁹ If, in Schuyler, we have two forms of rendering the real in language, representation and taxonomy, we also have in this poem a strong diaristic aspect, as the poem consists of what the poet sees out of his window. Nathan Kernan notes this interrelationship in his introduction to Schuyler’s *Diary*: “Schuyler’s remark that he was ‘more of a reader than a writer’ is true, then, in the largest sense. His writing, his transcribing, is simultaneous with and inseparable from his ‘reading’ of what is around him and becomes part of the process of thought.”¹⁰ “An East Window on Elizabeth Street” is not dated, but within the chronological order of the collection it can be placed in late spring. Of course its physical location is specified in the title, and as a whole it is really a line-broken version of numerous diary entries in

“Some / surprise, and apples, cinnamon, / nutmeg and a nutmeg grater. Whisky, / two very small mice, tinted china / mice”; “Somebody Lovely Has Just Passed By,” “raspberry; puce; ocher; blu; mutation”; “All Hearts Grow Warmer,” “The world is full / parkling / A arden / The shape / ancing”; and “Petty’s Fog Light,” where in fact the lines are numbered like a list (all in Schuyler, *Mandeville Special Collection*, ms. 78).

⁶ James Schuyler, *Collected Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993), 84.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁰ Nathan Kernan, “Introduction,” in *The Diary of James Schuyler*, ed. Nathan Kernan (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1997), 15.

keeping with Koestenbaum's suspicions. This raises questions as to what kind of subject these autobiographical poems deal with. Certainly it is a visual subject, or one actively involved in watching, but also one that interposes on the real thing with language, by rendering things in his poems and journal entries. The conclusion of the poem, for example, shows this, "The furthest off people are tiny as fine seed / but not at all bug like. A pinprick of blue / plainly is a child running,"¹¹ with Schuyler again being meticulous in his comparisons. People here are hard to "see" through the representational or taxonomic powers of language, but the child is easy to "see" even though it is theoretically smaller and on the move. It is as if the observing subject develops its agency and sense of self both in what it cannot "see" into words, and what it can. But more than this it seems there is an element of choosing here, as he seems really to *prefer* to see the single child rather than the "people." This is borne out, I believe, in Schuyler's love of single people over groups, and especially children, a fact noticeable in his poetry and the *Diary*,¹² while his ambivalent agency in language, at times actively interposing to prove his own inability to render the actual thing, at other times seeming just a receptacle for the visual impressions he is receiving and yet subtly choosing which to record as they "happen," is conveyed by a number of titles, in particular "Shopping and Waiting," an unusual playlet in *The Home Book*. The title seems to convey a double aspect of *The Home Book* generally, another diaristic form of course, that of the active agency of choosing and economy, and the passive agency of simply being there. Yet other titles, such as the infamous "Things to do" or "Sorting, wrapping, packing, stuffing," demonstrate that this active agency is, to a degree, again, the passivity of the cataloguer. The title "Things to do" seems to be mainly a joyful expression of the "let's make a list" impetus,¹³ always

¹¹ Schuyler, *Collected Poems*, 85.

¹² The Porter's children feature strongly in the diaries as do pets. The groups of adults are limited to a "family" circle of familiar figures and lovers, nearly always dealt with in small groups as opposed to the larger circle of people in party situations that one gets in O'Hara.

¹³ The phrase "let's make a list" is used in "Hymn to Life." Worth noting also are the famous shopping lists of "Morning of the Poem" and references to lists in *The Diary*. One entry in particular seems pertinent to the issues I am raising when read in conjunction with Kernan's explanatory note: "In the early light the privet hedge outside my north window looks pitted like bronze that has been in the earth a long time. Sometimes I mean to keep track ("Make a list") of what I read. What for? To amuse me when I've forgotten" Schuyler, *Diary*, 44. "Make a list" was a frequent refrain in the Porter household. Anne Porter writes, "If I asked F to pick up something when he was going out (like bread) & then said Oh yes and some butter, he would say (a little wearily) 'Make a list,'" Kernan's note to above passage in *Diary*, 44.

being things he *should* do, not things he *has* done. What he has actually done is make a list of actions or reduce the event to a representation of its optative desirability – things one *ought* to do.

In contrast to this, the passive side of merely observing things through the window, or on one’s desk, is, as critics note, a kind of passive–aggressive mode of subject forming. Schuyler’s own response to the peculiar choosiness of the diary/poem is challenging: “since I’ve been writing here I’ve mostly written one poem ... and some of my diary, though not much. I think I told you that people never get into it.”¹⁴ Kernan’s gloss on this letter further emphasises this unpopulated landscape of the typical Schuyler diary entry:

Certainly there is not much that could be called gossip in Schuyler’s *Diary*, not really any searching character- or self-analysis, and if his statement that “people never get into it” isn’t literally true, most of the *Diary* is descriptive: of weather, of “nature” ... and of small daily events. Nothing “happens” in Schuyler’s diary.¹⁵

The critics, however, are in direct conflict with Schuyler’s own view that “everything happens as I write.”¹⁶ Coming in a section where he notes he does not work from journals, it seems he is arguing for the journal and the poem as being part of the more general process of “everything happening,” sometimes suitable for prose, sometimes for poetry, and sometimes perhaps unrecorded. Everything can happen in three ways I would argue: in language through description and taxonomy; in the subject through the processes of observation, interposition, and recording; and through the objective world with its combination of radical specificity and general rhythmic repetition, both spatially and temporally.¹⁷ Therefore, Schuyler’s persona becomes the full working out of

¹⁴ Quoted from an unpublished letter in Kernan, 13. ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁶ Carl Little, “An Interview with James Schuyler,” *Agni*, 37 (1996), 168.

