

‘Remember to slam the parentheses behind you’: structures of attention in the lyric poetry of James Schuyler*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores structures of attention in the lyric poetry of James Schuyler. Arguing for a poetics of distraction and boredom, I suggest that Schuyler’s idiosyncratic use of the parenthesis functions as a formal strategy for confronting readerly distraction in the long-form lyric, breaking the reader’s attention to produce new forms of rhythmic and temporal engagement. Through readings of Roland Barthes’ *The Pleasure of the Text* and *Camera Lucida*, I show how the digressional parentheses in Schuyler’s poems open up syntactical spaces which house the body of both speaker and reader, substituting the cerebral for the corporeal to induce states of textual pleasure and recode readerly attitudes to boredom. This paper situates itself in relation to contemporary questions of attention in twenty-first century culture, proposing models for both writing and reading poetry that might engender continued engagement with the lyric form.

KEYWORDS: James Schuyler, lyric, attention, boredom, poetry and poetics

On the 25 August 1985, the poet James Schuyler accidentally locked himself in his diary:

The utter improbability of me sitting here typing my equally unlikely diary (I am keeping it with malice aforethought: i.e. I would like to make some money out of my writing for a change: oh well, winning an extra few thousand for a long poem in a non long poem contest. The Paris Review? Isn’t that where something good always happens? As usual I have locked myself inside a paren. Must bust loose: not always the best idea in life or anywhere else). Where was I?¹

While writing his unlikely diary, Schuyler opens an unwieldy parentheses, an apt rhetorical mistake for the digression that follows: a parenthetical musing on the scant accommodation for long-form poetry.. The parentheses gain momentum, growing until they become a space of incarceration; a space that traps Schuyler *physically* – ‘must bust loose’ – and which seems to have some correlative in the poet’s actual life – ‘not always the best idea in life or any- where else’. But when he finally does break free, the interruptive parentheses, which have broken up the main flow of the text, have also broken something else: the writer’s attention. ‘Where was I?’

When John Wilkinson introduced James Schuyler in his 2010 essay ‘Jim the Jerk: Bathos and Loveliness in the Poetry of James Schuyler’, he wrote that ‘only modest attention has accrued around the poetry of James Schuyler despite his routine appellation as a major poet of the New York School’.² Ten years later, the situation remains little changed: Schuyler’s work is still the least attended to of the New York School poets,

and most critical attention tends to appear as something of a footnote to the more prolific work of Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery. If critical attention to Schuyler has been modest, perhaps this has to do with what I want to call a commitment to *modest forms of attention*. As Wilkinson continues, 'part of the reason [for this critical oversight] may be that his poetry is low-key, and its successes so subtle that its differences from the routine or the failed take effort to discern or specify'.³

In this respect, Schuyler's poetry is not only 'the least Romantic of the New York School', but, as Wilkinson explains, is part of 'an important anti-transcendent strain in twentieth-century American poetry'.⁴ His work fits into an Epicurean⁵ literary tradition, which found its expression in 'English diarists from Gilbert White to Virginia Woolf', and in his love of 'the pastoral mode and gardening'.⁶ Little wonder, then, that his poetry is driven by routine – by the cycles of a daily routine, by the humdrum passages of days, weeks, and seasons – and that his interests are low key or modest: as Schuyler writes, 'The said to be boring things / dreams, weather, a bus trip / are so fascinating'.⁷

Not only was Schuyler inspired by diarists, he also kept his own, and much of the material from them made its way into the poems; indeed, many of his published compositions read like diary entries titled with a date and written in an unfolding present tense. In these verses, Schuyler transforms the poem into a space for tracking, seemingly in realtime, an attention to the world outside his window, registering those 'said to be boring things', like 'a chimney, breathing a little smoke (CP4)', or 'a mesh hangar on a roof (CP85)'. This trope of attention – by which I mean a finely tuned attention to the banal, the quotidian, the everyday – will be recognisable to any reader familiar with the New York School. In Schuyler's work, it is so pervasive as to amount to a kind of poetic ethos: as Douglas Crase has written, 'the working principle seems to have been to register your attention[...]in words, before it could be altered by your expectation of how things should [be]'.⁸ Yet critical readers must be alert to the generic distinction: these are not diary entries but poems, and are thus conditioned by the doubling of attention that is unique to the poetic form. As Lucy Alford writes, in a recent book *Forms of Poetic Attention* (2020), all poems are 'composed by, and compose in turn, acts and events of attention [my emph.]'.⁹ Yet, in identifying Schuyler's verses as diaristic, many critics have overlooked the formally inventive forces woven into the poems' compositions; forces that do more than simply represent attention by registering it. As Andrew Epstein has noted, Schuyler's writing is

not merely the exuberant celebration of the daily and ordinary that it is so often praised as being. It is, rather, an aesthetically and philosophically complex body of work, driven by a need to expose the ambiguity, doubleness, and elusiveness of the everyday.¹⁰

In this essay, I focus on Schuyler's idiosyncratic, unwieldy and, at times, formally experimental use of the parenthesis – a rhetorical-grammatical¹¹ figure that aligns with the Epicurean literary tradition of swerve and digression, and one that has been strangely overlooked in critical conversations on Schuyler's work. Through reading the parentheses, this essay argues that the poetry of James Schuyler reframes *attention* by reclaiming conventional notions of *distraction* and *boredom* in long-form poetry, transforming these readerly 'failures' into generative structures of aesthetic engagement. Through the work of Roland Barthes, I explore the corporeal and blissful possibilities of distraction, induced by the *punctum*¹² of the bracket. But if the bliss of the bracket represents a climax, the return to the poem on the other side, I argue, must engender a state of post-orgasmic boredom. Through the work of psychologist Adam Phillips, I turn from distraction to boredom, concluding with a contemporary framing of forms of attention through Alford's work.

