

More Light: On Morton Feldman

by Laurent Feneyrou

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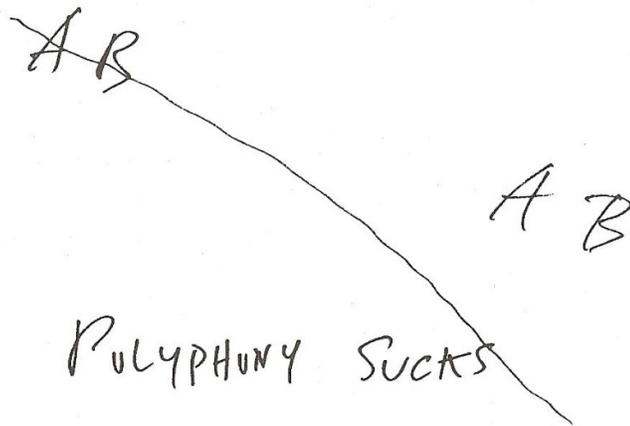
“One of my favorite stories is the young man that goes to the Zen master, and I think he has to go for seven years. And the Zen master gives him a broom. And for seven years he is told that he has to sweep the house. So he is sweeping the house and he is over there and the Zen master is here with a sword. This guy is sweeping with a broom and the Zen master screams, yells and comes behind here, and the young man lifts the broom. After a while the young man listens and he hears him over there, and so he turns the other way and he waits, or he gets out of the way, he stands over there. And the game of listening, the perception of listening comes in, you see. So all the nuances of listening, getting ready and naturally going in the right direction in terms of the body... At the time when seven years are over, he graduates and they give him a sword and take away the broom.” Morton Feldman¹

In the Western musical tradition, we transpose what we hear into an image or a story which explains it by what it is not, reducing it to metaphors or inscribing it, by analysis, in structures that hinder its perception. In short, we translate sound events into visual or verbal contents, and look there for confirmation of any other category than the acoustical. *“That was my idea about sound. It still is, that they should breathe... not to be used for the vested interest of an idea,”*² Feldman teaches us. What seems to belong *a priori* to music – listening – has to be rediscovered. And only the ear, purifying, frees us from the bonds of other representations. By purifying, listening also hears the listening itself, follows the music of its movement, without expectation, intention, or impatience, but according to its own internal rhythm. To penetrate there, slowly, is to operate in the way philosophers call *epochè* – suspending judgement. The work, then, is born of a concentration on the sound itself, forcing it to slow down, so that time, by its very stretching, becomes more audible. Feldman has created a body of work with scarcely any references external to itself. *“I interpret this ‘metaphysical place,’ this land where Feldman’s pieces live, as the area where spiritual growth in the work can occur,”*³ wrote his friend, the poet Frank O’Hara, author of many impertinent and casual texts, and little inclined to solemnity. Feldman invented a technique of playing where the pianist delivers a hushed sound by first silently depressing the keys to the point of resistance. Every note played in this way acquires a singularly long resonance and a musical presence which departs from the dialectical, theoretical or structural requirements of the piece. Dynamics at the edge of audibility contribute to the effect, creating an element of tension for the player and the listener, who are invited in this way to sharpen their attention. The writing focuses on the birth of the sound, the mode of attack, often sourceless, the softness of the sound, and its mode of decay. In this respect, Feldman recognized that to write in ink, which enabled him to judge how concentrated he was, was even more important than the idea, or the organization of the notes.

