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# "Finding a Form to Accommodate the Mess". Experimental Science and Storytelling in Thalia Field's Writing

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- 1 With the romance of the avant-garde now spent or suspect, *experimental* has emerged as a convenient term to refer to that type of literature which demotes conventions and promotes invention. Where, at one end of the spectrum of generic conformity, crime fiction or romance tend to renew compositional elements without questioning their defining genre, experimental literature seeks to challenge generic conventions, an ambition which accounts for many of its other common features: its often perplexing character, its greater reflexivity and attention to language. Thalia Field's work have consistently been identified as experimental with all her books manifesting generic hybridity. Since 2000 her work has primarily been page-based, developing at the intersection of narrative, essay, drama and performance and often incorporating images and extensive research. Field is the author of two long prose-works whose subtitles may be heard as fanciful generic labels: *Ululu (Clown Shrapnel)* and *Experimental Animals (A Reality Fiction)*. The latter zeroes in on a key moment of the term *experimental's* fortune to clarify its appeal. Field has also written three collections of stories or "essays in narrative clothing" as she likes to call them. In these collections Field repeatedly interrogates the units of storytelling (story, character, action), considering how they solidify or dissolve. Her latest collection of stories, *Bird Lovers, Backyard*, takes up these metanarrative questions and intertwines them with similarly elementary questions in biology and ethology: What is behavior? What is a species? What is an individual?
- 2 In a 2011 interview, Field takes issue with mainstream or realist narrative, which she calls "cinematic prose", for its narrowness of outlook and its human-centeredness:

From where I stand, I think literary practice is due for a deep revision of our relationship to the world and to "selves" in it. Cut open to expose the human-

centered narrative for its arrogance and ignorance [...] Cinematic prose contains consistent scale, in space and time, and the human figure, whether in close-up or establishing shot, predominates. This aesthetic holds because ultimately we don't spend a lot of time in the awareness of our world without ourselves as tragic heroes of it. Larger timeframes or scales rarely occur to us. Participation in the chorus of other creatures seems impossible, and it's scarcely imaginable to write ourselves out of the picture altogether. (Mellis)

- 3 Looking at the world as “a chaotic nonhierarchical system of interdependence” (Mellis), her own writing proposes to expand our understanding of narrative components, exploring non-human time scales and points of view, resorting to choral voices, dissolving characters to the point of evanescence, or restricting action to thinking or walking. Field's dissatisfaction with conventional narrative and impatience with the human as sole template stems in part from an environmental awareness fostered by her education and enduring interest in biology. And many of her unconventional narrative choices are rooted in biological facts. But, as a student of biology, she became equally frustrated with science's blindness to its methods and use of language<sup>1</sup>, and several of her stories confront science's epistemological blind spots. Field's two most recent books are sustained arguments with science and storytelling. While *Experimental Animals* takes Claude Bernard to task for his refusal of experience in the name of experiment, *Bird Lovers, Backyard* confronts Konrad Lorenz's use of analogy as scientific method and his use of storytelling to assert authority. Both books also help make clear how Field arrives at her distinctive narrative forms in an attempt to do justice to the variety of life-forms and the complexity of situations, a scruple that prompts her to finely negotiate with categories and frameworks.

## Exposing physiology's denial of experience and lack of empathy

- 4 “Seriously, Mr Zola, before talking to the public about ‘physiology’, ‘experiments’, ‘experimental’ etc, it would be good to first learn what the words mean,” (Field 2016: 207) reproves René Ferda, a student of the deceased Claude Bernard, outraged at Zola's irresponsible appropriation of his master's terms. Thalia Field takes this warning to heart and her most recent book sets out to “explore the word ‘experimental’ — [and] put some backstory to a phrase we use without too much rigor.” (Bouilly 2016) Set in Second Empire Paris and centering on the “father” of experimental medicine, *Experimental Animals. (A Reality Fiction)* revives some of the conversations that attended the birth of modern experimental physiology and the consequent anti-vivisection movement. Exhaustive research in archives and periodicals enabled Field to create a polyphony of voices through a dexterous montage of citations. The connective tissue is provided by a fictionalized narrative voice, that of Marie-Françoise Bernard, Claude Bernard's wife, a character consistently vilified in the accounts of the medical corporation. Opposed to vivisection, she separated from Bernard in 1870 and set up an anti-vivisection society. The book shows her roaming the streets of Paris night after night to save the dogs and cats stalked by Bernard's assistants.
- 5 In *An Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine* (1865), Bernard vindicates the superiority of experiment over observation. Where the observer is content to observe the facts that nature offers him, he writes, the experimenter makes them “present themselves in circumstances or conditions in which nature does not show them.” (15)