In attending to the parentheses as a simultaneously formal and thematic trope in Schuyler's work, this paper explores the particularity of poetry's 'doubleness of "attention to the form of attention"',¹³ not only to suggest new approaches to poetic engagement, but to find new modes of attentive living through the continued engagement with poetry. Because, as Alford writes, '[w]hen we practice attending to attention, we practice being in the world'.¹⁴

'Boredom is not far from bliss: it is bliss seen from the shores of pleasure'.¹⁵ In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes develops an erotics of reading, where the text induces a state of bliss – or *jouissance* – through its ability to lose the reader. According to Barthes, the reader 'enjoys the consistency of selfhood (that is his pleasure) and seeks its loss (that is his bliss). He is a subject split twice over, doubly perverse'.¹⁶ The notion of the split subject has a particular bearing on Schuyler, who, from 1951 until his death in 1991, was in and

out of mental health institutions and at one time diagnosed with schizophrenia.¹⁷ A ribbon of doubling runs through Schuyler's work and is often heard in the multiple, speaking personas, contained within parentheses - sometimes with explicit reference to his diagnosis. As he writes in 'The Morning of the Poem', "'Do you often / Experience déjà vu, Jimmy?'"[...]they see this as a symptom of schizophrenia (CP288-9)'.

For Barthes, it is the oscillation between reading and *not reading*, between paying attention and following *distraction*, that engenders a 'subject split twice over' in the drive towards bliss:

we do not read everything with the same intensity of reading; a rhythm is established, casual, unconcerned with the *integrity* of the text; our very avidity for knowledge impels us to skip certain passages (anticipated as 'boring') in order to get more quickly to the warmer parts of the anecdote[...]we boldly skip (no one is watching) descriptions, explanations, analyses, conversations.¹⁸

Textually induced distraction places us somewhere between the pleasure of selfhood and the bliss of its subsequent loss. According to Barthes, the source of textual pleasure, or '*tmesis*', inheres exclusively in the reader's patterns and choices: 'it is the very rhythm of what is read and what is not read that creates the pleasure', it is 'the abrasions I impose upon the fine surface; I read on, I skip, I look up, I dip in again'.¹⁹ It follows, then, that 'the author cannot predict *tmesis*: he cannot choose to write *what will not be read*'. Indeed, no writer could know each of their readers; and even if they could, readerly patterns are not static but alter 'from one reading to next'. Yet there are certain rhetorical forms that a writer can use, which will actively *promote* the skipping or skimming of passages. These are forms that disengage their reader by their very syntactical nature – and the writer who knows the significance of distraction to the attainment of textual bliss might well use these forms with to this effect.

Looking at definitions of 'parenthesis' in literary style guides across history, Robert Grant Williams notes that: 'the parenthesis signifies dead text, an appendage to the work which is neither vital nor functional, an appendix which instead of contributing to organic unity only stores toxic waste[...]the intrusive adjunct which readers quickly skim over'.²⁰ We can think about the parenthesis, in line with Schuyler's poetic ethos, as a rhetorical device that demands only *modest attention*: in order to properly perform their rhetorical role, parentheses must be self-negating, must be removable from the primary flow of the text without damaging the integrity of the structure. The graphic mark – the bracket – curves humbly into the line so that the words it contains might quietly exist as a disposable supplement to the main flow. Returning to Barthes, then, if the rhythm of reading is 'unconcerned with the integrity of the text', if it is one in which we find ourselves impelled 'to skip certain passages (anticipated as "boring")', then the parenthesis becomes the rhetorical figure through which the writer *can* 'predict *tmesis*'; or, at the very least, can attempt to lose their reader, to induce distraction, and to foster the conditions for boredom.

One obvious question arises: if they are indeed dead, and only there to be skimmed, why are parentheses in the text at all? Why have writers not found more coherent ways of incorporating these disposable snippets? There are many answers to this question, and it would require a book length study to trace the material and cultural history of the rhetorical figure and sufficiently cover them all.²¹ This is because any answer must depend on the text in hand. The parenthetical remark serves a number of functions, from elucidation to the creation of persona, and will perform differently in a poem, a play, a novel, an instruction manual, and so on. Yet, there is one trait that remains common to all parentheses: whether incidental or consciously styled, every parenthesis possesses an inherently *digressional* character.

There is something inescapably conversational about digressional language: when we speak, we sometimes lose our train of thought, switch tracks, get carried away on tangents. We do this in writing too but, when committed to the page, the digression ceases to be organically discursive, for now we have the time and space to stop and think – '(no one is watching)', as Barthes says – *before* we digress. We can alter our wording and parse our sentences more succinctly before we enshrine them on paper (or screen). And if, in a stream of consciousness, we do let our pen run on, we still have the capacity to edit *after* the event. In short, the digression in a written text must always know its discursive character; which must mean that, if the writer has chosen to keep it, the parenthetical aside must be understood as a *translation* of the spoken into the written, an attempt to keep alive something of the meandering quality of thinking aloud.

