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## The prodigality of the pedagogue

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When Terrel Howard Bell looked for a way to start his novel about “the problems of education” he appears to have faced an impasse. The novel, *The Prodigal Pedagogue*,<sup>1</sup> begins with a laborious entry by means of first a “Foreword,” then a “Prologue,” and then, finally, the scene commencing Chapter 1, in which the protagonist Robert Jones is found walking up to the high school building of Lapidary Valley.

The lack of faith in the conventions that allow other novelists to start *in medias res* without preamble, making their world up as they go along, would probably have been remedied by a competent trade house editor. But when *The Prodigal Pedagogue* was published in 1955, it was brought to the public by Exposition Press, which, like other so-called vanity presses, was content with transmitting the author’s vision with minimal changes. Everything in this separate world of publishing within (and outside) publishing leads us to believe that while the vanity publishers themselves are completely determined by economic considerations, (constrained only by a necessary concern for the legal ramifications of the books’ content, to be sure), the authors are guided by entirely different concerns, some of which must be considered “literary” but not *properly* literary. The practice of these authors shows us the effect of literary capital on those who lack the proper means to accumulate it. The full investigation of the role of vanity presses remains to be carried out, and I offer these speculations “on credit” to borrow a phrase from Broady and Palme.<sup>2</sup>

Terrel Bell’s awkward entry into his story about “the many problems faced by superintendents, principals and teachers during the period following World War II” shows us the product of an “expressive drive” which has not been subjected to the “systematic transformation” which a complete entry into the legitimate liter-

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<sup>1</sup> Terrel Howard Bell, *The Prodigal Pedagogue*, Exposition, New York 1955.

<sup>2</sup> Donald Broady och Mikael Palme, ”Inträdet. Om litteraturkritik som intellektuellt fält”, pp. 173–215 in Donald Broady (ed.), *Kulturens fält*, Daidalos, Göteborg 1998, p. 214.

ary field would have entailed.<sup>3</sup> The prodigality of the pedagogue is shown in the refusal to withhold from the reader the various considerations the author felt he had to make. This is not an artful beginning, but a “pedagogical” one: it aims to lead the reader, to awake “a sense of urgency [...] within the people to the extent that necessary sacrifices are made for education”<sup>4</sup> and also to inform the reader that such is the author’s intention. Among the systematic transformations effected by the imposition of literary form, one of the most fundamental is the conversion of a real social and physical space into an imagined, symbolic space. However, Bell’s creation of a “49<sup>th</sup> state” and a representative small town in it has nothing of the seeming naturalness of literary realist conventions, but is carried out as if on a blackboard: “Thus, in order to have a clear picture of the scene of this story, the reader should have a clear mental image of Lapidary Valley,” the author of the “Prologue” tells us, and informs us how “the valley is distinctly marked off in sections of economic and social interest.”<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, this kind of “clear picture” is nothing if not a result of a transformation of an actual space into an imagined one, and what is remarkable about *The Prodigal Pedagogue* is not altogether uncommon even in legitimately published novels: the transparency of its manifestation of an individual expressive drive.<sup>6</sup> Robert Jones, the prodigal pedagogue protagonist, is hired as superintendent of Lapidary Valley school district in August, 1947. Terrel Bell was hired as superintendent of Rockland Valley school district in August, 1947. Jones was born 1922 in Locust Spring, on a farm, in a family with nine children, the novel informs us in heavy-handed but lucid characterization. Terrel Bell was born in late 1921 in Lava Hot Springs, Idaho, on a farm, in a family of nine children. I could, but will not, continue with all the public particulars which make up at least those dimensions of a life that fit into a data set.

The description of Lapidary Valley and the city of Lapidary in the novel gives an accurate picture of Rockland Valley in terms of topography, soil, and its reliance on dry farming. Whether the sections of economic and social interest correspond to the actual divisions of social space is not a question we can answer, but in all the particulars that can be checked the *coincidental* “similarity to actual persons or places” of the imaginary ones is almost letter perfect. The formula of a “coincidental similarity” (“any similarity to actual persons or places is coincidental”) captures very well the fact that the same thing *takes place* in two entirely different spaces: the social/physical space of actuality and the sym-

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<sup>3</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger*, Trans. Peter Collier, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1991 [1988], p. 42.