Field also documents Zola's enthusiasm for Bernard's method and, by juxtaposing quotes of the two men, shows how the novelist devised *Le Roman expérimental* by analogy: "Zola: 'It will be sufficient for me to replace the word 'doctor' by the word 'novelist' in order to make my thought clear and to bring to it the rigor of scientific truth.'" (113)

Zola: "Since medicine is becoming a science, why should not literature itself become a science, thanks to the experimental method?" He will look into social ills and bring their facts into the open. "The problem is to know what a certain passion, acting in a certain environment, and in certain circumstances will produce as regards the individual and society. And the way to solve it is to take the facts in nature, then to study their mechanism by bringing to bear upon them the modifications of circumstances and environment. Just as Mr Claude Bernard transferred the experimental method from chemistry to medicine, so I transfer it from medicine to the drama and the novel." (112-3)

- 6 Claude Bernard having shown "that fixed laws govern the human body", Zola is confident that "[o]ne day physiology will no doubt explain the mechanism of thought and passions; we shall know how the individual machine of a man works, how he thinks..." And when Bernard claims: "The experimenter is the examining magistrate of nature", Zola echoes: "We novelists are the examining magistrates of men and their passions." When Bernard writes : "[...] it is the experimenter who always doubts and does not believe that he has absolute certainty about anything, who succeeds in mastering the phenomena which surround him and extending his power over nature", Zola echoes again: "The true work of the experimental novelist is there, to go from the known to the unknown in order to master nature" (112-5).
- 7 Field's researched novel establishes again and again the mechanistic view of nature and the ideology of mastery that underpins this scientist version of science, inextricably bound with the demotion of experience and the promotion of experiment inaugurated by Francis Bacon. Originally synonymous with *empirical*, *experimental* took on its current meaning of *sought* experiment when Francis Bacon distinguished it from merely *accidental* experience, making it a form of *experience at will*. Three centuries later, Claude Bernard himself campaigned to draw medicine from "the shades of empiricism." (Bernard 1865: 193) While the "conquests" of the experimental method remain undisputed, it has become difficult to ignore the underpinning ideology of a method which seeks to reduce the organic to mechanistic processes and whose cognitive model is rape. Ferda praises his master Bernard for having "penetrated to the mechanisms of organic processes" and used the experimental method "to interrogate nature and tear away her secrets." (Field 2016: 204) The statue of a lovely girl at the base of the stairs of the main medical school building testifies: "She holds folds of a cloth immodestly above her torso, with the carved words: *Nature Reveals Herself to Science*" (92). Bacon's distrust of both deduction and empiricism reveals its perverted facet when Magendie, Claude Bernard's teacher and an enthusiast pioneer of vivisection, boasts of his refusal to think and feel: "Why think when you can experiment? Exhaust experiment, and then think. When I experiment, I have only eyes and ears; I have no brain." (13) Field's archival findings reveal the perverse side of the experimental method as experiment at will, the rage for knowledge pursued by one subject at the expense of an objectified other. "Claude: 'What morality says we can't do to those like us, science authorizes us to do to the animals.'" (21)

