



In Memory of Their Feelings

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IN MEMORY OF THEIR FEELINGS

Susan Sontag

1. DANCERS ON A PLANE

I don't see them.

There. The dancers are there, invisible—an analogue to racing thoughts.

Framed by the utensils of eating.

A meal to be eaten?

An invisible meal.

Two meals: one light, one dark. One sprightly, one stained with sexual dread.

Dancers on a plate?

No. They need more space than that.

2. EATING AND DANCING

Recombinant arts.

A domain of pleasure. A domain of courtesy.

Rule-bound. Who sets the rules? Behavior with standards.

An idea of order. First one thing, then another. Then one is full. Then it is finished—the belly sated, the limbs heavy. After a decent interval: then again. All over again. All over, again.

They remind us we live in the body-house.

Living “in” the body. But where else could we live?

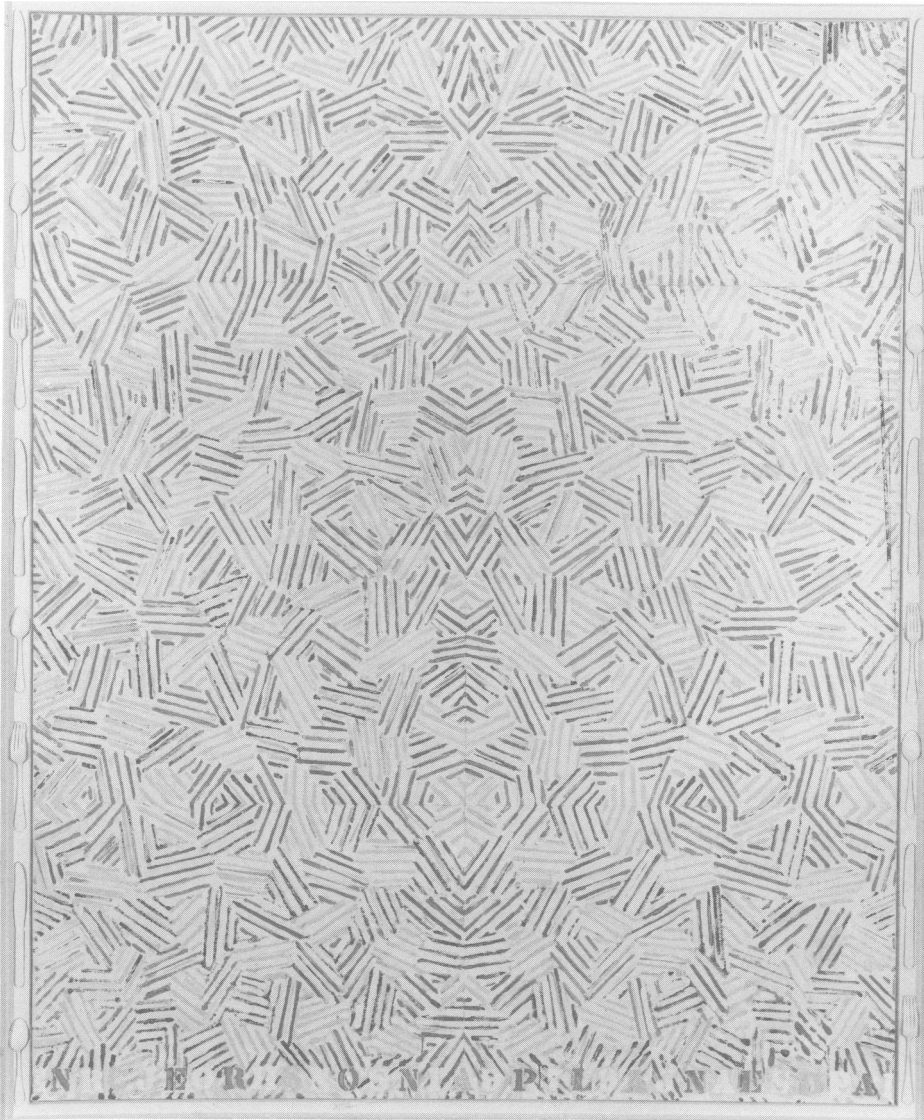
Dancing as the realm of freedom, that's less than half the story.

Eating as the realm of necessity. Not necessarily. What about eating idyllically (as in Paris)?

Everyone eats, everyone can dance. Not every one dances (alas).

I watch dance, with pleasure. I don't watch eating. If I watch someone eating when hungry, I wish it were I eating. A meal watched by a hungry person is always savory. If I watch someone eating when full, I may turn away.

You can dance for me. (You do the dancing in my place, I'll just watch.) You can't eat for me. Not much pleasure there....



Dancers on a Plane, 1979. Oil on canvas with objects. 77-7/8" x 64". © Jasper Johns/VAGA, New York 1993. Collection of the artist.