¹⁷ These qualities are noted but rarely developed by a whole flurry of critics. Donald Revell considers how Schuyler, “reconfirms the dignity of particularity, of the small, habitable sites of clarity in which phenomena and events may receive and return our human affections,” and how “James Schuyler is the most necessary, material witness I can imagine,” Donald Revell, “Editor’s Preface,” *Denver Quarterly*, 24:4 (1990), 7, 9. Ann Lauterbach develops this in relation to the postmodern “event,” defining in the poetry a situation “where the ‘event’ is almost anything available to the mind’s eye,” and also developing the relationship between the visual (spatial) and the temporal: “He tropes time: the time of the poem and the time in the poem, especially in the majestic longer works, seem to be the same. To put it another way: Schuyler undergoes the life of the poem as he is writing it: it witnesses him, he is its object,” Anne Lauterbach, “Fifth Season,” *Denver Quarterly*, 24:4 (1990), 70, 71. Lauterbach shows then how the *act* of witnessing or the trope of “waiting,” is less than passive, involving not only the vital act of witnessing which brings about the possibility of the differend, but also how

what he means when he says “everything happens when I write,” and is what I have called the process of taxonomic autobiography, or of being through the act of naming, or remembering a recording of the act of naming, the real things one encounters in the real world. I now want to go on to look at the way this has developed over the early and middle periods of Schuyler’s work, through a number of main stages which develop simultaneously a theory of taxonomy and autobiography.

Of all forms of autobiography the diary is the one which most highlights the taxonomic aspect of the trope, which is in essence a listing and counting out of your being in days, and is also in accord with both Foucault’s and Lévi-Strauss’s sense of *taxonomia*. *Taxonomia*, while theoretically a mode of naming the world in a categorical and classificatory manner, is in fact the means provided for structure to name itself, as Lévi-Strauss makes clear: “classifications do not constitute separate domains but form an integral part of an all embracing dynamic taxonomy the unity of which is assured by the perfect homogeneity of its structure, consisting as it does of successive dichotomies.”¹⁸ The structural aporia here is how a pre-established system can be the hypostatised precondition for its own establishment; how does structure happen? Foucault historicises this process but in doing so comes across a second aporia of homogeneity combined with succession, in particular the succession of dichotomies. In

witnessing both intervenes on the real as well as on the self by seeing the self as an object within the real world. Which is in essence how taxonomic autobiography could work, a process of witnessing which names the subject into objective being. Within this the nature of time, the days of the diaries or day books of Schuyler’s life of self-witnessing, also become things. As Mark Rudman notes in relation to the temporally specific titles of numerous poems, “they chronicle time parcelled out,” Mark Rudman, “James Schuyler’s Changing Skies,” *Denver Quarterly*, 24:4 (1990), 91. A fact which appears to be confirmed by Barbara Guest’s impressions: “his poems invite time: they play with it ... In each passage time exerts a passion ... where a moment’s minutiae become aggrandized and we believe their shifting is a permanent whole. I am always delighted when his poems catch the “unevenness” of the flow of day. Because that is how time flows” Barbara Guest, “The Vuillard of Us,” *Denver Quarterly*, 24:4 (1990), 15. Guest calls this the “vagaries of inhabitancy” Guest 14, in relation to Schuyler’s use of place, but in the Schuyler poem surely place, time, language, and self are all translated into the uneven continuum of interrupting the “going on” of endless interruption, that typifies the object of enunciation. Revell again expresses this: “Schuyler’s persona is one that rejoices in transience, in the differences between one hour and the next. It is a persona that likes to engage life by moments as they arrive and which does not care to urge its loving attention into any one final version of them all,” Donald Revell, “Ballads of the Provisional City,” *Denver Quarterly*, 20–21 (1986), 188.

¹⁸ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962), 139.

noting the onset of *taxonomia* in the modern period, as one of its three crucial structures along with grammar and economics,

... the sixteenth century superimposed hermeneutics and semiology in the form of similitude. To search for a meaning is to bring to light a resemblance. To search for the law governing signs is to discover the things that are alike. The grammar of beings is an exegesis of these things. And what the language they speak has to tell us is quite simply what the syntax is that binds them together.¹⁹

As this reliance on resemblance of the motivation of signs is overhauled by the onset of modernist discourse, the process of a system of naming that merely names itself *as* a system of naming becomes accentuated, so that Foucault notes in relation to the post-renaissance science of *taxonomia*: “the process of naming will be based, not upon what one sees, but upon elements that have been introduced into discourse by structure. It is a matter of constructing a secondary language based upon that primary, but certain and universal, language.”²⁰ A language designed to name language; it sounds as far from Schuyler’s objectivist urges as it is possible to be, and seems also to bear little direct relevance to autobiography. Yet in a poem such as “Sorting, wrapping, packing, stuffing,” we find an early example of how Schuyler establishes his agency through an autobiography of naming.

The poet seems on the brink of a major journey, but here the autobiographical interest is less involved in where he is or might be going, than what he must do with things before he goes there. As I have already mentioned, the title, itself a list of classificatory actions, provides a syntax of taxonomic action: of organising (sorting), of preservation (wrapping), of spatialising (packing), and of forcing (stuffing). Here Schuyler plays out his agency through the actions of what Foucault calls the naturalist, a subspecies of the more general figure of the *bricoleur* in Lévi-Strauss. His job is to preserve the real. To save nature however, “the naturalist is the man concerned with the structure of the visible world and its denomination according to characters. Not with life.”²¹ In his title Schuyler concedes this, his job being not so much the preservation of life in language, an impossible project in any case best avoided, as the preservation of a means of preserving the real thing. In effect his poetry is an ongoing archive of the thing, with the proviso that language and the self are also things. His poetry must organise visual experience, coat it in a protective layer of words and personal observation and commentary, put this compound bundle in a pre-conceived structure of some sort, and at times demand the

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Routledge, 1974), 29.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 139.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 161.

poet enforce his will on the thing so it will fit into the structure. The roles of the naturalist and the *bricoleur* thus assume the preservation of the structure against the continuum of time and change. It is poetry as structural prophylactic.

