



## Styles of Disjunction

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At the beginning of the summer of 1956, John Button went to visit his fellow painter Fairfield Porter on the Maine island where the Porter family made their summer home. He got a ride with Fairfield himself, which must have promised to be a convenience, given the length of the journey from New York. It proved to be an excruciation. In a letter to his poet friend James Schuyler, Button described the long drive and the awkward rendezvous with Porter's son Jerry on the way:

F. & I drove here via Putney in 2 days without speaking. When we got to Putney, Fairfield greeted Jerry by making a couple of violent side steps, rising on his toes, thrusting out his hand and missing Jerry's, and finally kissing him and giggling. Then he said, "Let's take a walk." and we walked or rather stormed down an old dirt road 2 miles and then turned around and stormed back refusing three offers of a lift. All this was, of course, done in absolute silence. I was so tired and sick that I didn't eat dinner.

Porter had many friends in the sociable network of poets and painters that was, by the middle fifties, already beginning to be called the New York school. He was close to John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara, and closer to James Schuyler, who became his lover for a time, and the family's houseguest for more than a decade. His poet friends admired his paintings, and they encouraged his ambitions as a poet (he had a couple of poems published in *Poetry*) and as an art critic (for *ARTnews* and then the *Nation*). But he was never easy to talk to. "He would come and go," recalled the photographer Ellen Auerbach. "He hated small talk. He just got right down to talking... For years he would come by my apartment whenever he was in town, have one of those conversations, look uncomfortable, and then leave." The painter Jane Freilicher compared his comings and goings to those of the Cheshire

cat. As his friends came to recognize, this was just his style.

Just his *style*. Is that the word? Yes, certainly, if we mean something recognizable about him, a distinctive and characteristic way of behaving. That's one of the ways we use *style*: for whatever it is that picks us out from others who are doing more or less the same things; and also, of course, for what links us to others doing those things in a similar way. This sense of style sponsors both our attributions (this must be Mozart) and our taxonomies (ah ha, the school of Giotto!). But the word has other connotations that don't sit as easily here. What about style as a form of *mastery*? "So much of art is the exercising of an achieved style," wrote Schuyler to Porter in 1954; so much of life too, for many temperaments. Porter's manner hardly seems to be an achievement of this controlled and practiced kind. Furthermore, doesn't style also imply a certain *ease*? At least insofar as it spares the stylist the rigors of constant choice, constant self-reinvention? You do things according to your style, and that ease is matter both of inward fluency (I can keep going like this) and outward continuity (there he goes again). Porter's social life, by contrast, seems to have been a succession of small crises that he could solve only by interruption, by changing the topic or leaving the room. He was habitually forgiven by his friends—such allowances were a requirement for keeping his company—but it was not easy for him, and it put no one at ease.

The everyday awkwardness of Fairfield Porter may seem like a peculiar way into the question of style in such a compulsively sociable, charismatic community of makers. But all of them would likely approve of the association of style and self: as O'Hara put it, "Style at its highest ebb is personality." Moreover, Porter's social jump cuts bear a funny, formal resemblance to a hallmark of the New York poets, their sudden leaps of topic and tone, sometimes blithe and assured, sometimes manic, occasionally sad or panicky. It is that similarity, that common habit of disjunction (however different the context, and the motive, or the cause), that this essay will consider. Or, another way of putting it, some problems of *transition* in art and life—how we get from one thing to another, and what happens when we neglect or sabotage the intermediating offices. If style holds us together, what could it mean to have a style of disjunction? And—a still larger question—what does it mean to have a style, anyhow, and do you get to choose the style you have, or not?

Best to begin with a few examples, with some poems by Porter's friends. Since expectations for wholeness and continuity are strong in poems, by reputation the least accidental of our speech acts, strategies of disruption stand out there—nowhere more so than in the work of John Ashbery, who was a sometimes reluctant standard-bearer for the joys of incomprehension. Among the first to be publicly baffled was the editor and translator William Arrowsmith, whose skeptical review of Ashbery's first book, *Some Trees*, ran in the *Hudson Review* in 1956. "I have no idea most of the time what Mr. Ashbery is talking about or being," he complains. Or being: already a worry about the words is also a worry about a form of life. "What does come through," he continues, "is an impression of an impossibly fractured brittle private world, depersonalized and discontinuous, whose characteristic emotion is an effete and cerebral whimsy." There are two kinds of disjunction here: a discontinuous subject matter, and a privacy that interrupts what he calls "poetic communication." The implication is that the first causes the second, that non sequitur is the cause of alienation, poet from reader, person from person. How can I know you if I cannot follow you?

