

Incarnate: Story Material

Reviewed by Brian Whitener

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by Thalia Field

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I have this odd compulsion to tell you that I shouldn't be writing this review. I have read *Incarnate: Story Material* cover-to-cover several times and certain parts more often, and until my last reading I really didn't have any idea what to say. While I knew I wanted to say *something*, the strangeness of the work, its sparkling otherness, was evasive, difficult to talk about, harder to approach.

However, *Incarnate* is a wildly beautiful book, and I had an overwhelming desire to say something to it, to address it. Especially in her shorter poems, Field's trajectory of thought and language is so original, so specific that it's difficult to find any point of entry. In fact, it is a writing that repels most of the devices of New Criticism. As a result, it appears to me that these shorter poems, if not the whole book, call for a new type of criticism. In this review, through readings of three of the book's poems, "Land at Church City," "Feeling into Motion," and "Zoology," I will make a few gestures in the direction of a style of criticism, trying to invent a manner for saying something, not about the book, but alongside it.

"Land at Church City"

There is a man and a woman, as well as churches, birds, and community. None of them are real, none are unreal. The man is not any man, as he has a particular and not entirely obscure psychology. The woman obtains less existence. The churches truly exist the most, as they are connected to all the other elements and, due to these relations, attain a certain complexity. Also the church serves as the site of social commentary.

"Flight as she thinks her sanctuary in motion, digging from wings into a small repeated phrase, trembling at his faith."

"...he is aching in worship, and with hands that strive to forgive the height of churches..."

What is the relation between the man and the woman? We cannot say that they are in love, because the text does not discuss them in this manner or, perhaps better, use this vocabulary. However, they are something intimate yet far apart. They never appear together and the man is never orientated to the women (only the reverse). They have something for which no word exists, for.

"The population is bliss freak, and church."

"Avenue the churches or blocks and street churches, for lack of a better word, every structure a church..."

“Churches, for a lack of a better word, fake the orange cones at detours consummating.”
“One body makes a street a multitude of church buildings...”

A church is a thing that exists, but what is it? Church has a relation to groups of people; it serves to modify. Church structures physical space. It is both a building and something before a building as well...it is a building and something other buildings can't drive out of themselves. Churches are not what they seem; you are crazy if you think you can say what a church is. Church is not inside of us, but it provides a manner for us to sit down at a table.

“a billboard becomes Seraph the highest angel six, whole wings of calendars open...”

“A bird forgives the beating up the entrance, as he could pardon...”

“Feathers aren't muscles...”

Birds are gateways to other valences: they are windows to new language, to new thought. As well, the bird is not a bird, but divine, making it not human as well. A bird is real and can respond to stimulus, it can also be the same, better, or worse than a person. Birds, to put it simply, are the opposite of humans. But there is no saying what this means or if each feather is not other things.

“...a town unwieldy with churches, for lack of a better word, burdened with them and yet undeniable justified.”

Communities exist only in relation to churches. This community has too many of them. However, we cannot say if the population is 2 or 2 billion. The community exists only as a passage.

“Feeling into Motion”

I want to comment briefly on the poem “Feeling into Motion” mainly because I find it markedly different than the other poems in the collection. “Feeling into Motion” is a poem about the marking of Alaska by modern forms of control and its creation as a site where national desire and imagination were given free reign. Taken together these two processes describe, in a very historically particular sense, how feeling becomes motion, or desire action.

“Too bad: so many reasons. Now we think we are realistic. The rising feelings. Where we're headed. An incessant question.”

In some respects, this is the most legible poem in the book. Its concerns of rational control, elision of history, and militarization as the Primary Mover are easy to pick out. In this poem, unlike “Havoc,” “Sweat,” or “Crewel,” the flights of thought are of a closer orbit. More to the point, this poem has different concerns: a concern with what is there, with what has been there, with the “actual”.