<sup>4</sup> Bell, op. cit. 1955, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> This very morning Lisbeth Larsson adds a contribution to the debate in *Dagens Nyheter* about the blurring of fiction and autobiographical reality in recent novels (“Författarna checkar ut från fiktionen” 8 Dec, 2005, Kultur 6–7).

bolic space of the novel; it only fails to add that “any *difference* vis-à-vis actual persons or places is *also* coincidental,” that is, it is an incident that is repeated but in either a similar or a transformed manner.

The ambiguity of the novelistic discourse in *The Prodigal Pedagogue* can be found partly in a tension between the unchecked expressive drive towards telling every irritating detail and the literary demand for compression and symbolic significance. The redundant “effets du réel” (the uncensored speech of the expressive drive) are part of the pedagogical prodigality which would gladly be wasteful of all the particulars which combine to spell out the need for educational reform in anything but lapidary prose, while the novelistic demands of narrative move Robert Jones if not speedily, then inexorably towards his brief triumph and immediate downfall.

Having won over the townspeople by a straightforward appeal to their generosity, and not least to their martial spirits in the “all-out war on the universal ignorance of the world,” Jones is politically stabbed in the back by the most ignorant and the greediest among the Lapidary population. After having been forced to resign, he is rebuked by his wife for having chosen to be a “damned schoolteacher! The lowest form of human life! [...] It’s just like my dad said, anyone with anything on the ball won’t stay in schoolteaching for very long. When are you going to wake up to that?”<sup>7</sup> This scene is surprising for its emotional pitch, but quite convincing in terms of psychological realism: extreme disappointment prompts Jones’s wife to measure his career choice in stark economic terms, and to remind him of her own attachment to economic capital in the figure of her father: “Why, my dad could hire you at your wages and never know where the money went.” On the other hand, her condemnation of the (relatively poor) townspeople shames them for their economic calculations, their obsession with the “paltry increases in taxes.”<sup>8</sup> There is a real contradiction here, and Bell then does what US authors so often do when symbolic resolutions must be found for such contradictions: he takes Jones out in the woods, away from civilization, all alone with nature but for his firearm. Humbled and bitter, he takes stock of his situation, weighs money against the profession. Despairing, Jones then has a shooting accident which he actually anticipates with near equanimity. As the novel ends, however, he wakes up in the hospital, only to affirm the value of the profession: “Maybe there’s an old school district somewhere with a broken-down building that needs a superintendent”.<sup>9</sup> The idea of vocation, and of civic pride, wins out over the purely secular values of money.

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<sup>7</sup> Bell, op. cit. 1955, p. 273.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 273.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 276.

Terrel H. Bell is in some ways atypical among the vanity-published authors who appeared as first novelists in 1955.<sup>10</sup> The deviation from the norm could be expressed statistically, but in this essay I will go straight to the salient fact that Bell's trajectory finally led him to legitimate publishing. Two books related to education were published in the 1970s. And then, in 1988, one of the big players in the publishing field, Macmillan, published his memoirs, *The Thirteenth Man: A Reagan Cabinet Memoir*.<sup>11</sup> It is to this phase of Bell's career we must now turn, because to the extent that anyone remembers Terrel H. Bell, it is in association with the first Ronald Reagan administration, the movement for school reform, and the notorious phrase "a tide of mediocrity."

The period between *The Prodigal Pedagogue* and Bell's appointment to Secretary of Education is an interesting one in terms of Bell's mobility, including a spell in Washington DC under the Nixon and Ford presidencies, but it is in 1980 that the next story begins. This story is the sequel, so to speak, and we might term it *The Prodigal Pedagogue Goes to Washington*. In fact, newspaper accounts on several occasions alluded to the famous Frank Capra film *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*.<sup>12</sup> In that 1939 movie, James Stewart played Jefferson Smith, a Boy Rangers leader from a Western state who becomes a senator thanks to backroom deals in which it is anticipated that the political machine will be able to manipulate the naïve idealist. However, Smith is able to fight back and his idealism wins the day. Journalists associated Bell with Jefferson Smith in retrospect, and the early reactions to his appointment played up the provincial, "folksy" angle. It was noted that Bell was the only non-millionaire in the Cabinet, and newspapers described his move from Utah in a Jeep Waggoner and a U-Haul truck.<sup>13</sup> The arrival within the Beltway of one who is a stranger to its customs is how this story starts (although in fact Bell had been around the block more than once).

