A Medieval Crusader in Twentieth-Century New Orleans: John Kennedy Toole’s A Confederacy of Dunces

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ABSTRACT

After a survey of the unusual publication history and the polarizing critical reception of A Confederacy of Dunces, it is shown that the novel’s picaresque surface hides an artfully designed structure that tells about the hilarious encounters of programmatically named characters who represent New Orleans’ ethnic diversity. This article investigates the character of Ignatius J. Reilly and the opposition between his medieval world view and that of his twentieth-century antagonists and its reflection in the subversive contrast between Ignatius’s reliance on Boethius and his rejection of Mark Twain. It shows how Ignatius’s rude behavior contradicts his pious beliefs and makes him a satirist satirized, discusses his fascination with the movies as intertextual play with Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye and Percy’s The Movie-Goer, explains Toole’s strategies for creating both situational and verbal comedy, and shows that Ignatius’s linguistic flights of fancy go back to his creator’s academic work on Lyly’s Euphues (whereas the other characters’ ways of speaking represent New Orleans’ linguistic variety). This article outlines the unsavory, partly Swiftian traits of Ignatius’s repellent corporeality and reveals the easily overlooked reasons for his distasteful behavior. It reads the novel’s open ending as the double-pronged result of the medieval notion of the arbitrary workings of the rota Fortunae and the twentieth-century ethics of reward and punishment. It also points out the weaknesses of Toole’s overambitious novel and concludes that, despite these shortcomings, it is an accomplished example of narrative art.

A great writer is the friend and benefactor of his readers.

Thomas Babington Macaulay

Under the big clock of what once was the landmark D.H. Holmes Department Store on Canal Street stands a bronze statue of Ignatius J. Reilly, a famous fictional inhabitant of New Orleans. The statue shows him clad in a hunting cap, flannel shirt, baggy pants, and scarf, carrying a Werlein’s shopping bag, and “studying the crowd of people for signs of bad taste in dress” (Toole 13). Ignatius was created by John Kennedy Toole, who studied English at Tulane and Columbia University and taught at different colleges before he was drafted into the Army in 1961. Fluent in Spanish, he was sent to Puerto Rico where he taught English to Spanish-speaking soldiers and began writing A Confederacy of Dunces, which he finished in 1964 in his parents’ home in New Orleans and sent to the publishing company Simon and Schuster. Their senior editor, Robert Gottlieb, who had convinced Joseph Heller to finish Catch-22 and would later see books by John Cheever and Toni Morrison into print, found the manuscript not yet ready for publication, and wrote in a letter of December 14, 1964:
What we think is this. That you are wildly funny often, funnier than almost anyone around, and of kind of funny. That many of the characters are wonderful—Burma, Santa, Irene, Mancuso, Lana Lee, and others (Miss Trixie too). That certain things don’t work: Myrna, in particular. That Ignatius is in trouble—that he’s not as good as you think he is, and there is too much of him. That the Levys are not so hot. That the book is considerably too long. That certain scenes, particularly my favorite—the civil rights demonstration in the factory—are glories. That others are washouts. [...] But that, all this aside, there is another problem: that with all its wonderfulnesses, the book—even better plotted (and still better plotable)—does not have a reason; it’s a brilliant exercise in invention, but unlike CATCH [22] and MOTHER’S KISSES and V and the others, it isn’t really about anything. And that’s something no one can do anything about. Certainly an editor can’t say: “Put meaning in.” (qtd. in Nevils and Hardy 131)

Devastated by this criticism, Toole started revising and on March 5, 1965 wrote back to Gottlieb:

In the revision plot threads were tied together, but sometimes this turned out to be only sound and fury. Myrna turned into a cartoon, in a book where almost everyone else was basically real, but she was supposed to be very, very likable; if, to an objective reader, she is a “pain in the ass,” then she’s a debacle. But when I sent you the revision I was certain that the Levys were the book’s worst flaw. In trying to make them “plot” characters, they got out of hand, becoming worse and worse, and turned into cardboard whose conversa-tions I was embarrassed to reread. [...] I don’t know whether I can describe just how that couple kept slipping from my grasp as I tried to manipulate them through the book. Irene, Reilly, Mancuso—these people say something about New Orleans. They’re real as individuals and also as representative of a group. [...] Burma Jones is not a fantasy, and neither is Miss Trixie and her job, the Night of Joy club and so on. (qtd. in Nevils and Hardy 138-39)

But after two years Toole gave up in despair, developed a growing paranoia, and on March 26, 1969 committed suicide at the age of thirty-one. His ambitious mother, who was convinced that her son was an unappreciated genius, sent the manuscript to eight publishers and received eight rejections (MacLauchlin 226). But she finally persuaded the novelist Walker Percy to read the text. He found it excellent, and in 1980 the original version of the hefty novel was published by the University of Louisiana Press with a foreword in which Percy praised it as a “gar-gantuan tumultuous human tragicomedy” (9). In spring 1981 Grove Press brought out a paperback edition, and a year later, A Confederacy of Dunces was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. It quickly grew from a cult book into a classic. By 2000 over 1.5 million copies were in print (Nevils and Hardy 214), and by 2005 the novel had been translated into eighteen languages (Fletcher 14).

In 2001 René Pol Nevils and Deborah George Hardy made the first attempt to shed light on Toole’s unhappy life and his relationship with his domineering mother, but their portrait of Toole as a failed artist suffering from an Oedipus complex, suppressed homosexuality, and alcoholism, and ending in madness and suicide annoyed many of his friends. Joel L. Fletcher found their book “an appaling piece of work” that was “irredeemably flawed” (185, 186) and set out to correct it in his 2005 memoir. He used his journals and letters to recreate his friendship with ‘Ken’ and dealt in detail with his long association with Ken’s indomitable mother Thelma. In 2009 Joe Sanford released his award-winning film
John Kennedy Toole: The Omega Point that traces Toole’s life through interviews with his mother and friends and is available online in the internet. And, in 2012, Cory MacLauchlin published what so far is the definitive biography, using interviews with family members, friends and colleagues as well as the Toole archives at Tulane University. Thus, by now we know that the ‘model’ for Ignatius was Toole’s colleague Robert Byrne at the University of Southwestern Louisiana at Lafayette, who was an eccentric medievalist, played the lute, wore baggy clothes in strange colors and a deer-stalker hat with ear flaps, had an aversion to driving cars, thought of himself as a devoted slob, suffered from flatulence, and often talked with Toole about Boethius and the wheel of fortune. We know that Ignatius’s hostile relationship with his mother mirrors Toole’s problems with the overbearing Thelma and that the young professor’s acquaintance with liberal Jewish women students during his teaching at Hunter College in New York provided him with material for Myrna Minkoff. And we can assume that his student jobs as a hot dog vendor at Tulane football games and clerk in the Haspel Brothers clothing factory inspired his creation of Paradise Vendors and Levy Pants.

Toole’s novel has been read as “a keen satire of modern existence” (Daigrepont 74), a novel in the classic eighteenth- and nineteenth-century tradition presenting “a decidedly conservative view of art and of society” (Miller 30), and a “comic-tragic or grotesque novel” (Nelson 36; see Simmons; Kline). The many-faceted tale has been understood as “a book about the abuse of children, both physical and psychological” (Clark 269), “the kind of satire in which the satirist-persona or satirist-character makes his attack and is ironically ridiculed himself” (McNeil 33), and a novel which “transports the medieval picaresque tradition to modern-day New Orleans” (Bell 15) by means of a protagonist who is “in some ways [...] a latter-day picaresque hero” (Patteson and Sauret 84). It has been identified as “transparently a travesty” of Walker Percy’s The Movie-Goer (Regan 171; see Simon), “a distinctive brand of southern satire which involves the use of religious allegory in the exploration of modern ills” (MacKethan 29), and “a Christian comedy” (Gardner 87). It has been read as part of the southern tradition with Ignatius as “a parody of agrarianism” (Ruppersburg 124), a narrative whose greatest strength is “its use of ethnic humor” (Lowe 159), and as “a medievally inspired allegory with a twentieth-century twist” (Pugh 78). In view of the many labels that critics have affixed to the sprawling narrative, one wonders whether so many different things can be accomplished in a single text. Thus, it seems appropriate to heed Lowe’s warning that “we begin to run into problems [...] when we try to confine this baggy monster to only one of our existing literary categories, such as satire, parody, bildungsroman, and so on” (Lowe 159), and to concentrate on a close reading of the novel’s constitutive elements.

A ‘Picaresque’ Plot with an Intricate Structure

On the surface Toole’s novel is a rambling picaresque tale told by an omniscient narrator and consists of sundry episodes arranged in a chronological sequence. On closer scrutiny, however, it turns out to possess an intricate structure
that consists of a tightly woven web of intersecting narrative strands and whose center is filled, in an almost literal sense, by Ignatius J. Reilly. When his mother causes an automobile accident and faces unexpected expenses, her lazy son must look for some gainful employment, which sets all further action in motion. Ignatius, who abhors “the perversion of having to GO TO WORK” (41), manages to get an office job at the dilapidated factory of Levy Pants, where he ruins the filing system and tries to persuade the black workers to take over the factory in his outrageous “Crusade for Moorish Dignity” (149). Having been fired, he becomes a hot dog vendor in the French Quarter, where he gets to know the rich homosexual Dorian Greene and stages his second, even more ludicrous and equally abortive, social project, trying to recruit the gays in the Quarter for his plan to save the world through degeneracy. His misadventures culminate in a near-riot in a sleazy bar on Bourbon Street, ending with his narrow escape from the psychiatric ward of Charity Hospital, since his former girlfriend Myrna Minkoff arrives at the right moment and spirits him away to a new cycle of adventures in New York.