What is it then to be a composer? “*You know a termite? The one that eats wood. So it’s very, very interesting. Who chews the wood? The termite has no apparatus himself to chew the wood. But inside it there are millions of these microbes and they’re chewing the wood. There’s some analogy about composition, about something else doing the work.*”⁴

Feldman takes part, with John Cage, in a modern critique of creative subjectivity, a radical crisis of the subject as it had previously been understood, as a solipsistic and absolutely free consciousness. The subject no longer animates from the outside the inertia of rules and linguistic codes, nor does it deposit in the discourse the trace of its freedom, but rather, it touches a piano, and listens. Feldman calls into question the notion of the sovereign subject: “*For art to succeed, the creator must fail.*”⁵

Sketch by Feldman



Whilst, during the 1950s, Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen inherited from Anton Webern material that took for them, religiously, the place of truth in the Thomist sense, Feldman considered himself, with Cage, as one of Webern’s “illegitimate sons.” He took from Webern, rather than the laws of serialism, the spirit of the music: the role of silence; the lack of distinction between horizontal and vertical, abandoning what is traditionally called harmony and counterpoint; the multiplication of breaks and mirrored passages; the irregular displacement of the rhythm and the distribution of sounds in the bar; the motif or the *pattern*... Feldman and Cage met in New York during the winter of 1949-1950 at a performance of Webern’s *Symphony op. 21* conducted by Dimitri Mitropoulos. And Feldman liked to quote Kierkegaard saying that speculative, Hegelian philosophy cannot equal in complexity the feelings of a deceived woman, whose love cannot conceive that she has been betrayed. In art, the same illusion arises from system and construction, whether serial or not; and the artist, thinking most often that the success of the work results from its technical perfection, ends up believing, against all the evidence, this necessary lie. The concept, logic, rules of generation and construction, the authoritarian and intimidating concern with work and the justification of the gesture, are not sufficient to establish the validity of an assertion.

In music, the dialectic culminates in the principles of variation, which, in the 1950s, should be dissociated from their moral foundation, that of nineteenth-century German music from Beethoven to Brahms – a foundation whose values Nazism had ruined. If Beethoven is the Hegelian musician of the dialectic, varying theme, rhythm, position of accents, orchestration, even the development of his symphonies, at the same time simpler in their materials and more complex in their structures, Feldman takes another path; not variation, but *variants*. What does this mean? No longer a latent unity, but changes and repetitions, or rather, reiterations with subtle displacements – a resemblance to repetition, a surface that sounds “like a repetition.” The difference between variants is somewhat similar to the translation that Samuel Beckett – to whom Feldman devoted three essential works (*Neither, Words and Music*, and *For Samuel Beckett*) – practised all his life on works by himself and others. In this respect, consider this aphorism by the 18th century moralist, Sébastien Chamfort: “*Que le cœur de l’homme est creux et plein d’ordure,*” and the English translation by Beckett: “How hollow heart and full of filth thou art.” Translations and musical variants are closely related here. Feldman says the same thing but puts it differently: Beckett’s writing is determined by tiny displacements. According to Feldman, the poet writes a sentence in English, translates it into French, then retranslates it into English that conveys the same thought, thus distancing, by a double translation, the second English sentence from the first: “*Every line is really the same thought said in another way. And yet the continuity acts as if something else is happening. Nothing else is happening.*”⁶ The difference is so subtle that, the same motif coming back, he simply adds a note, or takes two out. Here without doubt Feldman’s Jewishness asserts itself: the angel is an attentive and patient exegete of differences. The concentration operates only on the choice of the pattern to be repeated and on the nature of its variant. The genius of the musician will hold to its sense of timing, determining the exact moment of the introduction of an element, and its duration, so that music – the art of time – gives to time its essence by imprinting on it a *tempo*.

This thought belongs to a poetics of *and*, where the last term does not necessarily preserve the one before it, and echoes the construction of Hebrew sentences, with their short propositions coordinated by the conjunction *we* [and], with different values depending on the context. In short, a paratactic thought: a mode of arrangement (*taxis*) where the elements of a sentence are not put together (*sun*) as the logic of the syntax demands, but juxtaposed, put next to one another (*para*) according to a principle of apposition, without the link word indicating the nature of the relationship between the propositions. Moreover, in his writings, Feldman constantly uses, at the beginning of sentences, this *and* that divides and unites the discourse, whose construction proceeds from the alliance, assuming or transfiguring the accidents of fragmentation. Like Adorno, Feldman questioned the status of works of art after Auschwitz: “*I want to be the first great composer that is Jewish,*”⁷ he said – a Jewishness he claimed to have rediscovered in Berlin. Following the tradition of Jewish exegesis, favouring the unfinished, the partial, the undecided, the profuse, the gathered together, openness as a source of perpetual creativity, Feldman rediscovers the broken tablets of Moses or the flesh of Akiba ben Joseph. To this sage from the time of the Mishnah, master and spiritual hero, known as one of the ten martyrs, Feldman dedicated a work in 1963. Akiba had inaugurated new methods of commentary, relying on orthographic variants of