If all poetic language is essentially non-functional, if poetry, as Schuyler's one-time employer W. H. Auden wrote, 'makes nothing happen',²² then the superfluous rhetorical trope of the parenthesis steps into the plane of the poem with a unique task: to house the speaking body. Wilkinson recognises this oral quality in Schuyler's 'distracted jotting' which brings his poetry 'as close to immediate speech as you can get in writing'.²³ This is akin to what Barthes calls, '*writing aloud*', a phonetic form whose:

aim is not the clarity of messages, the theater of emotions; what it searches for (in a perspective of bliss) are the pulsional incidents, the language lined with flesh, a text where we can hear the grain of the throat, the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels, a whole carnal stereophony: the articulation of the body, of the tongue, not that of meaning, of language.²⁴

Barthes' 'writing aloud' aligns with my explanation for the continued existence of parentheses in print culture: we *could* find seamless ways of integrating parenthetical digressions into the text, but to do so would be at the expense of these fleshy, blissful moments; fissures in which the writer inserts their own voice, their own *corporeality*. In so doing, they invite the reader to distraction from the primary flow, encouraging them to lose their selfhood in the 'physical' encounter with the other.

Wilkinson's reading of Schuyler's spoken poetic focuses not on parentheses but on another digressive figure; 'epanorthosis', a rhetorical 'trope of self correction' that 'Schuyler uses[...]more frequently than any other poet'.²⁵ Steering Schuyler away from the sublime and towards the bathetic, Wilkinson turns to epanorthosis to flag the indolent banality of his poetic distraction. Yet, although this trope captures the speaking subject, it overlooks the possibility for corporeal presence, which the syntactic space of the parenthesis makes possible. If, as Maggie Nelson suggests, Schuyler, 'like[s] to play with the gaps that invariably occur when one attempts to get one's body into the body of one's writing',²⁶ then the parentheses are these gaps made manifest. Though I read Schuyler as part of an Epicurean (rather than Romantic) tradition, I want to suggest that the sublime is not altogether absent from his work; rather, it is to be found in the blissful inducement to textual distraction, embedded in the spatial, metrical, and corporeal parenthesis that Schuyler also uses 'more frequently than any other poet'.²⁷

In an early composition entitled 'Seeking', Schuyler transforms parentheses into archi-textual doors:

Remember to slam the parentheses behind you

) bang and) bang and)) double bang

(to be on the safe side) (CP30)

Uncoupled from grammatical context, Schuyler's focus here is on the materiality of the mark, its sonic as well as visual textures. Written some twenty years after Charles Olson's seminal manifesto, 'Projective Verse' – subtitled, '(projective (percussive (prospective'²⁸ – 'Seeking' fits into a by-then established tradition that explored the poetic possibilities of liberating graphic marks from their grammatical contexts. Using the typewriter, Olson suggested, poets could transform these marks into musical notations, indicative of breath, speed, pause, and silence:

It is the advantage of the typewriter that, due to its rigidity and its space precisions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he intends.²⁹

Schuyler taps into this approach yet, unlike Olson, he simultaneously reinforces the functional propriety of the bracket. The parentheses in this poem do not *sign* for a door, or for something else that slams, but are, themselves, *what is being slammed*. In this, Schuyler does not abstract the grammatical mark, but heightens our awareness of how it *does* function in a text, reminding us (with 'Remember' haunting the section) that when we use parentheses we open and shut (or in this case slam) them, and that, in doing so, we create enclosed, semantic spaces, parallel to the architectural spaces (furnished with slammable doors) that our bodies occupy. As if to emphasise the bracket's utility, Schuyler closes the passage with a complete, and

properly functioning, parenthesis – ‘(to be on the safe side)’ – though he leaves us to wonder which side of the bracket is a haven and which might threaten peril.

On the whole, this material play is uncharacteristic of Schuyler: his early compositions are the work of a poet finding his voice, at times betraying a tendency towards experimentation that dissipates in the diaristic forms that come to characterise his later style. Nevertheless, this excerpt is indicative of Schuyler’s poetic interest in parentheses, demonstrating his desire to both uphold grammatical convention and to break with it; or, at the very least, to push it to the limit of its proper function.

The poem ‘I sit down to type’, which appears in Schuyler’s Pulitzer Prize-winning 1980 collection, *The Morning of the Poem*, captures this doubling. In this poem, parenthetical asides pretend to conventional usage, while, in fact, functioning with strong corporeal and temporal sensibility, creating rifts in the text’s surface to derail the reader’s attention:

[...]In
fact, I am a Presbyterian:

but before I was

confirmed I’d read

Of Human Bondage

(if that phone rings

one more time I am

going to castrate it

with nail scissors)

and became an atheist:

imagine it: losing your

faith because of a book

by one of the most over-

rated writers of all time. (CP240)

As he talks his reader through his volatile relationship with religion, the speaker is momentarily sidetracked by the ringing of the telephone. It is a moment of levity, generating persona more palpably than the plain facts of Presbyterianism or Somerset Maugham, and it is perhaps a familiar moment, too, in the petty admission of low level irritation, which snaps to create a comical burst of empathy.

What has annoyed the speaker here, specifically, is *distraction*: the ringing phone has pulled his thoughts away from the poem that he composes. Registering his irritation in this intimate aside, the speaker allows the reader to share in his experience: our attention, too, is momentarily dragged from the poem. And yet, it isn’t, for this is still a line *in the poem*, even if it is contained in parentheses. What is happening, then, is something strange, not so much to the structure of the poem, but to the *time of reading*. The poem is composed in the present tense, and this is emphasised by the title, which doubles as the first line: ‘**I sit down to type** // and arise whatever for?’. This is a poem that documents its own process of composition (a bodily process, a choreography of sitting and standing), and, in so doing, must remain forever stuck in *that* present moment,

the moment in which it came into existence. This is what Paul K. Saint-Amour has identified as the literary present, which he describes as ‘the eternally present immediacy of the textual artefact’ where the ‘presence of the voice had been given a home outside the ephemerality of the body’.³⁰ True to Barthes’ thesis of *writing aloud*, Schuyler’s parenthetical digression registers the literary present twice over: first because it houses the speaker’s voice ‘outside the ephemerality of the body’, and then because it ‘play[s] with the gaps that invariably occur when one attempts to get one’s body into the body of one’s writing’, registering irritation in explicitly bodily terms: ‘I am / going to *castrate* it / with *nail* scissors [my emph.]’.