This central action is multiply intertwined with several subplots. There is a narrative strand that deals with Patrolman Mancuso, who tries in vain to arrest a real criminal, becomes acquainted with Mrs. Reilly after her car accident, and introduces her to his bawdy aunt Santa Battaglia. This in turn creates another subplot that revolves around Santa’s attempts to bring about Mrs. Reilly’s marriage with Mr. Claude Robichaux, a well-off pensioner who hates communists, and to rid her of her troublesome son. A third subplot deals with Lana Lee, the owner of the shabby bar Night of Joy and the purveyor of pornographic pictures for high school children, her inept B-girl Darlene, who dreams of becoming a stripper, and her unwilling black handyman Burma Jones, who tries to sabotage her illegal business. A fourth subplot deals with Mr. Levy, the unhappy owner of a crumbling pants factory, his bored wife Mrs. Levy, who dabbles in amateur psychology, the obsequious office manager Mr. Gonzales, and the senile octogenarian assistant accountant Miss Trixie. Finally there are minor characters such as George, a pimply truant pretending to be a streetwise criminal; Dr. Talc, a bumbling professor of English literature; Mr. Watson, the confidante of Burma Jones; Mr. Clyde, the aged owner of Paradise Vendors; Miss Annie, the suffering neighbor of the Reillys; and Frieda, Betty and Liz, three militant lesbians from the Quarter. In addition, the novel contains books within the book by incorporating passages from Ignatius’s writings, and it employs epistolary narration by presenting Ignatius’s exchanges of letters with Myrna Minkoff, I. Abelman, and Dr. Talc. It intertwines all these elements by having its characters play different roles in more than one narrative strand and by using recurring material objects, most prominently a book, to establish other surprising links.

How well this is done becomes obvious in the opening chapter that unobtrusively plants the seeds for further developments. It opens with Ignatius J. Reilly wearing his green hunting cap, waiting under the clock at the D.H. Holmes department store for his mother, who is buying cakes for her voracious son. Since his strange appearance arouses suspicion, a yet nameless policeman asks him for identification. Ignatius’s enraged reaction causes a commotion, and an old man, also yet unnamed, calls the policeman a communist. When Ignatius’s doting
mother joins the fracas and defends her son, the policeman arrests the old man, and the Reillys walk away and take a rest in the Night of Joy on near-by Bourbon Street. There Ignatius tells a boring story about his traumatic trip to Baton Rouge, and “a depressed blonde” joins the conversation and introduces herself as Darlene (29). Meanwhile, in the police precinct, the old man, whose name turns out to be Claude Robichaux, talks to a young black man named Jones and is grudgingly released, whereas the policeman who arrested him is identified as Patrolman Mancuso and scolded by his sergeant for being incapable of bringing in a real “prevert [sic]” (28). In the Night of Joy, an effeminate young man introduces himself as “a dealer in used clothing” and buys Mrs. Reilly’s ancient hat, before the owner, a “Miss Lee,” appears and chases Ignatius and his mother away as unwanted customers (35). On their walk to their 1946 Plymouth parked on St. Ann Street, Ignatius’s appetite is aroused by a vendor’s cart “shaped like a hot dog on wheels” (36), but his mother prevents him from buying a hot dog. Maneuvering her car out of the parking lot, Mrs. Reilly rams a post that supports a wrought-iron balcony, which crashes down on the car. Patrolman Mancuso, who has just unsuccessfully tried to arrest a young man wearing a lady’s hat, passes the scene on his hunt for a bona fide pervert and sees an old car buried under a balcony and a man in a “green hunting cap emitting vomit among the ruins” (39).

All of the novel’s plots take place in New Orleans, which is evoked in its beauty and decay, as well as its ethnic and linguistic variety. For the agoraphobic Ignatius, it is “a comfortable metropolis which has a certain apathy and stagnation which [he] find[s] inoffensive” (131); he greatly prefers New Orleans to northern cities, which he generally associates “with efficient repair shops and permanently smoking factories” (14), and especially to Manhattan, which for him is a “center of mechanized horrors” (138). This is why he wants to stay in the Big Easy, because when for the only time in his life he left it for a trip to nearby Baton Rouge, he came home in a terrible state and remembers (with allusions to Joseph Conrad and T.S. Eliot) that “outside of the city limits the heart of darkness, the true wasteland begins” (22). Later he observes that “outside the city limits there are many horrors” (222). He explains his position to his uncomprehending mother by observing that during his trip it was perhaps “the lack of a center of orientation that might have upset [him]” (23). Feeling at home in New Orleans, however, does not prevent Ignatius from proclaiming that the city is “a flagrant vice capital of the civilized world,” “famous for its gamblers, prostitutes, exhibitionists, anti-Christ, alcoholics, sodomites, drug addicts, fetishists, onanists, pornographers, frauds, jades, litterbugs, and lesbians” (15). Especially the French Quarter is for him “that sinkhole of vice,” “Sodom and Gomorrah,” and “an area which houses every vice that man has ever conceived in his wildest aberrations” (221, 222, 237).

The different faces of the city that Ignatius finds both protective and repellent play a major role. The novel’s opening chapter not only refers to such former New Orleans landmarks as the D.H. Holmes Department Store and Werlein’s and to famous Canal Street and Bourbon Street, it also mirrors the city’s multicultural makeup and linguistic diversity. In the Big Easy a raised sidewalk is a “banquette” (103 et passim), Ignatius’s mother speaks with an “accent that occurs south of New Jersey only in New Orleans, that Hoboken near the Gulf of Mexico” (16), and what
in Mr. Robichaux’s French-inflected Creole English is a “communiss” becomes a “cawmiss” in the black jive talk of Burma Jones (26). The first chapter assembles an Irish mother and her son, the French Creole Claude Robichaux, the African American Burma Jones, the Italian Patrolman Angelo Mancuso, the southern bar girl Darlene, who likes Spanish and Italian food, a yet nameless homosexual who later turns out to be a rich Anglo from Nebraska, and the bar owner Miss Lana Lee. It also introduces and artfully intertwines almost all the subplots that comprise the rest of the tale. Thus, Ignatius’s accidental encounter with Claude Robichaux introduces the man who will become his mother’s suitor. The Night of Joy will turn out to be the center of a pornography ring headed by Lana Lee and accidentally uncovered by Ignatius and Patrolman Mancuso. The man who buys Mrs. Reilly’s hat will turn out to be Dorian Greene, a gay man from the Quarter who figures prominently in Ignatius’s plan to “Save the World Through Degeneracy” (280). And the passing reference to the hot dog-shaped vendor’s car anticipates Ignatius’s later work for Paradise Vendors. The only strand, then, that is not yet present in the introductory chapter is Mr. Levy’s pants factory, which adds a Jewish family and the Latino Mr. Gonzales to the ethnic mélange.

The absolute chronology of the novel, whose action covers only a few “mild winter” months (47), must be inferred from passing references to films, songs, and daily objects which suggests that the action takes place in the winter of 1962/63. That was a time when the growing Civil Rights movement led to social upheavals in a city in which half of the population was black, when radical students staged demonstrations and riots, when gay rights groups clamored for attention, and when in the Big Easy the unexpected success of Walker Percy’s apprentice novel The Movie-Goer (1961) was the talk of the town. This historical context certainly helped to shape characters such as the streetwise black underdog Burma Jones or the college radical Myrna Minkoff, and it explains Walker Percy’s double role, who not only arranged for the posthumous publication of A Confederacy of Dunces in 1980, but whose own 1961 novel also provided a major referential horizon for Toole’s text.

The Range of Ethnic Characters

The novel’s characters represent the ethnic, religious, and linguistic mix of multicultural New Orleans and particular sections of the Big Easy. When Toole taught at St. Mary’s Dominican College, “one of his favorite class pastimes was the study of names. He was fascinated with what characteristics names bring to mind” (Nevils and Hardy 130). Thus, it is hardly surprising that his characters have programmatic names. Ignatius J. Reilly bears the name of the founder of the Society of Jesus, Ignatius Loyola, who is well known in a city which is the home of both Loyola University and a Jesuit high school. While Ignatius is a fitting name for a medievalist, it is also ironically inappropriate because Ignatius of Loyola paid unquestioning obedience to the Church, whereas Ignatius “cannot support the Church” and is “opposed to the relativism of modern Catholicism quite violently” (72, 64). Ignatius’s family name, which identifies him as Irish, might be an allusion to General Alejandro O’Reilly, the Irish-born second Spanish governor
of colonial Louisiana known as “Bloody O’Reilly” because he severely punished the French Creoles for the expulsion of Spain’s first governor Antonio de Ulloa. It also conjures up “the popular Irish American hero of radio’s Life of Rily, a character most memorably rendered in William Bendix’s 1950s television show, which depicted American ethnic groups finally achieving the American dream” (Lowe 170), and it might refer to a character in George Herriman’s influential comic Krazy Kat and Ignatz (MacLauchlin 53). Ignatius and his mother live on Constantinople Street in a working-class neighborhood known as the Irish Channel, which was settled by Irish immigrants in the early nineteenth century but also housed Germans, Italians, and Blacks. This district, which had a reputation for violence arising from conflicts between the ethnic groups, is portrayed as

a block of houses built in the 1880s and 90s, wooden Gothic and Gilded Age relics that dripped carving and scrollwork, Boss Tweed suburban stereotypes separated by alleys so narrow that a yardstick could almost bridge them and fenced in by iron pikes and low walls of crumbling brick. [...] It was a neighborhood that had degenerated from Victorian to nothing in particular, a block that had moved into the twentieth century carelessly and uncaringly—and with very limited funds. (48)

When Patrolman Mancuso pays his first visit to Mrs. Reilly, her house is described as “the tiniest structure on the block, [...] a Lilliput of the eighties” (48), and later Mr. Levy experiences it as a “miniature house” and “a dollhouse” (369). In a novel whose title comes from Swift and whose huge protagonist is a kind of Brobdignagian, the passing reference to Lilliput is certainly no accident (see Simmons 41). Ignatius’s uneducated mother who tries to drown her troubles in too much “Gallo muscatel” (62 et passim) lost her husband twenty-one years ago, and she bears the Christian name of Irene, which in Greek means ‘peace’ and refers to a state which she will not be granted as long as Ignatius is around.