What is remarkable is how Schuyler establishes his subjectivity through this process, conveyed in an image of mundane justice and domestic specificity in the first stanza:

when the great bronze bell
 sounds its great bronze bong
 it will find a lifetime jar of Yuban Instant in my right hand,
 in my left, Coleman's Mustard.²²

Here Schuyler is a self-styled preserver of the radical specificity of *every* thing. However, immediately this is problematised for, while the trade names of everyday and perhaps irrelevant things seem the epitome of specificity, and feature throughout his *Collected Poems*, of course these names are not species names, but genus names. They enforce a synecdochic violence by suggesting one jar of Yuban Instant coffee is enough to stand in for all jars, in this way being truly a “lifetime jar,” (see my comments on synecdoche in the *Diary*, pp. 1–4) but this is not in keeping with the poet as adjudicator who should mediate in the case of every jar based on its own idiom, to use Lyotard's term in *The Differend*, rather than deal in such generalities. What we find is that the poet is incapable of fulfilling any role except that of the naturalist, that he cannot preserve the “life of things” by looking at them, any more than Wordsworth was able to by trying to look into them.²³ In both instances the poets are constructing the science of *taxonomia*, of naming an all-embracing discourse of naming, which becomes even more apparent in stanza three:

better we should slip into this Ice Age remnant granite boulder
 and grab a snooze
 it is too much like packing
 on Saturn
 where they have poison ivy like we have Himalayas
 poisonous only to planets
 give us a gingham smile
 red white and checkered
 Help
 the blue fire escape!
 it's coming unpacked all over the floor like a Milky Way
 lighting the north

²² Schuyler, *Collected Poems*, 27.

²³ For more on Schuyler and Wordsworth see Rudman, 90–91.

and aurora borealis of neckties

Knize
Sulka
Au Chardon d’Ecosse

stuff wrap cram snap²⁴

The narrative of packing is itself a classification of different means of classifying the same experience of packing. The time/space shift from the Ice Age to Saturn continues a discourse of temporal shifts matching the spatial movement begun in stanza two, giving way to the use of synaesthesia in the “gingham smile,” gingham also being a direct reference to the grid of linguistic structure. The gingham draws attention to the clothes being packed but also forms the basis for the slip from the thing at hand to the poetic process of metaphor-making, so that packing and poetry approach synthesis in the same manner as time and space. The reference to the “blue fire escape” is a direct intervention by the two tropes of autobiographical enunciation: imagination, which Foucault also sees as instrumental in the leap of taxonomic language from similitude to discourse; and the “memory” of reiteration which is the memory of language, the image having been already used, again in stanza two. The end of this small grid of the ordering of experience is, then, the final line list of packing, which comes after a three-line exercise in the defamiliarisation of language. These strange words, “Knize,” “Sulka,” etc., *can* be made to fit into the poem through the process of taxonomy, perhaps with violence and maybe even by breaking them, “stuff wrap cram snap.” Which is again demonstration that taxonomy does not name the real thing, as here the real thing is inaccessible to the reader, at least initially,²⁵ and this stanza is a simple but effective example of how taxonomic autobiography works; naming the subject into the agency of naming, by naming the very discourse of naming itself. And while the real is the trope or mythic concept upon which the whole process is founded, it really has very little to do with the fabric of the poem as a whole.

Towards the end Schuyler summarises this process of the production of the agent of classifying, “cut down the books / to fit an Oshkosh nutshell.”²⁶ He returns back to the thing, as he is always trying to do, first

²⁴ Schuyler, *Collected Poems*, 27–28.

²⁵ In fact “Knize” and “Sulka” couldn’t be more accessible at least to a certain generation of American readers as they are makes of ties. Knize is especially pertinent as it is supposed to be pronounced “nice” with the “kn” recalling that of “knot,” as in a knotted tie. The word then conveys a certain defamiliarisation and musical/material motivation at the heart of the post-war American commercial idiom. In this vein one supposes “Sulka” is a bastardisation of “a silky.”

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

by making language a thing also to be violently made to fit into the taxonomic discourse of language.²⁷ Further, the books must be cut to fit into a strange hybridity of trade names, Oshkosh, and a natural means of packing. The nutshell is a tree packed up, but it is also the autobiography of the tree, the kernel of its being and the central trope for the idea of autobiography as a significant summation of a life: the seeds and kernel with all the dead wood cut away.

The idea of autobiography, like that of taxonomy, is, as Paul de Man notes, one of naming the system of naming through the interposition of the proper name into the process of day-to-day being. It is surprising that this link has not been made more forcefully before, that the autobiographical being, the deep subject inherited from Freudian psychoanalysis, is itself a taxonomy consisting however of only one name, your own. In analysing Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, de Man highlights the moment of deconstruction of the sense of a unified self that could name itself in full by returning itself back to every moment of its historical being. He concludes:

Everything in this novel suggests something other than what it represents ... It can be shown that the most adequate term to designate this "something else" is Reading. But one must at the same time "understand" that this word bars access, once and forever, to a meaning that yet can never cease to call out for understanding ... The allegory of reading narrates the impossibility of reading. But this impossibility necessarily extends to the word "reading" which is thus deprived of any referential meaning whatsoever.²⁸

Derrida calls this self-devouring logic of called prosopopeia, "*memoires-from-beyond-the-grave*,"²⁹ a process by which the subject reads itself by naming itself, but in doing so names not only the death of a unified sense of self which could never be read in full, but also the death of language. What use is a language that cannot be read? These problems come directly from the logic of taxonomy, for autobiography is nothing more than an obsessive process of sorting, wrapping, packing, and stuffing the vast diversity of things and words about things, into the proper name "Marcel

²⁷ "Oshkosh" clothing is American "one size fits all" industrial/casual wear which adds a curious resonance to both my point about forcing language to fit, and also the paradox of the looseness of Oshkosh clothing, originally overalls, and the compactness of a nutshell. Schuyler is always reminding us of the humour at the heart of the postmodern condition and the ease with which the New York School negotiate their often confounding world is nothing short of heroic at times.

