

AN INTERVIEW WITH THALIA FIELD

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SENECA REVIEW: *How would you say your work fits into the genre of the “essay” — you straddle the middle space between theatre and fiction and poetry — does the essay stretch to fit?*

THALIA FIELD: I would say that I am among those writers who say “I think through writing” and in the practice of keeping an open mind, the writing comprises an *essai*. Sometimes the thinking is more argumentative than other times, sometimes more playful and without purpose. Sometimes the questions I’m thinking through require a lot of outside voices, languages, testimony imported from other ways of asking. Sometimes I think through a question simply to explore it, lose myself around it. When a question is particularly full of “actors”, the polyvocality can feel unresolvable but offers fresh hearing. Thinking through things can require a lot of approaches to form, a lot of associative logic, and that’s where genres come and go. To me, theater, fiction, essay, it’s all essentially a matter of what helps watch the question, play with the contradictions, wonder at connections and dissolutions. I’m interested in how minds change, but not necessarily in changing them. I think that’s the essence of *essai*, as Montaigne saw it, to find connections and wander in questions, to watch thinking as it works.

SR: *Do you find identification with other essayists uncomfortable or welcome? That is, do you think we might lose something in your work when we approach with the essay in mind?*

TF: I definitely don’t want to convey that there’s anything unwelcoming about essays or essayists! But you’re right...If you read my work solely from the point of view of the essay, you might find it lacking. In the same way if you approach it as a story, or certainly as a poem, you would find other things lacking. So I think what you lose in any one approach is the way in which the imaginative and the essayistic alchemize questions and thinking in new ways, in new forms. I hope that by side-stepping certain normative features of essays, my work can provoke thinking almost by accident.

SR: *How do you find yourself approaching the essay differently now than when Point and Line was published?*

TF: This is hard to address because to me each piece of writing has different textures and explores different questions and in different ways. Still, each *collection* of pieces (books) loosely circumscribes an area of inquiry. In each, the inquiry takes multiple forms, is posed in multiple figures, with multiple vocality. To risk total generalization, *Point and Line* asked a lot of questions about character and story-shape, where *Incarnate* asked more about how the flux of experience/embodiment is something we give names and deem meaningful, even as we try to own and control it. *Ululu: Clown Shrapnel*, generally, was an extended meditation around authorship and origin. My new collection, *Bird Lovers, Backyard* (where “Apparatus...” appears) asks questions of how we narrate ourselves in terms of biology, architecture, situation – how we invent story in our relationship with history, species, place. The most overarching generalization is that these have all been essays of one form or another, circling the same ultimate question: who are we when we tell a story? What are selves trying to do in thinking and authoring? What is a story to a self-less self?

Another answer might be to say that I don’t really “approach the essay” any more now than I did in the past. Forms of thinking through writing have always been my basic practice. Sometimes I use the tropes of characters to experiment with, sometimes less traditionally embodied voices.

SR: *How do you negotiate the tension between some of the recurring conceptual underpinnings within your own writing – which does not privilege the discrete, individual subjectivity on which much of what gets categorized as literary nonfiction relies – and the broader assumptions of the essay as a genre?*

TF: I think you’re asking if I would place myself in contrast to conventional forms of non-fiction (fiction and poetry, too, I think) which prioritizes an unassailable “I” – a perceiving subjectivity at the center of what’s known, felt, expressed. As part of my process of

watching thoughts and questions pass through writing, I attempt practices where hardened concepts can be softened. I try not to stand in the center of the scene but rather to displace and disperse, turn myself around, wander, wonder, get lost. I don't find the need to argue a single point, maintain a single view, or defend a single territory of the self.

