

A Moth Among Troubadours; Or, My Semantikon/One-Legged Cow Years

- Mick Parsons

I first met Mark Flanigan at Kaldi's Coffee House on Main Street in OTR; this was before gentrification had fully set in, before the riots in '08. I'd managed, mostly out desperation and the willingness to be seriously underpaid, to land a gig writing for an upstart arts and culture rag, *ArtSpike*. While I framed this as a success based purely on my talent to my 2nd ex-wife, the fact was that my willingness to be exploited probably played a much larger role. My portfolio was dated and I had no idea how to present myself. In other words, I was a rube. And, I probably still am. The fact that I was (and am) a rube accounts for the fact that when I met Mark with the intention of interviewing him for an article about something he was doing at the time (Forgive me, Mark, I can't remember what it was.) and I mostly did the talking. I mostly talked about me. You may not believe this, but that sort of thing wasn't – and isn't – common for me. I'm a lousy self-promoter and even at the not-so-tender age of 30, I wasn't quite comfortable with talking about myself as a writer. Yet that's what I did. At several points in the conversation, Mark even joked about the fact that I was supposed to be interviewing him, not the other way around.

But that was first conversation I'd had with another writer since getting out of graduate school. I was hungry for a creative community. Hungry for contact with other people who worked in words. My working life at the point was academic; I was still plying my tarnished by newishly-minted MA in the college teaching trade, playing a losing game based on broken rules – the 3 Card Monte Ponzi scheme you live as an “adjunct instructor.” I wanted to do well. Hell, I wanted to be “successful.” And I even looked for writers in the not-so-hallowed halls because that's where I found them before. It never did any good; I didn't know how to talk to them. I didn't know what journals they were reading (I still don't, though I could care less at this point) and I didn't know the trends and fashions of academic poet culture (because they do exist and editors do often fall back on them... or fall against them... but in either case, there's an assumption that the poet knows about such trends and fashions and is also either falling back on or falling against them.)

I don't remember the details of showing Mark my work. But he didn't hate my work when he did read it, though I do remember him making some comment about it being decidedly academic. At some point he said to me something like, “There's this guy you should meet.” And that's how I ended up meeting Lance Oditt.

To understand One-Legged Cow Press, you have to bear in mind that what little bit of tech savviness I have is hard won and looks impressive only by relative comparison to others who are unfortunate enough to be even less tech-savvy than me. I'm far more comfortable on typewriter than I am a computer keyboard; but in spite of that shortcoming, meeting Lance and seeing what he was doing with semantikon.com made me think about publishing. And it made me think about the fact that I was in Cincinnati, OH, a place with an incredibly complex artistic community that got the short end of the shit stick for no good reason at all. I was reading – and bumping up against – incredible writers that for one reason or another, fell out of the mainstream.

Let me backtrack a bit.

I don't exactly remember meeting Lance. I was probably drunk – not an uncommon state of existence for me back then. But I know what I'm like mostly at first meetings and, unlike when I talked Flanigan's ear off in Kaldi's I probably stammered and said very little when I first met Lance. Or, being drunk, I was overly talkative and mildly obnoxious in that way I used to think was glib and sociable.

But when I showed Lance my writing, he didn't hate it. And in future conversations about my work and about the work of writing in general, we struck upon a theme that I've carried forward – that the separation between academic writers and non-academic writers – work that is sometimes called Outsider Art – is a false one. There's the work and there's writers. How they get to the page is far less important than what they do when they get there.

And there was another theme that Lance and I struck upon, after I talked to him about this idea of a regional small press... an outlet for writers from the Ohio River Valley (mostly) or with ties there, at any rate. Because publishing was still, in the early years of the millennium, pretty much a coastal or academically housed concern. The big publishers existed on the outer doughnut of the United States – New York or California. The “literary” publishers were all within the protected walls of academia. There were a few exceptions that held on – *Stovepipe* out of Georgetown, Kentucky, and Sarabande Books out of Louisville for example. But the small press explosion in the 1990's hadn't gained much ground in the Ohio River Valley. And the wave had retreated almost as fast as it had happened.

It was a losing game. But I'd been teaching a dozen sections of college composition at four different area colleges and universities; I was starting to see the strings in the machination, saw the shadow of my professional future at that time. I needed to do something. And talking to Lance about community – which was always the goal for *semantikon.com*, to build a self-sustaining creative community, where there were no leaders, exactly. And no followers. He wanted to get the ball built and rolling – a process he was always... well... in the process of ... and I saw clearly that the main issue with starting a small press – money and being able to print affordably – was easy to get around online.

