ABSTRACT

SARAH PERKINS. James Schuyler and the Agentive Ordinary. (Under the direction of Professor Jon Thompson.)

This essay seeks to examine the difficulties underlying James Schuyler’s representation of the everyday. By acknowledging the ordinary’s uncanny—its simultaneous familiarity and unfamiliarity—Schuyler alerts his readers to its complexity beyond its associated roles and contexts. Often Schuyler discovers this uncanniness in the moment of composing his poetry when, as this paper argues, the ordinary itself breaks through his familiarity with it and reveals its own excess. This ability to surprise, interrupt, occasionally ignore, and resist Schuyler’s interpretation demarks the ordinary as an agentive entity which functions outside the will of the poet representing it. These interactions between Schuyler and a resistant ordinary become a key feature of his poetry wherein the poet attempts to allow the ordinary to speak for itself.

But Schuyler’s presentation of the ordinary as agentive, or able to “speak” and “act” for itself, is impossible because objects are obviously not able to speak. To reconcile the conceptual gap between Schuyler’s portrayal of the everyday as agentive and the inherent impossibility of the object to communicate outside the poet’s own representation of it, this paper proposes an alternate theory of agency as conceived by philosopher Adam Miller. Though agency is traditionally understood as the ability to speak and act for oneself, speech is impossible for the ordinary. To give the ordinary voice, then, Schuyler must acknowledge its irreducibility, meaning the ways the ordinary defies reduction into his interpretation; in so doing, he establishes a relationship with the ordinary based upon a negotiation of the ordinary’s resistance and usefulness to him, and acquires the right to speak in its name in a role similar to that of a writing agent. In this role, he may preserve the will of the ordinary even as he speaks for it in his poetry.