Lana Lee, the good-looking and ruthlessly materialistic owner of the Night of Joy and the purveyor of pornographic pictures to high school children, whom Ignatius refers to as “a Nazi commandant” or “Third Reich strumpet” (35, 351), expresses her cynicism most clearly in her statement that “mothers are full of shit” (35). She bears a Christian name that could mean ‘precious’ and the family name of General Robert E. Lee. Her exploited black janitor Burma Jones calls her “Scarla O’Horror” in a meaningful distortion of the name of the heroine of Margaret Mitchell’s Gone with the Wind (86, 232). When Lana’s underpaid B-girl Darlene, who dreams of becoming an exotic dancer and “subscribe[s] to Life for purposes of self-improvement” (66), gets permission to stage her inept act, it is advertised as “ROBERTA E. LEE presents Harlett O’Hara the Virgin-ny Belle (and pet!)” (304). This slogan refers even more obviously to Robert E. Lee and ingeniously puns on both ‘Harlett—harlot’ and ‘Virginian—Virgin.’ The name of Dorian Greene, the effeminate gay man from Nebraska, which refers to the eponymous hero of Oscar Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray, is so obvious that even Ignatius remarks “You can’t really be named Dorian Greene” (267). And the onomatopoeic names of minor characters from the French Quarter, including those of three militant lesbians—Billy Truehard, Raoul Frayle, Frieda Club, Betty Bumper, and Liz Steele—speak for themselves.
Mr. Levy, the owner of Levy Pants, bears a name that makes him a member of the tribe of Levi and thus a Jew. His dilapidated factory is located in the Bywater area in the Ninth Ward, a poor industrialized section of the city. But his comfortable home is a “Xanadu of the senses” (106), reminiscent of both the pleasure dome of Coleridge’s Kubla Khan and the palatial estate of Orson Welles’ Citizen Kane, and lies in “Bay St. Louis” (105), a summer destination for upscale New Orleanians an hour’s drive from the factory. Miss Trixie, the demented octogenarian whose name is the diminutive of Beatrix, the ‘bringer of joy,’ and who is a victim of Mrs. Levy’s ruthless amateur psychology, lives near Levy Pants in an apartment “across from the Desire Street wharf” (369). Mr. Gonzalez, about whom readers only learn that for “twenty years” he has been the manager of what Ignatius considers “the most disreputable office that he had ever entered” (75, 78), bears the most common Spanish surname, and the fancy sign that Ignatius devises for him says “SR. GONZALEZ and [is] decorated with the crest of King Alfonso” (120). Of surly Mr. Palermo, who controls the factory workers, the readers only learn that he is an alcoholic. Two other Jewish names are those of Myrna Minkoff, whose family name is a matronymic derivation from the Jewish female name Minke, and I. Abelman, the only customer of Levy Pants, about whom Pugh ingeniously speculates that Ignatius, when he writes an insulting letter to him, metaphorically plays Cain to this Abel-man (86).

The meek and hen-pecked Patrolman Angelo Mancuso is clearly defined by his name as Italian. His uncomplaining acceptance of his sergeant’s chicanery makes him something of an ‘angel,’ whereas the original Sicilian meaning of Mancuso as a left-handed or maladroit person points to his professional ineptitude. Santa Battaglia, his sixty-five-year old loud and bawdy aunt, whose mother was a first-generation immigrant from Sicily, bears a name that is the Italian equivalent of ‘holy battle’ and fittingly sums up both her fervent Catholicism and her preference for violence as an educational strategy. She constantly threatens her grandchildren—“I bust you right in the mouth” (184)—and belligerently suggests that “somebody oughta punch that Ignatius in the nose” (216). She lives in “the St. Odo of Cluny Parish” (186, 277), the fictional equivalent of St. Bernard Parish.

Old Claude Robichaux bears the Christian name of the French Saint Claudius of Besancon and the last name of a family that played an important role in early French immigration to America. It might also recall John Robichaux, the influential jazz band leader, and his nephew, the drummer of the same name, both of whom were well known in New Orleans. Burma Jones, whom Lana Lee can blackmail into working for her as a porter because he is a colored guy who would get arrested for vagrancy if he didn’t work” (44), is forced to take the underpaid job because he is afraid of being sent to “Angola” (26), the nickname of the Louisiana State Penitentiary. This man, whose common surname makes him a kind of black Everyman, seems to be at home “in the Carrollton section of the city” (131). In his attempts to discover Lana Lee’s secret business, he assumes the role of a latter-day Sherlock Holmes, an association probably intended by Toole as he also has Ignatius call Patrolman Mancuso “Sherlock Mancuso” (301). Thus, it is fitting that the owner of his favorite pub, Mattie’s Ramble Inn,
to whom Jones talks about his worries, is a Mr. Watson. To complete the mult
icultural mélange, there are recurring references to a store that is run by “the
German” (51, 72, 90) and might be modeled on a Swiss Bakery on Magazine
Street (Fletcher 127).

The Grotesque Protagonist

Ignatius Jacques Reilly, who was named Humphrey Wildblood in earlier ver
sions of the book, is a misfit whose odd appearance sets him apart from his
fellow humans, whom he looks down upon with disapproval. The emblem of
his otherness is his green hunting cap. His uncut hair, the ugly bristles stick
ning out from his ears, and the crumbs in the corners of his mouth betray his
lack of personal hygiene, and his eyes are an astonishing mix of blue and yel-
low, the colors of promise and defeat, freedom and envy. In his foreword to the
novel, Walker Percy calls Ignatius “a mad Oliver Hardy, a fat Don Quixote, a
perverse Thomas Aquinas rolled into one” (8), but the hunting cap and other
details relate him to yet another classical figure: Edmund Spenser’s Red Cross
Knight. In one of her letters, Myrna Minkoff writes about an artist who wants
to become a forest ranger in Montana, “planning a dramatic allegory set in a
dark woods (Ignorance and Custom)” (189), and she predicts that although he
will fail as a ranger, “the allegory, I know, will be challenging and controver-
sial, full of unpleasant truths” (189). And in a section of his Journal about his walks
through the French Quarter, conjured up by references to St. Louis Cathedral,
the Cabildo, Pirate’s Alley, and the French Market, Ignatius writes that “the bal-
conies of the old buildings hung over my head like dark branches in an allegori-
cal forest of evil. Symbolically, a Desire bus hurtled past me, its diesel exhaust
almost strangling me” (241). Both passages represent the world as a dark forest,
Dante’s *selva oscura* and Spenser’s Wood of Error, and imply that upon entering
the dangerous woods of the world Ignatius will experience rejection and defeat
and encounter “unpleasant truths.” Many further references to the Middle Ages
confirm such a reading. Thus, Ignatius asserts that he “feel[s] rather like a Cru-
sader” and calls his ludicrous revolt at Levy Pants “The Crusade for Moorish
Dignity” (241, 281). Signing an installment of his Journal with “Lance” (244),
he conjures up Sir Lancelot, and when he says to Mr. Clyde that he is “upon a
quest for work” and “might as well have the Grail set as [his] goal” (166), he
refers to King Arthur’s Round Table. He describes his musings about his second
reform project as “a debate between Pragmatism and Morality” reminiscent of
“the medieval Morality play” (282), comments on the failure of his revolt at
Levy Pants by referring to Boccaccio’s collection of moral stories, “De Casibus
Virorum Illustrium. Of the Fall of Great Men!” (133), and mentions yet another
medieval genre when he demands “an *exemplum* to the youth of our nation”
(54). He refers to Abélard, Thomas à Becket and Everyman, draws questionable
parallels between Piers Plowman and himself, and praises Hroswitha of Gan-
dersheim as “a sibyl of a medieval nun [who] has guided [his] life” (259). These
references place Ignatius between two worlds and help to establish the novel’s
constitutive tension between medievalism and modernity, the meek acceptance of one’s fate and the active work for improving it.

The readers’ first and unpleasant impression of Ignatius is confirmed by a host of further details: he is a “behemoth” with a “gargantuan rump,” thighs like “Smithfield hams,” and big hands like “paws” (18 et passim), and moves in “el-ephantine fashion” (78, 20, 178, 18, 13). But it is not only his outward appearance that sets him apart. He is an obese glutton and obnoxious slob who feels he lives in the wrong century, a silly hypochondriac who is plagued by flatulence and eructation created by what he describes ad nauseam as the recurring closing of his pyloric valve, a malcontent hypocrite whose behavior stands in outrageous contrast to the values he professes and the elevated language he speaks, an avid masturbator who jealously guards his virginity, a movie addict who hates the movies, and a man who is obsessed by his need to best his former fellow student Myrna Minkoff, a Jewish radical from the Bronx in favor of free sex. Being “thirty” years old (18, 213), he has spent eight years at college, where he managed to get “a master’s degree” (31, 33, 64) as a “medievalist” (42). His worried mother “spent all his poor Grammaw Reilly’s insurance money” on his education, but “since then all he’s done is lay around the house watching television” (34). When he briefly taught at college, he was too lazy to grade his students’ papers, and when they revolted, he dropped their ungraded papers out of the window and is proud of “this act of defiance against the abyss of contemporary academia” (63, see 354). The only time he ever worked was for the New Orleans Public Library, pasting slips into books. But after only two weeks he was fired for laziness. Living off his mother’s small pension, Ignatius is writing what he calls, with hilarious hubris, “a lengthy indictment against our century” (18). Revealingly, he jots down his elevated ideas and comments on “Big Chief tablets” (40), notebooks with cheap paper and widely spaced lines meant to help children to learn how to write properly. And “in the five years he had dedicated” to what he calls the “seeds of a magnificent study in comparative history,” he has produced “an average of only six paragraphs monthly” (41). In the course of the action, he takes up a new project, his “Journal of a Working Boy, or, Up from Sloth” (111), which is a combination of Horatio Alger’s stories about a “working boy’s” rise from rags to riches, of morally uplifting memoirs like Booker T. Washington’s Up from Slavery, whose title is varied in “Up from Sloth,” and of such novels of successful immigration as Abraham Cahan’s The Rise of David Levinsky.

Intellectually Ignatius is a knowledgeable academic, but psychologically he is an arrested child, and socially he is an inept misfit: he is overbearing and inconsiderate, cannot drive, has a very “poor sense of balance,” and suffers from “a tendency to fall, trip, and stumble” (96). He is convinced that “with the breakdown of the Medieval system, the gods of Chaos, Lunacy, and Bad Taste gained ascendancy” and that the world has taken an “unfortunate turn [...] since the Reformation” (40, 41). He understands his contemporary America as the result of a process of degeneration that has replaced the comforting medieval determinism that had everyone accept their place by the misleading belief in free will that has everyone strive for self-realization. He loathes “Doris Day and Greyhound Scenicruisers” as emblems of false progress and is certain that the inmates of psy-
chiatric wards are the only sane people and have been wrongly put away because “they don’t like new cars and hair sprays” and “simply cannot stand lanolin, cellophane, plastic, television, and subdivisions” (41, 317). He shows his abhorrence of commercialism observing that “what had once been dedicated to the soul was now dedicated to the sale” (40). The sentimental depiction of love in Hollywood films clashes with what he calls his “stringent attitude toward sex” (137)—and what Myrna Minkoff deems his “unhealthy attitude toward sex” (188)—and he considers optimism a fatal aberration: “Optimism nauseates me. It is perverse. Since man’s fall, his proper position in the universe has been one of misery” (71). Thus, he declares that “I am forced to function in a century which I loathe” (63), and “I am an anachronism. People realize this and resent it” (71). Fighting a one man’s war against a world which he hates, Ignatius is aware that he does not belong in the 1960’s and will thus necessarily remain an outsider: he grandly states that “since I have no peers, I mingle with no one” (134), and consequently he finds it quite “inconceivable that [he] should get a job” (61).