You can dance to please: Salome. You can eat to please, too: as a child might eat to please its mother or a nurse. (As Suzanne Farrell is said to have said that she danced for God and for Mr. Balanchine.) But except to doting parents eating is a poor spectator sport. Mildly disgusting unless you're doing it as well.

To eat is to put metal in one's mouth. Delicately. It's not supposed to hurt.

The eater fills the hole.

A dancer eats space.

Space eats time.

Sounds eat silence.

3. THE KNIFE

It cuts. Don't be afraid. This is not a weapon. It's just a tool to help you eat. See. Passing it to you—you asked for it—I proffer it by the handle, keeping the blade pointed at myself. The blade is pointing at me.

One should not move the point of the knife toward someone as in an attack.

You can lay it down two ways. Blade in, blade out.

Don't be timorous. It isn't sharp. It's just a plain, ordinary...knife. Straight. Two-sided.

In the fairy tale, a mermaid who has fallen in love with a prince begs to be allowed to assume human form so she can leave the water and make her way to the court. Yes. She will have legs, she will walk. But with each step she takes it will feel as if she were walking on knives.

You can dance with a knife. (Between the teeth? Between the shoulder blades?) Hard to imagine dancing with a fork. Or with a spoon.

The knife seems like the master utensil, the one from which all others depend. (Swiss Army Knife.) You could spear food with your knife, eliminating the fork. (As everyone knows, you *can* eat the peas with your knife. You're just not supposed to.) As for the spoon—well, we could do without that, too. Just lift up the bowl dish cup, and drink it.

Only the knife is really necessary. And it is the knife, more than any other eating utensil, whose use is most restricted. The evolution of table manners is mainly about what to do with knives. Use the knife more and more unobtrusively, elegantly. With your fingerends. Don't grasp it against your palm, like a stick.

“There is a tendency that slowly permeates civilized society, from the top to the bottom, to restrict the use of the knife (within the framework of existing eating techniques) and wherever possible not to use the instrument at all” (Norbert Elias). For instance, to eliminate or at least limit the contact of the knife with round or egg-shaped objects. Not all restrictions are successful. The prohibition on eating fish with a knife, once fairly strict, was circumvented by the introduction of a special fish knife.

That oxymoron: the butter knife.

To eat is to put metal in one's mouth. But not knives. The mere sight of someone putting her knife in her mouth produces an uneasy feeling.

4. THE SPOON

The spoon seems to belong in the mouth.

The spoon is not quite grown-up in the way the knife and fork are. It doesn't menace. It isn't a tamed weapon.

The spoon is the utensil of childhood, the friendliest utensil. The spoon is a child—or child-like—forever. Yum yum. Scoop me up, pour me in. Like a cradle, a shovel, a hand cupped. Doesn't cut or pierce or impale. It accepts. Round, curved. Can't stick you. Don't trust your child with a knife or a fork, but how can a spoon harm? The spoon is itself a child.

The world is full of pleasures. One has only to be where one is. Here. Now.

Give me my spoon, my big spoon, and I'll eat the world. A metal spoon is an afterthought. While a wooden knife is less of a knife, a wooden spoon isn't less of a spoon. It's just fine.

"Spooning": embracing, kissing, petting. Lovers in bed fit together, in sleep, like spoons.

To bring about a music "that will be part of the noises of the environment, will take them into consideration. I think of it as melodious, softening the noises of the knives and forks, not dominating them, not imposing itself," wrote John Cage, quoting Erik Satie.

What happened to the spoons? Don't spoons make noises, too?
Softer noises.

And music. Music is made with two spoons (not with two forks, two knives).

Spoon music.

5. THE FORK

There's a hesitation about the fork. You hold down the food with the fork in your left hand while you cut it with the knife held in your right. Then—if you're not only right handed but also American—you put down the knife, then transfer the fork to your right hand and send the speared morsel up to your mouth.

Grown-ups throw knives. Children throw spoons. Nobody (I think) would throw a fork. It may be four-thirds of a toy trident, but it can't be thrown as one. It wouldn't arrive, spear-like, tines first.

The weight is in the handle.

The fork as emblem—emblem of the real. Jasper Johns, explaining something about "my general development so far," said: "That is to say, I

find it more interesting to use a real fork as a painting than it is to use painting as a real fork.”

What would a fork that wasn't real look like?

The fork is the youngest of the three great eating utensils. The Last Supper was set with knives and spoons only. No forks either at the wedding feast in Cana.

It made its appearance when the knife and spoon were well established. Invented in Italy, thought a foppish pretension when it arrived in England in the early seventeenth century: a set of gold “Italian forkes” presented to Elizabeth I by the Venetian ambassador were put on display at Westminster; she never used them.

The principle of fastidiousness. Embodied in objects that now could hardly seem more everyday, plain....