²⁸ Paul De Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 77.

²⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Memoires for Paul De Man*, revised edition, the Wellek Library Lectures, trans. Eduardo Cadava, Jonathan Culler, Peggy Kampf, and Cecile Lindsay (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 29.

Proust,” or in this case “James Schuyler.”³⁰ This is the role of denomination central to all autobiography:

Denomination could never exist by itself although it is a constitutive part of all linguistic events. All language is language about denomination, that is a conceptual, figural, metaphorical metalanguage ... A narrative endlessly tells the story of its own denominational aberration and it can only repeat this aberration on various levels of rhetorical complexity. Texts engender texts as a result of their necessarily aberrant semantic structure; hence the fact that they consist of a series of repetitive reversals that engenders the semblance of a temporal sequence.³¹

Denomination *is* taxonomy, at least it is the dark aporetic machine at the heart of taxonomy, whose irresolvable paradoxes produce a spiralling logic of necessity and impossibility, from which the already complete structure of language somehow springs, complete in its permanent incompleteness. For if language cannot even name one thing sufficiently to be read in full, one person in the case of autobiography, the “I” has little chance of ever naming fully its own inadequacies.

In Schuyler, the proliferation of texts about texts and of naming processes of naming, in other words of a self-conscious taxonomy, finds full expression in *The Home Book*. Less interesting in the content than the means of ordering the content of day-to-day existence, the collection presents an example of the double process of de Manian denomination: a proliferation of texts about texts, coupled with a series of repetitions which ape the structure of a temporal succession. The title itself is a form of diary or narrative of self which is the mask of reading, prosopopeia, that autobiographical form always must assume. It presents the self in a “nutshell,” both in its limited domestic setting, and in the self-conscious naming of one’s being-at-home as a narrative worthy of being read. The book then presents, in miniature, a number of repetitions of the same masking. “Voyage au tour de mes Cartes Postales,” reduces the subject to the missives it sends out to the world and receives in return. Through this trope the subject is mutilated by summary, introduced into an economy of intersubjective desire, and reduced to the impossible logic of allegorical reading. In “Things to do,” the list is interestingly modified from naming things in the world, to naming the self through an inversion of autobiography, which would, of course, consist not of things *to* do, but of things *done*. This becomes a virtual or prospective autobiography with such injunctions of banality as “Write Maxine,” balanced by the

³⁰ Kernan makes a link between the two: “Although Schuyler never wrote his own memoirs, one of the characteristics of the *Diary*, as of Schuyler’s poetry, is the way memories seem to rise abruptly out of the fabric of whatever else is going on, like Proust’s “involuntary memories,” Kernan, *Diary*, 10. ³¹ De Man, 152–62.

grandiose overall project: “Remember / “to write three-act play” / and lead “a full and active life.”³² At first an ironic comment, perhaps on autobiography, the prospective structure implied by “Things to do” is in actual fact the essence of the denominative narrative act, for hovering above *The Home Book* and the *Diary* is the injunction to write an autobiography which is a prospective casting of a future possible self into a masked linguistic structure of the archival self.

The diary section of *The Home Book* does not, as one might assume, fit into this logic of self-denomination quite so easily. With opening entries like “The air is like Crist-O-Mint,” “Still: bright blue, white, and the scatter of leaves,” “Easter Snow and bad temper,”³³ and concluding with a paean to Darwin’s *Autobiography*, “A little dumb perhaps ... but only in the gloriously innocent way of a man whose concerns are on the largest and most detailed scale. He often sounds so surprised that *he* turned out to be *him*,”³⁴ the project of this kernel of the whole *Diary* is clearly that of a kind of self-abnegation. The treatment of natural details and trade names aside, his final comments on Darwin’s autobiographical techniques are instructive in the manner in which he sees Darwin’s innocence as matching his own attempts to liberate his subjectivity from egotistical agency. Innocence here is a kind of total worldliness so vast it disallows any space for the subject except to render up these things in words. It is no wonder such a figure might be surprised to *be* himself, for the troping of the self in autobiography proper is elided in favour of that equally abused and abusive construct, the world. An alternative to the diary is the prose piece “Current Events,” which combines the active self-to-be of “Things to do,” with the day-to-day self of the diary’s main conceit recording each day with the minimum of retrospection. “Current Events” comprise the things done of the diary format, but with the temporal gap removed, stressing the event and its irreducible currentness. The fact that the real event is writing the event is not dealt with here in the manner of more sophisticated later work like “Hymn to Life,” but the piece completes a stable of alternative means of autobiographical denomination, that avoids obsessively saying “I am” in a number of aberrant tropic reiterations. Rather it names the subject into being by establishing a subject of minimal agency. It is an agency whose denomination is not that of someone who names itself increasingly into otherness, but who names itself through a commitment to naming the realm of the other. Postcards which send the subject to the other, lists

³² James Schuyler, *The Home Book: Prose and Poems* (Calais Vermont: Z Press, 1977), 34, 35.