But Ignatius’s behavior constantly contradicts his avowed beliefs. He complains about the debauching of childlike innocence in TV shows, but his masturbatory excesses emphatically disqualify him as a judge of such matters. He denounces the instant gratifications of a consumer society, but constantly gorges himself on mass-made cakes. He is an inveterate drinker of Dr. Nut,¹ and his copious consumption of that soft drink is another comic example of the discrepancies between his purportedly ascetic medieval values and his gluttonous lifestyle. When he goes to the movies, he gorges himself on Milky Ways and large quantities of popcorn. Selling hot dogs for Paradise Vendors,² he is his own best customer, and although he is told that the Paradise frankfurters consist of “rubber, cereal, tripe” (165), he gobbles them with “blissful savagery” (165). When Mr. Clyde gives him a choice of carts, he shows that he is not averse to aesthetic appeal by choosing “that shiny one with the white sidewall tires” (170). He drinks milk out of “his Shirley Temple mug” (54), wears a silly “Mickey Mouse wristwatch” (164, 338, 344), and squanders the little money he has on a trumpet, a lute, a harmonica and a movie camera. Blackmailing George into giving him the money he needs for movie tickets, he behaves like the businessmen he loathes. Although he rages against all forms of commercialism as the new religion of his times, at Levy Pants he tries to combine religion and business in a wooden cross with the inscription “GOD AND COMMERCE” (125). And when he thinks about finally getting a job, he reflects on his paradoxical situation: “perhaps the experience can give my writing a new dimension. Being actively engaged in the system which I criticize will be an interesting irony in itself” (65).

¹ Dr. Nut was a soft drink with the almond flavor of Amaretto liquor produced by a New Orleans company. It was well known for its slogans, but when Toole’s novel was posthumously published in 1980, it was already out of production.

² Paradise Vendors is a fictional counterpart of the really existing Lucky Dogs Company. Jerry Strahan, who for over twenty years managed that company, published his experiences as Managing Ignatius, arguing that Toole’s hero is a composite of actual Lucky Dog vendors who sell hot dogs out of seven-foot-long hot dog-shaped carts in the French Quarter.
David McNeil rightly states that “as much as Ignatius rages against the modern degeneration of values, he himself is an all-too-farical product of that same society” (36), and Jonathan Simmons defines Ignatius as “a figure who, while he scorns modern society, reflects so many of its excesses in himself that he ultimately comes to symbolize the very object of his scorn” (34). The man who functions as the novel’s criticizing subject simultaneously becomes, without being aware of it, its criticized object since he is guilty of the very behavior he castigates. This puts him in the venerable tradition of “the satirist satirized” (Elliott 98), and it is one of the major reasons for the situational comedy generated by the text. But things are even more complicated because parts of Ignatius’s critique of the excrescences of his commodified world are justified and shared by Toole. This becomes obvious in a passage that is almost an independent vignette and exemplifies Ignatius’s soul/sale dichotomy. When Lana Lee, the unscrupulous business woman who tries to get rich in a reprehensible way counts the money for the pornographic pictures George has sold, the text reads:

Lana started to make sounds like the imprecations of a priestess, over the bills that the boy had given her. Whispered numerals and words floated upward from her coral lips, and, closing her eyes, she copied some figures onto a pad of paper. Her fine body, itself a profitable investment through the years, bent reverently over the formica top altar. Smoke, like incense, rose from the cigarette in the ashtray at her elbow, curling upward with her prayers, up above the host which she was elevating in order to study the date of its minting, the single silver dollar that lay among the offerings. Her bracelet tinkled, calling communicants to the altar, but the only one in the temple had been excommunicated from the Faith because of his parentage and continued mopping. An offering fell to the floor, the host, and Lana knelt to venerate and retrieve it. (85)

Here, a bar owner mutates into a priestess, the counter of her bar turns into an altar, cigarette smoke becomes incense, the counting of money changes into a prayer, a coin is elevated into a venerated host, and Lana’s black porter, who is excluded from her illegal business, is described as one who is excommunicated from the Faith. Thus, the worship of mammon replaces the adoration of a deity and the “sale” usurps the place of the “soul” (40).

The critique of an all-pervasive materialism, which Ignatius shares with his creator, also becomes obvious in an easily overlooked chain of scattered references to the commodification of religious objects. For instance, Mrs. Reilly tells her son that she has bought “a nice little pair of beads filled with Lourdes water” for her sick neighbor “at Lenny’s” (89), and he disgustedly answers that he has never seen “a shop filled with so much religious hexerei. I suspect that that jewelry shop is going to be the scene of a miracle before long. Lenny himself may ascend” (89). Santa Battaglia is proud of a tasteless statue on her television set which is “made outta nice plastic” (274) and about which she says to her visitors: “It’s a little Our Lady of the Television. It’s got a suction cup base so I don’t knock it over when I’m banging around in the kitchen. I bought it by Lenny’s” (273). In a subplot Mrs. Levy suggests that her husband consult the analyst who “cured Lenny of that complex he had about selling rosaries. [...] Now he’s got some kind of exclusive agreement with a bunch of nuns who peddle the rosaries in about forty Catholic schools all over the city. The money’s rolling in. Lenny’s happy. The sisters are happy. The
kids are happy” (162). Later she repeatedly admonishes him to “go see Lenny’s doctor” (249, 364, 367) or “Lenny’s savior” (294), and Mr. Levy wants to consult “Lenny’s doctor” (384, 386) in a different case. In another subplot, Lenny’s success with rosaries is taken up when the devout Catholics Claude Robichaux and Santa Battaglia take part in the use of holy objects for making money through lotteries. Claude explains his being late for Santa’s party by saying that he “had to take [his] little grandchirren around the neighborhood. They raffling some rosaries for the sisters” (209), and Santa retorts that she has “bought a chance from a little kid just the other day. They beautiful rosaries. A lady I know won the outboard motor the sisters was raffling last year” (209). These scattered details show once more how the soul has been replaced by the sale, and also demonstrate how carefully the different strands of the plot are interconnected.

That readers cannot but share some of Ignatius’s criticism provides the novel with a peculiar ambiguity derived from the tension between their willingness to agree with Ignatius’s convictions and their awareness that his behavior deprives him of every right to voice them. Such tension, which greatly contributes to the novel’s comic effects, is enhanced by the fact that Toole provides some easily overlooked clues as to why Ignatius might have become the thoroughly disagreeable person he is. Thus, during the rowdy party in Dorian Greene’s house on St. Peter Street, Ignatius feels

as alone as he had felt on that dark day in high school when in a chemistry laboratory his experiment had exploded, burning his eyebrows off and frightening him. The shock and terror had made him wet his pants, and no one in the laboratory would notice him, not even the instructor, who hated him sincerely for similar explosions in the past. For the remainder of that day, as he walked soggily around the school, everyone had pretended that he was invisible. (333-34)

When he discovers Lana Lee’s pornographic pictures, he is aghast and recalls that “once in high school someone had shown him a pornographic photograph, and he had collapsed against a water cooler, injuring his ear” (299-300). And when packing his overnight bag for his escape with Myrna Minkoff, he remembers that “his mother had bought [that bag] for him for a disastrous one-day stay at a boys’ camp when he was eleven” (400). These references insinuate that even as a boy, Ignatius was a rejected outsider who, due his obesity and his balance problems, was the laughing stock of his classmates, and that these traumatic childhood experiences possibly contributed to his adult state.

The most important cause of Ignatius’s arrested development is the death of his beloved dog Rex, who bears the name of the oldest Mardi Gras krewe. “The large and devoted collie that had been his pet when he was in high school” is first mentioned when Ignatius, the inveterate masturbator, thinks of him while gratifying himself (43). At this point, it becomes grotesquely obvious that something must have gone frightfully wrong with the sexual development of a thirty-year-old man who is sexually aroused by thinking of his dead dog (43). When Patrolman Mancuso pays a visit to Mrs. Reilly, he sees a grave in the unkempt front with the name “REX in faded letters on the cross” (49). One of Ignatius’s essays deals with “The Death of Rex” (110), and later Mrs. Reilly says that Ignatius “calls the priest
in our parish a heretic. They had a big fight when Ignatius's dog died” (213-14). But it is only near the end that the mystery about Rex is explained, when Miss Annie, the suffering neighbor who hates Ignatius with all her heart, admits to Mr. Levy:

Lemme tell you something. I gotta be fair. That Ignatius was okay until that big dog of his died. He had this big dog useta bark right under my window. That’s when my nerves first started to go. Then the dog dies. Well, I think, now maybe I’ll get me some peace and quiet. But no. Ignatius is got the dog laid out in his momma’s front parlor with some flowers stuck in its paw. That’s when him and his momma first started all that fighting. To tell you the truth, I think that’s when she started drinking. So, Ignatius goes over to the priest and ax him to come say something over the dog. Ignatius was planning on some kinda funeral. You know? The priest says no, of course, and I think that’s when Ignatius left the Church. So big Ignatius puts on his own funeral. […] Well, that’s when things started going bad around here. (371)

These scattered details about the traumatic experiences in Ignatius’s past provide his otherwise static character with some historical depth, and the readers’ indignation about his affronts—and some critics’ complaints about his lack of development—are tempered with a little commiseration and a better understanding of “the fear and hatred which [Ignatius’s] weltanschauung instills in people” (63).

The frequent grossness of Toole’s humor is mainly related to the unsavory aspects of Ignatius’s corporeality. An early reference to his lack of personal hygiene occurs when his mother’s arthritic fingers are described as “chafed from many years of scrubbing her son’s mammoth, yellowed drawers” (16), but soon his problems with his pyloric valve become the central concern. This valve tends to close and trap the gas that develops in his massive body as a result of his excessive eating. When it opens, Ignatius emits loud flatulences and eructations and emits indelicate noises that range from “a small burp” to “a monstrous belch” (42, 71). The readers accompany him on the uptown trolley, in which he belches “Paradise gas so violently that, although the car was crowded, no one would sit next to him” (223). They also observe how “great belches ripped out of the gas pockets of his stomach and tore through his digestive tract” (253), or hear him belching so violently that “the gassy eructations echo[ed] between the walls of the Alley” (258).