The introduction of that vital implement, the fork (for a long time despised as effete), enabled people to distance themselves from the eating process by avoiding manual contact with the food.

New forms of distance, new forms of delicacy.

New rules of finicky behavior at table proliferated. People were expected to manipulate an increasingly complicated battery of utensils.

It seemed hard, setting up and keeping this distance.

Now we take forks for granted.

6. KNIFE, SPOON, FORK

A secular trinity—knife, spoon, fork.

No hierarchy. The list can only be varied, systematically. As in knife, fork, spoon. As in fork, knife, spoon. As in fork, spoon, knife. As in spoon, fork, knife. As in spoon, knife, fork.

Seemingly immutable (after all that history).

They lie there, flat. On a plain (plane) surface. Perpendicular to the edge of the table.

A trialogue.

A stately relationship. Not all on the same side of the plate. Three divides into two and one. Fork on the left side. Knife and spoon on the right.

The knife is scary by itself. But as part of a setting, something else. Lying beside the spoon, the knife becomes quite...domestic. Knife and spoon: the odd couple. They don't go together, you don't use them together. But they *are* together.

The fork is solitary. Always is. Even in an ampler setting, all you could have next to it is another (smaller, larger) fork.

That's how they're arranged at the start of the meal, one step down from the plate. Escorting the plate on either side.

No excuse now to eat with your hands. Civil eating (versus gluttony).

After finishing eating you arrange them neatly on the plate.

Not alphabetically. Not in order of importance, if there were one.
A trinity but quite contingent.
They seem to complement each other.
We have learned to use all three. But they can be taken separately, of course.

7. DANCERS ON A PLAIN

On a plane? An airplane?
On a plain. As open (borderless) as feasible.
Low, level. Don't try for any of those old heights. Depths.
What is essential about a surface that makes it different from another surface? How do we experience smoothness in a surface, a movement, a sound, an experience?
Smoothness?
Yes. Something continues, plausibly.
Pleasurably. With parts.
What does it mean to say of something that it is one part of something (a surface, a movement, a sound, an experience)?
The old heights. Mirroring. Look down. These are my genitals.
Be more modest. (Elegant.)
Sometimes light, sometimes heavy—it's all right to be heavy sometimes.
Makes it new. Yes. And make it plain.

8. SYMMETRIES

Dancers on a plane. No center. Always off-side. Any place is the center.
We seem symmetrical. Two eyes, two ears, two arms, two legs; two ovaries—or two hairy testicles. But we're not. Something is always dominating.
A mirror image: a fantasy of symmetry. The right the reverse of the left, or vice versa.
We *seem* symmetrical. But we are not.
They cross-refer (knife, spoon, fork). As in the brain. Right-handedness means the left side of the brain is dominant. Left-handedness means the brain's right side dominates.
How to find out which side of your brain is dominant. Close your eyes, think of a question, then slowly think of an answer to the question. If while you're doing this you turn your head slightly to the right, that means the left side dominates.
And vice versa.
The question-master.
An art that asks questions.

How do we understand how one part of a surface, a movement, a sound, an experience relates to another? Note: you have a choice of questions. But if *that's* the question you choose to ask, you can be sure the answer will include a bias toward asymmetry.

"The non-relationship of the movement," Cunningham has declared, "is extended into a relationship with music. It is essentially a non-relationship."

The dancer must be light. Food makes you heavy.

You eat with your hands, dance on your legs. Eating can be right-handed or left-handed. Is dancing left-legged or right-legged?

Any place is the center.

A real symmetry: chopsticks.

9. SILENCES

Lots of prattle. That, too, is a kind of silence. (Since there is no silence.) The deaf hear their deafness. The blind see their blindness.

Controlling through silence. Whoever speaks less is the stronger.

Is there a warm silence?

The noise of ideas.

Take it to language.

No, take it to babble. Cut up the words in strips, like raw vegetables. Make meals out of words. A culinary relation to words....

Suppose Knife, Spoon, and Fork are three people. And they get together on a plane (plain). What would they have to say to each other?

I know. "Who brought the marshmallows?"

Mushrooms, surely you mean mushrooms.

As I said, marshmallows.

That's not what I had in mind. Then what?

Then they get very particular about how the marshmallows are to be cooked.

All three of them know a lot about food. (About eating. Preceded by gathering, preparing, cooking....)

But these are just marshmallows. American junk.

You can be fastidious about anything. And marshmallows can be botched, too; can disappoint. It's a question of (yes, once again) the relation of inside to outside. The inside has to be cooked very well, while not letting the outside catch fire. Ideally the outside will get crusty but not burnt, while the inside melts. Then, right before it falls off the stick, you pluck it off with your fingers and pop it whole into your mouth.

Stick? What happened to the fork? Don't you toast marshmallows with a fork?

All right, the fork. But this is better as a gooey experience than as a refined one.