Some version of Arrowsmith's concern could be expressed about almost any poem from *Some Trees*. Take the beginning of "Two Scenes":

We see us as we truly behave.  
 From every corner comes a distinctive offering.  
 The train comes bearing joy;  
 The sparks it strikes illuminate the table.  
 Destiny guides the water-pilot, and it is destiny.  
 For long we hadn't heard so much news, so much noise.  
 The day was warm and pleasant.

You can make some sense of these lines, with a little effort. Someone is waiting—at a cafe by the water?—as distinctive offerings arrive by train and boat. There is a lot of clamor, and it is not unwelcome. But any sense of place or narrative progression is precarious, and it is not clear that the difficulties should be explained away. If you allow yourself to read instead for the negative space, it opens up everywhere.

Perhaps not between every word (as in some of the more ecstatic performances of fellow New York School poet Kenneth Koch: "Pineapple eagle forehead caress bumps!"). But the sentences are isolated almost one to a line, and they are discursively unresponsive to one another. The properties (train, table, water-pilot) can't be said to add up to much by way of *mise en scène*. The diction is mismatched, the formal parallelism of "so much... so much" and the casual banality of "warm and pleasant." Even the syntax skips, in the self-estranging solecism "We see us." If there is a speaker behind these words, one wonders, could he be looking at me? Does he care what I think? Does he know I am here? Hello? These effects intensify in Ashbery's next book, *The Tennis Court Oath*, which begins, "What you had been thinking about / the face studiously bloodied / heaven blotted region." Over the years, Ashbery criticism has developed ways of talking about such passages: what we have (for example) is the language speaking, a collision of idea and idiom in a space that is not quite inward, not quite public. If, however, we deny the poem an exemption from interpersonal encounter, we will not only assess those negative spaces as a violation of the old poetic virtue of decorum, the fitting of part to part. They will look like a lapse in something like manners, the countless, small diplomacies that hold our language together.

So Arrowsmith's worry seems to be realized: when words are dissociated from one another, when they do not speak to one another, then neither poem nor poet will be able to speak to us readers. Ashbery himself is not uninterested in the problem. Take "The Grapevine," also from *Some Trees*:

Of who we are and all they are  
 You all now know. But you know  
 After they began to find us out we grew  
 Before they died thinking us the causes

Of their acts. Now we'll not know  
 The truth of some still at the piano, though  
 They often date from us, causing  
 These changes we think we are. We don't care

Though, so tall up there  
 In young air. But things get darker as we move

To ask them: Whom must we get to know  
 To die, so you live and we know?

The title promises ad hoc, familiar communication. And indeed, the staccato, disjointed sentences of "Two Scenes" are gone: the syntax is even-tempered and full of obliging connectors, *buts* and *thoughts* and colons and so on. The whole poem sustains the rhythm of consecutive speech, of someone who attends, if anything, overmuch on the smooth transitions that "Two Scenes" neglects. But the sense keeps slipping away across the enjambments. There is another kind of disruption too, in which Ashbery specializes: those intricate fluctuations of confidence and doubt, the rallying of "We don't care," the renewed worry of "But things get darker." Later poems, like "The System," make an art of such second thoughts. Ashbery is expert at tacking back and forth in the middle range of his emotions, steering clear of ecstasy on the one side, despair on the other. "The Grapevine" is as full of strategically considerate gesture as "Two Scenes" is void of it, but the effect is the same, insofar as these transitions transit to nowhere in particular. Distraction regulates emotional life at the expense of the idea that we readers might *follow* what this poem has to say, or adjust our own moods to its demanding and unpredictable schedule.

Transitions, then—understood as the writerly equivalent of gentle manners—are neglected, or up for parody. Either way, Fairfield Porter seems not to have minded. He wrote a sharp letter to the *Hudson Review* in response to Arrowsmith, finding value in the gaps where the critic stumbled: "For me the pleasure in the first three lines [of "Two Scenes"]... is in the surprise of the sequence of words—there is, as it were, space enough between nouns, modifiers, and verbs; one does not know ahead of time what is coming; but one is convinced by the words as they appear." Something about this formulation suited him, and he returned to it in 1961 when he wrote about Ashbery, Schuyler, Koch, and Frank O'Hara side by side in an essay for the *Evergreen Review* called "Poets and Painters in Collaboration": "John Ashbery's words which are separated from each other with the stiff lucidity of words in a primer, constitute... an impersonal persona." Words that follow discursively get lost, Porter implies, in the headlong rush of sense-making. Words in a primer are singled out, and their strangeness to the reader is presumed. He thinks that the deracinating surprises of Ashbery's lines

have a similar effect, making the words "opaque" and the persona of the poem (could one say, its social presence?) impersonal.