“Juneau airport: 9 miles northwest of downtown. The airport covers 640.55 acres of land. Directly south and east of the airport is a wildlife refuge. There is an east-west paved runway (8456 feet long by 150 wide, along magnetic alignment of 80/260 degrees and 26 feet above sea level).”

What I like about this poem is that “the new” occupies a position quite different than what we saw in much of the 20th century. The poem is thinking and lost in thought it gives up the quest for the new. “Feeling into Motion” is the clearest statement of a tenor that can be found throughout the book as a whole. There are perhaps, three ways of formulating it. Sometimes to think a certain thought, a single-minded quest must be abandoned. There is a fidelity here to something besides aesthetics. Not the new but a recasting of the form of thought.

“Zoology”

For me, one of the most difficult parts of reading this book is trying to parse the first part of the title “incarnate.” What is this rare term that carries a weight so different than its normal usage? The book jacket offers: “Thalia Field’s new book explores the very condition of being *incarnate*: how, invested with human form, we experience both suffering and ecstasy from childhood to adulthood to death.” But while this explanation has enough distance from everyday meanings, this quote seems to be an odd fit with the book itself. (And, perhaps, a map of misreading simply becomes a misreading, but I’m happy to eliminate the distinction.) Looking for assistance to the poem “Incarnate,” which has something of a holocaust atmosphere, we might see it as a play on words, as in “evil incarnate” or in an analogical sense. The reading I’d like to offer, however, is the following: incarnate signifies an in-between state; that is, neither fiction nor reality, neither virtual nor actual. In poems like “Pine” and “Envelop Bag,” but really across the entire book, this in-between state is explored through the category of character.

I’d like to look at this interpretation in the context of “Zoologic,” a poem whose form explicitly references the theater and thus character. Unfortunately, this discussion will neglect much of the poem’s thematics, but I think the point is worth pursuing. “Zoologic” has three characters: Tessella, H. Hediger, and a narrator who occasionally addresses the audience and interacts with the characters. The characters of Tessella and H. Hediger have certain consistencies: Tessella is frequently disconcerted (“Tessella profiles perfectly into the outline of an enemy”) and the life of Martin Heidegger often serves as a slanted backstory for H. (“historical action figure/ old individual of the heroic class”). However, these are characters with no “center of gravity,” whose lives are both vaguely impossible (H. appears as a zookeeper, aviator, and historical personae) and who engage in actions that are at once realistic and fantastic (“Tessella rejects my ferocious argument/ her display consisting of tooth and claw, ritually/ again and again, and promises of skin”).

Perhaps an argument could be made that Field’s writing is a new kind of realism, that these characters are in fact a closer approximation of the “form” of life as it is lived. Why, however, the impulse to call this a realism, why the desire to chain this writing to already familiar concepts?

We could also say this: there are elements (simply in the category of character) of a kind of humanism, a concern with life as it is lived and seen in relation to time and history, but, at the same time, the self is disassociated, unfixed, contradictory. However, this line of thinking is once again tying the book to available ideas. And, personally, I find that a kind of “ethical turn” towards or reinvestment in the “human” of language-oriented writing fails to capture what is happening in the book.

It seems to me rather that the book is offering a new possibility of human subjectivity that, at this moment, we can't recognize the essential features of. For this reason, we have the impulse to have recourse to what is already legible to us. But we must resist the call of the available and answer the book's call: to think and write, not of it, but alongside it.

It is possible that this subjectivity will never become truly legible for us. However, if it turns out in this manner, it won't be the book's fault. It will be because the future the book imagines will have been foreclosed by the world's movement in another direction. That is to say, the book thinks beyond the horizon of possibility (into, we might say, possibility itself). The crux is this: exactly as the category of character encompasses the virtual and the actual and exists precariously in both worlds, the book does so as well. In other words, the book takes the risk of writing that which is not yet “being.”

You can read excerpts from Thalia Field's Zoologic at

http://www.how2journal.com/archive/online_archive/v2_2_2004/current/multimedia/zoologic.htm