I am recently returned from the 4th Biennial Meeting of the BABEL Working Group, held at the University of Toronto (Oct. 9-11; see full program [HERE]), where I participated as a speaker on a session co-organized by Craig Dionne and Nathan Kelber, “Amateur Hour: Professionals, Geeks, Enthusiasts, and the Role of Play in Our Work.” In my talk, “Illegitimate,” I shared some of my own personal experiences as both a struggling fiction writer and also as a struggling early-career academic writer in order to also make some claims about the importance of “illegitimate” thought and writing, especially at a time when the University, and Academic Publishers Proper, have (in my opinion) lost sight of the importance and value of teratological / “abnormal” work, without which academic disciplines can only keep repeating themselves within certain always already agreed-upon paradigms of inquiry. Ultimately, my talk asks that we consider an ethics of the care of the self as a modus operandi for publishing ourselves and others’ work. As Foucault once reminded us, within discourse (which “proliferates to infinity”), “anything” should be allowed in — mundane, rational, marvelous, monstrous — and we should try to avoid gaining “mastery over its chance events” and “ponderous, formidable materiality” (“The Order of Discourse”). Discourse founds and enacts hegemonies and structures of (often oppressive) power, of course, but it is also what allows us to undermine and subvert those very same hegemonies and powers — how is it that we have all read Foucault on this subject, and likely nodded our heads in agreement, yet we fail to enact and to also cultivate and foster teratological work as editors, as peer reviewers, as colleague evaluators (tenure and promotion), as publishers, etc.? This must change. Herewith, the full text of my talk —

ILLEGITIMATE

In his book From Dissertation to Book (Chicago, 2013), William Germano writes that “[b]ad dissertation writing inevitably reminds” him “of the sort of play in which young actors in gray wigs and heavy makeup play characters forty years older” (p. 118). I can imagine this line getting some laughs, nervous and otherwise, although I find it beyond condescending, given the many constraints (and anxieties) under which many graduate students labor, specifically at the hands of assholes like William Germano. But I have a different take on this image — I think that after these students supposedly “grow up” and get older, and supposedly wiser, and supposedly more confident in their own voices, that they are still putting on this play, and are still wearing these wigs. I think so many early-, mid- and advanced-career scholars are still so concerned about how their work might be received by particular so-called “experts,” editorial boards, granting agencies, tenure committees, and the like, that this play never ends. It has a longer, and more deadly, run than Agatha Christie’s The Mousetrap.
Interestingly, the word legitimate’s etymology is partly rooted in both filial authority and also the theater, emerging in English as it does in the 15th century to mean “lawfully begotten” with “full filial rights,” and later signifying “plays acted by professional actors, but not including revues, burlesque, or some forms of musical comedy” (Oxford English Dictionary). So let’s begin by saying, “here’s to scholarly writing as musical comedy burlesque acted by unprofessional, wig-wearing bastards.”

When I decided in the early 1980s that I wanted to be a creative writer — well, really, I decided that in the 6th grade when I wrote my own version of Dante’s Inferno, and also staged in the backyard with my sister and brother and our friend Jenny Adler Sartre’s No Exit, for which I actually charged admission, and which inspired one of my mother’s friends to tell my mother she should seek professional help for me — but anyway, when I was reading Raymond Carver’s What We Talk About When We Talk About Love as an undergraduate in the early 1980s, I loved it so much that I wanted to be Raymond Carver, and I started writing a lot of short stories in a certain minimalist style in which there was really no plot and nothing was ever resolved, and we all know imitation is not only the sincerest form of flattery but is also precisely how one first begins to fashion any sort of voice at all. After my Carver period, I had an Italo Calvino period, and even later, when I was trying to get into the Yaddo writer’s colony, in the mid-1990s, I was told by a famous author that he would not write a letter of recommendation for me, because I was trying too hard to be Kafka, which, indeed, was precisely what I was trying to do, and when I think about my published fiction from the past few years, it’s clear I’m still in my George Saunders phase.

