



Schuyler, James (1923-1991)

by Craig Kaczorowski

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James Schuyler is the author of novels, one-act plays, and numerous essays on modern art, but he is best known for his poetry, of which he published some twelve volumes in his lifetime.

Schuyler, a prominent member of what has become known as the New York School of poets and painters, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1981 for his collection *The Morning of the Poem*.

Schuyler's poems celebrate the small details of daily life. They are intimately observed, conversational in tone, and suggest a seemingly effortless immediacy. As a reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* once noted, "His poems often read like elegant journal entries."

Schuyler's foremost subject was his own life, and he wrote openly about his homosexuality. In fact, his sexual frankness was pointed out for particular admiration by the poet and critic Howard Moss, who observed that "[Schuyler] is in touch with parts of himself not usually available for examination and not often handled by most writers."

Schuyler led a peripatetic childhood, moving frequently with his family, and lived a similarly difficult and unsettled life as an adult. He suffered from manic depression and was occasionally hospitalized. He candidly addresses his illness in his series known as "The Payne Whitney Poems."

The New York School

Along with John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, and Kenneth Koch, James Schuyler is generally considered one of the "first generation" poets of the New York School, a loosely connected circle of writers and artists who socialized together and influenced one another's work during the 1950s and 1960s.

The New York School of poetry, a term used primarily by critics and scholars and only rarely by the poets themselves, is characterized by an observational, anecdotal, and spontaneous rhetoric, as well as by an urban sensibility and a concern for the personal. The New York School poets often took inspiration from travel, painting, music, and their own friendships.

Abstract expressionist art was also a major influence, and the New York School poets had strong artistic and personal relationships with such painters as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning.

They also collaborated on a variety of projects, including plays, operas, and illustrated books, with many "second generation" New York School painters, including Larry Rivers, Jane Freilicher, and Fairfield Porter.

The three gay New York School poets--Schuyler, Ashbery, and O'Hara--frequently refer to their sexuality, with varying degrees of candor, in their works. And while Koch was the sole heterosexual of the group, his friend and frequent collaborator Larry Rivers once recalled that he "talked and acted as gay as the rest."

Biographical Details

James Marcus Schuyler was born on November 9, 1923 in Chicago, Illinois. His parents divorced when he was six years old. Three years later his mother remarried.

His new family moved often and Schuyler lived for a time in Downers Grove, Illinois, then Washington, D.C., and later Chevy Chase, Maryland. When he was twelve years old, his mother and stepfather moved to Buffalo, New York, and finally settled, two years later, in East Aurora, a suburb outside of Buffalo.

Schuyler frequently fought with his stepfather, who disapproved of his stepson's love of reading, and whom Schuyler later claimed to "loathe." These frequent disputes contributed to Schuyler's unhappiness at growing up gay and sensitive in a small town.

He entered Bethany College in West Virginia in 1941. He studied literature, architecture, and history, but he was not successful academically. "I just played bridge all the time," he later recalled.

In 1943, Schuyler left college without graduating to join the U.S. Navy. While on leave in New York in 1944, Schuyler got drunk, missed his ship, and was declared AWOL. During the hearing that followed, Schuyler's homosexuality was revealed, which led to his dishonorable discharge.

He returned to New York and began a relationship with Bill Aalto, a former soldier and struggling writer. Although Aalto had a problem with alcohol and was frequently violent when drunk, the two men remained together for nearly five years.

While in New York, Schuyler was also befriended by Chester Kallman and his lover, the poet W. H. Auden.

In 1947, Schuyler inherited a farm in Arkansas from his paternal grandmother. He promptly sold the farm. With the proceeds he and Aalto moved to Italy, where he planned to write short stories.

In Italy, Schuyler attended the Università degli Studi di Firenze, in Florence. He later served as Auden's secretary and typist in Auden's villa on Forio d'Ischia, an island in the Bay of Naples.

In an interview given many years later, Schuyler recalled that he found Auden's poetry both "inspiring" and "inhibiting," and thought at the time, "If this is what poetry is like, it is something far beyond my powers."

One night while at Auden's house, Aalto, violently drunk, attacked Schuyler with a carving knife. In the poem "Dining Out with Doug and Frank," published in 1980, Schuyler refers to this incident and describes Aalto as "A dark / Finn who looked not unlike / a butch version of Valentino." The two men subsequently broke up.

After returning to New York in 1950, Schuyler suffered the first of a series of nervous breakdowns, and was hospitalized at a sanitarium in White Plains, New York. He was also later hospitalized at the Payne Whitney Psychiatric Clinic, on the Upper East Side of Manhattan.

In 1951, through John Bernard Myers, an art dealer and friend of Auden's, Schuyler was introduced to Ashbery and O'Hara, who quickly became close friends, frequent collaborators, and, off and on, roommates throughout the mid-1950s.

Myers also introduced Schuyler to the dance critic Edwin Denby, with whom he began a relationship. Denby in turn introduced Schuyler to the pianist Arthur Gold. Much to Denby's chagrin, Gold and Schuyler soon embarked on an affair that lasted almost five years.

During this period, Schuyler devoted most of his time to writing. In 1952, his one-act play, *Presenting Jane*, was produced at Poet's Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts; a year later another one-act play, *Shopping and Waiting: A Dramatic Pause*, was produced at New York's American Theatre for Poets.

Additionally, in response to a commission arranged by Gold, Schuyler wrote the libretto for Paul Bowles's "A Picnic Cantata" in 1955.

That same year, Schuyler began working at the influential magazine *Art News* as an art critic and associate editor. He remained with *Art News* for nearly ten years. A selection of his articles was published in 1998 as *Selected Art Writings: James Schuyler*, edited by Simon Pettet.