I'd also recently read an article about this new technological marvel that was in the pipeline – ebooks. Microsoft and Amazon were both working on something called **e-ink**, which would be easier on the eyes than a back lit computer screen. I remember talking to my older brother – who is what he refers as a “technologist” – and he thought it was more than plausible. But it was a couple of years away still. And I didn't want to wait.

When Lance first decided to publish me on *semantikon.com*, I was over the moon. I didn't have much luck with the traditional publishing routes; being an academic myself at the time didn't seem to ingratiate me to editors, and while I could have published myself on *One-Legged Cow*, I didn't really want to. As I saw it, I was trying to build something bigger than me – a vehicle for other regional writers to get their work into the world. And when Lance wanted to publish segments this long poem I'd been working – “Expedition Notes” – in the January 2005 feature, I couldn't have been more pleased.

Here,
pollution rises to the top of the frozen river, impervious to the cold
dredging up with it
the bones of all our children, most beloved pets and evil memories, ex-wives,
cheating husbands, deadbeat fathers and drunken mothers.

We've learned not to notice.
Not anymore. Better to keep our heads down
lest he arctic wind snatches our souls from our nostrils.

A leading authority has suggested
the increasing number of winter deaths

is a direct result of exhaling at the wrong moment.

People have died
suffocating themselves
trying to keep it in.

Great mystic nihilists use pillows,
having learned to ignore the unconscious drive to survive,
holding the goose feather down on themselves.

Others have their mouths and noses surgically sealed—
but that's mainly on the west coast
according to a special report on 20/20.

Sex and asphyxiation clubs are forming in high schools
all over the Great Midwest, while here,
in the Great Valley, senile riverbed farmers watch
while their proud sons' daughters
wrap their legs around their heads
and crawl back up the birth canal.

-from "expedition notes: winter blockade"

(Full Version Online:

<http://www.semantikon.com/features/mickparsons2006.htm>)

In one of his more exuberant moments, Lance told me "Expedition Notes" was my *Wasteland*. All I knew was that something I wrote found a home. And that was when I learned that every poem has a home. Every poem has an audience. Every single poem.

The idea for OLCP was to build it up and then, when the technocrats figured out e-ink, I could make the move. But I didn't just want to do a website. That didn't feel... tangible enough. So I used the PDF format. I wanted to pay the writers I published, even if it was only enough to buy a beer. When readers bought OLCP books, I sold them a lock code and emailed them a locked PDF. That also helped me build an email list, too, which was far more complicated to do then than it is now.

And we did ok. I published Mark and some other writers, some of whom have gone on to bigger publishing opportunities. I published a literary journal, *Sticky Kitchen*, which was archived at Ball State University in a collection dedicated to regional literary journals. I ran monthly readings at the Base Art Gallery – a coop art gallery on Main Street in OTR.

Lance eventually offered me the chance to be a feature editor on semantikon.com and I brought in what I felt were some solid writers. I was still straddling the false dichotomy – that space between academic writers and "Outsider Artists" – and my editorial picks reflected that. And when OLCP imploded after 3 years and I moved to Arizona chasing the only (short-lived) full-time teaching position I ever got, I found myself thinking about it as a watershed moment.

Something else was born then, too. This idea, one I'm still playing with and trying to bring into focus. This idea that there's an Ohio River Valley Literature that's distinct from Midwestern Literature

3 | M i c k P a r s o n s / A Moth Among Troubadours; Or, My Semantikon/One-Legged Cow Years

and distinct from Appalachian Literature. A literature formed by the land made by the changing river channels, this Wild West before the western expansion, this land of myth, this land of the Seven Hills. A literature that's more about what happens when writers get words on the page instead of how they approached the precipice. I see the shape of it when I unfocus my eyes stare forward, in writers like Mark Flanigan, F. Keith Wahle – who was also published on semantikon.com at one point – as well as Aralee Strange, LaTasha Digs, Nathan Singer, and Ralph LaCharity. There are others. If you're lucky, you'll get to read them.

And as I think about what it all means now, I'm left with the lessons. Every poem as a reader. And some of the best writers to come out of America come out of the mud of this river and the land it's created. Publishing is a lot easier than it used to be, and maybe the small press/indie press boom, was only this bridge between the big boys having all the toys to being able to publish a book using your cell phone and a borrowed WiFi signal. But semantikon.com stands as a testament to something else: that once upon a time, someone dared to believe that regional writers deserve the stage as much as Billy Collins and Barbara Kingsolver. I can't think of a better legacy to be a part of as a former teacher, former publisher, and working poet.