These two early Ashbery poems afford some sense of the variety of ways that Porter's separations might be achieved: breaks in syntax, lexical miscellaneousness, ingenious defaults on the promises of narrative and argument, and above all the neglect (or pointless superfluity) of help across those interruptions. Porter found related terms of praise for another friend in the same *Evergreen Review* essay: "James Schuyler is contemplative and compressed; even when he says 'I,' the 'I' is a third person, as though he were invisible in the presence of his object." Schuyler's poetry is very different from Ashbery's but adds another way of thinking about poetic discontinuity, one important (as we will see) to Porter the painter. "He tends toward a deceptively simple Chinese visibility, like transparent windows on a complex view," says Porter, as in "The Roof Garden":

petunias  
     tubs of pink petunias  
 a gray roof  
     black when it's hot  
 light grays today  
     green tubs of punctured glow  
             before a glowing wall  
 all the walls reflecting light  
 at six on a summer evening  
     the petunias shimmer in a breeze  
 a long, long time ago  
     petunias  
 adorable, sticky flower

Here the disjunctions are not as abrupt or disorienting as they can be in Ashbery; everything is in the same place, for starters, the roof garden. But the poem is a staggered list of impressions and memories, and nothing in its rhetorical organization advertises progress or even a necessary sequence. There is very little higher-order, coordinating syntax. What accounts for that separation is a kind of recurring attention to the world, whose principle is metonymy, the side-by-sideness of things, rather than metaphor (though the poem does have a subtle erotics; even, perhaps, a buried anagram in "petunias"). The net result

is like O'Hara's breathless "I do this, I do that" poems—with the difference that the leaps are prompted not by the miscellaneous order of events, but by the miscellaneous order of noticing as it traverses a similarly miscellaneous world.

Schuyler's commitment to observation makes Ashbery look, by contrast, like a poet of the accidents of thinking. If Schuyler trusts the world to resist the intelligence, Ashbery relies upon the mind itself. O'Hara—to play this scheme out—lets the next thing spin the wheel of his attention, the next cocktail party, or headline, or friend in the street; and Koch is the great game player, setting up ad hoc, but binding, rules for a poem that cut, stochastically or permutationally, against the rules of ordinary speech. The division is crude, not least because these poets borrow so much from one another, and from other contemporaries, and the past. But it does reflect a common interest in challenging poetic unity both as an aesthetic criterion and as an ideal of utterance. Some of their various liberties could of course be seen under the opposite aspect of free association, rather than disjunction, and most modern critics are practiced in the use of interpretation to overcome apparent heterogeneity. A rush to do so would ignore what is specifically missing, that crucial carelessness with transitions, the rhetorical formulas—logical, narrative, above all mannerly—by which we ease passage, in writing and in life, across gaps and barriers of all kinds. This carelessness is something that Fairfield Porter liked about his friends' poems. As he wrote to Tom Hess, again about Ashbery, he appreciated a poetic line that "allows each word enough space to be savored properly."

So what did Fairfield Porter make of those influences? As a writer, even as a painter?—But it may be worth thinking first, for a moment, about just why we might be concerned about losing these transitions in the first place. If transitions can be so lightly foregone by writers as charismatic as these New Yorkers, and missed only by dyspeptic pedants like Arrowsmith, who needs them? At some almost unfathomably fundamental level, the answer must have something to do with controlling startle and surprise. We cultivate surprise in amusement parks and scary movies and sometimes in art. But mostly we try to avoid it, in preference for some sort of continuity of experience across a page or a day, and the milder pleasures of familiarity and elegant

variation. So we warn our interlocutors that we are coming to the serious part of the conversation, we let our laughter and our smiles fade gradually, our formulas of farewell promise future greetings, and so on. This smoothing out promotes a sense of connectedness to other people, giving us time to match as best we can our thoughts and moods to one another. We stay in sync: I follow what you are saying, follow the argument, follow the story. That interesting word *follow* may have political shadow, and the question of whether it implies consensus or obedience. But generally we think of the countless conversational helps that ease us between the potentially dissonant parts of experience as generous.

