

Feldman at Guston's Funeral

by Ross Feld

The text below consists of short excerpts from Chapter 6 ("Friend") of Ross Feld's book about Philip Guston, Guston in Time: Remembering Philip Guston (New York: Counterpoint Press, 2003).

[On the day of Guston's funeral] before heading out to the Artists' Cemetery in the center of Woodstock, a number of people gathered for a time in the [Guston] house. Then, with what seemed like one unspoken will, we drifted across to the studio. In the studio's office corner, on a shelf above a worktable, sat the cardboard box that earlier in the day had contained Guston's ashes before they were buried by Musa and Ingie [Guston's wife and daughter]. The box was an object of dumb amazement, as odd, pregnant, and absurd a plain object in its own way as anything Guston had spent the last fifteen years painting. In a dead painter's studio absence itself assumes a definite form, something almost sculptural, and everyone seemed to walk around the central void of being in the studio that belong to but never again would be entered by Guston.

Even more remarkable than the box, though, at least for me, was the presence among us of the composer Morton Feldman, summoned down from his home in Buffalo a day or so before. Feldman, Philip Roth and I – as per Guston's hospital-bed list of last desires – were to say Kaddish for him in an hour's time. But no one who was in the studio that afternoon was unaware of the poignancy as well as the more than small grotesquerie of Feldman's presence. Over the best part of two decades Feldman had been Guston's closest friend. Up till that very day of the funeral, though, Feldman basically had not spoken to Guston in nearly a decade. There had been a rupture which never managed to become resealed in life. Guston's late style, the move away from abstraction, had alienated the two men.

With bottle-glasses, a low forehead, a sensualist's lips, thick straight hair that streamed toward the crown of his head like hawsers thrown back over the side of a departing ship, Feldman was an imposingly homely, unforgettable-looking man. Yet about him was a charm and a fluency abetted by his thick New York accent and sophisticated aplomb that were tremendously winning. Like his friend Guston he was a jet of hot and various talk, even on that sad afternoon. Quickly and nervously, with real passion, he spoke about caffeine, Kirghaz rugs, his writing an opera with Samuel Beckett, a steak dinner he'd shared with his girlfriend in the local motel the night before. You could see why Guston had loved him. [...]

Yet Feldman finally couldn't sanction the work Guston started producing in the late sixties. In 1978, eight years after the loosening of their bond, Feldman was still enough on Guston's mind to be the subject of one of the most remarkable Guston paintings: *Friend – to M. F.* (1978).

It is a portrait of Feldman's half-turned away face, a picture composed out of pain plus a startling concentration of simple adult resignation. As still and frozen as a Piero in its way, the remarkable, almost helmet-like Feldman hair is captured in the front while the back of the head begins looking very mineral indeed, that solidified-blood-look that Guston used so effectively. Sclerotic. Feldman was putting a good face on his acceptance of new art, the picture seems to suggest, but the back of his mind was firmly made up. It had frozen against Guston paintings just such as this one.

This would not be the only such portrait of Feldman that Guston would make at around the same time, either. Paintings of coats began to appear. Feldman's father was a garment manufacturer, and Guston delightedly used to tell of long walks with Feldman, the two of them talking about Valéry but being eminently interruptible when they happened to go by the old S. Klein's-on-Union-Square, where Feldman would duck inside to handle a sleeve, to comment on a garment's workmanship. These coat paintings were paintings of Feldman as well – Feldman as *schneider*, the Jewish artist, tailor of the goods. And, like *Friend*, they were done during the men's long estrangement.

On that funeral day Guston's last pictures, small acrylics and inks on paper, were tacked up to the free-standing painting wall that bisected the studio. Feldman, who I'm sure had seen very little new Guston work, kept glancing over at these tacked-up sheets but was understandably constrained, being in a group of friends and family that full well knew the cause of the chill between the two men years back. Finally, however, he had to go over and look at them (and be seen looking at them), which he did quickly, repeatedly, lightning raids each time. On his first return from them he exclaimed to no one in particular, yet somehow to everyone:

"Now I understand what he was getting at!"

At least for me, hearing him say this was to suffer a kind of existential splinter the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas analogizes insomnia to: hearing and seeing what you don't want to hear and see, the intimate hollowness, the seemingly endless vertigo of time coming at you in waves. I couldn't wait for the moment to be done, to pass. No one of course dared to ask Feldman what he thought it was that Guston was getting at – but then he told us anyway:

"I see the rhythm of the images. I see how he arranged them, which ones repeat, the *pattern*. Now I see it!"

After Feldman had left the studio to go to his car and on to the cemetery, and my wife and I were getting ready to do the same, Musa walked up to me and said shyly and offhandedly: "Oh Morty, that Morty. I put those pictures up myself today. Ingie helped me. They're just where *we* decided to put them."¹

A year later Feldman wrote an introduction to a catalogue of those same last works after they were assembled for exhibition by the Phillips Collection in Washington. It was clear that he'd held on to his perception of these particular works on that funeral day like a psychological life raft, for he began his published remarks on this very odd note:

"I question the appropriateness of writing about something other than this exhibition. But to write about it, some effort should be given to research. And I have a resistance in talking to anyone who could tell me why Guston assembled these last works in the way he did. My attitude is not unlike my father refusing to ask for directions the time we were lost in Hoboken."²

He was speaking the most candid truth here: *he did not want to know*; he wanted to know nothing they themselves taught him but rather only something that he already had taught himself. [...]

[Feldman] was hardly alone in not understanding Guston's final work, his disapproval of (and blindness to) what his old friend was up to seems if anything more inevitable – and in some way culturally proper, culturally clear – than anyone else's. In his sympathy and identification with abstract painting, and with his own methods of translating some of the New York School's visual investigations across channels to his own music, Feldman perhaps was in better viewing angle than anyone else to see what Guston was doing *differently*. [...]

With each decade since [Guston's] death it becomes clearer that there was a significant cultural crossroads involved in his heresy, that from Guston modern art received a late challenge someone like Morton Feldman simply perceived earlier and more painfully than anyone else.

¹ This ironic anecdote has yet another layer. According to Guston's daughter, Musa (Ingie) Mayer, and David McKee [Guston's gallery representative], the pictures had in fact been arranged by Guston himself [note added by the editors of Feld's book].

² Morton Feldman, "Essay" in *Philip Guston: 1980/The Last Works* (Phillips Collection, 1981) pp 5-8. Reprinted in *Give My Regards to Eighth Street: Collected Writings of Morton Feldman* edited by B. H. Friedman (Exact Change, 2000) pp 128-132.