"Everywhere and at all times," Lévi-Strauss has observed, "the

European code of politeness rules out the possibility of eating noisily.”
And you don’t always have to be polite.

10. IN MEMORY OF THEIR FEELING

In the first—buoyant, *allegro vivace*—painting, this is real flatware that has been painted white. In the second, heavy painting, the artist has cast the utensils in bronze.

Repeating as a means of varying. Accepting as a way of discriminating. Indifference as a form of emotional vitality.

Use me as you will.

Savoring non-relatedness. Put the emphasis on savoring. “I am more interested in the *facts* of moving rather than in my feelings about them” (Merce Cunningham).

Would you like to play chess? Chess seriously.

We were younger then. Who would have thought then—when we were younger; then—that it would be like this?

We meet. This could be at a dinner party (forks, knives, spoons, etc.).

We say things like, How lovely to see you. I’ve been busy. I think so. I don’t know. That must have been very interesting. (Everything is interesting. But some things are more interesting than others.) Probably not. I’ve heard. In Frankfurt, in Illinois, in London. Next year. What a pity. He’s gone away. He’ll be back soon. They’re organizing something. You’ll get an invitation.

We smile. We nod. We are indefatigable. I think I’m free next week. We say we wish we saw more of each other.

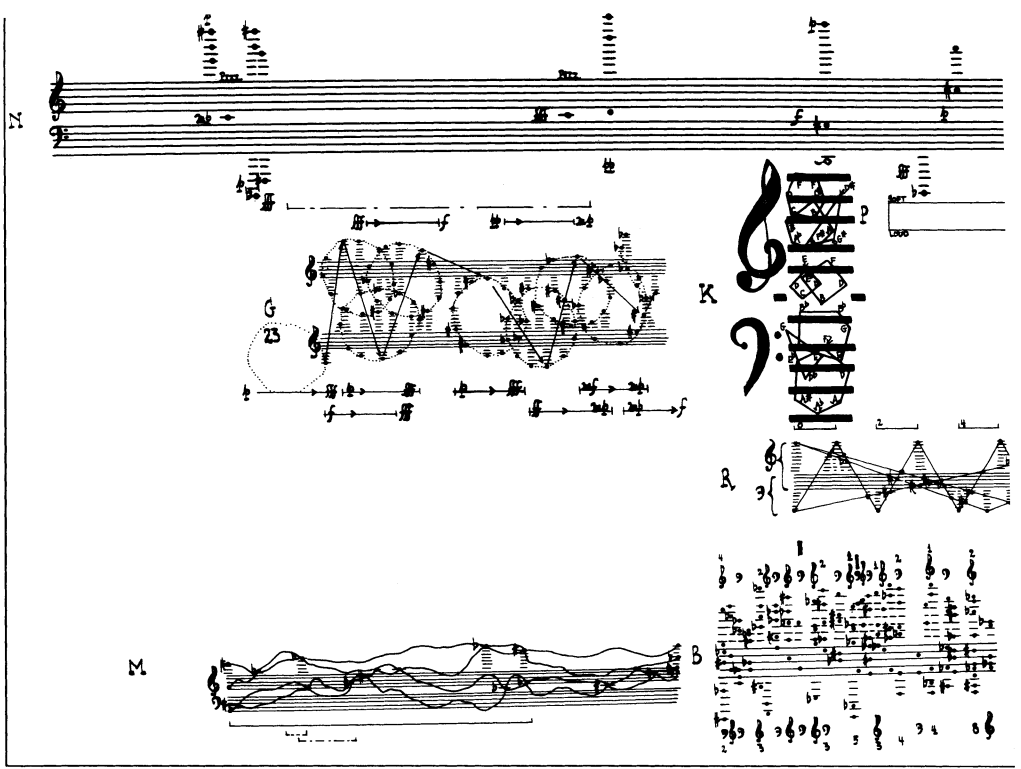
We eat, we savor.

Meanwhile, each harbors a secret idea of ascending, of descending. We go on. The plane’s edge beckons.

“In Memory of Their Feelings” appeared originally in the exhibition catalogue of *Dancers on a Plane: Cage, Cunningham, Johns* at the Anthony d’Offay Gallery, London, 1989.

SUSAN SONTAG directed *Waiting for Godot* in Sarajevo last summer. Her play *Alice in Bed* was staged recently by Robert Wilson at the Schaubühne, Berlin. *The Volcano Lover* is her most recent novel.

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ABOVE: John Cage, *Solo for Piano, Concert for Piano and Orchestra*. Photo: Courtesy Northwestern University Music Library, John Cage (Notations) Collection.

BELOW: *Walkaround Time*. Merce Cunningham and Dance Company. Decor: After Marcel Duchamp's *The Large Glass* in the Philadelphia Museum, supervised by Jasper Johns. Photo: James Klosty.