Every blissful encounter is haunted by physical threat; the vulnerable body must experience bliss with the tacit acknowledgement of the risk of violence. The same is true of Schuyler’s parenthetical coding of the corporeal, where textual bliss is mediated by an image of castration. The intrusion of nail scissors here – the alleged instrument of the comedic castration – acts as a sort of *punctum*, an ‘element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me’,³¹ as Barthes writes in *Camera Lucida*. Barthes’ notion of the *punctum* is particular to photography: something like an accidental visual detail, the part of the photograph which is not coded by the photographer, but which attaches to the viewer’s attention to the point of distraction from the primary or intended focal point. Given its accidental nature, the *punctum* does not happily migrate into the poetic, where images do not appear by chance. The nail scissors in Schuyler’s poem are, of course, deliberately placed and coded in intentional ways, and it is no accident that we have fixed our attention to them. Nonetheless, they do provide an intertextual moment with *Camera Lucida*, given that the *punctum* is so often figured through an attention to *fingernails*: ‘One of them holds a gun that rests on his thigh (I can see his nails)’; ‘many of the men photographed by Nadar have long fingernails’; ‘the grace of the *punctum*, is Tzara’s hand resting on the doorframe: a large hand whose nails are anything but clean’; ‘Warhol[...]offers his hands to read, quite openly; and the *punctum* is not the gesture but the slightly repellent substance of those spatulate nails’.³² Furthermore, the Latin term *punctum* offers itself to Barthes not only because it implies a ‘wound’ or ‘prick’, but because it ‘also refers to the notion of punctuation’.³³ Thus, when the nail scissors appear in Schuyler’s poem, in the digressional punctuation of the parenthesis, they do become a poetic *punctum*, a ‘pointed instrument’³⁴ capable of imposing ‘abrasions’ on the ‘fine surface’ of the text. They thus draw the reader’s attention away from where it *should* be focused (the confession of faithful lapse) and towards an embarrassingly intimate moment: the trimming of unkempt nails. In four, truncated lines, the speaker has inserted his corporeal presence, alerting us to his body in situ, his nails, and even his genitals, all vulnerably housed in the ‘intrusive adjunct’ of the grammatically disposable parenthesis. For Barthes, both the *punctum* and *mesis* are effects produced by the aesthetic object that lie outside of the artist’s sphere of intention. Yet, as I am emphasising through Schuyler’s work, the parenthesis opens the possibility that a writer *can* induce these moments in their reader, can draw attention to elements that would seem an uninvited distraction in another context.

In dragging the reader’s attention away from the more prosaic flow of the text, the parenthetical digression here also produces what Williams calls ‘a temporary amnesia’. The parenthesis, he explains:

obstructs reading by inducing temporary amnesia in its readers; the inconvenience divides meaningful passages in two, distancing text from context, distancing the immediate past from the present as though both writer and reader stood helpless as this diabolical force wiped their short-term memories clean.³⁵

When Schuyler returns from his castration fantasy, we have lost the thread of the poem’s primary flow: ‘and became an atheist’. The effect is one of a ‘cleaving in the mind’, to paraphrase the opening line from Emily Dickinson’s ‘The Lost Thought’, in which ‘The thought behind I strove to join / Unto the thought before’.³⁶ The disorientation in Schuyler’s poem demands that we go back to the line before the opening bracket, in order to pick up this ‘lost thought’ and remember how we arrived at atheism in the first place. But how far back do we need to go? This will depend, of course, on how much attention we were paying in the first place. If we were really listening then simply ‘*Of Human Bondage*’ should jog our short-term memories, but if our minds had been inadvertently following some other track, we may need to follow the sentence all the way back to its beginning. In this way, the parentheses structurally parallel Schuyler’s personal journey: how far back, in his own life, does the speaker need to go to reach the root of his atheism? Was it really *Of Human Bondage* that triggered this loss of faith or might it have been tripped by some earlier incident? Of course, there remains another readerly strategy, which is that we don’t go back at all because, often, we feel that reading a poem has something to do with rhythm and flow (and maybe, with the speaker, we don’t really

want to dwell on childhood and religious lapse, better to plough on in sinful determination). So we keep going, perhaps at the expense of the poem's *narrative*, but in deference to its staccato *rhythm* ('the articulation of the body, of the tongue, not that of meaning, of language'). This moment illuminates the particular character of parentheses in poetic construction. Working both with and against the metrical tide, the parenthetical *punctum* in a poem is shaped by a cross-current between metre, lineation, and punctuation, producing possibilities for free verse rhythm. Performing like a musical notation, the parenthesis is conditioned by this delicate combination, which presses on the texture and opacity of the bracket in ways that are inaccessible to prose. It is this metrical quality, working in tandem with spatial and material characteristics of the parenthesis, that engenders an embodied relationship to attention. In this way, the parenthesis is transposed to a formal device that promotes a gestural, rather than simply sense-gleaning, engagement with the poem. This is akin to what Alford calls "'poetry's double transitivity" – the fact that, in poetry, attention is first given to language, and out of this primary engagement with language a multisensory, multivalent experience of dynamic attention is formed'.³⁷