How do we react, then, when those helps are stripped out? Arrowsmith offers us one example: unhappily, with a sense of heavy ethical cost. (Perhaps it is precisely the enabling habits, the *ethoi*, of discourse that he misses.) Porter would seem to be just the opposite, grateful for the ways that his reading is disrupted and the words made to stand out. Perhaps also for vicarious release from a trying social obligation. Each detail "comes as a surprise, and the surprise of recognition that it does exist equals accuracy." But there is still another possibility, maybe a purer opposite to Arrowsmith's disapproval—a kind of insouciance, not beyond surprise but hard to shock, curious without having specific questions in advance. And then there always came a time when Happy Hooligan in his rusted green automobile came plowing down the course, just to make sure everything was OK. The sort of attitude that would breeze through the last sentence—borrowed from Ashbery's "Soonest Mended," where it arrives just about as unexpectedly—without frowning the brow, taking it instead for whatever new pleasures it offers, letting anxiety about where things are going slide, and enjoying not just the words but the very buoyancy of not worrying. What a pleasure to find you are the reader who doesn't flinch! And what a pleasure to be part of a community of readers who don't flinch, either, together.

Some version of this attitude—maybe it is a kind of naïve knowingness—is proposed by so much of what was written by the New York school poets. The pleasure you take in bounding across the leaps and leaping across the bounds is a mark of your membership. That pleasure is often audible in their correspondence too. Ashbery and Schuyler wrote to each other under constantly changing assumed



names (Marcellus Loon, Asher B. Durand, Lillian Bowes-Lyon, Lad of Sunnybrook Farm) and stuffed the envelopes with clippings from magazine ads ("James-Dean-Jacken sind salopp und chic zugleich"). An Ashbery letter from the '50s is in the spirit:

We also have a new FM radio which is intended as a Christmas present for my grandmother but I have practically worn it out listening to the local continuous classical music station. You can sometimes get quite surprising effects by turning down the tv sound during a Danny Thomas rerun and splicing in some Mozart or Bellini. Right now they are playing what I believe to be Bruckner's 8th symphony—in any case it's one of my favorite symphonies. It makes me think of something you once said about the Webern string quarter [*sic*]—"They're turning on the stars in the central power house."

Everything about such exchanges recommends against reading seriously, if *seriously* means for the plot or the point. How, then, *should* you read? Maybe *for the style*—for the way of doing things, for the charisma of the idiom and the possibility of writing back, writing that way, even living that way, with that particular literate insouciance. And how much more promising is that invitation when the idiom extends across poems, letters, cocktail parties? The account of style implicit here presumes that it is founded on imitative impulse. When you respond to the style of something, you recognize that it is part of a web of imitation (I have seen that before), or that it might be (I can imagine more like that). You may not want to imitate it yourself—plenty of styles leave us cold—but you can see that someone might and that it could afford some sense of community to its makers, its users, its owners. (Even the radically individual style impresses us as a principle of continuity across a number of works, the artist imitating, as it were, him- or herself.) Ordinary life, in its darker moments, may seem like a series of crises, as Ashbery's "The System" suddenly fears: "They were correct in assuming that the whole question of behavior in life has to be rethought each second; that not a breath can be drawn nor a footstep taken without our being forced in some way to reassess the age-old problem of what we are to do here and how did we get here." Style affords one way out of this skeptical predicament.

Even, or maybe especially, a style of blithe disjunction, which has no fear of the next step.

All of which is to say that the problem with which this essay began—the apparent paradox of a disjunctive style—looks to be not so difficult to resolve after all. The various tactics of playful discontinuity that this group of friends practiced are not only imitable, but they cultivate a shared posture of aesthetic openness, light on interpretation and its discontents, heavy (or lighter still) on pleasure and play. Contra Arrowsmith, non sequitur *can* bring us together. Then where does that leave Fairfield Porter? Who does take those disjunctions seriously, who speaks of Ashbery's surprises as productively arresting? He could play ball, when he wanted, with the spontaneous inventions of his friends, writing sestinas back and forth with Kenneth Koch. They cowrote one to Schuyler and O'Hara in which every line ends either with "Jimmy" or "Frank." ("My typewriter is stuck and needs a jimmy, / My inspiration needs a Frank," it begins). And his friends' sensibilities got into all kinds of his writing, as a letter to the Kochs from 1955 testifies:

I enclose five poems of John's that he sent me, asking me to send them on to you. I like them very much, and so these are copies I made, in order sentimentally to keep the originals. John Button just left, having made about three oils and twenty-five watercolors, many of which are very beautiful and unusual. In a great wind like the three day blows of September, and icy cold, I cooked potato soup on the woodstove that went like a breeze in the wind. Anne [Porter, his wife] says a woodstove is like a sailboat, depending on the wind. Do you notice the influence of John's poems on the last two sentences? I also tried a rusty kerosene thing on the porch...