- 8 Many features of Field's writings appear to have been embraced in reaction to the prejudiced underpinning of the experimental method. Wary of the rage for knowledge and mastery, Field often resorts to ignorant or subaltern narrators. Because Fanny Bernard is almost entirely absent from the archive, and thus official history, "Field constructs a voice for Fanny that guides, cuts through, organizes, and interprets the chorus of male voices that comprise the bulk of the historical record." (Goldman) Wary of the excesses incurred by the analytical approach (when a live being is reduced to an organ or function), Field seeks to embrace a situation in all its messiness. Instead of following Zola who ambitioned to "dissect" a character and "put men and women through things" (Field 2016: 112), she seeks to show the interconnectedness of things and beings, large and small. Wary of the operating theater which focused the audience's attention on Bernard's performance, she reconsiders the older model of the Salon which promoted conversation, and what she writes of Madame de Scudéry applies to her own work to a certain extent: "Like Fontenelle, she set her dialogues in gardens, and in her books there is no protagonist, no consistent narrator or authorial voice, just a sequence of entertaining verbal adventures: *Conversations on Diverse Subjects*." (105) But more than Madame de Scudéry, the writer who embodies the counter-model to the experimental method heralded by Bacon, systematized by Descartes and radicalized by Bernard is Montaigne, the champion of experience against experiment. As Giorgio Agamben has shown in *Infancy and History, The Destruction of Experience*, experimentation and modern science have discredited experience in the traditional sense, which is the sense Montaigne still gave to his *Essays* as occasions for errancy and chance encounters; "For — as demonstrated by the last work of European culture still integrally based on experience: Montaigne's *Essays* — experience is incompatible with certainty, and once an experience has become measurable and certain, it immediately loses its authority." (Agamben 1993: 18)
- 9 Field's Bernard offers a pathetic illustration of this fact. Repeatability of experiment, a defining feature of the scientific method, turns into a macabre farce. Field threads a parallel between science and theater, questioning the demonstrative dimension of Bernard's practice. A failed playwright, who staged a successful amateur vaudeville, Bernard became popular when he opened his own 'demonstration theater' and performed a repertoire of experiments in front of an audience avid for the signs of science.

To curious ladies and gentlemen, as well as to artists and other students, Claude performs these physiology experiments, even if they are only staged facts. [...] The audience in his basement sees live rabbits and dogs undergoing this puppet show. A second act might be to damage the brain of a pigeon or cat so it turns only around and around, no longer able to walk straight; more of a comedy, on days that need brightening. Claude laughingly calls himself "the physiologist in the theater." (Field 2016: 12)

- 10 "Only action, crusty old Aristotle warned, centers the drama." (4) And in Bernard's theater there is only one actor, and passive, suffering props. Animals are "strapped to a table", their vocal cords cut to prevent them from crying. But it is Bernard's description of the effect of curare that best defines vivisection as the drama of withheld action.

Claude, from "On Curare", *Review des Deux Mondes*: "Within the motionless body, behind the staring eye, with all the appearance of death, feeling and intelligence persist in all their force. Could one conceive of a more horrible suffering than that of an intelligence witnessing the successive subtraction of all the organs that serve it, and thus finding itself enclosed alive within a corpse. Since time began, epic

stories wanting to move the reader to pity showed us sensitive beings closed in immobile bodies. Our imagination can't conceive of anything more unhappy than beings equipt with feeling, by that I mean able to feel pleasure and pain, while being deprived of the ability to flee the one and go toward the other. The torture that the poetic imagination has invented is produced naturally by the action of an American poison, curare. We could even add that fiction lags behind reality." (156)

- 11 What makes this passage so appalling is that here, by means of the epic, Bernard for once demonstrates empathy, recounting this extreme experience of pain and death from the animal's point of view. What for the vivisector is a measurable, repeatable experiment is a final experience for the animal: a profound transformation experienced over a period of time. By contrast to that animal's deadly immobilization, Field's ambition is to move us to awareness and action, using the means of the ancient epic poets: empathy and "poetic imagination". She repeatedly does so by opening the circle of protagonists not only to those who act but to those who are acted upon, not only to those who speak and are recorded but to those who hear and remain unrecorded. Her aim is not to tell a hero's quest but to address a "situation": a "paradoxical ecology of perspectives and meanings" (Field 2016b). For, as Tim Ingold puts it, "we can understand the nature of things only by attending to their relations, or in other words, by telling their stories. [...] *Stories always and inevitably draw together what classifications split apart.*" (Ingold 2011:160). But stories raise their own issues.