Since the novel contains several references to Swift, with this motif Toole is probably indebted (cf. Simmons 40) to the Dean’s tale about the AEolists in Section VIII of Swift’s *A Tale of a Tub* (1704), where one reads:

The Learned AEolists, maintain the Original Cause of all Things to be Wind, from which Principle this whole Universe was at first produced and into which it must at last be resolved [...]. In Consequence of this, their next Principle was, that Man brings with him into the World a peculiar Portion or Grain of Wind [...]. This, when blown up to its Perfection, ought not to be covetously boarded up, stifled, or hid under a Bushel, but freely communicated to Mankind. Upon these Reasons, and others of equal Weight, the Wise AEolists, affirm the Gift of BELCHING, to be the noblest Act of a Rational Creature. [...] For this Reason, the Philosophers among them, did in their Schools, deliver to their Pupils, all their Doctrines and Opinions by Eructation. (Swift 66-67)

Ignatius’s massive body exudes a peculiar odor. When his mother enters her son’s secluded room for the first time, she says that “it smells terribly in here,” and Ignatius coolly replies: “The human body, when confined, produces certain
odors which we tend to forget in this age of deodorants and other perversions” and adds some learned references to Proust’s reclusiveness and Schiller’s rotten apples (59). But it is not only Mrs. Reilly who smells “her son’s curious personal odor, which always reminded her of the scent of old tea bags” (102), but Mr. Levy also feels “nauseated” when he enters Ignatius’s room with its “scent of old tea leaves” (378). This smell is less due to Ignatius’s malfunctioning valve than to his frequent masturbation, which he started when he was twelve years old and which has become “merely a mechanical physical act stripped of the flights of fancy and invention that he had once been able to bring to it. At one time he had almost developed it into an art form, practicing the hobby with the skill and fervor of an artist and philosopher, a scholar and a gentleman” (43). One reason for Ignatius’s excessive masturbation is his neurotic fear of bodily contact. Early in the novel he says to his mother: “You know how I feel about touching other people” (22), in the Night of Joy he warns the Latin bar girl, “Don’t you dare touch me!” (341), and in the hospital he anxiously asks: “Have people been fooling with my body while I was unconscious?” (349). While his haphephobia makes him furiously reject Myrna Minkoff’s sexual attacks—“How dare you? I’m a virgin” (372)—once again his behavior is at odds with his ideas. Whenever he bounces up and down in his bed to open his clogged valve, he develops an “erection” that must be taken care of (42), and when the workers at Levy Pants lift him up on a table, he “become[s] somewhat stimulated” (148). When he awakes in the hospital, “an erection [is] bothering him” (350), and when he lies in bed worrying about what Mr. Levy will do, he “attack[s] his rubber glove” (389). This is why his bed sheet is “spotted and yellowed” (50), and when the workers at Levy Pants have to carry it as their banner they make knowing comments about “the yellow stains” all over it (149). Thus, the man who passionately denounces “onanists” is himself an inveterate masturbator (15), and the most appalling indication of his arrested sexual development is that he uses the image of his beloved dog Rex as a stimulant.

It is tempting to look for a psychoanalytical explanation of Ignatius’s conundrum, but Toole’s devastating portraits of two would-be psychologists let one hesitate. One is the scheming Mrs. Levy, sarcastically addressed by her husband as “Dr. Freud” (197, 291), who has acquired her alleged knowledge through “a psychology correspondence course, the final examination of which she had failed resoundingly” (196, see 81), and whose “psychic rejuvenation” program for senile Miss Trixie exposes her stupid cruelty in a frightful way (109). The other is Myrna Minkoff, the college radical who believes that “the therapy of sex” can remedy all social ills and constantly babbles about a “perfect mental-sexual balance” (92, 189), but whose failed relationships show that her half-baked Freudian theories are little more than alibis for sexual libertinage. Yet despite these scathing caricatures of misapplied psychological insights, Toole has planted some clues that might explain Ignatius’s conundrum in Freudian terms. When his mother enters her son’s womb-like room for the first time, he warns her not to step on the pages strewn around the floor and she replies: “Well, where I’m gonna stand, Ignatius? You want me to get in bed with you?” (60). Moreover, in one of her letters, Myrna Minkoff advises Ignatius “to cut the umbilical cord that binds you to that stagnant city, that mother of yours, and that bed” (92). Both statements imply that Ignatius
is arrested in his Oedipal phase, and therefore Myrna might be right for once when she writes to Ignatius that “great Oedipus bonds are encircling your brain and destroying you” (193, see 401). And when Mrs. Levy violently ‘rejuvenates’ Miss Trixie with a lot of makeup, new dentures, and a wig and then realizes with a shock that now she “looked exactly like Mrs. Levy’s mother” (251), a similar explanation might be in order.

Despite his incessant masturbation, Ignatius is prude and sexually naïve. When he fastens a sign that says “T W E L V E I N C H E S (1 2 ”) O F P A R A D I S E” to his hot dog cart (255), he does not think about the dirty joke it invites and is shocked when George decorates this sign “with a variety of genitals” (309). When he thinks of a fit punishment for people he dislikes, he usually comes up with the medieval punishment of flogging. Thus, he says to his mother, “You should have been lashed right there in the confessional” (72), and writes in his letter to Abelman that “if you molest us again, sir, you may feel the sting of the lash across your pitiful shoulders” (101, see 387). He finds that George “must be lashed until he collapses!” (174) and that Myrna Minkoff and Doris Day in That Touch of Mink must be lashed until they drop (see 212, 238, 302). He thinks that the dancing children in American Bandstand “should all be gassed” (53) and Patrolman Mancuso should “be impaled upon his own nightstick” (61). He becomes sexually outspoken when he says about Myrna Minkoff that “this liberal doxy must be impaled upon the member of a particularly large stallion” (226), and he uses advanced sexual innuendos when he dreams that he is reincarnated as St. James the Less and proclaims that “Jesus will come to the forefront, skins or not” (254) and when he punningly asks the gays of the Quarter: “Will you turn your singular talents to saving the world, or will you simply turn your backs on your fellow man?” (332). But when Lana Lee’s pornographic picture makes him dream of an affair with an attractive woman who is also a learned philosopher and admirer of Boethius, he forgets about his fear of being touched and imagines that “with her background and Boethian worldview, she would take a very stoic and fatalistic view of whatever sexual gaucheries and blunders he committed” (304).

The Learned Literary Horizons

“The very basis of [Ignatius’s] world view” is Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius’s De consolatione philosophiae (351), about which it is said that “as a medievalist Ignatius believed in the rota Fortunae, or wheel of fortune, a central concept in De Consolatione Philosophiae, the philosophical work which had laid the foundation for medieval thought. Boethius […] had said that a blind goddess spins us on a wheel, that our luck comes in cycles” (42). One of Ignatius’s unpublished essays is titled “Boethius Observed” (110); he tells the owner of Paradise Vendors that “the writings of Boethius may give you some insight” (169); he asks Dorian Greene “Have you read widely in Boethius?” and when Greene says no, admonishes him:

Then you must begin a reading program immediately so that you may understand the crises of our age. Begin with the late Romans, including Boethius, of course. Then you should dip rather extensively into early Medieval. You may skip the Renaissance and the
Enlightenment. That is mostly dangerous propaganda. Now that I think of it, you had better skip the Romantics and the Victorians, too. For the contemporary period, you should study some selected comic books. (266)

Thinking about himself as a kind of mentor for his planned “Save the World Through Degeneracy” movement, Ignatius even considers himself a modern-day Boethius: “I shall act as a sort of mentor and guide for the movement, [...] Boethius himself played a somewhat similar role in degenerate Rome” (281). He also imagines that he will have to share Boethius’s fate: “The world will someday get me on some ludicrous pretext: I simply await the day that they drag me to some airconditioned dungeon and leave me there beneath the fluorescent lights and sound-proofed ceiling to pay the price of scorning all that they hold dear within their little latex hearts” (241).

Ignatius reduces Boethius’s discussion of the theodicy problem and the relation between free will and determinism to the ‘wheel of fortune’ notion and neglects the more important concept of an omnipotent divine providence that replaces the arbitrary workings of the rota Fortunae by the meaningful intervention of a higher being that leaves room for free will and thus also for virtue and guilt, reward and punishment. It is the mechanical concept of the wheel of fortune that consoles Ignatius through the ups and downs of his life, and he constantly refers to it from his early complaint, “Oh, what low joke was Fortuna playing on him now?” to his closing observation, “Now that Fortuna had saved him from one cycle, where would she spin him now?” (60, 405). Initially, he uses the unfathomable workings of the wheel of fortune as an alibi for his behavior—“There was no use fighting Fortuna until the cycle was over” (64)—and respectfully calls Fortuna a “blind, heedless goddess” (42) or “dear old Fortuna” (240). But when things get worse he denounces Fortuna as a “vicious slut” (337), “wretch” (396), “degenerate wanton!” (351) and fears that he is “the dupe of a conspiracy” and that “the apocalypse is near at hand” (373, 266).

Boethius’s treatise, however, not only provides the referential horizon for Ignatius’s assessments of his respective situations, but in an ingenious reversal Toole makes the book itself a crucial instrument of Providence that propels the action towards its denouement and effects that the good people are rewarded and the bad ones punished, thus bringing about the very consequences which, according to Ignatius’s misreading, it denies. Commiserating with Patrolman Mancuso, who must spend his time in a public toilet until he arrests a real criminal, Ignatius asks his mother to give an edition of De consolatione to the suffering policeman whose predicament reminds him of the imprisoned Boethius, and he tells her: “The book teaches us to accept that which we cannot change. [...] No doubt it will aid your patrolman during his moments of crisis” (172). Mancuso dutifully reads the book and wonders “whether this Boethius was something of a gambler. He was always talking about fate and odds and the wheel of fortune” (200-01). When he tries to arrest George, the boy hits him with the book and runs away, taking it along. Remembering that Lana Lee has asked for a book, he gives it to her, and she uses it in one of her pornographic pictures. When Ignatius finds this picture of a masturbating naked woman hiding her face behind De consolatione, he assumes that she is a philosopher forced by circumstances to earn her living in such a debased way. Finding the address Jones has secretly scribbled on the wrapping paper, he goes to the Night of Joy, where he addresses Lana Lee and Darlene with
the absurd comment “I don’t imagine that either of you ladies has read Boethius,” admonishes the puzzled Jones to “read Boethius” and, waiting for the stripper’s performance, thinks that he might “whisper something about Boethius that would attract her attention” (305, 309, 340). After the riot triggered by Darlene’s cockatoo, when Ignatius comes to in a hospital and his mother tells him that Mancuso found “the large volume of The Consolation of Philosophy” in the bar after the raid (350), he comments: “Ironically, the book of Fortuna is itself bad luck. Oh, Fortuna, you degenerate wanton!” (351). Boethius’s book, then, not only serves as the major source for Ignatius’s anachronistic weltanschauung, but Toole makes it a kind of actor that plays a major role in his intricate plot.