Ultimately, it matters little if we went back to the text before the parenthesis in Schuyler's poem or not: whatever pattern the reader assumes, this parenthetical moment has broken the reader's attention, forcing them into awkward confrontation with their own body, in situ in the moment of reading, as well as with the speaker's, forever 'locked in paren'. It's a slap on the wrist from the writer, who wakes up the wandering mind and, in so doing, draws out the parameters for textual tmesis: Schuyler has brought the reader close to bliss (sexual threat in attendance), not simply through distraction, but through a distraction predicated on an attention to the two bodies that give shape to the poem: as Schuyler's friend Frank O'Hara wrote, in his mock-manifesto 'Personism' (a sly satire of Olson's 'Projective Verse'), 'the poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages'.³⁸

'Dining Out with Doug and Frank', which also appears in *The Morning of the Poem*, contains Schuyler's most sustained use of parentheses: the longest bracketed remark spans thirty-seven lines. The poem is one that poses as a diary entry, the record of an evening out with friends, noting locations and people, dinner-talk and incidental observations, and wrapping up with a series of journal-esque reflections: 'I really like / dining out and last night was especially fine (CP250)'. The parts of the poem that fall outside of parentheses are ostensibly a record of *now* (or, at the very latest, a record of last night, looked at from the morning after), while the bracketed sections contain memories or abstract musings: thoughts, in other words, that run concurrently with the diaristic documentation, that 'working principle' that Douglas Crase (the 'Doug' of the poem, incidentally) identified as 'register[ing] your attention[...]in words, before it could be altered by your expectation of how things should [be]'.³⁹

In recognition of this cognitive cleaving, 'Dining Out with Doug and Frank' establishes a complex relationship with its own temporality in the opening line, through the trope of deferral:

Not quite yet. First,
around the corner for a visit
to the Bella Landauer Collection
of printed ephemera:
luscious lithos and why did
Fairy Soap vanish and
Crouch and Fitzgerald survive?
Fairy Soap was once a
household word! (CP244)

Something is being held back, and to stave off whatever it is that's 'not quite yet' Schuyler engages in an O'Harian burlesque of Pop-cultural observation: a perusal of advertising ephemera replete with quippy exclamations. On the surface, Schuyler is deferring the main event – the dinner with Doug and Frank, or so we assume – as part of a narrative strategy, which takes the reader on the speaker's physical route. But, suddenly, the poem shifts to 'Part II' and we find ourselves in the time *after* the dinner, before it has even been served: 'Now its tomorrow, / as usual (CP245)'. The passage from today to tomorrow is a usual one – usual in the sense of both normal and routine – but enjambement signals the strangeness of it being tomorrow *now*: a temporal impossibility, made possible by the poetic strategy of deferral, by the poem's ability to occupy several temporalities at once, pushing backwards and forwards between the present, the past, and some expectation of the future.

Dinner eventually arrives, and, having shifted from the 'not yet' of futurity, back to the 'so I went' of recollection, we realise that it was never the activity of 'Dining Out' that was being deferred:

so I went with Frank (the poet,
he makes his dough as a librarian,
botanical librarian at Rutgers
and as a worker he's a beaver:
up at 5:30, home after 7, but
over striped bass said he
had begun to see the unwisdom
of his ways and next week will
revert to the seven hour day
for which he's paid. Good. Time
and energy to write. Poetry
takes it out of you, or you
have to have a surge to bring
to it. Words. So useful and
pleasant) to dine at McFeely's
at West 23rd and Eleventh Avenue
by the West River, which is
the right name for the Hudson
when it bifurcates from
the East River to create
Manhattan "an isle of joy."
Take my word for it, don't

(shall I tell you about my
friend who effectively threw
himself under a train in
the Times Square station?
No. Too tender to touch. In
fact, at the moment I've blocked
out his name. No I haven't:
Peter Kemeny, gifted and tormented
fat man) listen to anyone
else. (CP246)

Removing the parentheses, the line contracts to: 'So I went with Frank to dine at McFeely's at West 23rd and Eleventh Avenue by the West River, which is the right name for the Hudson when it bifurcates from the East River to create Manhattan "an isle of joy." Take my word for it, don't listen to anyone else'. According to the style guides, *this* is the important part, the primary flow, the rest is just 'dead text[...the intrusive adjunct which readers quickly skim over'. Only, we don't skim these sections because, of course, they contain the real substance of the poem: our introduction to the titular Frank, and Schuyler's lapse into something like an *ars poetica*, 'Poetry / takes it out of you, or you / have to have a surge to bring / to it. Words. So useful and / pleasant'. We don't skim these parenthetical sections, yet Schuyler writes them in the knowledge that, conventionally, readers do. And it is in this knowledge that here, as elsewhere in the poem, Schuyler 'buries' his dead friends, engendering another corporeal engagement with this semantic space, literally transforming the parenthetical lines into what Williams calls 'dead text'.³⁹ The poem, as Howard Moss has noted, thus becomes a kind of 'burial ground':

In 'Dining Out with Doug and Frank', parentheses perform their usual grammatical function, but they also bear the burden of a unique task; they become enclosures, safety pockets of memory, each of which is a burial ground. There lies Bill Aalto, and there Peter Kemeny, and there Ally Nichols.⁴⁰

It is the contemplation of death, then, that the speaker has been staving off since the poem's opening, but which creeps into those moments of parenthetical dislocation. Moss introduces the notion of safety in relation to the brackets – a motif that we have already encountered in Schuyler's adjunct in 'Seeking', '(to be on the safe side)'. In some sense, Moss is right: these brackets do become safe spaces, within which Schuyler can face his fears: his fear of forgetting dead friends, his fear of the death of his memory, and the fear of his own death. Yet, if these death-filled spaces store the 'toxic waste' that Williams identifies, surely it is safer to remain *on the other side*, safer to 'prattle', as Barthes puts it: 'I am offered a text. This text bores me. It might be said to prattle'.⁴¹ Boredom has been subverted, our attention now heightened by those tender (but risky) digressional moments, where Olsonian grammar (excessive colons; staccato full stops) behaves like musical notations that slow down our attention, while the lines that 'prattle', minimally punctuated beyond the brackets, can be quickly skimmed.