SR: *How important is it to you for readers to engage intellectually with your essays? What is the difference between intellectual engagement and witnessing? How do you conceive of the relation between either of these categories and the Buddhist idea of "self-secret," which you've spoken of elsewhere? What to do about the thinking that "can no longer help them"?*

TF: Of interest to me is the how form/emptiness occur in language; how emptiness of conceptual solidity (of self, word, event, meaning) leads to a continuous luminous display of stories arising, dissolving. The paradox of living my very specific life this very moment, the exact and irreducible world of this life – my questions, thoughts – and the inseparably empty nature of everything (the manifestation of constant change and total interdependence, world without beginning or end) – this provides the most provocative energy in my writing practice – generally. I experience this paradox and the rest follows from there -- questions that I then explore about the ways avoiding this paradox leads into certain trouble and suffering.

SR: *To return to the self-secret, there are certain teachings and texts a reader needs to encounter in order to unlock whatever new text is before her. What texts do you think might be helpful in unlocking "Apparatus?"*

TF: Self-secret doesn't mean that there are two types of readers: those that would be "in the know" and those who aren't. It simply refers to the fact that there are layers of truths, accessible differently for different audiences at different times. And it also doesn't imply that I'm controlling those truths, they are beyond my understanding as well. There's something about Corbusier; i.e. the way he juxtaposed the 'donkey' and the linear/orderly. There's also a modernist model in Corbusier which was very idealist, which I think contemporary fall-out reveals as flawed. In this

piece the protagonists are more like donkeys in their meandering yet purposeful thinking. Other echoes in Apparatus might include Hannah Arendt, a little Plato...And of course the idea of falling bodies; how we only fall in our own limited world. I think that's it. There's a synthetic quality to this piece – it draws from many sources – but its basis remains imaginative, beyond one interpretation.

SR: *Time seems to imply an ending (the body hitting the earth, for instance). In your writing, does the performance or the thinking/theory end first? Are the two separable?*

TF: In “Apparatus...” the narrative of falling (in a world of gravity) and ideas about endings (in a world of stories) are conflated – posited as things we might try to experience, “lay in”, rather than take as teleological. Stories about what falls become stories about what's fallen, implies where things fell from, history, and a certain kind of forgetting and mythology. Thus when I was thinking through the question of the food court and how to perform philosophy, falling and endings reveal things about each other – though only in the specific world of this piece, because the question of pigeons is here. In other words, thinking about certain questions led to “Apparatus...” and neither really end, they are put into play and left irresolvable.

SR: *“Apparatus” appears to enact a kind of hermeneutic circle -- near its outset, the essay repeatedly articulates a desire to circumvent narrative and “lie down in an ending” but it can only inscribe this within a form that emphasizes the piecemeal quality of each individual entry. Each entry has a quick death. So, does this sense of an ending necessarily relate to a sense of this (paradoxical) whole or is the proposition precisely the opposite, that an ending is only a final, irreconcilable division that thinking can no longer help? Is it somewhere between?*

TF: The question of “ending” is one of possibly giving up the attempt to control what is otherwise a truly mythological, gravitational telos; the inevitability of wasting one's potential in an ultimately futile battle. It's the death-accepting option, the option that says “Why bother?” And yet, from the point of view of life/samsara/

attachment, it feels as though this option is impossible. Of course the characters do nothing so dramatic as lay in their ending. They suffer through their day, minute by minute, and they skulk away finally in a sort of fade-out. The stories we are attached to rely on the “middle” – the place where identity reigns. So to take back a portion of the story by simply surrendering – another way of laying down in the ending -- would be exactly to deny the pleasure of the text, the meandering illusion of the middle in which “anything” could happen. To remove this pleasure feels like a crisis, as though it might deny the experience of narrative, almost of wonder, of potential. The “ending” as it’s conceived in this piece is the final arbiter of meaning – and ultimately it doesn’t happen for these characters; they discover the opposite. That there’s no great adventure. In some ways mythologizing the ending of stories repeats the damage that death threatens, but makes it safe because we can “tell about it”. These folks cling to an optimism that thinking, the philosopher’s role, can impact real problems. This allows them not to surrender to death, but to tell stories about history in its place.