It seems likely that this "thirteenth man" was chosen in the belief that as a provincial outsider he would be respectful, loyal, and, more importantly, easy to manipulate. Two of the key people handling the transition to the new administration, White House personnel director Penn James and chief of staff Edwin Meese III, made the hiring decision after having briefly met with Bell in a San Diego airport restaurant. In Bell's words, Meese was the "keeper of the radical right dogma" in the White House, and his main means of controlling policies

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<sup>10</sup> For a presentation of the project "Literary Generations and Social Authority" which studies three cohorts of US authors, a research project that would have been unthinkable without the pedagogical activities of Donald Broady, see *Poetics* 30.5–6 (October–December 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Terrel Howard Bell, *The Thirteenth Man. A Reagan Cabinet Memoir*, Macmillan, New York 1988.

<sup>12</sup> See Martin Morse Wooster, "Mr. Bell Goes to Washington," *Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 8, 1988, and Beryl A. Radin, "No to Jelly Beans," *New York Times*, Mar 20, 1988.

<sup>13</sup> Megan Rosenfeld, "For Whom Bell Toils," *Washington Post*, Apr 5, 1981, and Storer Rowley, "Bell quits Cabinet to teach," *Chicago Tribune*, Nov 9, 1984.

was his influence over staffing decisions.<sup>14</sup> Once in place, with a one year's lease on his Washington house, Bell declared his support for the administration's platform on education, but at the same time he resisted Meese's attempts to stack the Department of Education with New Right people.<sup>15</sup> There is little doubt that he had an overt politics and a covert one, the latter being the attempt to bolster the federal support for education and to maintain the very Department his overt politics was seeking to nullify. He turned out to be a stubborn opponent. As David P. Gardner, President of the University of Utah, noted in his memoirs: "Much to their later dismay, [Bell's] critics and detractors often mistook his self-effacing manner for weakness at best and ineptitude at worst".<sup>16</sup>

Gardner chaired the commission that was to outflank Bell's adversaries. Bell's plans for a Commission on Education that would analyze the state of the nation's schools must have come as an unpleasant surprise to Reagan, who understandably refused to endorse such a body.<sup>17</sup> Instead, Bell himself appointed The National Commission on Excellence in Education, wrote its charter, and provided support for it.<sup>18</sup> Guthrie and Springer argue that Bell's purpose was to get a report praising U.S. public schools, in order to make it less politically expedient to cut funding to public education. "A report intended by the President to promote an antipublic education agenda, and by the Secretary to promote a celebration of public schools, turned out to be neither of these. Instead, it embraced the role of public education but declared the present system a failure."<sup>19</sup> Whatever may have been Bell's expectations, the Commission Chairman credits him with supporting the commission's work, and when the report came, entitled "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform," Bell made the most of its cautionary message. "Bell, who could not have imagined that the national media would disseminate his report with so much fanfare, had arranged for his own blitzkrieg dissemination at no less than twelve regional conferences throughout the year."<sup>20</sup>

Some of the formulations in the Commission report are justly famous. The authors claimed that "[t]he educational foundations of our society are presently

<sup>14</sup> Bell, op. cit. 1988, p. 39.

<sup>15</sup> Radin, op. cit. 1988, and Jonathan Yardley, "What Terrel Bell Learned at the Dept. of Education," *Washington Post*, Jan 3, 1988.

<sup>16</sup> David Pierpoint Gardner, *Earning My Degree. Memoirs of an American University President*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2005, p. 104.

<sup>17</sup> See Linda Symcox, *Whose History? The Struggle for National Standards in American Classrooms*, Teachers College Press, New York 2002, p. 42.

<sup>18</sup> Gardner, op. cit. 2005.

<sup>19</sup> James W. Guthrie and Matthew G. Springer, "A Nation at Risk Revisited. Did 'Wrong' Reasoning Result in 'Right' Results? At What Cost?", pp. 7–35 In *Nation at Risk. A 20-Year Reappraisal. A Special Issue of the Peabody Journal of Education*, Kenneth K. Wong et al. (eds) 79.1 (2004), p. 11.