Two crucial concepts in Ignatius’s world view are “theology and geometry,” a phrase which Robert Byrne claimed Toole had taken from him, and he had in turn taken it from a fantasy story by H. P. Lovecraft (Palumbo 65). Toole employs this phrase as shorthand for an unchanging order with fixed rules of behavior resulting in a common sense of decency and a shared taste. In the beginning, Ignatius sees new and expensive clothes as “reflect[ing] a person’s lack of theology and geometry” and finds his own peculiar outfit “acceptable by any theological and geometrical standards, however abstruse” because it suggests “a rich inner life” (13). When he watches American Bandstand, he observes that America “needs some theology and geometry, some taste and decency” (54), and when he uses his soiled bed sheet as a banner for his “Crusade for Moorish Dignity,” he claims that “there is a certain geometry involved in these things” (150). He considers George’s “tight trousers that bulged offensively in the crotch in violation of all rules of theology and geometry” unacceptable (173), and he tells his mother that he wants “a good, strong monarchy with a tasteful and decent king who has some knowledge of theology and geometry” (224). He writes in his Journal that “perhaps the Quarter will provide me with some material: a crusade for taste and decency, for theology and geometry, perhaps” (244), criticizes the amateurish pictures the ladies exhibit in Pirate Alley saying that “you ladies need a course in botany. And perhaps geometry, too” (256), and condemns a contemporary film as a “flaunting of vulgarity in the face of theology and geometry, taste and decency” (282-83). In all these cases, his assessments are questionable because they are either self-contradictory, far too general to make sense, or comically falsified by their situational contexts.

For Ignatius, Boethius’s negative counterpart is Mark Twain, whose works he abhors as much as he reveres the Roman philosopher’s treatise. He explains to his mother: “You may remember that Mark Twain preferred to lie supinely in bed while composing those rather dated and boring efforts which contemporary scholars try to prove meaningful. Veneration of Mark Twain is one of the roots of our current intellectual stalemate” (59). When Mrs. Reilly tells her son that their neighbor, Miss Annie, has complained about being disturbed by his playing the banjo, he irately replies: “That is a lute, not a banjo. Does she think that I’m one of these perverse Mark Twain characters?” (88). In his Journal, he points out that the Mississippi “is famed in atrocious song and verse; the most prevalent motif is one which attempts to make of the river an ersatz father figure” (131), and adds that
Ignatius is right in observing that the Mississippi is a river along whose banks folk songs, blues, and jazz were created and that Mark Twain played a major role as a mythmaker and creator of river lore. And he correctly points out that Samuel Clemens wrote much of his *Autobiography* lying in bed, thus assuming the very position in which Ignatius himself scribbles the bits and pieces meant to make up his “magnificent study in comparative history” (41). Ignatius is of course fright-eningly wrong in rejecting Mark Twain as a “dreary fraud” and in charging that American art has no “contact with reality.” But these ludicrous judgments are the inevitable consequences of his irate rejection of the modern world and its beliefs.

But there exists yet another—unspoken and highly ironic—connection between Toole’s novel and Mark Twain’s work. *A Confederacy of Dunces* is built on the constitutive contrast between, on the one hand, the twentieth-century world in which Ignatius lives—a world that believes in free will, opts for deliberate action and strives for individual self-realization—and, on the other hand, the medieval world of which Ignatius dreams—a world that believes in destiny, approves of the workings of chance and accepts anybody’s God-given place. This very contrast can also be found—albeit with certain modifications—in Mark Twain’s novel *A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur’s Court* (1889). There, Hank Morgan, the superintendent of the Hartford Colt factory, awakes after a blow to his head at King Arthur’s court and single-handedly tries to convert the ‘backward’ and supersti-tious civilization of medieval England into an industrialized nineteenth-century society. But his self-assured Yankee ingenuity loses dramatically against Arthurian chivalry, and he closes the resigned account of his self-destructive progress, lamenting: “But how treacherous is fortune!” (405). In Toole’s novel, Ignatius ends his ludicrous and lonely revolt in the name of the predetermined order of the Middle Ages against the progress of modernity by asking, “Now that Fortuna had saved him from one cycle, where would she spin him now?” (405). Thus, another ironic twist of the novel lies in the fact that Ignatius not only wrongly reduces Boethius to the wheel of fortune notion, but also misunderstands Samuel Clem-ens, who, in his disillusioned old age, developed an ever more pessimistic attitude towards his contemporaries’ belief in social and technological progress as well as individual success and thus stood for a position which has quite a lot in common with the one held by Ignatius (see Britton 17).

The most glaring example of Ignatius’s self-contradictory attitudes is his fascination by and hatred of the movies, with which he stands in a literary tra-dition that goes back through Walker Percy’s *The Movie-Goer* (1961) to J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), which Toole knew well because he assigned it in his classes at St. Mary’s Dominican College (MacLauchlin 167). Salinger’s Holden Caulfield declares “I hate the movies like poison but get a bang imitating them” (33), and his re-enactments of stock-in-trade film scenes are expressions of his adolescent role playing. He also refers to films he loves
such as the French comedy *The Baker’s Wife* or Hitchcock’s *The 39 Steps*, and his hatred of “the goddam movies” is limited to the Hollywood films which he considers ‘phony’ (49). For Percy’s Binx Bolling, the movies are a cure for his existential malaise. He finds it “necessary […] to learn something about the theatre or the people who operate it, to touch base before going inside” (67), and with regard to *Panic in the Streets* that is set in in New Orleans, he explains his Kierkegaardian concept of “certification” when he observes that if a person “sees a movie which shows his very neighbourhood, it becomes possible for him to live, for a time at least, as a person who is Somewhere and not Anywhere” (58). Robert Regan was the first to show that the movie-going motif in *A Confederacy of Dunces* is influenced by Walker Percy’s *The Movie-Goer*, which was widely discussed in New Orleans at the time of Toole’s writing: “Binx Bolling of New Orleans, B.A., Tulane, moviegoer; Ignatius Reilly, B.A., M.A., Tulane, moviegoer. The second is transparently a travesty of the first” (171). And Richard Keller Simon has likewise demonstrated how subtly Percy’s novel plays with Kierkegaard’s concepts of repetition and rotation which is in turn repeated and rotated by Toole.

In contrast to Holden Caulfield and Binx Bolling, who both share special movies with a person they love, Ignatius always goes to the cinema alone; for him movie-going is a deeply masochistic experience that allows him to revel in his militant rejection of such “vile” twentieth-century values as personal success and social progress and to flaunt his arrested sexual development (307). His love-hate relationship with the movies is introduced in a passage which reveals his self-delusion: “When Fortuna spins you downward, go out to a movie and get more out of life. Ignatius was about to say this to himself; then he remembered that he went to the movies almost every night, no matter which way Fortuna was spinning.” (67). Sara Lewis Dunne comments that “Ignatius ‘gets more out of life’ at the movies because of his deeply personal concentrated, asexual, love affair with them” (45). Ignatius’s favorite movie theater is “the Prytania” (67, 110, 113, 396), the oldest operating theatre in New Orleans in the Garden District, which he had already visited “as a child” (254) and which—an example of Toole’s hilarious cross references—played a major role in his conception and made him literally ‘a child of the movies.’ Mrs. Reilly remembers “the horrible night that she and Mr. Reilly had gone to the Prytania to see Clark Gable and Jean Harlow in *Red Dust*. In the heat and confusion that had followed their return home, nice Mr. Reilly had tried one of his indirect approaches, and Ignatius was conceived. Poor Mr. Reilly. He had never gone to another movie as long as he lived” (103). Richard F. Patteson has shown that the Reillys “would have seen *Red Dust* during the winter of 1932-33,” and since Ignatius was conceived on that very night, that would make him “approximately thirty years old in the early 1960’s, the approximate, (but not exact) time frame of Toole’s novel.” Later when Mrs. Reilly, Santa Battaglia, and Mr. Robichaux see an unnamed film with Debbie Reynolds (which might be *How the West Was Won* [1962]), Toole adds yet another hilarious cross reference by having Mrs. Reilly experience a frightening déja vu. Thinking about her trouble with Ignatius and hardly taking in the film, she suddenly realizes that
Mr. Robichaux’s hand had gently covered and was now holding hers. Mrs. Reilly was too afraid to move. Why did movies always seem to make the men she had known—Mr. Reilly and Mr. Robichaux—amorous? She stared blindly at the screen, on which she saw not Debbie Reynolds cavorting in color but rather Jean Harlow taking a bath in black and white. (279)

It is characteristic that Ignatius only chooses movies which he knows in advance he will hate. Thus, he considers “a widely praised Swedish drama about a man who was losing his soul”—probably Ingmar Bergman’s *Winter Light* (1962)—“dull fare” and decides not to see it (110). He concentrates instead on those Hollywood movies which nauseate him and about which he says in his Journal:

> I have sought escape in the Prytania on more than one occasion, pulled by the attractions of some technicolored horrors, filmed abortions that were offenses against any criteria of taste and decency, reels and reels of perversion and blasphemy, that stunned my disbelieving eyes, that shocked my virginal mind, and sealed my valve. (113)

He finds a film most appalling when it stars the actress whom he passionately abhors and ironically calls “my favorite female star” (244), namely Doris Day. One of the movies he sees in the Prytania is a film that he describes to his mother as “a circus musical, a heralded excess which I have been waiting to see for some time” (65). It is Billy Rose’s *Jumbo*, an MGM musical film starring Doris Day, which “opened in New Orleans on Christmas Day, 1962, and played the Prytania Theatre from February 22 to February 28, 1963” (Patteson). It makes him comment on the action with sneers and shouts and become hysterical when the heroine sings about “trying over and over again until you succeeded” and the chorus praises “ultimate success” (69).