³³ *Ibid.*, 89.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 97.

which promise to actuate the thing in the future through direct action, the taxonomy of the self in time through the ongoing inscriptions in a diary, and finally a diary so close to “current events” it becomes almost an itinerary of minutes; these are all structures of taxonomic autobiography conveyed in the double trope of “Shopping and Waiting” which can now be fully formulated. Shopping is an intervention on behalf of the object by choosing it, and is really nothing more than making a list out of things. While waiting holds the subject within the continuum of time, or the day to day, passive but endlessly receptive to the other, and willing to interpose on its behalf.³⁵

Both Lévi-Strauss and Foucault concede that taxonomy is a means of coming to terms with the proper name, in light of a diversity of things in the world which then could be deemed to be improper. In a sense Schuyler’s work is an attempted contravention of the modern predicament of denomination, as Lévi-Strauss stresses: “Everything takes place as if in our civilisation every individual’s own personality were his totem: it is the signifier of his signified being.”³⁶ Rather than give in to this, Schuyler moves in an opposite direction, to try to resolve the disjunction between the general and proper noun key to the development of *taxonomia* in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. During this time a conceptual leap from language as a process of representing the world by naming it, to naming as a means by which the visible world could be manifested in such a way as to fit into language, was brought about:

Natural history can be a well-constructed language only if the amount of play in it is enclosed: if its descriptive exactitude makes every proposition into an invariable pattern of reality (if one can always *attribute* to the representation what is *articulated* in it) and if the *designation* of each being indicates clearly the place it occupies in the general *arrangement* of the whole. In language, the function of the verb is universal and void; it merely prescribes the most general form of the proposition; and it is within the latter that the names bring their system of articulation into play ...³⁷

In this structure, which actually is the archetype of structure, identity and being or the proposition “this *is* this,” which is the deictic function of the noun, comes from articulation in the system. And so naming denominates

³⁵ Shopping is basically Michel de Certeau’s active model of the consumer subject in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), while waiting is the more passive model one finds in Walter Benjamin’s work or, in a more extreme version, Henri Lefebvre’s. Schuyler is involved, then, in a mode of developing a double sense of consumption-as-being which, to my mind, is a far more sophisticated analysis of the category of the everyday than has yet been attempted within critical theory generally.

³⁶ Lévi-Strauss, 214.

³⁷ Foucault, 159.

not by magically recalling the absented thing named, but through the means by which this process of naming allows for a system of mediation, by which the thing can reappear in language as the named thing making it available to discourse. In the old system of naming, the idea of the noun was that it was irreducibly linked to the thing it was denominating, which told you everything about the thing but nothing about how the thing could fit into the whole structure. Thus it remains, what Foucault calls, a proper noun leaving the thing “its strict individuality,” with the project of taxonomy being the transformation of the proper noun into the status of a common noun. This requires removing the named thing from its privileged location of specificity, and replacing it in a new “tabular” space of juxtaposition, which is the essence of the taxoneme.³⁸

Again Schuyler rejects this construction. He neither wants to be centre of his own limited totemic system of taxonomy, where each denomination he makes in verse merely denominates himself, nor does he want a system of taxonomic denomination that downgrades proposition to articulation, which would mean however many names of roses he as a poet might know,³⁹ each denomination would be doubly unable to name the specific thing. Instead, it would name his ability to denominate, along with the structure of taxonomy that allows such denomination to happen in language. In this fashion Schuyler utilises a form of autobiographical “slippage” in a manner akin to Lyn Hejinian’s postmodern formulation of autobiography in *My Life*, and more especially *Writing is an Aid to Memory*:

I am always conscious of the disquieting runs of life slipping by, that the message remains undelivered, opposed to me. Memory cannot, through the future return, and proffer raw conclusions ... Abridgement is foolish, like lopping off among miracles; yet times is not enough. Necessity is the limit with forgetfulness, but it remains undefined. Memory is the girth, or again.⁴⁰

The preconditions for the totalising structures of denomination Schuyler attempt to free his poetry from, are the discursive practices we name language and subjectivity. The essence of Hejinian’s approach to this is

³⁸ The taxoneme is what I conceive as being the minimal semantic unit within taxonomy, operating at the same semantic level as the noun but, as I hope I have shown thus far, in a very different fashion.

³⁹ As John Ashbery notes, Schuyler’s attention to the names of thing is an important part of his contribution to the New York School aesthetic: “I give you a poet who knows the names for things, and whose knowing proves something” John Ashbery, “Introduction to a Reading Given by James Schuyler,” *Denver Quarterly*, 24:4 (1990), 12.

⁴⁰ Lyn Hejinian, *Writing is An Aid to Memory* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1996), Preface.

essentially deconstructive: to take these two opposed discourses and look for the slippage in each, which allows the autobiographical to slip through the blind-spots of totality, back into a realm of being within a process. Life is enunciated only through language and language through life, and the poet’s role is, as in the case of Schuyler, that of a mediator who operates by direct denomination: “abridgement is foolish.” Such a view is apparent in a poem like “An East Window on Elizabeth Street,” as well as pieces such as “Alice Faye at Ruby Foo’s,” and “Buildings,” (all in *The Crystal Lithium*) which take a mediated view of the relation between words and the world. In particular we have seen the important tension between the general and the specific in these more taxonomically sophisticated works, and the three titles convey different approaches to this in their use of proper versus common nouns. “An East Window on Elizabeth Street” plays with specificity by seeming, with each word, to convey a sense of honing in on the specific scene, and yet the indefinite article begins a certain sense of generality where one could presuppose any number of east facing windows on this particular street. “Alice Fay at Ruby Foo’s” operates in an opposite fashion. Apparently incredibly specific with its use of two proper nouns, the poem seems itself mainly concerned with direct denotation:

1 from 9 is 8
and 4 from 5 is 1
K’ 59
a black green and white catalog from Germany⁴¹

However, the proper names are *so* specific that interviewers have since had to ask who Ruby Foo is,⁴² which introduces another sense of slippage into a realm of such heightened specificity, that the words effectively become general common nouns denoting specificity. “Buildings,” the most general title, forms a bracket out of the specificity of generality:

Buildings embankment parkway grass and river
all those cars
all those windows
...
all those cars
all those millions of windows⁴³

These opening and closing comments are not so much the rendering of the totality of diversity, that typifies one’s experience of the real world into

⁴¹ Schuyler, *Collected Poems*, 85.