<sup>20</sup> Symcox, op. cit. 2002, p. 43.

being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. [...] If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves. [...] We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking unilateral, educational disarmament.”<sup>21</sup> As many commentators have noted, the effect of the report was to tie education to issues of economic and military vulnerability in the popular mind and thus focus “almost unprecedented attention on the nation’s public education system.”<sup>22</sup> The Reagan administration made an about-turn on education, increasing (if only for a time) federal funding and making the performance of schools a leading issue in the re-election campaign.<sup>23</sup> Reagan even wrote an article claiming the report’s message echoed his views.<sup>24</sup>

In an altogether surprising and ironic fashion, then, Terrel Bell came to be a key figure in how education was affected by what Michael W. Appel has termed “the conservative restoration.”<sup>25</sup> It is true that the Reagan administration dropped the educational theme after the re-election, but Bell’s successor, William Bennett, would turn the new interest in education in a decidedly more ideological, conservative direction, deliberately using his Cabinet post as a “bully pulpit to influence educational policy.”<sup>26</sup> Within five years of the commission report, a spawn of books about education, in a right-wing mould, were on the nation’s bookshelves, including William J. Bennett’s *To Reclaim a Legacy*,<sup>27</sup> E. D. Hirsch’s *Cultural Literacy*,<sup>28</sup> and Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind*<sup>29</sup> and hard on their heels followed Roger Kimball’s *Tenured Radicals*<sup>30</sup> and Dinesh D’Souza’s *Illiberal Education*.<sup>31</sup> By then Bell was back in Salt Lake City, teaching at the University of Utah and tending his sod

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Susan R. Martin, “The 1989 Education Summit as a Defining Moment in the Politics of Education,” pp. 133–160 in Kathryn M. Borman and Nancy P. Greenman (eds), *Changing American Education. Recapturing the Past Or Inventing the Future?* SUNY Press, Albany 1994, p. 139.

<sup>22</sup> Guthrie & Springer, op. cit. 2004, p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> Martin R. West and Paul E. Peterson, “The Politics and Practice of Accountability,” pp. 1–22 in Paul E. Peterson and Martin R. West (eds), *No Child Left Behind? The Politics and Practice of School Accountability*, Brookings Institution Press, 2003.

<sup>24</sup> Symcox, op. cit. 2002, p. 43.

<sup>25</sup> Michael W. Appel, *Cultural Politics and Education*, Teachers College Press, New York 1996.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Symcox, op. cit. 2002, p. 41.

<sup>27</sup> William J. Bennett, *To Reclaim a Legacy. A Report on the Humanities in Higher Education*, National Endowment for the Humanities, Washington D. C. 1984.

<sup>28</sup> E. D. Jr. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy. What Every American Needs to Know*, Houghton, Boston 1987.

<sup>29</sup> Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, Simon and Schuster, New York 1987.

<sup>30</sup> Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals. How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education*, Harper, New York 1990.

<sup>31</sup> Dinesh D’Souza, *Illiberal Education. The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus*, Vintage, New York 1991.

farm. He resigned almost immediately after the landslide re-election of Reagan, tired of fighting the New Right ideologues.<sup>32</sup>

The role of Terrel Bell in laying the foundations for the right-wing offensive that started the so-called “culture wars” has never been recognized, no doubt because indirect relations and effects are difficult to perceive. When President Reagan appointed Bell as Secretary of Education he unwittingly handed Bell the *skeptron*, and thus made it possible for Bell to speak of that which filled his heart: the importance of education for the whole nation.<sup>33</sup> In Bell’s novel from 1955, Robert Jones is given an opportunity for oratory because of the political debate around taxes and modernization of the local school. The issue of building a new gymnasium is tied directly to the performance of the whole American people in a civilization that is extremely precarious: “If there is any hope of peace in an age when mass destruction and wholesale murder are within the grasp of greedy men, it is through education.”<sup>34</sup> The form of the novel supplied Bell with a virtual bully pulpit which he used to portray the humble righteousness of the educator, but it was a pulpit without an audience to bully. It is by the unlikely delegation of the power of public speech that resulted from his appointment in 1981 that Bell gets to speak the same message again, now through the Commission report, and in the conferences he arranged in relation to it.

It was an unexpected turn of events, from the perspective of those who hired Bell, and it is my argument that they failed to reckon with the strength of the expressive drive that had once resulted in the novel and the books on education. The sudden appearance of education as a central issue in national politics was perhaps a classic case of “unintended consequences” but as it turned out, it was necessary that such a figure as Bell would be there to bring it about. His integrity as an educator, as a spokesman for the profession, was what made him resist the explicit (anti-)education agenda of his party and his President, but it was also what made it possible for him to gain a platform from which all camps would attend to him. We can see in the media coverage and in later assessments how Bell is identified as an agent with a great deal of specific professional-educational capital.<sup>35</sup> We can then analyze the struggle personified by Bell and Meese as a confrontation of different kinds of capital within the field of politics. The sheer volume of political capital stacked against Bell finally forced him out of federal politics, but the irony was that the temporary stalemate resulted in a political innovation: the new utility of educational arguments for the conservative restoration (or even revolution). It is a utility based on fears and anxieties about national decline which could easily be wedded to the perennial figure of

<sup>32</sup> “Bell hints he left because of the Right,” *Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 10, 1984.