He ended up using the image of the woodstove in an untitled poem of his own, which ends, "Like a boat under sail, / The stove burns before the wind, / And in the mail / I find only stale papers and stale bills."

That image may be Ashbery-esque, or at least, it may take license for its metaphorical far-fetchedness from Ashbery. But the tone of the letter is quite different. To be sure, it is disjunctive. The topic shifts almost sentence by sentence, from Ashbery's poems, to Button's visit,

the wind and the potato soup, the image of the woodstove, back to Ashbery, then finally another stove, the rusty kerosene one on the porch. But this is not the playfully evasive wit that Ashbery models. The leaps are not a dare to play along, and if the affect is not exactly flat—the pleasure in the beauty of Button's paintings, the poems, and Anne's metaphor is felt—still it has no convenient arc, nor are its shifts anything like the subtle, emotionally strategic reversals of "The Grapevine." The strong interruptions of his critical prose can be similar, as in this passage from a review of an exhibition by Giorgio Morandi:

More than any contemporary Italian painter's, his work has a quiet commanding authority. It is as though Cézanne had mellowed into a simplified serenity. There are two themes: in one, soft grayish bottles and leathery boxes cluster in the center of the tiny canvas; in the other, boxy Italian houses stand in olive groves, by the sea, under cliffs. No human face appears. Cézanne looked for the "motif" as a vehicle to express his "little sensation." Morandi's motif is not elaborated, but presented in abstract nakedness. It expresses idea rather than sensation. The color is subdued and clear.

This paragraph is much more composed than the paragraph from the letter, but they share some features. Modest variations in sentence structure cannot disguise a preference for sturdy subject-verb-object word order, and the verb is as likely as not to be "is." Argumentative connections are implicit: another stylist might have written, "It expresses idea rather than sensation, and the color is accordingly subdued and clear"; not Porter. There is some of Schuyler's commitment to detail in the descriptions, the tubs of green petunias, the black roof, one after another. But Porter is also a gifted aphorist, and aphorisms are built to stand alone.

One more excerpt, this time not praise but blame, from a 1959 review of Allan Kaprow's performance art "happenings":

The action is monolithic, the materials of the setting flimsy, and the voices have an unrelieved seriousness. Kaprow's method is almost the opposite of most artists, literary or visual, who make something out of clichés or ordinary things or rubbish: he uses art, and he makes clichés. Kaprow debases what he quotes and

what he refers to... The "Eighteen Happenings" devalue all art by a meaningless and deliberate surgery. And the final totality is without character, it never takes off from the sidewalk.

Avant-garde art has the merit of surprise. Kaprow's avant-garde "event" constantly disappoints one's expectation of surprise.

Parataxis is the order of the day, from the opening tricolon (action, materials, voices) to the damningly offhanded comma splice at the end of the first paragraph. The last two sentences seem particularly calculated in their disregard for elegant variation, ending as they do with the same word. (Polemically unsurprising.) But the brusque advance from point to point is a strong persuader of serious thinking. If Porter accepts the sponsorship of his New York school friends in making a style that is full of rift and fissure, he solicits a very different response from the reader, who is advised not to dance across, but to judge each step.

These excerpts suggest that Porter was as interested in the space between sentences as in the space between words: in keeping them open, not cluttering them with gestures, gestures which perhaps he did not quite know how to make. So it is not surprising that he speaks in similar terms about his artistic medium, color: "what I like in painting and in writing is sensitiveness for the innate value of colors (concrete colors, the ones that are actually used in a painting) and for the innate value of words, of course the concrete ones that are used," he wrote to the critic Tom Hess, an editor at *ARTnews*. He pursues the point in a 1960 review of the paintings of Alex Katz: "His vocabulary of colors is one in which between one color and another there is just enough space, or interval, because they are accurately chosen. This is like the space in an accurate sentence between nouns and verbs, between words and their modifiers." When you look at his paintings, it is clear how this disposition leaves its mark. *Jimmy and John*, a portrait made of Ashbery and Schuyler in the late 1950s, presents its figures with a characteristic lack of modeling. The colors are distinct, not shaded or blended—each in its own space, as it were, rather than fully reconciled by gradations, by transitions, to a common situation. If one could speak of the social space of a picture plane, with its elements more or less neighborly, these colors keep an unusual share of independence from one another.