⁴² See Little, “An Interview,” 170 for more about these figures.

⁴³ Schuyler, *Collected Poems*, 86, 87.

either a total motivation of personal Totemism or total discourse, but are more like an attempt to render in language the specificity of the experience of generality. The opening manages to be specific about a general scene consisting of all those common and everyday nouns, and although Schuyler does then descend into generality proper, the use of “those” seems to distance the common nouns from the propriety of his taxonomic agency, while the use of “millions” at the end of the poem seems to be reaching for further definition.

It is incorrect to accuse Schuyler of being a renaissance taxonomist or a result of proper tribal Totemism, the two sides of the structural history of taxonomy presented by Foucault and Lévi-Strauss respectively. He isn't, however, a taxonomist of the modern period, because he resolutely refuses to name the system of naming as much as he denies the fetishisation of his own self into an all consuming poetic totem. The autobiographical tone of his work, coupled with the diaristic formats he regularly uses, means he does try to come to terms with the taxonomy of the self that is inherent to the denominative aporias of autobiography one finds in de Man. But his sophisticated sense of how language works, means he is not restricted to exploring these blind-spots. Language, in the taxonomic poetry of Schuyler's total output, has a threefold being as indeed it should with all postmodern poets. It has its representational or denotational function, it has a sense of its own thing-ness, and finally it has the material aspect of words as such. In the taxonomic structure the materiality is not merely reducible to the mark and the phoneme however, for the taxonomist is as much aware of the *structure* of the name as he is of the mark of its *character*, to paraphrase Foucault. And so in the later Schuyler we have such poems as “Eyes at the Window,” which uses specificity not to denote specific things, but to denote the general structure of specificity within taxonomy: “The veiled lady is Burr's daughter / under the grapes is Alexandria, Virginia. / Robert Schuyler, the great defaulter.”⁴⁴ His abuse of proper naming in this instance, typical of a New York School poet, takes taxonomy as the totem of its own structure of naming, reducing the proper nouns into a basic material of generality. In “Gray, Intermittently Blue, Eyed Hero,” the impetus towards taxonomic materiality works in the other direction, with one common noun, “fog,” used as a “poetry idea” through the poem,⁴⁵ to such a degree that the poet

⁴⁴ Ibid., 157.

⁴⁵ The concept of poetry ideas is taken from Kenneth Koch's work on teaching poetry to children. He says of poetry ideas: “I taught reading poetry and writing poetry as one subject. I brought them together by means of ‘poetry ideas,’ which were suggestions

accuses: “Fog, / you stand, sit and lie / accused of an overwhelming list-making thoroughness.”⁴⁶ The fog is, of course, the lover made highly specific in the title, although the emphasis on the eyes is a metonymic reduction, and the fog a metaphoric reduction, allowing the poem to seem to register an inability on the part of the poet to see the real person through the process of language.

A final poem from this collection, (*Hymn to Life*) “Greenwich Avenue,” presents a materiality of representation in its attempts to render, absolutely accurately, the shifting effects of evening light on brick:

In the evening of a brightly
unsunny day to watch back-lighted
building through the slits
between vertical strips of blinds
and how red brick, brick painted
red, a flaky white, gray or
those of no color at all take
the light though it seems only
above and behind them so what
shows below has a slight evening
“the day – sob – dies” sadness and
the sun marches on.⁴⁷

The poem seems to occupy a curious space between denotation and representation, through which slips accuracy and beauty. The beauty of the piece seems to be the two values of attention and affection which critics have come to see as central to his work. The poet wants to be accurate in his naming, but not so that he ends up merely reproducing the process of naming in a lazy and pre-established fashion. He wants to be attentive, but not so much so that his concentration negates any space for

I would give to children for writing poems of their own in some way like the poems they were studying ... for the Wish Poem, starting every line with ‘I wish’; to help them think about the difference between the present and the past, I suggested alternating lines-beginnings of ‘I used to’ and ‘But now’,” Kenneth Koch, *The Art of Poetry: Poems, Parodies, Interviews, Essays, and Other Work* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996), 104–5. And further: “As for trying difficult forms, this was all pulverized into one form or variations of one form: repetition. I would say, ‘Start every line with ‘I wish’ ‘Put your favorite color in every line,’ ‘Start the first line with ‘I used to’ and the second line with ‘But now’” and so on. It was a children’s version of what I had done with adults ... When you write a poem, it’s as if you are saying how you feel on a grid, and you are hanging flowers everywhere on it,” *ibid.*, 155–56. In this instance Schuyler has set himself the task of repeating the word “fog.” Examples of such “artificial” or predetermined composition techniques abound in New York School poetry. ⁴⁶ Schuyler, *Collected Poems*, 168. ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 169.

the real thing to slip into the poem. It is an attentiveness, to a degree, of built-in inattentiveness. Also he wants to establish an empathic relation with the scene. It moves him to sadness after all, but not so that this reduces the specificity of the real event to a trope of his own emotionality. Which is why he undermines his authentic emotion with the “inauthenticity” of the camp prose of the citation. Thus between denoting the world, which is closest to Foucault’s structural naming of structure, and representing the world, which inevitably increases the degree of agency to the point where the subject can become its own totem, Schuyler attempts to work out, in the many taxonomic and autobiographical poetic forms I have considered here, a midway status. Taxonomic autobiography is not just a way of creating a subjectivity out of naming, but a means of building in slippage, as in Hejinian’s theory of postmodern autobiography. Which allows the poet to slip from the real and current world into the autobiographical and memorialised subject, not through the aggressive denominational power of language, but by utilising, quite openly, language’s failure to really name anything at all properly. The poet names himself into being by negating his “name,” the denominator of enunciation, in favour of naming the things around him and the days he occupies in observing them. The result is his *Diary*. In a sense, then, the mask of prosopopeia is allowed to slip on purpose.⁴⁸ However, the relinquishing of agency and the relegation of language to a process of denomination, in fact the giving up of self-denomination in favour of objective denomination, is really just another mask, that of the naturalist.