## Exposing ethology's compromised use of narrative and analogy

- 12 *Bird Lovers, Backyard* creates a "situation" at the narrative level. While the nine stories which compose the book are independent, they question and answer each other, and the book's meaning emerges from this active conversation. Unlike her two previous books of stories, *Bird Lovers, Backyard* has a recurrent narrator who appears in the first and last stories and in the long central piece devoted to Konrad Lorenz. This recurrent narrator is a choral one, a group of former biology students turned itinerant thinkers on the brink of homelessness, and clearly a persona for Field herself in what feels like her most autobiographical book to date. The choral narrator voices Field's growing dissatisfaction with science as a former student of biology: "During lab-sections of the bio courses, some students begin to consider that perhaps they weren't cut out for 'real' research. They begin refusing live-animal experiments, and find themselves criticizing 'method' at every turn." (Field, 2010: 71) While *Experimental Animals* constitutes her argument with live-animal experiments, *Bird Lovers, Backyard* is, among other things, her argument with "scientific 'method'".
- 13 The central story in the collection shows science caught up in narrative, especially when asserting authority. For it so happens that experimental proof is less convincing to the human imagination than a good story. Devoted to Konrad Lorenz, the Nobel Prize-winning father of ethology, and entitled "Exposition: He told Animal Stories", it exposes Lorenz's questionable scientific method based on analogy and storytelling as well as his connections with the Nazi regime. It does so by juxtaposing excerpts from his published and unpublished work, a collage interspersed with questions and reflections from the choral narrator who comes to question their own interest in stories and ethology, presumably also questioning their initial attraction to Lorenz because here was a scientist who distrusted zoos and labs, never used invasive

techniques and advocated animal welfare. Field suggests that Lorenz erected his whole, erroneous, theory of instinctive behavior after witnessing one hand-reared starling make a grab for a non-existent fly:

Lorenz: "Although it had never trapped a fly in its whole life, [it] performed the entire fly-catching sequence without a fly."

A skeptical colleague once asked Lorenz, "Is that something that actually happened or just something you saw?"

In other words, is storytelling your scientific method? (Field 2010: 64)

- 14 The material Field collects and ingeniously juxtaposes shows how blind Lorenz, and some of his peers, are as to their motivations, how their hypotheses, their experiments and theories reflect a prevailing ideology, how, like any other human being, they are drawn by unconscious desires and sometimes conscious interests — and how much they are after a good story, an appealing new theory that will supersede the previous one. Because, unlike fiction, science can only accommodate one "paradigm" per generation. Further down, Field asks: "How is a story not the story? What if there was a fly?" (70) What increases the responsibility of science compared to fiction is that it passes its stories as *the* story, i.e. the truth. The history of science, of course, instructs that a theory will only remain "the story" until overthrown by an even better story.
- 15 By the end of the Lorenz exposure, the students are left with serious doubts about the scientific character of science: "Years later, only a rangy group remains on the library stairs, pondering what part of behavior isn't ultimately fantasy." (88) They are equally suspicious about the avowed goals of literature and science: "It is so often said that poetry<sup>2</sup> and science both seek truth, but perhaps they both seek hedges against it." (81) Perhaps poetry and science consolidate our impulses, providing a mythical or scientific justification for our often destructive desires. (One only needs to consider how scientific racism served to sanction slavery and discriminatory practices before it was exposed as ideology in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.) "Freud also used literature — mostly Greek tragedies — to illustrate his discoveries. To drape one's science in the authority of the poets seems as common as poets using science to dramatize daydreams." (78) Delving deeper into the Lorenz material and their own attraction to stories, the students realize that stories are ultimately all we have to make sense of our world, to organize data into a pattern, to narrate and situate ourselves. "We like these stories because it's hard to get a grip on exactly where we stand. No matter how many airplanes we build or satellites guide us, we feel like we're everywhere and nowhere, lost in our family without a poster or a map." (81)
- 16 "Exposition" gives us to understand Field's early change of career: if science is so riddled with stories, one might as well become a writer and search for alternative ways of telling; ways of telling which are themselves informed by one's experience with science as well as one's dissatisfaction with so-called realist narrative. Field's work develops at the juncture of narrative and biology and uses one to question the other. *And* to question both, since science and "realist" fiction are predicated upon the same modern assumptions: a god-like omniscient perspective, separation of subject and object, linear causality.
- 17 Unlike experimental science, vivisection, and the realist novel, Field refuses to pry into live organisms and psyches. She doesn't venture to explain what goes on in the mind of the feral child in "Development: Another Case for Television". She refuses the bird's eye view of the omniscient narrator; we are always in the thick of things, lost *in medias res*. Unlike Lorenz who could not refrain from drawing analogies and imposing a moral



twist onto his animal stories, Field refuses anthropomorphic projections and ventriloquy: "Anthropomorphism involves projecting one's self into the body of something which is so completely different that its interiority cannot be known, yet assuming that one can tell stories in its voice; a species ventriloquism." (78) Or when she does resort to ventriloquy, she does so overtly and humorously: "This Crime has a name" is a letter from the grave written by the last individual in a now extinct species of sparrows, which Field endows with the analytic capacities of a scientist and philosopher. But in "Youthful Folly", her pet-newt remains obdurate and impenetrable to human psychology and language.