*Fairfield Porter's painting, Jimmy and John. Courtesy of Barbara and Michael Kratchman.*

Porter sometimes speaks of this use of color as abstraction: "the detail may be only an area of color, in short, abstract." Such abstraction suits his abstracted subjects, who neither face each other, nor even appear to know that the other is there. This is again typical of Porter's paintings. "... The apparent lack of interrelation among the figures gives the whole a somewhat creepy air," Ashbery would write of another painting, twenty-five years later. The space between the two friends in the picture is not easily crossed. We might recall that missed handshake that John Button described between Porter and his son Jerry.

But that miss, we also recall, was overcome with an awkward giggle and a kiss. Porter had a big family, five children with his wife, Anne, and through the later fifties and sixties all of his poet friends were frequent houseguests in Maine or at the family house in Southampton. The children formed strong attachments to O'Hara and Schuyler in particular. Only one was never part of the mix: the firstborn, John, who had been profoundly withdrawn from his earliest years, asocial, sometimes aggressive. At the time, the diagnosis was a chronic schizophrenic condition; it is safe to say that the present-day label would be autism. While we are affixing labels, perhaps we could hypothesize that Porter presented some of the same symptoms himself, the much milder version sometimes now described as Asperger syndrome. At any rate, he found difficulty in the mutual adjustments of mood, expression, intensity, and initiative that are the texture of social life—borrowing for psychological purposes a term from rhetoric, a difficulty of decorum. His sudden entrances, exits, and shifts of topics were challenging to everyone. We are back to Arrowsmith's problem, how discontinuities in expression become discontinuities between people.

For in life, as in art, things fall into parts: days, events, actions, thoughts; colors, sentences, words. So much of our sociability and our artistic technique is constituted of strategies for connecting things and for moving along without too much bump or jostle. (Even if we sometimes put them, perversely, to opposite purposes.) Given the homology, something is gained by considering all sorts of artistic transitions—narrative, logical, rhetorical—under the aspect of manners. For these forms, Fairfield Porter had no gift. That deficit made him an idiosyncratic and interesting reader of his friends' work, inclined

not to follow along, but to honor the interruptions and pay attention to the fragments as fragments. As a maker himself, a prose writer and a painter, he found a way of fashioning, out of that difficulty, a style. We do not read Porter's criticism (or his letters) for their infectious insouciance, or for his invitation to join in a community of shared sensibility; we read him for sharp expression and effort of thought. The realism of his work—and he has been fairly called a realist—consists primarily in his acknowledgment that the fit between things is never seamless. In this he can also function as a kind of conscience of his circle, or at least a voice of implicit caution. The dream of solidarity that is one effect of the poets' delight in disjunction—the freedom of reading, and writing, headlong—was an ideal that no one could ever altogether live up to, so long as rivalry and resentment were part of the texture of friendship, as they always are. Not that Ashbery, Schuyler, and their circle never show this shadow or this strain. But Porter knows it in his very style.

What can we learn from all this about style itself? At a fundamental level, the promise of style is under threat from disjunction: to have a style, after all, is to be recognizable across occasions, be they works of art or cocktail parties, to others and to yourself; and as a maker, to proceed to whatever is next without the need of radical self-reinvention. Mastery, and ease. Randomness or mere fragment will not do the trick. But if you violate the conventions of association in what comes to seem a familiar way, you're playing the game; so much more so if you do so in cahoots with others and promise a way of reading that will elide whatever difficulties you pose. (The difficulties are for the sake of elision, not solution.) This is the sociable paradox of the New York style, and if its legacy of imitators is any gauge, it has worked handsomely. The word *style* collaborates. Because we use it to refer both to the distinctiveness of individuals and the shared characteristics of groups, such communities can carry on their business without trying to parse the impossible problem of originality and imitation—or at least, the word's doubleness betrays how much we resist such parsing. (Otherwise, why not have two different words?) Something similar might be said to happen when we use the word both to describe what about our style is studied, or in Schuyler's word, "achieved," and what is instinct in us, no more subject to our will than our fingerprints. Here again the word shelters us from making a distinction we could

never make anyhow. The awkwardnesses of Porter's art, the unbridged spaces between its elements, are a symptom. But a symptom that has been rationalized, cultivated, sublimated as a style. Allowing him, and us, not quite to tell the difference—to write, paint, and live in an ambiguous accommodation between the given and the made—is the work we have collectively fashioned the word *style* to do.

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