

America's Big Heart

Irving Feldman, *Beautiful False Things*. Grove Press, \$13

Irving Feldman is an exceptionally accomplished and powerful poet, who has won any number of grants and prizes, including the MacArthur “genius” award. And yet he is not nearly as well-known and widely read as many a more slender talent; neither the *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, nor Cary Nelson’s recent *Anthology of Modern American Poetry*, finds room for him. Certainly Feldman is not easy to anthologise; many of his best poems span several pages, or draw their power from their position within the larger arc of a book or a poetic sequence, like those of the title sequence of *All of Us Here* (1986). Perhaps, in a poetry world where each poet seems compelled to enhance his or her brand recognition with an easily recognisable gimmick—C.K. Williams’s long lines, Jorie Graham’s philosophical concept-dropping, Sharon Olds’s narcissistic unembarrassability—Feldman’s broad range of styles and tones, which runs from an elegance and finesse analogous to James Merrill’s to a plainspoken sharpness reminiscent sometimes of Robert Frost and sometimes of Old Testament prophecy, makes him too uncomfortably unpredictable for many readers. Or perhaps the keenness of his satire is too unsettling for readers accustomed to the tepid epiphanies purveyed by so many American poets of our moment. Whatever the reason, Feldman’s work has yet to find the audience it deserves.

Satire is a mode little practised nowadays, at least in American poetry. The kinds of savage attacks poets turned on their rivals in the eighteenth century are understandably out of fashion in a world where you never know who’s going to be on the next grant panel or prize committee. Spite and spleen are too ill-mannered for a nation in which even politicians must sling mud by proxy lest they be soiled themselves. And the moral and intellectual certainties of the satirist sort ill with the relativistic temper of the times; the confidence of judgement that necessarily underpins the satiric voice threatens to appear unacceptably elitist in a culture saturated by a consumerist populism. Satire, though, has always been one of the home keys of Feldman’s instrument, a satire that gains an added edge from the way that it often turns uncomfortably back on the poet, and on his readers. So “My Olson Elegy” (from

Lost Originals, 1972) begins outrageously with the lines “Three weeks and now I hear! / What a headstart for the other elegists!”—and continues with a pointed assessment of an “adolescent... poetboy” who has already completed “section fifteen” of his Olson elegy, and of Olson himself, denominated the “bard of bigthink.” But ultimately the poet has to acknowledge a kind of kinship, however reluctant, to both bard and poetboy, for by writing his poem has he not joined the “dazzling elegists” who “jockey for position” in a poetic culture in which even mourning has become a form of competition?

Beautiful False Things is Feldman’s tenth book, the latest in a career now entering its fifth decade; his first book, *Works and Days*, appeared in 1961. It shows Feldman in a retrospective and reflective mood; a number of the poems recount episodes from the speaker’s youth (a speaker sometimes called by the name “Irving”), others are haunted, more or less ominously, by the spectre of approaching death. But there is nothing of autumnal mellowness in the volume; Feldman’s wit remains as pointed, his observation of the world as disenchanted as in his previous volumes. Rueful this voice may be, but never less than clear-sighted; and the thoughts of death that impinge so powerfully throughout the volume have not made Feldman any less inclined to be dissatisfied with what we, and he, have made of our lives.

The volume’s title comes from the decidedly disenchanted saw that translations are like wives: when most beautiful most apt to be untrue. Translation, in several senses, is one of the strategies Feldman deploys throughout the volume. Recollections of the poet’s youthful days are overlaid onto the plot of *La Bohème*; Lazarus becomes a Catskills comic, Oedipus a talk-show host. Feldman uses these incongruous clashes as a means of creating ironic perspective. The transformation of tragedy into talk-show in “Oedipus Host” becomes a strategy for exploring the commodification of pain that permeates the culture of therapeutic confession. Where we once had been purged by pity and fear, the poem suggests, we now insist on appropriating the spectacle of suffering as a form of narcissistic solace. The speaker of the poem, witnessing the parade of “losers from history” and “everyday... freaks” on the Oedipus show, joins in a bogus community founded on resentment:

Can anyone not feel what I feel in my heart
 so strong the wave of it rolls back to them?
 Because no longer are we putting people down
 for creep, dog, dickhead, weirdo, whatever.
 That’s over. Done with. Ashamed I did.
 The shut-ins, everything shut in, are coming out....
 Lying here, I stomp and hoot and high-five them on.
 And feel America’s big heart in my heart pumping.