It took me three days to realize I couldn't properly care for Newt. I could read Newt about as well as I can ancient Greek. Is the rock hot enough? Do you need more shade? [...] There is no language at all, it seems, between some creatures, and an excess among others. Or, rather, sometimes an excess of one or another language results in profound silence. I watched. I tried to feel the air temperature from his point of view. I exercised anthropomorphic skills to no avail. I knew, as cricket carcasses littered the tank, that I was inadequate as a conversationalist in Newt's language, causing him a long, drawn-out starvation. (101)

- 18 Field's stories also refuse narrative build-up as I will proceed to show, but rather than continue defining the characteristics of her stories negatively, instead of showing how her critique of modern science and realist narrative led her to abandon a number of conventional features of narrative, I now want to take a more constructive approach and further characterize her stories based on her project.

## Finding the right distance and "a form to accommodate the mess"

- 19 My hypothesis is that Field's main object or concern is life, a premise supported by her initial and continuing interest in biology. Like the bird in the Audubon epigraph to *Bird Lovers, Backyard*, life is an elusive quantity that has continuously challenged philosophers and biologists and remains improperly defined. "When an individual is seen gliding through the woods and close to the observer, it passes like a thought, and on trying to see it again, the eye searches in vain; the bird is gone. — J. J. Audubon." (vii) In a 1999 panel on methods of composition, Field says she's always seen the world as "a really fractured place, a really disorganized, incomprehensible, elusive, mysterious, impenetrable and difficult place." (Baer) Clearly, it is this world, in all its complexity, that she wants to address in her work, or, as Beckett famously put it: "To find a form that accommodates *the mess*, that is the task of the artist now." (Driver: 23) Another artist who was acutely aware of this challenge and remains an important reference for Field is John Cage. In "Lecture on Nothing", he writes: "Structure without life is dead, but Life without structure is un-seen" (Cage 1961: 113). For Field as for Cage then, the challenge is to devise an adequate structure, one that will make life visible (observable, apprehensible), without destroying it. This challenge accounts for the strong constructivist impulse in Field's pieces. They devise a grid that serves as a ground and system of coordinates for an elusive figure, or invent a procedure that will trap and organize the material she researches. Many of her pieces experiment with typography and layout, treating the page as stage. Unlike the traditional plots and story-lines they replace, these often graphic structures flaunt their artifice.

- 20 What defines the adequate cage? A recurrent figure in Field's books is Heini Hediger, a Swiss biologist and zoo director, the founder of zoo biology and proxemics in animal behavior. In *Wild Animals in Captivity*, Hediger challenged the anthropomorphic vision of zoo enclosures as prison cells and the "traditional idea of the wild animal roaming more or less aimlessly at random about the world," instead defining an animal's territory as a highly differentiated individual living space centering around a home. Flight is first and each animal shows a characteristic escape reaction as soon as the enemy approaches within a definite distance: the flight distance (Hediger 1950: 19). Since "man is the universal enemy" (19), "the smallest cage in theory must thus be a circle of a diameter twice the flight distance" (32). "Only at the center of this minimum theoretical cage would the animal be separated from surrounding spectators by its flight distance, and thus able to find rest there." (32) Similarly, Thalia Field's stories often choose to illuminate the stage only peripherally, allowing a blind spot at the center for the object or characters to take cover, to escape full view. Important features of her characters will sometimes remain indistinct: number, gender or species. Is the narrator in "Apparatus" singular or plural? It says "we" but what sort of "we" has a sudden yearning for a cinnamon roll? Being the last of its species, the bird-narrator in "This Crime has a name" speaks both as an individual and as a species:

A memory-bird that died and kept right on living, exploding from one to many in mid-flight. [...] Am I a unit of life, a unit of evolution, or am I simply the latest in a long series of mistakes? [...] I tell myself I'm not a dusky seaside sparrow any longer, since I don't form a functional part of the future of that group. (Field 2010: 31-32)

- 21 Where wild animals each have their flight distances, the human animal withdraws in his mind. Aggression begins with the seemingly innocuous and well-meaning question the scientist asks the feral child:

On video: "I wonder what you're thinking," he said, "What are you thinking" holding that white bowl full of liquid. Where are you taking that? He's going to yell and scream and beat your head like your father did. (Field 2010: 97)

- 22 "I know exactly where I am" the narrator boldly announces at the end of "A : I", the opening story in Field's first collection, defying her analyst who presumably would encourage the exploration of *who* one is (Field 2000: 14). Instead of a lyric I predicated on soul-searching, Field proposes a zoological I defined in terms of territory. Therefore, the adequate cage or narrative structure is one that allows the "subject" to hide from view.