<sup>33</sup> See Donald Broady, “Skolmästarkonst och vetenskap,” pp. 80–85 i *Artes*, 25.1 (1999) for a discussion of the delegation of the right to speak symbolized by the *skeptron*.

<sup>34</sup> Bell, op. cit. 1955, p. 250.

<sup>35</sup> E.g. Guthrie & Springer, op. cit. 2004, p. 10.

the fifth-columnists destroying American values from within. *A Nation at Risk* leads straight to the Culture Wars and to the politics of cultural values within a generalized Hobbesian world-view. This was the unpredictable but unsurprising ending to a more local struggle.

*The Prodigal Pedagogue* was a novel filled with minor incidents, but its main drama “centered around a struggle for development and control of the schools in the valley” and in a similar manner the sequel, “The Prodigal Pedagogue Goes to Washington,” focused on the struggle over the monopoly to define the value of education within the conservative restoration. As in the novel, the hero both triumphed and was defeated. He saved the Department of Education and fought off budget cuts, but he was beleaguered by enemies who outnumbered him. Forced to resign, the hero withdraws, but remains true to his vocation. The similarities between Robert Jones’s story in the vanity press novel and the tribulations of the Secretary of Education in the first period of the Reagan administration are no doubt coincidental, but if we are tempted to associate the two emplotments with one another, it is because their fundamental ambiguity points to several social spaces all inhabited by one individual. The symbolic space of the fictional work expresses the urge to fight the good fight, and it justifies the choice of an educator’s profession. This vocation, in turn, empowers the individual, who is, outside of the terms of that vocation, bereft of power. Within the contradictory accord of the new conservative dispensation, many of Bell’s ideas no doubt fit in, but his commitment to the dignity of the profession of the public school teacher and administrator did not. The prodigality of the pedagogue had no place in the age of Reaganomics. The deficit could be increased as long as the money was spent on the military-industrial complex, but public education was in for a cut once the election had been won, a nation at risk or not.

Edwin Meese III and the other “movement conservatives” must have thought of Bell in the field of federal politics as something like the douanier Rousseau in the art field: a politician “made” by them and the forces of Washington. However, he turned out to serve another script, one that he had written himself twenty-five years earlier. One has to wonder whether Bell was ever struck by the fact, in those years in the early 1980s, that he was living the story he had told in the novel, a novel based on his own experiences from his first years as a civil servant in education. Terrel Bell may not be a world-historic personage, but he does appear, so to speak, twice, the first time as a fictional hero of a vanity-press published regional melodrama, and the second time as a principal agent in a real-life Beltway political drama. On reviewing his remarkable trajectory, one has to see in the writing of that first novel a kind of investment, but not the kind that qualifies a writer for entry into the literary field. In that novel he invested and objectified his own belief in the educator’s profession—a belief directly expressing the social position he had fought for—and while the

symbolic product itself has earned no recognition within any social field, it is tempting to think that the investment, turned into habitus, was one of the useful things Mr. Bell took with him, along with the other stuff in the U-Haul truck, when he went to Washington.

I wonder if anyone will ever read *The Prodigal Pedagogue* again. I wonder if anyone has read it for the past forty years or so. Its afterlife is curtailed in the extreme. Like all the books published by vanity presses it is a monument to one individual's wish to have his concerns expressed in the form of a book, but the drive to express them was not sufficient to propel the writer into the reality of legitimate publication. As so many other novels of this kind, it is a thinly disguised rendering of the writer's own experiences, all its scenes co-incidental, being incidents both in real life and in this representation. Its audience is restricted to kin and friends. It is the work of the "non-initiate" and will therefore, as Donald Broady puts it, meet with nothing but silence.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Donald Broady, "Kulturens fält. Om Pierre Bourdieus sociologi," pp. 59–88 i *Masskommunikation och kultur, NORDICOM-Nytt/Sverige 1–2* (1988), p. 6.