The voice we encounter here, and in many other poems by Feldman,

is a curious combination; it is at once the voice of the sort of caricature figure we encounter in satire (“Follies and Vices”, as Feldman names them elsewhere), and yet also particularised and vivid, seething with a kind of life the poet seems to find horrible and yet to delight in creating. Yeats disdainfully observed the “passionate intensity” of “the worst” from the outside; Feldman often seems compelled to experience it from the inside.

Though Feldman’s ferocities might seem far removed from the elegant detachment of James Merrill’s work, the two poets share a fascination, however appalled, with contemporary corruptions of language. From the worlds of politics, entertainment, and marketing pours forth a steady stream of degraded speech designed to mislead or flatter its hearers. How can the poet respond? Many American poets simply proceed as if they haven’t noticed that their medium has become polluted. Most of those who acknowledge the problem have in recent years tended to take the Ashbery path, ventriloquising the inanities of public discourse with a self-protective detachment that points both to a kind of pleasure in the demotic and to an awareness of a loss in the expressive power of the language available to the poet. Merrill and Feldman respond to this crisis of medium by an ironic recycling of the empty language that surrounds us; both are particularly fond of pushing poetic diction and allusion into pointed juxtaposition with the vacant phrases of media culture or slang that has gone just past its sell-by date. I instance here a passage from “Cartoons”:

A whizz-by of words down a leafy street;
big red letters peering over the green slats
of the brand-new, bright, shiny pickup truck
—just loafing along and hanging out, at ease
in the still momentum inside the commotion,
just going with the flow of trees and trellises
and whatever else is streetwise in spring:
seven signs in search of seven sites,
where they shall proclaim **NO PARKING** to the world,
and—with two words and by the power to seize
chattels, assets, persons—make a sacred space.

The conceit of the passage turns on the gap between an earlier kind of prohibition, the fearful taboo associated with a “sacred space,” and the sort of purely functional prohibition encountered in our disenchanting world. This contrast is echoed in the clash of diction within the passage; a loose, slangy phrase like “going with the flow” is played off against an oblique echo of T.S. Eliot in “still momentum inside the commotion,” which recalls Eliot’s “still point of the turning world.” The signs, “loafing along... at ease,” become each a singer of self, as the poem echoes Walt Whitman’s famous self-description: “I lean and

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loaf at my ease." And the line "seven signs in search of seven sites" hilariously superimposes Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*. The passage points ironically to the decline in the power of words, which once heralded the incarnation of numinous forces and now proclaim "NO PARKING," but even as the poet seems ruefully amused at the gap between prophecy and social control, he retains a kind of delight in his own ability to play wittily against the slack language of the times.

But if Feldman often generates fierce irony or bemused resignation out of the world's disenchantment, he also is capable of celebrating the secular, and of writing with a lucid, expressive purity. I quote the whole of "The Recognitions," the first poem in *Beautiful False Things*:

Not the god, though it might have been,
 savoring some notion of me
 and exciting the cloud where he was hidden
 with impetuous thunderstrokes of summoning
 —it was merely you who recognized me,
 speaking my name in such a tone
 I knew you had been thinking it
 a long, long time, and now revealed yourself
 in this way. Because of this, suddenly
 who I was was precious to me.

The speaker of this poem gives no indication as to whether he feels disappointed or relieved not to have been interpellated by a supernatural force. Either way, the consolation of being recognised by the "you," presumably a lover, seems richly and completely satisfying, and is made vivid through the simplicity and care of the language of the poem's latter half, as opposed to the overwrought diction of "impetuous thunderstrokes of summoning." Better, the poem implies, the human scale of eros than the high rhetorical sublime of prophecy. This mood is of course only one of those available to Feldman; at other times pain at the knowledge that the prophetic sublime is unavailable pushes the poet to bitter ironies. But Feldman seems equally at home in either mode, equally open to elegant refinement or savage mockery. It is paradoxical, but perhaps not entirely surprising, that the poet who may be one of America's most pointed and tough-minded satirists is also one of its most capable writers of lyric celebration.