When I accepted my first (and only) tenure-track position as an assistant professor at Southern Illinois University in 2002, I spent my first year there attempting to write an article about trauma and historical memory in Beowulf that would be acceptable to the editors of Speculum, which to me meant something like, make sure you have at least 200 footnotes, and that the footnotes themselves take up at least half of every page. I spent a lot of time working on this article, which grew to about 20 or so pages and I never finished it and today it is lying in a sad manila folder in a box somewhere. But I did manage to complete an article on the intellectual history of the early modern library catalogue that had about 150 footnotes and was published in the British Library Journal.\footnote{I was, and still am, very proud of this article, and it took literally years and years to write, but what always stings a little is how my structural framework for the whole story I wanted to tell, in a kind of film noir detective frame, was Italo Calvino’s short story “The Count of Monte Cristo” and also the dialogue between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan in Calvino’s Invisible Cities, and the journal’s editor asked me to delete all of that because it had nothing specifically to do with the history of library catalogs. I was also asked to revise the article so that its real purpose would be announced within the first three paragraphs. In other words: no inductive reasoning or fiction-style, metaphorical narrative allowed.}
My next published article was about the Old English poem *The Ruin* and Tony Kushner’s contemporary play *Homebody/Kabul* (set against the backdrop of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan), and my first reviewer said to publish it but get rid of the Kushner stuff since it had nothing to do with Old English poetry. This time I decided to stick to my guns and I told the editor that would be like cutting my brain in half, and miraculously, she said, “oh, okay, cool, just ignore that part of the review,” and I was like, “whoa ... editors can *do* that?” I’ve never forgotten this act of editorial charity and I strive every day to be just this sort of editor — meaning, the sort of editor who helps other writers be exactly the sort of writer they want to be, who treats the practice of editing as curatorship, as cultivation, as care of the self.

I personally was never deterred from producing more of this sort of work, and it always found a home somewhere. But it never found a home anywhere that was deemed — within medieval studies “proper” — “legitimate.” I never submitted to *Speculum*, to *Exemplaria*, to the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, to the *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, to *Viator*, to *Anglo-Saxon England*, and so on and so forth. I did everything that I was told over and over again was wrong and illegitimate: I published myself online, I published my own chapters in collections I edited with my friends, I published in new journals no one had ever heard of nor cared about, and with university presses low on the prestige scale, and so on and so forth. For me, it was and is “publish or perish,” but not for the reasons most people mean when they say that. It’s more like, if I can’t write this stuff I’m writing and in my own idiosyncratic way, I will die. I will die a million small deaths. And here let me publicly express my gratitude to my former colleagues at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville who basically agreed to let me get away with this professionally self-destructive behavior. They didn’t care where I published as long as my words were out there ... somewhere. When I was up for early promotion (partly because of my prodigious, if “illegitimate,” output), and I needed three external reviews of my work, I received three amazing and generous letters from my peers in medieval studies that almost made me cry, although one of them felt it was worth expressing that some people in Old English studies did not view my work as worthy of regard, but if anyone in my department, or my field, were to ever (again) raise the question of whether or not I was a “real medievalist” (id est, a legitimate medievalist), they should simply read my first article in the *British Library Journal* because it proved I could do deeply historicist work. He meant, with all good intentions, to defend me, but with reference to the one article I have written in my career that was designed in advance to be read while wearing a gray wig, while deep inside of me a comedy burlesque was dying to get out.

It was literally when composing these remarks that I realized that, of course, my one most true vocation was always to be an editor and publisher, and I can’t believe it took me pretty much my entire life (until just a couple of years ago) to figure that out. And for me, being a publisher means taking seriously the idea of the publishing *house* — id est, publishing as a form of hospitality. In order for our public commons to be more open, more diverse, and hopefully more rowdily democratic, the
University itself has to be more open to the ideas and voices of its supposed non-, para-, and anti-institutional Others. It is precisely at the moment that we believe that the humanities has, or should have, cultural Authority and Legitimacy, that we should revolt by striving to be illegitimate, fatherless children who want to put on musical comedies in the streets.