During his days as a hot dog vendor in the Quarter, Ignatius sees two more films. One is “a teen-age beach musical,” which he finds “especially grueling” and which may have been the film *Beach Party* with Frankie Avalon and Annette Funicello (219). The other is an unidentified “film about drag-racing teenagers,” which he sees “at Loew’s State” (318). More important than these two movies is a film he calls “a sophisticated comedy [...] opening at the RKO Orpheum” and considers so outstanding that he wheedles some dollars out of George for a ticket (296). Because it caters to all his prejudices, he greatly enjoys the film in which the heroine was even more offensive than she had been in the circus musical. In this film she was a bright young secretary whom an aged man of the world was trying to seduce. He flew her in a private jet to Bermuda and installed her in a suite. On their first night together she broke out in a rash just as the libertine was opening her bedroom door. (302)

This movie, which Ignatius considers “filth!” and whose erotic scenes make him “lose control” (302), is the romantic comedy *That Touch of Mink* (1962) with Clark Gable as the suave pursuer of the young female lead Doris Day. While Toole’s detailed plot description is correct, the timing is wrong, because this film was not shown in New Orleans before the summer of 1963, that is, too late for the novel’s action in the winter of 1962/63.

As far as television is concerned, Ignatius regularly sees his favorite show about which his mother says to Patrolman Mancuso: “Every afternoon, as right as rain, he looks at that show where them kids dance. [...] He don’t like the show
at all, but he won’t miss it. You oughta hear what he says about them poor kids” (52). This unnamed show is *American Bandstand*, a popular music-performance show that aired from 1952 to 1989 and featured teenagers dancing to Top 40 music. It is the “images of […] lasciviously gyrating children” (58) that make Ignatius comment: “The ironic thing about that program is that it is supposed to be an *exemplum* to the youth of our nation. I would like very much to know what the Founding Fathers would say if they could see these children being debauched to further the cause of Clearasil. However, I always suspected that democracy would come to this” (54). Ignatius also loves to watch “the Yogi Bear program” that revolved around a funny animal cartoon character and first aired on TV in January 1961 (225, 228). Another comic book figure admired by Ignatius is Batman, about whom he says to Dorian Greene: “I recommend Batman especially, for he tends to transcend the abysmal society in which he’s found himself. His morality is rather rigid, also. I rather respect Batman” (266-67). Ignatius signed his insulting student letters to Dr. Talc with the name of the dashing masked outlaw who defends people against all kinds of villains, “Zorro” (140, 246). And when Patrolman Mancuso visits the Reillys, he “hears that someone is singing ‘Big girls don’t cry’” on TV (49), a song by The Four Seasons that hit number one on the *Billboard Hot 100* in November 1962 and strengthens the conjecture that the novel’s action takes place in the winter of 1962/63.

### The Numerous Linguistic Registers

What makes *A Confederacy of Dunces* such a hilarious novel is not only situational but also verbal comedy, and Toole’s major instrument for creating the latter is Ignatius’s ludicrously elevated diction. Ignatius always chooses inappropriate registers and wrong levels of formality that are disturbingly unsuited to the given situation, and his elaborate diction is even more unsuitable because it stands in stark contrast to his sloppy appearance and behavior. Moreover, his utterances are glaringly contrasted with his interlocutors’ grammatically faulty dialects and sociolinguistic that range from colloquial to slangy. For instance, Burma Jones says that “he never go to school more than two year in my life” (143), and his black jive talk is a far cry from standard English: “That fat freak a guarantee one hunner percent nucular

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3 There are many more references to the movie and TV world. Dorian Greene compares Ignatius to Fatty Arbuckle (257), Marie Dressler (257), Charles Laughton (258), Mary Marvel (258), and Bette Davis (259), and talks about his “Ruby Keeler phase” (264). Ignatius thinks his mother looks “like a refugee starlet from the *Golddiggers* film series” (88). At Dorian Greene’s party, records by “Judy Garland” (325) and “Lena Horne” (331) are played; Mrs. Reilly mixes up “Debbie Reynolds” and “June [sic] Wyman” (272). Mrs. Levy watches “Perry Como” (106) and accuses her husband of talking “like Gary Cooper” (381). Ignatius hopes that his Journal might be successfully filmed by “a Walt Disney or a George Pal” (402), and Miss Trixie asks for “Lawrence Welk” (197). Musical references occur when Mr. Clyde of Paradise Vendors whistles the folk song “Turkey in the Straw” (165), when Santa Battaglia plays a Fats Domino record (216), when Darlene’s performance is introduced by “You Are My Lucky Star” (340) and accompanied by “Sophisticated Lady” (342), and when Frieda refers to Jeanette MacDonald (330).
A Medieval Crusader in Twentieth-Century New Orleans

bum. Shit. Drop him on somebody, everybody getting caught in the fallout, getting their ass blowed up. Ooo-wee” (360). And Santa Battaglia reminisces about her childhood: “Poor momma. Right off the boat. Couldn’t speak a word of English hardly. There I was just a little thing breaking them ersters open. I didn’t go to no school. Not me, babe” (103). Barbara A. Fennell and John Bennett have shown that “Ignatius aims to seal himself off from the other characters in a speech community of one, consistently employing verbal obfuscation and breaching linguistic conventions in order to stifle effective communication with those he considers inferior” (372-73), and they have pointed out that his strategies for distinguishing himself from everybody else are his aggressive criticism of his interlocutors’ linguistic limitations, his insulting impoliteness, his compulsive lying, and his deliberate choice of unknown words that make his “lexical performance [...] consistently inappropriate to the social situation” (377). Robert Rudnicki has approached Ignatius’s style from a different angle and shown that it is indebted to Euphuism, the affectedly elegant literary style of John Lyly’s *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit* (1678) with its elaborate alliterations and antitheses. This is not as far-fetched as it might seem since John Lyly’s humor was the topic of Toole’s undergraduate thesis at Tulane and his Master’s thesis at Columbia. By analyzing Ignatius’s language in the light of what Toole had to say in his scholarly papers about Lyly, Rudnicki demonstrates that Ignatius’s speech contains “the most common figures of Euphuism: antithesis, parallelism, alliteration, repetition, consonance, assonance, puns and word-play, anecdotes, and allusions to historical figures” (289).

In his affectedly elevated and pointedly anachronistic speech, Ignatius has only one positive term for women, who for him are strange and dangerous creatures: the old-fashioned designation “maiden” (136). But with “jade” (15), “trollop” (93), “doxy” (226), “strumpet” (311), “bawd” (311), “minx” (331), “slut” (337), and “wanton” (351) he uses a wide range of rare and partly obsolete designations for ill-tempered, vulgar, disreputable, slovenly, promiscuous, and lascivious females. For people whom he really dislikes he employs the uncommon and insulting epithet “mongoloid” (60 et passim). He calls a letter a “missive” and sweat “the stench of glandular emissions” (225, 331). He finds Paradise Vendors not an old but a “paleolithic” firm, and describes himself not as dressed but as “caparisoned” in a pirate’s costume (220, 238). He calls George his “pubescent nemesis” (297), Dorian Greene a “flamboyant offal” (260), Claude Robichaux a “roue” (374), Darlene’s cockatoo an “avian menace” (342), his own fantasies “sexual gauderies” (304), and his mother’s endearments “lachrymose clichés” (393). Instead of saying ‘it smells bad,’ he states: “My olfactories are already beginning to send out distress signals” (21), and when he smells the hot dogs of Paradise Vendors he observes: “I thought that the vibrissae about my nostrils detected something unique” (165). When his appalled mother discovers the pornographic picture of Lana Lee, he thunders: “How dare you besmirch that magnificent image with your vintner’s hands” (312), and when he describes his physical state to simple-minded Mr. Clyde, he says:

My tarsi are apparently about to throw in the towel completely. [...]arious small bones and ligaments are beginning to wave a white flag of surrender. My physical apparatus seem to be preparing to announce a truce of some sort. My digestive system has almost ceased
functioning altogether. Some tissue has perhaps grown over my pyloric valve, sealing it forever. (221)

Ignatius is disdainfully critical of the linguistic limits of his interlocutors. When his mother misreads an ad in the paper he comments that “it’s unfortunate that you couldn’t complete your education” (72), and when she tells him about an old lady who sells pralines in front of the cemetery, he remarks that he is “not in the mood for a dialect story” (227). When she refers to a comment by Santa Battaglia, he curtly observes that he is not interested in that woman’s “assaults upon the Mother tongue” (190), when Myrna Minkoff suggests that he leave a note for his mother before running away with her, he says that “it would hardly be worthwhile. She’d be weeks in comprehending it” (402), and the black English of the workers at Levy Pants he dismisses as “their seventeenth-century English accents” (135). Predictably, his interlocutors do not understand Ignatius and can only make helpless comments. Burma Jones asks: “How come a white cat like you, talkin so good, sellin weenies?” (306), and George, who thinks that Ignatius has gone to school too long and that “that was probably what was wrong with him” (295), admits: “You said it better than I ever could” (298). But in most cases Ignatius and his interlocutors talk on cross purposes as in this exchange in the Night of Joy:

“Canned food is a perversion,” Ignatius said. “I suspect that it is ultimately very damaging to the soul.”

“Lord, my elbow’s starting up again,” Mrs. Reilly sighed.

“Please, I am speaking,” her son told her. “I never eat canned food. I did once, and I could feel my intestines starting to atrophy.”

“You got a good education.” Darlene said. (33)

One of the most glaring examples of Ignatius’s unique mixture of self-delusion and ignorance is his outspokenly racist attitude towards African Americans, that is, towards half of the population of the New Orleans of his days. Although he repeatedly stresses that he has “deep and abiding convictions concerning social action” (113) and is vaguely aware of the existence of “civil rights organization[s]” (130), his embarrassingly misnamed “Crusade for Moorish Dignity” (149) shows that he has neither any knowledge about nor the faintest interest in the plight of racial minority groups and the Civil Rights movement that was in full swing at the time of the novel’s action. When he speaks about “Negroes [picking cotton] in the healthful outdoors singing and eating watermelons” (130), rejects “obscene jazz” (133), declares that he “abhor[s] spirituals” (136), and is envious of “the terror which Negroes are able to inspire in the hearts of some members of the white proletariat” (134), a terror he specifies as having to do with the threat of rape, he employs every racist cliché. Additionally, his condescending admission that “in spite of all to which they have been subjected, Negroes are nonetheless a rather pleasant folk for the most part” as well as his ludicrous observation that he has “always felt something of a kinship with the colored race because its position is the same as mine: we both exist outside the inner realm of American society” reveal a frightful lack of understanding (134).