The poem thus registers our complex relationship with mortality, by setting up these simultaneous channels of prattle and profundity. It locates our desire to defer contemplation of death, to distract from it, to block it out – 'at the moment I've blocked out his name' – in spite of the inevitability of our attention being dragged back towards it – 'No I haven't: Peter Kemeny'. The speaker's temporary amnesia is paralleled in the amnesia of the parenthesis, whose presence, again, forces us to forget the main flow: these interruptions slice into the reader's attention, troubling their relationship not only to the present – the time of reading – but to

memory itself. The poem, with its temporal rifts, reminds the reader of the ease with which one forgets – as Schuyler writes elsewhere, ‘I’ll / soon forget it: what / is there I have not forgot? / Or one day will forget (CP232)’.

In negotiating the cognitive dissonance that surrounds the poem as memento mori Schuyler draws attention to ‘the proper reader’s attitude of listening forward and thinking backward’,⁴² as Wilkinson puts it, and, by implication, the bad reader’s attitude of thinking ahead and listening backward. Thus, Schuyler’s parenthetical approach both fosters and preemptively swerves the kind of loss of attention that often automatically happens in the process of reading long-form poetry. This digressional swerve (a term with its own sexual connotations) thus slips the reader into a moment of blissful corporeal presence, where mortality meets *la petite mort*.

The cohabitation of bliss and death (or physical threat, as in the castration image) complicates the space of the parentheses in Schuyler poetry. Though these are coded as ‘moments of queer relational bliss’,⁴³ to borrow Jose Esteban Muñoz’s description of Schuyler’s poetry, the parenthesis also exposes the body’s fragility and vulnerability – as well as its own; forever redundant, disposable and dead, according to the logic of the grammarians. In the final section of this essay, I turn from these erotic rhythms of distraction to focus on boredom itself – for if, as Barthes suggests, bliss is only the journey *towards* boredom (‘Boredom[...]is bliss seen from the shores of pleasure’) then what is waiting for us when we reach the other side? The parentheses in Schuyler’s long poems amount to the Lucretian swerve⁴⁴ of epic poetry. But, like all erotic divagations, their duration must be short-lived. Thus, I suggest, in heightening a bodily interaction with the poem, the parenthesis equally attenuates verse’s corporeal bondage. Emerging from the profundity of the parenthetical musing and back onto the ‘safe side’ of poetic prattle, boredom thus offers the release that Schuyler seeks out of the bounds of ‘paren’: ‘Must bust loose’.

To be with the one I love and to think of something else: this is how I have my best ideas, how I best invent what is necessary to my work. Likewise for the text: it produces, in me, the best pleasure if it manages to make itself heard indirectly; if, reading it, I am led to look up often, to listen to something else. I am not necessarily *captivated* by the text of pleasure; it can be an act that is slight, complex, tenuous, almost scatterbrained.⁴⁵

To ‘look up’, to glance vaguely from the text and around the room: this is the emergence from the blissful intensity of the bracket back into the diaristic prattle of the main flow. Indeed, Barthes’ analogy here is one of post-coital passivity: *la petite mort* achieved, there is pleasure in the quietude of this physical presence, our thoughts once more permitted to stray as we read (or lay in our lover’s arms).

Exploring pathologies of boredom, psychoanalyst Adam Phillips writes that ‘boredom is actually a precarious process in which the child is, as it were, both waiting for something and looking for something, in which hope is being secretly negotiated; and in this sense boredom is akin to free-floating attention’.⁴⁶ In my discussion of the parentheses, I have revealed Schuyler’s subversion of the ‘intrusive adjunct’: these are not the moments that we skim but the moments at which our attention is most alert, swerving from the Epicurean tradition through punctures of the Romantic sublime. Thus, the free-floating attention of boredom is not located in the brackets of these poems but in the main flow of the text. When free-floating attention attaches itself to the poem, then various attentions can spin out in different directions: first we follow the narrative; then, as we are carried along, our attention hooks onto a specific word, to the sound or shape of that word, to some sensuous piece of linguistic material, derailing narrative attention. From there, our minds continue to wander, as if a parenthetical thought were developing at the same moment that we were reading, allowing us to forget the present even as we attend to it, and affix meaning to the past or the future. This is the view of bliss from the shores of the present, a kind of limitless deferral, in which we are both putting off the end of the poem, and, at the same time, anticipating its conclusion. Indeed, thanks to the literary present (heightened in the non-narrative tide of the poem), we might say that we are always, in some sense, waiting for every poem to end.⁴⁷ If, as Phillips writes, boredom is ‘a capacity for representation as a means of deferral’, if ‘representation – fantasy – is the medium in which [one] desires and waits’,⁴⁸ the poem must, as I have been arguing, be understood as a chain, in which waiting equals boredom and boredom equals free-floating attention. The poem – and, in particular, the long-form poem – is therefore singularly able to produce a dense network of attentions, all happening at once, ‘scatterbrained’, as Barthes writes of the pleasurable text.