From 1955 to 1961, Schuyler also worked at the Museum of Modern Art, organizing exhibitions that circulated throughout the United States and Europe.

He later collaborated with Kenward Elmslie on the one-act plays *Unpacking the Black Trunk* and *The Wednesday Club*, which were presented at the American Theatre for Poets in 1965.

Due to a relapse of his mental illness and because of financial difficulties, from 1961 until 1973 Schuyler lived with his close friend the artist Fairfield Porter and his family in Southampton, Long Island, and at their summer home on Great Spruce Head Island off the coast of Maine.

He then returned to New York City and lived a relatively reclusive life until his death in 1991.

A Nest of Ninnies and Other Novels

Schuyler published his first book, *Alfred and Guinevere*, in 1958. The novel, about two children who are sent by their parents to spend the summer at their grandmother's house in the country, is told entirely through fragments of dialogue and passages from the young girl's diary. Illustrated with simple line drawings, the work was mistakenly classified by the *New York Times Book Review* as a children's book.

Schuyler's friend and fellow New York School poet Kenneth Koch, in his review for *Poetry*, found a connection between the novel's prose and Schuyler's poetry, which had yet to be widely published, noting that the writing was "prose as poetry really should be: among other things fresh, surprising, artful, and clear."

In 1969, the experimental novel *A Nest of Ninnies*, co-written by Schuyler and John Ashbery, was published. The two men had begun the book in the summer of 1952 in the backseat of a car returning to New York City from a weekend in the Hamptons.

The novel, which satirizes the uneventful lives of two suburban families, received a mixed critical response. Some reviewers, such as Sara Blackburn of *Nation*, found the novel's lack of plot and the ordinariness of the characters' lives both "maddening" and "boring."

The poet and critic John Koethe, however, in his review for *Poetry*, warned against reading the book "as another heavy-handed exposé of the emptiness of the middle class," and noted that "the disarming thing about the ninnies is that despite their vacuity they live pretty much like most of us do." Koethe went on to suggest that "the situation in which we and the other ninnies find ourselves may be either more earth-shakingly banal than we know, or an unrecognized heaven."

Schuyler returned to a suburban setting for his third novel, *What's for Dinner?*, published in 1978. The story

revolves around the commonplace, anonymous lives of three suburban families, and is told almost entirely in dialogue, with little narration.

Eve Ottenberg, writing in the *Village Voice*, observed that "it is the surface of life that Schuyler is after: the deliberate, yammering silliness of these characters persists through the tragedies of their lives, and in the end it makes them more than ninnies and even helps them endure."

Schuyler's Poetry

Although he had published a few poems in limited-edition chapbooks and literary magazines, Schuyler did not publish his first major collection of poetry, *Freely Espousing*, until 1969 when he was 46 years old.

Freely Espousing introduced readers to a fully developed poet who had been writing for almost twenty years. John Koethe, reviewing the collection in *Poetry*, remarked that "coming upon a mature body of work without much prior warning is always a perplexing experience." He further observed that "not only is *Freely Espousing* a collection of extremely good poems, but it also embodies the sort of vision that periodically awakens us to the infinite range of possibilities open to the poet."

Included in the collection is the poem "Buried at Springs," Schuyler's elegy for his friend Frank O'Hara who had been killed in a dune buggy accident on Fire Island in 1966. Schuyler's emotional reaction to the tragedy is filtered through a meditation on nature and the mutability of life.

As Schuyler recalled in a 1992 interview, "[The elegy] 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."

Schuyler published his next collection of poetry, *Crystal Lithium*, in 1972. His focus in these poems is on the minutiae of daily life, such as the smell of coffee on an early winter morning, which reveal, according to the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, his "meticulous . . . devotion to the physical world." In the *New York Times Book Review*, David Kalstone contended that "these are the best poems that [Schuyler] has ever written."

Schuyler published several more volumes of poetry throughout the 1970s, including *A Sun Cab* (1972); *Hymn to Life* (1974); *Song* (1976); *The Fireproof Floors of Witley Court: English Songs and Dances* (1976); and *The Home Book: Prose and Poetry, 1951-1970* (1977).

In 1980, he published *The Morning of the Poem*, for which he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1981. Joseph Conte, in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, observes that the collection's sixty-page title work is a "poem of recovery--of the self, of one's family and friends, of a meaningful existence." He contends that it is Schuyler's "masterwork" and "among the best long poems of the postmodern era."

Schuyler published his last completed volume of poetry, *A Few Days*, in 1985. The long title poem, which Conte calls a "significant contribution to the autobiographical epic," is Schuyler's elegy for his mother.

Posthumous Publications

Schuyler died in New York City of a stroke on April 12, 1991.

Schuyler's *Collected Poems* were published in 1993. As a reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* noted, "Rarely has a poet imparted so much of his experience as honestly and engagingly as Schuyler does here."

The Diary of James Schuyler, which he began writing in the late 1960s, was published in 1997, edited by Nathan Kernan. In 2004, *Just the Thing: Selected Letters of James Schuyler*, was published, followed a year later by *James Schuyler's Letters to Frank O'Hara*, both edited by William Corbett. Together, these

publications, which include meditations on music, literature, painting, and nature, as well as witty, gossipy portraits of the gay and literary scenes in New York, provide great insight into Schuyler's life and works.

Schuyler's manuscripts, covering the years 1947 to 1991, are housed at the Mandeville Department of Special Collections at the University of California, San Diego.

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About the Author

Craig Kaczorowski writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.