To conclude, the apparent paradox at the heart of taxonomic autobiography, as I have adumbrated it, is fully developed in the games Schuyler plays with the thing in language, and language as a thing, in a poem such as “Buttered Greens.” On the surface this seems to be a poem about a banal and everyday thing.⁴⁹ However, the title is modified in the poem body into “battered / green,”⁵⁰ so that the sign ceases to refer directly to the food image, and is rather a modification of colour, in this case of leaves:

⁴⁸ Again Kernan is instructive: “the day itself is often the subject, or as David Bergman has pointed out, the object of the poem ... Schuyler’s poems often draw our attention to the idea of the Day as the infinitely varied yet unchanging, inexorable unit of passing time,” (Kernan, *Diary*, 9). Schuyler is using an alternative to the normal masking trope of autobiography I am going on to investigate, choosing a system of taxonomic denomination, naming the days of being, over the denomination of self-enunciation.

⁴⁹ Paul Hoover stresses the use of the everyday or non-essential in Schuyler: “A book jacket mentions his use of the ‘non-essential,’ but Jimmy’s a part of redefining that,” Paul Hoover, “A Fictional Memoir,” *Denver Quarterly*, 24:4 (1990), 18.

⁵⁰ Schuyler, *Collected Poems*, 174.

free
leaves fall
and the will
stirs and
turns out
from it-
self, housed
in disposable
rib cages
(the heart
thumps) in
disposable
houses, wood
ribbed and
glazed to
flash back
buttered
green, what
it means:⁵¹

What we have here is a kind of Augustan “nature modified.” Schuyler seems to be making a bid for a continuum of objective details, which the tension between greens, cooked vegetables, and green sets up. In and of themselves “buttered greens” demonstrate, as a trope, the modification of nature to our own tastes in terms of food, but also poetically by its titular status and its semi-aphoristic nature in modern American idiomatic discourse. However, in the second use the verb becomes a metaphor for the smearing of colour, presaged by the verb “glazed.” In the end we have three tropes. The leaves turning as they fall from the tree and down the page become, in an act of associative synaesthesia, the house which is the domestic setting of the typical Schuyler poem and also of the original meaning of “buttered greens,” which in turn becomes the body housing the heart. The heart is doubly associated with the tree, both because the house seems to be wooden and because of the cliché of the wooden heart, which again reflects back onto the home. Home is where the heart is. The leaves, the buttered green, become the words and pages of the poem, due to an age-old association of leaves to pages, expressing the marking of the thin, “falling,” word stanza, *and* because the act of glazing words in this manner is that of poetry. The initial aim of the poem, therefore, seems to suggest a subjectivity, a social/domestic subjectivity not just an Orphic/poetic subject, based on objects’ complicity with the subject:

⁵¹ Ibid., 174.

all done
 not by
 us or for
 us but
 with us.⁵²

At the heart of the piece, therefore, is a dynamic between the manner in which language changes the thing observed, and the way things themselves allow this to happen. The “greens” of the title become buttered simply by the removal of the “s,” just as the lines of this poem have become truncated by Schuyler deciding to cut them up this way, which is how poetry works on language and how language works on the thing observed. Yet this agency, limited as it is to one simple action of cutting into poetry – the cutting off of an “s” and the cutting up of lines – does not really reside in the subject but with the object, which does this “with” us and “for” us. Without things, subjective agency, of even a most limited kind, cannot occur, as it is the primary scission of subject from object that is the onset of subjectivity as a discourse.⁵³ This is especially true when one concedes that language is also a thing, so the scission here is not just the cutting off of the subject from the real thing by the removal of the “s,” but also the cutting off of the subject from language and of language from the thing. To lose the “s” is to see how much taxonomy is a structure of differentials – words are different to the things they name – that operates as a thing unto itself away from the agency of subject or object. The fact that it does this for us and with us is predicated on the trauma of the realisation that it is not truly for us or with us. It is for and with itself.

The paradox of a concourse between subject and object predicated on a traumatic division, is established in the poem from the opening trope of change and the disposability of the leaves:

⁵² Ibid., 175.

⁵³ For more on this see variously the work of Emile Benveniste, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, and Jacques Derrida. Basically one finds that the trauma of the subject’s realisation that it is separate from those objects around it, which also means it has become an object for other subjects, is the same trauma as that of a society that realises that signifier and signified are also separate. The word no longer refers to the thing, as the thing is only apprehensible as a concept through language. Objects have no cognition of their object status. Benveniste deals with this through the concept of the “subject of enunciation,” Lacan through the “subject of uncertainty.” Kristeva refines both theories in her conception of the *sujet en procès* (subject on trial/in the process), while Derrida comes from a metaphysical tradition, in considering the effect iterability has on full subjective presence. The last point ties the subject and object together, for the subject becomes the object which language cannot touch, name, or refer to in a manner by which it might fully be known.