the Pentateuch and establishing additional rules from prefixes, suffixes, and other words without literal meaning. No doubt it would be appropriate to measure Feldman's work by the yardstick of such hermeneutics, which go back to Hillel the Elder, and which include reasoning by analogy, applying the rule of a verse to a broader context, applying a rule from two verses considered together, deduction according to context and, more importantly, deduction of a rule on the basis of a similarity between different passages.

Resumed, repeated, rearranged, and thus gradually revealed, the patterns play with our forgetful memory. Invoking what has already appeared, rather than the self-willed, Beethovenian transformation of what has been invented, the form yields to a scale so vast as to deny perception. To describe or analyze a work by reducing its sections to a classical archetype or letters (A, B, C...) from which, through their succession or series, a form would be born, it is to miss this forgetful memory. With Feldman, the experience of form whilst listening prevails over its schematization, and the meshes of time are undone, creating the idea of the work as a time canvas – less, in the end, sound than duration stretching it. “Is *The Odyssey* too long?” he replied to those who heard nothing but boredom, searching, like Beckett with Proust, for an epiphany tying the present and the past into a unity more essential than either of them taken in isolation.

In a world of nuances and gradual chromaticism, development is replaced by structurally non-functional modulation, which excludes all causality and opens another way. Such modulation appears, emerges, happens, like a change of light. Feldman modulates, not in the sense of classical or romantic tonality, but in the sense of light. The same element is illuminated from a different angle, without one ever knowing which is the shadow of the other. The theme of light is also the subject of Feldman's only opera, or “anti-opera”, *Neither*, on a poem by Beckett: a dark, gloomy region, a refuge from danger (“to put oneself in the shade,” says colloquial language), a black figure thrown out on the surface by a body intercepting the rays of a light source, on the ground and even on the back of the hand, a ghost following one (shadow as guardian angel or double), a shaded section of a painting, attenuation or residue, a source of misfortune – don't we say “menacing shadows”? The shadow reflects a hovering between the self and the unself, there where light has let itself to be stopped by the singing body, where nothing moves except the ephemeral folds of the fabric. In using a deserted landscape, Feldman, opposing the metaphor of shadow, turns from its figurative sense to a literal meaning. He achieves sonorous silences, as well as silent and transparent sounds, exalting in the profound continuity between the two. His music is always at the limit, torn between saying something and remaining silent, without remaining quite silent and saying almost nothing. *Neither nor*, neither the one nor the other. Between the voice and silence, movement and immobility, or rather movement as retaining in itself a certain idea of immobility, and conversely, as giving itself the same narrow space as between shadow and light. Thus this painful lament in memory of Frank O'Hara becomes clear: “*Secreted in O'Hara's thought is the possibility that we create only as dead men. Who but the dead know what it is to be alive? Death seems the only metaphor distant enough to truly measure our existence. Frank understood this. That is why these poems, so colloquial, so conversational, nevertheless seem to be reaching us from some other, infinitely distant place.*”⁸ On the same poem by O'hara, *Wind*, shot through with

snow, wind and bears, Feldman composed *The O'Hara Songs* in 1962, and nearly twenty years later, *Three Voices*.