We might remind ourselves that English studies were partly founded in the living rooms and salons of rogue amateurs such as Frederick Furnivall and his compatriot para-academics, who founded, among many other ventures, the Early English Text Society in 1864. When James A.H. Murray was working on what would become the Oxford English Dictionary, he had to do so in a tin shed in his backyard in Oxford, which tin shed was sunk into the ground several feet so that it would not obscure the view of the Oxford don who lived next door, about which situation Murray himself wrote that “no trace of such a place of real work shall be seen by fastidious and otiose Oxford.” Because his Edinburgh degree was not recognized by Oxford and he was also a Dissenting Congregationalist, he was not initially allowed access to the Common Rooms or even to Bodleian Library, until Benjamin Jowett, Master of Balliol College, prevailed upon Oxford to grant Murray an Honorary M.A. It is worth mentioning as well that Murray was grossly under-compensated and always in debt, and that the University hounded him fairly mercilessly for always falling behind schedule on the Dictionary, so much so that he was often on the verge of a nervous breakdown and in ill health. Murray was eventually knighted in 1908, multiple honorary doctorates were ultimately conferred upon him, and he was also feted in a parade in London where he walked alongside Thomas Hardy.

Cadging from Edmund in King Lear, might now be the time to stand up for bastards, and for bastard thought — i.e., the thoughts, and the work (such as Murray’s and Furnivall’s), that the Academy does not (initially) want to claim as its supposedly “rightful” progeny? I definitively answer: yes. There is no way to move knowledge forward without this “standing up.” The more difficult question is how to refashion the academic press, such that it actually provides safe harbor and nourishment for such refugees who otherwise might capsize on the shoals of institutional indifference and even hostility. What we need right now, in my view, are more distributive collectives of someones, nomadic para-institutions, or “outstitutions,” who would take responsibility for securing the freedom for the greatest number of persons possible who want to participate in intellectual-cultural life. And a publisher would be a person, or a group, or a multiplicity, who desires to be held hostage for securing this freedom.

Publication would thus be focused on creating tools and platforms and holding areas (some call these books, journals, zines, serials, weblogs, podcasts, databases, editions, etc.), around which certain communities might coalesce and be sustained. More than just “publics,” these spaces would be “counter-publics,” in the sense given to them by Michael Warner as “spaces of circulation in which it is hoped that the poesis of scene making will be transformative, not merely replicative.” And a “press” would be that which, following the word’s Old French etymology, serves as the imprinting device, but
also as the pressing “crush” of the crowd into the commons. The university — and the presses associated with it — will hopefully continue to serve as one important site for the cultivation of thought and cultural studies more broadly, but increasingly their spaces are so striated by so many checkpoints, watchtowers, and administrative procedures, that truly radical modes of publishing are difficult to pursue and develop. One has to do only a brief survey of all of the new academic publishing initiatives cropping up everywhere — partly due to, on the one hand, a genuine enthusiasm for digital and open-access and post-monograph publishing modes, and on the other hand, the fears and anxieties that coalesce around such new directions, and on yet another (third) hand, the almost anxious hyper-reaction to governmental and university mandates that would dictate open-access publishing as compulsory — and one will see that a concern for certain forms of what I will call elite and bureaucratic-managerial academic oversight still exist (with few exceptions).\(^9\) And this sort of concern, in my mind, is not conducive to opening up the important question of what ‘counts’ as ‘scholarship,’ such that we might begin to build new avenues of access for novel (and counter-institutional) modes of thought and writing.

