

Henry Crown: Daniel Stern's "Portrait" of Morton Feldman

[Compiled by Chris Villars]

*Between 1938 and 1944, Morton Feldman attended New York's High School of Music and Art, a selective, public alternative high school for pupils with special talents in music or art¹. There he met and became friends with Daniel Stern, at that time a cellist and aspiring composer². Stern later became a novelist and short story writer. Between 1968 and 1975, he wrote three novels featuring a semi-autobiographical character called Wolf Walker. In the second of these novels, *The Rose Rabbi* (1971), Walker recalls his encounters with Henry Crown, a character based on Feldman. The following short excerpts from the novel give us, via Crown, some vivid glimpses of Feldman as Stern knew him.*

Henry Crown filled the doorway, eyebrows like bushes, face like a moon. [...] He stood marshaling all his fat grace, feet spread delicately apart, his pudgy forefinger pressing 20/200 eyeglasses nearer to his nose for a better look at me. [...] Before I realized what was happening, or who was in charge, we were off for one of Crown's classic Chinese dinners: Mandarin specialities with Jewish side dishes. Over Peking duck and sour cream and *dem sem* with *tszimmes* we traded reminiscences. [49]³

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I found Henry Crown lying on a couch fast asleep, looking like a beached whale. [...] Crown slept, belly rising, a gasping bellows, fish-like eyelids trembling over (it would seem) rolling eyeballs. His legs, half-curved under his great weight, twitched arrhythmically. Crown slept as other people agitated; a running, jumping sleep in which who knew what triumphs of imagery and style were being unreproducibly produced⁴. [79]

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"The immense and total memory," Henry Crown once quoted to me, "is a state of complete unity." It was from Benjamin Constant: the kind of writer he read. [...] I pursue my way through Henry Crown's remembered quotations. (He spoke them as other men speak small talk.) [30]

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Crown gestured toward the girl [he was with]. "She's just one – I'm involved with three. I can't let well enough go. I have to push everything past the next barrier. The raw material of love is woman, right? Well, I have to get more and more of it. That makes trouble – it makes torture." [59]

* * *

“Listen,” he said, creasing his fat forehead at me, “I’ve just given up cigarettes.”

“Good,” I said, as if I’d been asked for a professional opinion.

“I mean have you got one on you?” [59]

* * *

I’d taken a piece, a Pastorale for String Orchestra, to Henry Crown for criticism. No! What lunatic would ask for criticism? Rather, I asked for approval, for celebration. Crown and I walked in Central Park – the Central Park of years ago, which was itself a kind of Pastorale for Strings, particularly at my age which was twenty-two. And also, bear in mind that this was Henry Crown, a composer, heroically self-proclaimed; winner of our high school’s Music Award for his Dirge for Kafka⁵. A man whose life at twenty-three, was already encased in capital letters. I was strictly lower case.

Through the park we stumbled – he fat, myself thin – chasing our future reputations. Finally, after glancing over my score, Crown took the paper and rubbed it on the grass until green smears interspersed the notes.

“Wolf,” he said, “there’s your Pastorale.” And we said no more about it, going on to years of friendship, anger and separation⁶. [1/2]

* * *

[When I met him again many years later, I asked him:]

“What did you really think about that piece of mine?”

Crown squinted at me from behind his milky spectacles.

“What piece?” he said.

“That Pastorale I showed you in the park. You know...” [...]

“I remember,” Crown said. “That was a good piece.” [...]

I was forced to describe to him in detail how he had destroyed my score and my ambitions with one gesture. His laughter shook all that roundness like a sudden storm attacking a whale. Wheezes underlined his amused contempt for my nurtured injustice.

“Oh, Jesus,” he moaned. “All I did was throw you back onto yourself with a joke.” [56/57]

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“Listen,” he said. “Let me tell you what was wrong with that piece you wrote.”

“You didn’t understand anything about time. That’s rock-bottom. If you don’t understand time then you can’t do anything with music. There’s a poison that has to flow back and forth to the change of the material – notes, electronic sounds, temple gongs, taxi horns – it doesn’t

matter what the *stuff* is. But if you're not tracking those split-seconds right, moving the poison from one moment to another, killing little pieces of each one, killing and making worlds in split-seconds ... if you can't do that, then all you can do is repeat what happened before, a little louder, slower, faster, or with different pitches. If you're afraid to use that poison – if you want to be so damned benign with your Pastorales, then don't get involved with music, or with art, at all." [61]

"You know what you're interested in? [...] Success! Success is just feeling good about yourself. [...] An artist *always* feels bad about himself, somewhere, even at the best moments." [100]

"That's why your Pastoral was no good. It was just a collection of moments trying to feel good about themselves. None of that poison moving from beat to beat that makes music – that makes anything..." [101]

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"Don't just live," Crown said. "Rewrite. [...] Why be so passive? Why do anything over again? Do it again – but differently!" [49]

¹ For more about this school see, Benjamin Steigman, *Accent on Talent: New York's High School of Music and Art* (Wayne State University Press, 1964).

² Feldman's unpublished *Two Pieces* for cello and piano (1948) are dedicated to Daniel Stern. Stern can be heard playing Feldman's, also unpublished, *Music for the Film "Jackson Pollock"* for two cellos (1951) in a multitrack recording used in the soundtrack of the film by Hans Namuth and Paul Falkenberg.

³ Page numbers in square brackets refer to the first Syracuse University Press edition of *The Rose Rabbi* (1997).

⁴ Cf. Musa Mayer, *Night Studio: A Memoir of Philip Guston* (Da Capo Press, 1997) p62: "My memories of Morty have him stretched out and snoring on our wicker chaise, following some feast the two [Feldman and Guston] had shared."

⁵ Possibly a reference to an actual work by Feldman, his unpublished *Dirge: In Memory of Thomas Wolfe* for string orchestra (1943), which was given its first performance, conducted by Feldman, at the High School of Music and Art in April 1943.

⁶ Cf. Mark Steven Brooks, "Memories of Morty" (Online: <http://www.cnvill.net/mfbrooks.htm>): "I went to the University for an interview, brought some of my scores with me and ran into Feldman in the hall. I asked if I could show him a score of mine, a piano piece called *Movement and Stagnation* (1973). He took it, held it close to his face (he had terrible eyesight) and proceeded to drop ashes from his cigarette all over the manuscript. He gave it back and said, in his thick Brooklyn accent 'you know, you don't have to be just a composer, I've got a friend who's a Rabbi who's a composer'".