they fell first
blown under
a big plane
tree⁵⁴

But the empathy the poet has for the leaves sets up the structure of the agency of the object as other, by establishing difference in terms of free will:

leaves which
have not
free will:
have you?’’⁵⁵

Yet not only is the poet himself an advocate of relinquishing up will, but the synaesthesia he sets up in the poem between the leaves and the house suggests that this difference, or act of specificity, between the leaves and the house is not so clear cut. In fact, it is the fall of the leaves down the page that allows the idea of will to come about:

free
leaves fall
and the will
stirs⁵⁶

This occurs primarily due to poetic language. The breaking of the linearity of syntax allows moments of movement into a sensibility of the materiality of the words, as in the phrase,

all
is not con-
tent, yet
the chance
of it is
there⁵⁷

The breaking of “con-tent” also allows, structurally, a double semantic charge, as it could also mean all this is *not* the content of the poem/person. And so the break sets up a dialogue between what is held inside of us and what is held outside, which could be a bid for an excess of subjectivity that cannot be held inside. The “chance of it,” in this way, becomes almost self-reflexive, referring to the chance of this semantic reading, as well as the chance of becoming content, *and* becoming the contents of your own work. The “fall” is also the fall of the versification which allows for such combinations, and this then becomes the precondition for the central

⁵⁴ Ibid., 172.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 173.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 174.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 173.

synaesthesia. The heart turns, as do the leaves, out from itself, to itself, as that which is also outside of itself. Not just as self-object, but self defined by relation to the outside world. Thus the house/heart/leaf motif, turns chiasmatically in the narrow vortex of the restricted typography, while the flash of the buttered green *is* “what it means,” “it” being, in this context, the will itself.

Taxonomic autobiography is the subject’s return back into a language not only subject to the poet’s agency, but which names the subject into agency. Again it is the ability to return to the linguistic denomination of the self as other to oneself through an appreciation of language’s inherent difference to itself, that disallows this from falling into the aporias of totally determinant systems. Instead, the subject gets back to itself through the slippages of the denominational inadequacies of language; taxonomy’s inability to name the system of naming in full. The marking of radical poetic language is the material condition for this. In breaking syntax, one removes the need for a structural table to interpose between the subjective and objective world so as to erase their difference. So, in a sense, what Schuyler does in the radical line-breaks of “Buttered Greens” is give things their difference back, by establishing a mode of sympathy between the dual force of subjectivity and language, and the singularity of the objective, based on the radical dissimilarity to each other and themselves they all share.

As children we are hyper-aware of the aesthetics of the tatty and inconsequential, the myth of the ugly, saggy, unremarkable thing which we can still love. Somewhere along the way, the glamour of everyday shoddiness is lost to all but a few of us. Schuyler is the prophet of a sect of the bland and uninteresting thing.

The last entry in the *Diary*, dated Tuesday, January 1, 1991 reads:

Sooty tatters of cloud in a warm blue sky (although the day is cold), coasting low almost among the building that reach up to be glided by the sun resting on the horizon before it sets. A fresh and beautiful New Year day.

And now to change and go to the Hazan’s party.⁵⁸

His death in April of that year, the passage’s hermeneutic status as the last entry, the date of the entry, and the sublime imagery, undermine what is otherwise a powerfully banal instance of taxonomic autobiography. When we ask what we learn of the poetic subject through the objects he chooses to remark upon and the remarks he makes, we must now come to the conclusion that Schuyler was an ethical and sincere man, a poet of the

⁵⁸ Schuyler, *Diary*, 227.

encounter. Peter Nicholls, writing about the ethical status of George Oppen’s objectivist poetry, argues that ethical poetry or poetry of the “encounter,” “will assume that the domain of the ethical is also the domain of the ordinary and the everyday,” adding that, “the ethical subject is not only open, but vulnerable and in question.”⁵⁹ Levinas calls this “sincerity”, meaning, as Nicholls explains, “not so much the true account of one’s inner feelings ... as an acceptance of what *exceeds* the self.”⁶⁰ Schuyler seems to easily accept matter in excess of the self in his poetry and diaries, thrives on it even, but it would be a mistake to think this negates or somehow liberates the self from the arrogant meta-narrative claims for subjectivity that have been in place in poetry since Romanticism. In his last entry he certainly encounters the everyday and ordinary, except it is a New Year’s day, which is, therefore, *not* everyday or ordinary. However, a nominated day is no less ordinary than an ordinary day, not really. He also places his subjectivity in question, in two ways. First through the agency of taxonomic autobiography that exists throughout the *Diary*, where he opts for a narrative of self based on the process of naming the other thing. Second by the phrase “and now to change.” However, in some ways he is more sincere about sincerity than the neo-modernist objectivity of a poet such as Oppen, because he is aware of the double logic of excess: there is nothing in excess of the self, while in a sense everything is in excess of the self, *especially* the self.

Taxonomy names the system of naming, autobiography tells the story of being, and these linguistic forms are really what is in excess of the self. This is why Schuyler’s favoured thing is post-lapsarian and irredeemable. It sees the object as something degraded by language, language as itself an object and so self-degrading, and subjectivity as something that can only be expressed by its being undermined by the objective world around it. In taxonomic autobiography, language mediates ethically between subject and object, but only to point out the faults and inconsistencies in both, and only on the condition that subject and object do the same for it. In this sense, to make a list is really to be ethical, to be sincere about the inability of any poet to encounter the everyday object as in excess of the self, and to make a detailed list of all occasions when this was discovered to be the case. And yet it also shows a desire to deal with the object *as* other, through a poetic process of sympathy. Language, by virtue of taxonomy, is other to itself, and subjectivity, because of the trope of autobiography, is equally as other to itself. If the list is life, it is only

⁵⁹ Peter Nicholls, “Of Being Ethical: Reflections on George Oppen,” *Journal of American Studies*, 31:2 (1997), 168.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 168.

because it ethically shows life as other to itself three times over: once in language, once in the subject, and once in reference to the object. Language is, therefore, central to this, and it is Schuyler's sense of language's radical insincerity that is the precondition for his diffident, sincere, objectivist poetic practice.