Musician of light more than colour, Feldman was a friend of many painters: Jackson Pollock – in April 1951, after Cage declined the commission, he composed music for the film by Hans Namuth and Paul Falkenberg in exchange for one of Pollock's ink drawings –, Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning, but above all Philip Guston and Mark Rothko. He dedicated to one, *For Philip Guston*, for flute, percussion and piano, and to the other, at the Chapel of the Institute of Religion and Human Development in Houston, one of his masterpieces, *Rothko Chapel* for soloists, choir and instruments. With Guston, in whose paintings Feldman admired the absence of weight[gravity], the painting exists “*somewhere in the space between the canvas and ourselves*” and connects us to the work, rejecting a closed inventiveness, and inviting us on a difficult journey between distance and immersion, at a slow pace, in stasis, the gesture should be carried out in an exalted, "Hassidic" way, to use Feldman's word. This stasis, which is also found in Varèse's music – its “*almost stationary grandeur, like a sun standing still at the command of a latter-day Joshua*”⁹ – and in Rothko's canvasses, is the maintenance of a tension: “*It's frozen, at the same time it's vibrating.*”¹⁰ Recalling a visit to the Metropolitan Museum during which Rothko scanned paintings by Rembrandt and drew attention to “*the way Rembrandt bleeds to the edges,*” Feldman stated during a lecture in Darmstadt in 1984: “*An atmosphere of Schubert. When we had the rehearsal in Toronto [for the premiere of the String Quartet 2, which can last more than five and a half hours], and I walked in, and I wanted to convey the mood of the piece to the musicians, I said to the marvellous Kronos Quartet, 'Well', I said to them, 'play it like Death and the Maiden.' And they played. That's it. That kind of hovering, as if you're in a register you'd never heard before.*”¹¹ An atmosphere (mood), therefore, like a landscape where each point, equidistant from the centre, reveals itself to the traveller who circulates there without advancing, where all evolution involves its opposite, an essential stagnation. Listening to Feldman is about this atmosphere, this landscape, engaging the whole being in exploring a unique and authentic mode of flow.

¹ Morton Feldman, “The Future of Local Music” (1984), in *Give My Regards to Eighth Street: Collected Writings of Morton Feldman* (Exact Change, 2000), p189.

² Morton Feldman, “Conversation with Walter Zimmermann” (1975), in *Morton Feldman Says: Selected Interviews and Lectures 1964–1987* (Hyphen Press, 2006), p56.

³ Frank O'Hara, “New Directions in Music: Morton Feldman” (1962). in *Give My Regards*, op. cit., p212.

⁴ Morton Feldman, “Darmstadt Lecture” (1984). in *Morton Feldman Says*, op. cit., p208.

⁵ Morton Feldman, “The Anxiety of Art” (1969). in *Give My Regards*, op. cit., p27.

⁶ Morton Feldman, “Darmstadt Lecture” (1984). in *Morton Feldman Says*, op. cit., p194.

⁷ Morton Feldman, Heinz-Klaus Metzger, “About Jiddishkeit” (1972), in *Morton Feldman Essays* (Beginner Press, 1985), p7. Feldman here uses not only the adjective, but also the verb form, “is Jewish”.

⁸ Morton Feldman, “Frank O’Hara: Lost Times and Future Hopes” (1972), in *Give My Regards*, op. cit., p107.

⁹ Morton Feldman, “Some Elementary Questions” (1967). in *Give My Regards*, op. cit., p66. In 1944, Stefan Wolpe had arranged a meeting between Feldman and Varèse. “*You know, Feldman, you will survive. I am not worried about you.*” For a long time, Feldman would visit Varèse almost every week, “*not feeling very different from those people who make a pilgrimage to Lourdes in the hope of a cure.*” See, Morton Feldman, “In Memoriam: Edgard Varèse” (1966), in *Give My Regards*, op. cit., p41.

¹⁰ Morton Feldman, “The Future of Local Music” (1984). in *Give My Regards*, op. cit., p184.

¹¹ Morton Feldman, “Darmstadt Lecture” (1984). in *Morton Feldman Says*, op. cit., p197.