- 23 For Field as for Cage, one feels, these structures are a compromise, a constructivist step to wrench the work away from convention and to welcome the mess. Cage eventually abandoned structure in favor of process, which he likened to the weather. The epigraph to *Incarinate: Story Material*, Field's second book, evokes passing clouds: "The clouds will pass, do not try to follow them — Venerable Khandro, Rinpoche" (Field 2004: vii). While *Bird Lovers, Backyard* remains extremely planned and constructed, the book as a whole and the opening story in particular question the "'instinct' for order" through a critique of urban planning and its potential drift towards intolerance and the logic of ecocide.

- 24 The opening story, "Apparatus for the Inscription of a Falling Body", unambiguously refuses narrative buildup and takes up the challenge of a plotless story: "Instead of narrative build-up, what if we have Icarus crawling right into the water — wings on, indifferent to flight — skipping past the story-part to lie down in the ending?" (Field 2010: 1) It also proposes that we turn our attention away from the tragic hero to make

room for larger groups, maybe whole species: "What about a million — convinced just to skip the whole drama, wade in and float there — wet, sinking, unmoved by the sun? [...] can we think about a whole species like a character?" (1) Where Icarus's liftoff and crash delineates Gustav Freytag's famous pyramid of narrative structure (exposition; rising action; climax; falling action; resolution), Field flattens out the graph and keeps the action on the ground, along the time axis. The story is organized as a series of chronological logbook entries, kept by what gradually appears to be a group of marginalized traveling philosophers. Instead of narrative build-up we have a list of chronological entries; instead of Icarus' tragic flight, action is limited to thinking, note-taking and, at midday, finding the bathroom and a trashcan.

- 25 The choral narrator is sitting in an empty food court, drawn there by a flyer advertising a thinking contest to solve "the pigeon problem". Pigeons become a problem when you "[l]ook at it from the side of architecture": "shit falls fast and sticks hard" (1-4). The problem of the city begins with "junk — that stuff we don't want but can't make go away" (20). Hence the vexed question of the backyard that the book's title points to. In more ecological terms, pigeons become a problem when the territories of two species overlap, that of people and pigeon: "Pigeons aren't thought to have selves that can have interests. 'Cultural Carrying Capacity' is the fancy name for the animal death rate resulting from how willing humans are to put up with them." (20) Field questions what her characters call the "'instinct' for order". It enables us to think (by classifying, comparing, building analogies) and survive (by separating the clean from the unclean, the live and the dead) but is also the root of intolerance and the logic of genocide and ecocide. While the narrator here looks at the issue from all possible angles, other stories in the book show individuals and institutions uncritically thinking up "solutions" to get rid of what they term "pests". The story entitled "Discussion group" is a list of posts answering the query of one member of the forum: "Need solution to kill ants in garden" (112). It demonstrates an ingrained irrational fear of penetration and the limitless imagination of simple citizens when it comes to means of extermination. But experts are no better: Lorenz evolved a north-south theory of canine origin which has since been proved utterly wrong, but which successfully echoed the Nazi *volkisch* ideology which insisted that Jews — "jackal-people of the barren deserts" (73) — were naturally part of no wilderness, essentially *displaced*. And as late as the 1980s, the American Office of Endangered Species let the dusky seaside sparrow go extinct because it upheld the "purity of races" (40) and refused to sponsor hybridization programs<sup>3</sup>.
- 26 The choral narrator itself feels marginalized and from the way the one woman they encounter and approach refuses to answer them or even look at them, we get the sense they are perceived as loiterers or vagrants. They see themselves as the distant heirs of the Greek public philosophers, eager to "[m]aybe start a dialogue, a dialectic" (Field 2008: 39). But the forum in which they gather is a depleted agora, a dystopic food-court. They never meet a single citizen to discuss the matters of the City: "But where do people gather? We can't find any trash, just a strong smell of ammonia and dirty water" (Field 2010: 4). "People, once political, are now simply manageable. [...] Few left to argue with, few to pressure for answers. So thinkers wander around." (Field 2008: 37) "Apparatus" dramatizes Field's compositional mode. In her stories, Field proceeds like her choral protagonist, addresses a question, a portion of the present which, as she writes, "gunks up the senses" (Field 2010: 10): something messy, confused, complex, paradoxical. Like them, she throws questions at it, makes hypotheses without providing