Schuyler's own lived experience of linear time might be thought of as 'scatterbrained', forced into a perpetual cycle of losing and finding selfhood through phases of psychological collapse. This, in large part, is why quotidian routine is stamped onto the poet's work: on the one hand, dailiness offered something for Schuyler to hook onto in less stable periods, while the diurnal cycles of days and months and seasons also reflected the cycling of Schuyler's life – a kind of dog-paddling,⁴⁹ back and forth, between periods of mental stability and breakdown.

'The Payne Witney Poems' documents a period of residence at the titular sanatorium. Most of the poems in the series (which is, itself, parenthetically housed within the larger collection *The Morning of the Poem*) are in the form of a single stanza of truncated lines: a visual analogue for the 'Pale green walls and / a white ceiling (CP254)' that surrounded Schuyler in the hospital. In these compressed spaces Schuyler 'botanizes boredom', as Wilkinson explains, because '[s]uch trivia hold off collapse, as do slight lyrics'.⁵⁰ In one poem, after 'pick[ing] up a loaded pen and twiddl[ing] it', and, 'clip[ping] my nails' (another fingernail *punctum*), the speaker registers 'Sitting. Staring. Thinking Blankly (CP257)'. Crucially, these moments of intense boredom are never parenthesised; they exist in the prattle of the main flow. When parentheses do appear in the collection, however, as in the opening poem, 'Trip', they tend to gesture towards the potential suffocation of enclosed space:

Wigging in, wiggling out:

when I stop to think

the wires in my head

cross: kaboom. How

many trips

by ambulance (five,

count them five),

claustrated, pill addiction,

in and out of mental

hospitals,

the suicidalness (once

I almost made it)

but – I go on?

Tell you all of it?

I can't. When I think

of that, that at

only fifty-one I,

Jim the Jerk, am

still alive and breathing

deeply, that I think

is a miracle. (CP252)

Here, the parentheses house Schuyler's neurotic moments ('(five, / count them five)') and his admission of suicidal tendency ('(once / I almost made it)'). Contained within the 'protective' space of the brackets, these less sane moments become stand-ins for Schuyler himself, 'locked' within the walls of the sanatorium from which he 'must bust loose'. But, as Wilkinson points out, the more prosaic moments of botanised boredom, which rest *outside* of the parentheses, rarely signal distress:

severe mental illness is not presented as a crisis, but as a somewhat intensified mode of a constitutional lack of intensity. These poems' simultaneously desultory and precise attention, their recurrent epanorthosis and their both studied and medication-induced indolence, are consistent with the poems of an endless Maine vacation.

The 'Maine vacation' is a reference to Schuyler's extended (and by all accounts happy) eleven year tenancy at his friend Fairfield Porter's home on Great Spruce Head Island. In pointing out this consistency, Wilkinson shows that the boredom of the sanatorium is indistinguishable from what he elsewhere denotes, evocatively, 'the Bored of Biarritz'. Orgasmic or neurotic, the parentheses in Schuyler's poems hold the sublimity of intensity only for intensity's inevitably limited duration; outside, 'on the safe side', boredom is botanised and activities resume their quiet mundanity. Through formal, metrical, and spatial attention to the parentheses, Schuyler produces a textual *punctum*, assigning the reader's attention to intense corporeal presence, before releasing them back into the quotidian, where boredom is recalibrated: the long-form poem is no longer daunting in its scale, but a spacious place in which the reader can roam freely, simply enjoying '[t]he said to be boring things / dreams, weather, a bus trip'.

'Why is this poem so long?' Schuyler asks, at end of 'Dining Out', 'And full of death?CP250'. Long poems were a trademark of Schuyler's later style: we know this already from his recollection of 'winning an extra few thousand for a long poem in a non-long poem contest'. The work in question was 'The Morning of the Poem' – a sprawling, prose-y piece, spanning over sixty pages, that gave its name to the collection on which I have been focusing. Length, as Schuyler knows, is often a dirty word in lyric poetry: long lines of lyric navel-gazing, and pages and pages of them, *make readers bored* – and Schuyler knows *this* too.

Writing this in 2020, we are relentlessly being told, as Alford highlights:

to pay attention to twittering petitions and to Kickstarter campaigns, but also to the increasingly abstract flood of Syrian refugees, all while "slowing down" and baking more bread, making more things ourselves, and at the same time moving more of our lives into linked format, hypertext, bit and Bitcoin and sound bite and GIF.⁵¹

Rarely, however, are we told to read poetry, especially of the long-form variety: 'when so many cultural and material forces drive toward productivity, profile updates, and increased public views' why would we spend our time on a form that is 'fundamentally noninstrumental'?⁵²

To say that one '*spends* their time' is, of course, to parse (but never idly pass) time in the language of economics, in which our valued attention becomes part of a transaction within wider systems of productivity. If I 'spend' my time baking bread, I'll have something tangible to show for it (not to mention something with an exchange value); but if I hand over the loose change of my time to reading a poem, what do I get in return? Poetic language (as distinct from the poetic object, the published book) continues to enjoy a singular existence outside this monetised system and it is for this reason that its survival is pressing. One of the byproducts of neoliberal models of individualism has been to embed narcissistic attitudes at the core of societal values and the poem, hovering outside this structure, reminds us that attention is not something that we deign to lend or to offer up as part of a transaction; rather, the poem *calls us to attention*. The distinction here is slight but profound: poetry cares little whether we 'pay' attention or not because it is, uniquely, a form that repels, not only textually but socially, culturally, politically.⁵³ This is not to say that poetry is necessarily antisocial or apolitical – far from it. In stepping away from the status quo and into the margins, poems like Schuyler's can open a space that revels in distraction and boredom to create new forms of attention. When we heed this call, when we rhythmically and corporeally engage with the forms of attention to which our attention has been called, we find new ways of looking at, and being in, the world: and 'that I think / is a miracle'.