Whether traditional old-school or forward-leaning progressive in its publishing methods, the Academy always seeks its own imprimatur as a sign of so-called legitimacy. And it always talks in the language of austerity and false choices (like, “monographs only for tenure!” or more recently, “screw monographs; it’s all just one huge digital mega-journal from now on and everyone can aggregate their own books and cataloguing systems using Mendeley!”). What we need now are illegitimate publishers willing to build shelters for illegitimate publics, which is to say, public-ations, ones that would be hell-bent on pressing a rowdy and unruly crowd of ideas into the ventilating system of this place we call the University-at-large — an Academy of Thought (and also, thought-practices) that would not be bound by the specific geographic co-ordinates of specific schools and colleges, but which insists, nevertheless, on playing the shadow-demon-parasite-prod-supplement to the University-proper (its paramour/more). What we need now is an excess of counter-thought, an excess of modes and forms of counter-public-ation. There is no epistemic rigour worth guarding here; there is no good reason to put a limit to thought within the setting of the Academy of Thought: one must admit the mad, the chimeric, the deviant, the teratological, the wayward, the crooked, the lost, the invalid, and so on. Here be monsters in the Academy of Thought.

As Derrida reminds us, in Plato’s philosophy it “is often the Foreigner (\textit{xenos}) who questions. He carries and puts the [intolerable] question,” and thus he is the very “someone who basically has to account for [the very] possibility of sophistry.”\(^{10}\) The “paternal authority of the logos” is always ready to “disarm” the Foreigner, who nevertheless prevails as an important figure of Thought’s (difficult) natality. To welcome this xenos, this Foreigner, invites danger (the guest as enemy, the host as hostage) as well as a way forward, a way out of Authority and Legitimacy, out of our settled (overly-professionalized) selves, toward the wilder shores of vagabond thought. The publisher as host and hostage, and also as the
persons, or collective of persons, who are willing to devote their lives and service to converting as many illegitimate ideas as possible into objects of beauty, erudition, and legibility. It is hoped that these new (teratological) works would provoke us to rethink everything we thought we knew and to let go, finally, of our Legitimacy, while still insisting on Care (which is a gentle form of co-management). So let us take care. Let us take care of ourselves and our illegitimate ideas, and our illegitimate writing styles, which nevertheless also involve the mastery of others' voices as a (hopefully) non-self-harming way of finding our own voices. And if we can take care of ourselves, we will then find the resources to take care of each other.

This was Foucault's point in his late work on ascesis and the hermeneutics of the subject: there can be no good politics, and no flourishing (eudaimonia), without care of the self, and that self, of necessity, will have to be fashioned in a crooked crucible, in order that it might radiate forth those diagonal lines in the social fabric that will bring to light certain affective and relational virtualities that have been foreclosed in advance as “illegitimate,” but without which, “still improbable manners of being” cannot be invented (with the emphasis on invention, not discovery).¹¹

Whenever I’m depressed, I always watch Woody Allen's Everyone Says I Love You, which is a musical comedy in the style of Frank Capra and Preston Sturges. It isn’t “legit,” but it performs the therapy I (often) need. It performs the queer family we all need, the one that (sweetly) lets you be exactly the eccentric weirdo you need to be in exactly the way(s) you self-determine. I want to live in the (queerly loving) world of this film, even while I recognize its dramatic artificiality, its false romanticization of a certain social class, its whiteness, its (at times) Allenesque (sexual) creepiness, etc. Academics have always been good weirdos, and they probably don’t need to get much weirder. They simply need to invent and practice a better ascesis for welcoming improbability — while wearing their gray wigs, of course, but also allowing some dancing under the tables.

Footnotes


9. See, for example, the final conference report of Jisc Collections and OAPEN on “Open Access Monographs in the Humanities and Social Sciences,” a conference which was held at The British Library in July 2013 to explore the ways in which the publication of monographs would intersect with new digital publishing platforms, and where one of the overall conclusions was that the humanities and social sciences will still rely to a certain extent on monographs as a significant ‘output’ of their research dissemination while those monographs will also need to be delivered in a variety of open-access platforms if they are to have any sort of wide impact and also be sustainable over the long term. That all makes sense, but there was also a lot of hand-wringing during the conference over how to continue to ensure that these open-access monographs would continue to build and confer “prestige” and “authority”: https://www.jisc-collections.ac.uk/Reports/oabooksreport/.


Illegitimate definition is - not recognized as lawful offspring; specifically: born of parents not married to each other. How to use illegitimate in a sentence.

1: not recognized as lawful offspring specifically: born of parents not married to each other. 2a: not sanctioned by law: illegal.