SR: *“Mind you, despite good ideas, we won’t be doing anything. We’re only here to think, and hopefully win something.” Here, it seems as if thinking is not a kind of action, whereas thinking/walking does seem to be more closely related in a piece like, say, “Walking,” in Point and Line. How has this relationship between thinking and action developed in your work over time? Can hardening into action be dangerous?*

TF: Yes, there is something always challenging about how philosophy and practice go together. Partly I have been influenced by my buddhist practices in which what your mind does and what your body/speech do cannot be separated. In western philosophy (to generalize) the mind and one’s body have gone their own ways, so that what you think is considered a separate realm to what you do. This is a bit of a weird question. It’s also a daoist principle not to act – not to create confusion or karma or interfere with the flow, the rightness, of events. When action must take place – what should it be? I’ve always been interested in how minds lead us both to massive confusion and yet offer us a way out at the same time. In “Walking”, the walker is experiencing a world of perception without much in the way of conceptual agenda. There is only the imperative to get

somewhere, a small set of circumstances which don't stand up to much in the face of the experience of the walk itself. There isn't a "problem" like the pigeon-problem to be solved. In "Walking" an event does occur – the fire truck (and some sort of emergency) but ultimately it is about the fleeing way we perceive bursts of meaning in relation to perception. In "Apparatus" it's almost the opposite. A conceptual problem has been established, and minds must return the problem to the status of perceptual experience. Ultimately it is the tension between our conceptual habits and our direct experience which offers the opportunity for fresh insights. But what finally to do? That's the issue they face as well. Thinking will not help anyone when its relationship to ethics is severed. To ask some to think and others to legislate gets us into trouble. This is where a philosopher-king comes in handy.

SR: *What differences do you find between working with time on the stage and with time on the page? How do the constraints unique to each affect other aspects of your work?*

TF: If you're referring to my work with [prompts] for example, those pieces engage an interplay (a poetics) of reading and timing and improvisation/indeterminacy which foregrounds "thinking" on stage (for the audience and the performer simultaneously) the "thinking mind" rather than rehearsed roles. How it functions on the page is torqued from that – more slow and layered. On the page, [prompts] open up the place of contingency and invite the reader's mind to overflow the text. Live performance also relates to "the work" differently – it is experienced in one collective world-event. Books reveal themselves as events differently – both for the reader and the writer. Audience is dispersed, sometimes separated by centuries. For me right now, I greatly prefer the dispersal.

SR: *How do you think/conceive of chaos? Is this beauty dependent on time/perspective, in the way that the long history of pigeons lends/revives beauty in the overlooked?*

TF: I don't find chaos uncomfortable – in fact chaos is quite beautiful and elegant. Meanwhile, I do get seduced by how people who say

they “know” things tell stories about knowing. These voices appear in many places in many of my pieces. I’m curious, even fascinated, about that kind of confidence, and I think I use it as one of many textures in setting questions against each other, an ecology, as it were, of questions. I’m fascinated by scientists and science history precisely because the question of knowledge is prioritized, and there’s a mixture of confidence and wonder – total failure, and unknowing success. In my writing practice a willingness not to know, to question without expectation, feels comforting. When it solidifies it’s troublesome, and I think my work shows many faces in the crowd of knowers and questioners. The essay is there, as a place of paradox, the assertion of the question. Creative work is a sustained practice of questioning. There is a comfort in questioning without needing answers.

Conventionally, the story of Chaos is told from the scientific principle of pattern which is indeterminate but yet bounded, tethered to nodes, or in my literary translation, questions. The elegance of chaos is this attention to form that skirts our expectation, and to beauties which, as you mention, can only be about finding our home in time, weather. To return awareness to the pigeons as historical agents, common to our ancestry is to reflect the need of complex systems to expel waste products (former resources) – all of this reminds me of the dynamics of living systems as it is modeled in these terms. Of course, these terms are purely metaphoric, so contain little truth value. They are just stories we like at the moment.