Notes

- ¹ J. Schuyler (ed. N. Kernan), *The Diary of James Schuyler* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1997), p. 175.
- ² J. Wilkinson, 'Jim the Jerk: Bathos and Loveliness in the Poetry of James Schuyler', in S. Crangle and P. Nicholls (eds), *On Bathos: Literature, Art, Music* (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), p. 73.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Ibid., p. 73; 71.
- ⁵ Don Adams also identifies this Epicurean lineage in: 'James Schuyler's Pastoral Poetics', *Genre*, 39.2 (1 June 2006), pp. 244–5.
- ⁶ Ibid., p. 73.
- ⁷ J. Schuyler (ed. T. Carey), *Collected Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), pp. 60–1. All subsequent quotations refer to this edition.
- ⁸ D. Crase, 'A Voice Like the Day', in *Poetry* (January 1994), p. 228.
- ⁹ L. Alford, *Forms of Poetic Attention* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), p. 9.
- ¹⁰ A. Epstein, *Attention Equals Life: The Pursuit of the Everyday in Contemporary Poetry and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 71.
- ¹¹ Robert Grant Williams has noted that 'unlike other rhetorical figures, the parenthesis is the only one that associates with its own diacritical mark'. R.G. Williams, 'Reading the Parenthesis', *SubStance*, 22.1 (1993), p. 63.
- ¹² R. Barthes (trans. R. Howard), *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage Books, 2000).
- ¹³ Alford, *Forms of Poetic Attention*, p. 15.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., p. 20.
- ¹⁵ Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, p. 25.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., p. 14.
- ¹⁷ Wilkinson, *On Bathos*, p. 86.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., p. 11.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ Williams, 'Reading the Parenthesis', p. 38.
- ²¹ For more on this see: J. Lennard, *But I Digress: The Exploitation of Parentheses in English Printed Verse* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).
- ²² W.H. Auden, 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats', in J. Fuller (ed.), *W. H. Auden (Poems Selected by John Fuller)* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005), p. 34.
- ²³ Wilkinson, *On Bathos*, pp. 81–2.
- ²⁴ Barthes, *Pleasure*, pp. 66–7.
- ²⁵ Ibid., p. 76.
- ²⁶ M. Nelson, *Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007), p. 82.

- ²⁷ Remarkably I have found no sustained scholarly attention to Schuyler's penchant for the parenthetical. It seems odd that critics of Schuyler's work should ignore his idiosyncratic use of parentheses; but, then again, this bracket-blindness does align with the long history of parentheses as 'additional, irrelevant, extraneous, subordinate, or damaging to the clarity of argument'. Lennard, *But I Digress*, p. 242.
- ²⁸ C. Olson, 'Projective Verse', in P. Hoover (ed.), *Postmodern American Poetry* (New York; London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013), p. 863.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 868.
- ³⁰ P.K. Saint-Amour, 'The Literary Present', *ELH*, 85.2 (Summer 2018), p. 369; 371.
- ³¹ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 27.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p.25; 35; 45.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, p.27.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*
- ³⁵ Williams, 'Reading Parenthesis', p. 59.
- ³⁶ E. Dickinson (ed. R. W. Franklin), *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, MA; London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 379.
- ³⁷ Alford, *Forms of Poetic Attention*, p. 14.
- ³⁸ F. O'Hara in (ed. Donald Allen) *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara* (Berkeley, CA; London: University of California Press, 1995), p. 499.
- ³⁹ This fits into a modernist tradition of placing death in parentheses. In Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, several of the main characters' deaths are stowed in bracketed asides – '(Mr. Ramsay, stumbling along a passage one dark morning, stretched his arms out, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty)' – and, in Nabokov's *Lolita*, the death of Humbert's mother is famously registered as, simply, '(picnic, lightning)'. V. Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 105; V. Nabokov, *Lolita* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 8.
- ⁴⁰ H. Moss, 'James Schuyler: Whatever Is Moving', *The American Poetry Review*, 10.3 (May/June 1981), p. 15.
- ⁴¹ Barthes, *Pleasure*, p. 4.
- ⁴² Wilkinson, *On Bathos*, p. 81.
- ⁴³ J.E. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York & London: New York University Press, 2009), p. 25.
- ⁴⁴ For more, see: S. Greenblatt, *The Swerve* (New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011).
- ⁴⁵ Barthes, *Pleasure*, pp. 24–5.
- ⁴⁶ A. Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored* (London: Faber & Faber, 1993), p. 72.
- ⁴⁷ This idea has been discussed, in relation to fiction, in Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* and Peter Brooks' *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*.
- ⁴⁸ Phillips, *On Kissing*, p. 79.
- ⁴⁹ I borrow the term 'dog-paddling' from Laurent Berlant, who uses it to describe 'precarity', a state that speaks to Schuyler's own, precarious life. L. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 199.

⁵⁰ Wilkinson, *On Bathos*, p. 79.

⁵¹ Alford, *Forms of Poetic Attention*, p. 3.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 20; 8.

⁵³ For the best account of this, see: B. Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2016).