answers, hopefully engaging the reader into the conversation. And it's probably in that sense, more than in a strict Cagean procedural sense, that her stories are indeterminate as to their outcome, which is how Cage defined the experimental in "Experimental Music: Doctrine": "and here the word 'experimental' is apt, providing it is understood not as descriptive of an act to be later judged in terms of success and failure, but simply as of an act the outcome of which is unknown" (Cage 1961: 13). Endowing her stories with an initial structure enables Field to throw in a lot of inconsistency because, as she says, narrative is such a weedy species.

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## NOTES

1. Epistemology notwithstanding. This would primarily target run-of-the mill scientists applying instructed protocols mindlessly but does not spare major scientists as her exposure of Konrad Lorenz shows.
  2. Used here in the Aristotelian sense which foregrounds *mimesis* rather than *metron* and therefore overlapping with what would later be called literature.
  3. "The Fish and Wildlife Service's decision to terminate the cross-breeding program was the result of bad, or at least obsolete, taxonomic analysis combined with questionable legal analysis." (Hill 1993: 259)
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## ABSTRACTS

Thalia Field's writing draws its power and inventiveness from the conversation it conducts between biology and storytelling. On the one hand, Field draws from biology or geology to invent non-human points of views or timescales and thus rethink the units of narrative (character, plot, action). On the other hand, she taps the critical learning garnered by poetry and poetics to point out the failings of science when it misuses its authority and turns a blind eye to its motives. On closer examination, "realist" fiction and scientific method share certain characteristics: omniscient point of view, separation between subject and object, linear causality. To these they owe their great cognitive faculties but also some tragic lapses. *Experimental Animals*, a polyphonic historical novel depicting the birth of Claude Bernard's experimental medicine and of the antivivisection movement, shows the tragic flaw of physiology to be the denial of experience in the name of experiment and the lack of empathy for objectified animals. Turning to ethology, the science of animal behavior, *Bird Lovers, Backyard* exposes Konrad Lorenz's tragic flaw to be a compromised use of storytelling and the projection of human psychology onto animals. Bearing these flaws in mind, Field seeks to write from the right distance, a requirement which accounts for the experimental forms her stories take, an experimentalism that owes more to John Cage than to Bernard or Zola.

L'œuvre de Thalia Field tire sa force et son originalité de la conversation qu'elle y conduit entre la biologie et la narration. D'une part, elle se sert de la géologie ou de la biologie pour inventer des échelles et des points de vue non-humains et ainsi repenser les unités de la narration (récit, personnage, action). D'autre part, elle se sert du savoir critique de la poésie et de la poétique pour pointer l'aveuglement de la science quand elle abuse de son pouvoir et s'illusionne sur ses motifs et ses méthodes. A y regarder de près, récit « réaliste » et méthode scientifique partagent des caractéristiques — point de vue omniscient, séparation du sujet et de l'objet, causalité linéaire — qui ont fait leur puissance cognitive mais ont parfois aussi causé leurs dérives et leurs méfaits. Roman historique polyphonique consacré à la naissance de la médecine expérimentale et

des sociétés de lutte contre la vivisection, *Experimental Animals* montre que la faille de la physiologie de Claude Bernard réside dans le déni de l'expérience au nom de l'expérimentation et dans le manque d'empathie pour les animaux réifiés. Consacré à l'éthologie, la science du comportement animal, *Bird Lovers, Backyard* montre que la faille de Konrad Lorenz réside dans un usage compromis du récit et la projection de la psychologie humaine sur les animaux. Avec l'enseignement de ces deux failles en tête, Field cherche à écrire à la bonne distance, une exigence qui explique la forme expérimentale que prennent ses histoires et qui doit plus à John Cage qu'à Bernard ou Zola.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Field Thalia, experimental, experience, storytelling, science, biology, Bernard Claude, Cage John

**Mots-clés:** Field Thalia, expérimental, expérience, narration, science, biologie, Bernard Claude, Cage John

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