SR: *Pigeons seem to work as something like a motor for this essay (“Apparatus”) as they create the occasion for a performance of philosophy -- though throughout the essay they also pull this performance in multiple directions. It seems that, as readers or thinkers, we will inevitably tend to anthropomorphize the pigeons as a multitude of what Agamben would call “bare life,” which the state sets itself upon managing. At the same time, there is a way in which the pigeons are treated as sufficient unto themselves, as a particular site of history, as creatures qua creatures. One of the fascinating things about the essay is the way in which this is amplified by the use of the first-person plural, the way in which we, as subjects, as thinkers and creatures, become confused into each other. What do you consider the most productive elements of this kind of confusion?*

TF: In this story, “falling” is the central question – and the pigeons which may have ‘fallen’ in the sort of way that only humans who create stories about falling can fall. This includes social and political and gravitational “falling”. The pigeons themselves are beyond the ken of this particular semiosis, but can’t avoid being stained with its implications. They are the bodies who have literally fallen from the sky. The choral protagonist is put in a position of intermediary between the government and the pigeons, the cultural chess-piece used to achieve bureaucratic ends. The “we” is a thinking creature, not exactly inside the power structure, but also not privy to the *umwelt* of the pigeons. The pigeons are the subject of the question, but the question relies on their unattainable subjectivity. Ultimately, philosophy might want to answer for the inner experience of others, and politics might want to try to control it.

SR: *Your work is often populated by many figures/strangers/bodies, but in the collective “we” of “Apparatus...” for instance, why are we so lonely? Is this a response to the perceived impossibility of meaningful collectivity and/or community? The ending of places for people? How is this sense of foreboding complicated by the recurring image of the unbuilt field? How do you see this “we” functioning in comparison to a chorus, in which the bodies of the voices are visible to the audience?*

TF: “Apparatus...” always had a choral ‘protagonist’; a “we” set in that *landscape*. The piece started from the image of the food court next to that ‘unbuilt’ field – and the mysteries of this world eventually opened up into this piece. I must admit to being lost to explain its imagery more than that – to say only that the loneliness of this protagonist has to do with considerations of philosophy, falling bodies, architecture, poverty, and the feeling that those we sort of like are no longer wanted. There’s no generalization to make from one piece’s questions to a universal statement. The ‘unbuilt field’ is an ecological feature in the story, a point of dialectic, providing its own questions.

SR: *What would it mean for the “we” to address or perform this thinking in the unbuilt field beside the food court? Might this affect the trajectory of their thinking?*

TF: I think the story offers the idea that it would be impossible to think this same way in the unbuilt field. This location is beyond conceptual grasp – it is like trash – fallen through categories into what is taboo and unnameable and indeterminate. It is impossible for the characters to figure out the unbuilt field – in many ways it is like their own status, stasis, hard to tell if it's moving up or down, disoriented. The characters had to come to the food court to think about the pigeon-problem because it is only a problem from the point of view of that architecture, the food-court perspective. From the unbuilt field, the pigeon-problem wouldn't exist, or it would exist differently.

SR: *Is there more you can offer regarding your idea of “an ecology of questions.” An ecology would seem to secure us in a net of relationship, while wandering is another theme that comes to the forefront in “Apparatus...” – how do you conceive of the relationship between wandering and ecology?*

TF: I think you're right that questions are for me the basis of ecology, the interplay of seeking and 'reading' which makes meaning and life possible. Aren't all creatures engaged in the paradoxes and parameters of their worlds? An ecology can't be summed up in economic terms. It can't be reduced to costs, or compared numerically. An ecology escapes the risk of hierarchy, of being easily explained. In “Apparatus” a very peculiar thing exists, which isn't true of many of my stories: an urgency, an imperative. The “pigeon problem” is causing an artificially induced constraint on thinking, on wandering, and because of this the questions that have brought the characters forward are stressful. This stress on the system reveals that the main actors are not the one's we see, but predators and others behind the scenes, also part of the ecology. ✕