While in the novel’s fictional world Ignatius uses his arsenal of daunting linguistic strategies to barricade himself in a speech community of one, Toole cre-
ates a text-external linguistic community between his grandiloquent protagonist and his readers. With Ignatius’s racist comments, Miss Trixie’s designation of the disastrous revolt at Levy Pants as “a minstrel show” (153), and Burma Jones’ reflection about the fear of a white woman sitting next to him in the bus—“She think cause I color I gonna rape her” (65)—he dares depict black-white relations in ways that violate all rules of political correctness. And since, in contrast to his uneducated interlocutors, his readers are not only expected to understand the meaning of Ignatius’s literary references to writers from Boethius to Mark Twain and many others,4 but also to decipher his rhetorical flights of fancy, this constellation once more creates a hilarious incongruity because the readers experience Ignatius’s abortive communications from his point of view and simultaneously recognize the absurd inappropriateness of his speech.

Another instrument for the creation of verbal humor is the style of Toole’s omniscient narrator, especially his imaginative and witty comparisons. Thus, Mrs. Levy’s letters to her daughters are “emotional, irrational brainwashing editorials that could have made Patrick Henry out to be a Tory” (160), and Mrs. Reilly’s shoes are described as “her brown wedgies squeak[ing] with discount price defiance” (88). Patrolman Mancuso’s eyes watch Ignatius “like torpedoes zeroing in on a great wooly tanker” (15), in the air-conditioned Levy house “the central machinery of the great life-giving unit” throbs “like a Red Cross instructor giving cadence in an artificial respiration class” (106), and in the boiling water at Paradise Vendors “the frankfurters swished and lashed like artificially colored and magnified paramecia” (165). Ignatius’s green hunting cap appears in the car window “looking like the tip of a promising watermelon” (37), and at Levy Pants the black women carry his soiled bed sheet “as if it were a leper’s shroud” (150). When Ignatius squats on the little stool in front of the filing cabinet, he looks “like an eggplant balanced atop a thumb tack” (96), and his pirate’s uniform makes him look “like a dinosaur egg about to hatch” (170). When he lies in bed his “body [is]

4 Toole integrates numerous allusions to writers like Joseph Addison (280), Harriet Beecher Stowe (403) and Uncle Tom’s Cabin (130), Elizabeth Barrett Browning (92), Geoffrey Chaucer’s Wife of Bath (395), Gilbert Keith Chesterton (281), Agatha Christie’s Miss Marple (167), Joseph Conrad (22) and The Heart of Darkness (132), Svengali from George du Maurier’s Trilby (71), Ernest Hemingway (196), Fanny Hurst (196), Thomas Babington Macaulay (129), Norman Mailer (191), Arthur Miller (108), John Milton (112, 139, 237), Margaret Mitchell’s “Scarla O’Horror” (86, 232, 304, 316), Marcel Proust (59), and Friedrich Schiller (59); to historians and critics like Charles Austin Beard (135), Vernon Louis Parrington (135), and Seymour Krim (191), to philosophers like Plato (111) and Machiavel (243, 268), to composers like Domenico Scarlatti (165) and Edvard Grieg’s In the Hall of the Mountain King (393), to the painter Grant Wood (322), the film director Fritz Lang's Metropolis (130), and to Sigmund Freud (91, 197, 291, 367), to spiritual leaders like Billy Graham (169) and Father James Keller (169), to Kublai Khan’s Xanadu (106), Marco Polo (223), Joan of Arc (259), Patrick Henry (160), the pirate Jean Lafitte (256), and Florence Nightingale (198), to politicians like Winston Churchill (169), Boss Tweed (48), Franklin Delano Roosevelt (254) and his wife Eleanor (265), Herbert Hoover (364), Harry S Truman (254), Joseph McCarthy (224, 373), Richard Nixon (254), and John F. Kennedy (254), to entrepreneurs like Thomas Alva Edison (238), John D. Rockefeller (238), Jay Gould (50), Henry Ford (107, 238), to the Guggenheim Foundation (293), to Life (66), Sports Illustrated (197), and diverse left-wing journals (137, 190, 227).
sunken into the mattress like a meteor” (352), when he takes a bath “he wallow[s] in it] like a pink hippopotamus” (187), in the newspaper photograph he lies “in the gutter like a washed-up whale” (356), and packing for his escape, he “paw[s] through a pile of yellowed drawers like a dog digging for a bone” (400). In these and many other cases the comic effects result from a mixture of irreverence that is reminiscent of Mark Twain’s Hank Morgan’s comments on the world of King Arthur, with the resourceful combination of strikingly incongruous elements. And often these comparisons carry an additional meaning. Thus, when it is said at the novel’s beginning that the bristles growing in Ignatius’s ears stick out “like turn signals indicating two directions at once” (13), this curious detail metonymically anticipates the untenable position of the twentieth-century medievalist who is torn between two conflicting worlds and simultaneously loathes and loves Hollywood movies, denounces popular culture and likes Batman and Yogi Bear, rejects sexuality and is an inveterate masturbator.

The Double-Pronged Ending

Picaresque novels with their episodic structure generally do not move towards an organic ending and therefore often take recourse to a deus ex machina. Toole solves this genre-specific problem with a double-pronged conclusion that combines a denouement logically resulting from the ingeniously interlinked strands of his plot with a suddenly intruding and barely camouflaged ‘God from the machine.’ In the end, all his characters except Ignatius get what they deserve, and this shows that the novel’s twentieth-century world is governed by the modern ethics of reward and punishment and not by Ignatius’s notion of accidental determinism represented by the rota Fortunae. Lana Lee, the criminal provider of pornography for minors, is arrested and will be duly punished. Patrolman Mancuso, who has doggedly tried to fulfill his orders, is commended for having single-handedly broken Lana Lee’s pornography ring and changes from a pathetic loser into an admired hero expecting a promotion. Darlene is offered a contract by a competing Bourbon Street night club and can start her career as an exotic dancer. Mr. Levy, whom the threat of bankruptcy and the chance to stop his wife’s nagging have galvanized into a new awareness, will rebuild his dilapidated factory. Miss Trixie is finally pensioned. Burma Jones will get both a job at the reconstructed Levy Shorts factory and the first award of merit handed out by the new Levy Foundation and will thus be provided with a new start into a better life. Mrs. Reilly is freed of the burden of her son and will probably marry Claude Robichaux. In short, the good people are rewarded and the bad ones are punished, and all of these developments result logically from the preceding events. But with regard to Ignatius things are quite different. In a scene that might have been inspired by the ending of A Streetcar Named Desire (see Fletcher 25), his mother and Santa Battaglia plot to send him to the psychiatric ward of Charity Hospital, but Myrna Minkoff appears out of the blue as a dea ex machina and at the last moment saves him from being committed. She takes him away to a “new cycle [that] would be so different from anything he had ever known” (405), and thus his narrow escape seems to confirm
that he was right in relying on the wheel of fortune. Yet in contrast to that of the other characters, his future remains ambiguously open.

Ignatius is last seen sitting in a fetal position in the back of Myrna Minkoff’s small car and staring “gratefully at the back of Myrna’s head, at the pigtail that swung innocently at his knee. Gratefully. How ironic, Ignatius thought. Taking the pigtail in one of his paws, he pressed it warmly to his wet moustache” (405). Critics have read this final paragraph in very different ways. Wesley Britton finds it unreservedly positive: “The ending is a rebirth for Ignatius as he lies in the fetal position in the back seat of Myrna’s car. *A Confederacy of Dunces*, then, is a complete cycle for Ignatius, from the beginning of his downward spiral to the final upward spin of the last paragraphs. […] Ignatius is justified in his reliance on medieval thought as he is ultimately saved by a *deus ex machina*” (20). Concentrating on the “innocent” swing of Myrna’s pigtail and on Ignatius’s “grateful” stare, Pat Gardner even reads the novel’s ending in terms of Christian salvation: “It is fitting that innocence and gratitude should appear, for the first time, together. It is fitting as well, that gratitude, a condition necessary for spiritual salvation, should be the note on which the novel ends” (90). And Tison Pugh limits his positive reading to Ignatius’s sexuality and argues that the latter’s final gesture “suggests that Ignatius is growing into sexual maturity” (93). William Bedford Clark is more skeptical and warns that “the fact that [Ignatius] kisses Myrna’s pigtail ‘warmly’ in the novel’s final sentence seems hopeful, but it is worth remembering that he assumes the fetal position upon entering Myrna’s car. Toole leaves the reader with the troubling possibility that Ignatius has not undergone a genuine rebirth but has merely traded one womb for another” (276). Elizabeth S. Bell sees the ending in even more negative terms and argues that Ignatius’s ‘rescue’ means his expulsion from the secure world of medieval allegory. For her, “Ignatius’s ‘escape’ in the end of the novel is not salvation but a form of damnation. He runs from the only help or solace the novel suggests, and in so doing, dooms himself to repeat the fiascos and torments of this past life” (21). Richard F. Patteson and Thomas Sauret see things in a skeptical but more differentiated way. Admitting that the final paragraph seems to imply that “Ignatius’ liberation may be psychological as well as geographical” because he “performs his first act of tenderness and thanks,” they add that this gesture should not be overrated because “as we see this Quixotic crusader at the end of the novel being guided into that true heart of darkness, the industrial North, by his unlikely Sancho Panza, it seems likely that for Ignatius the alternative to living in a world of illusion may still be too ghastly to contemplate” (86-87).

One has to remember that in order not to be committed to a mental institution, Ignatius must leave New Orleans, the only place in which he felt secure, and that his relationship with the woman who takes him away is a hostile one. One must not forget that he is moving out into a world he has previously described as “the heart of darkness, the true wasteland” and that his destination, New York, is to him the very “center of mechanized horrors” (22, 138). And one has to keep in mind that the last thing his embittered mother says to her pampered son is her scathing judgment: “You learnt everything, Ignatius, except how to be a human being” (375). In view of these conditions, Ignatius’s start into an uncertain future is anything but a promising development, and one must conclude that in spite of
his momentary rescue his one-man’s crusade against the world has failed completely and that he will either have to adjust to a world he loathes or really end up in a place like Mandeville, the home of Southeast Louisiana Hospital, a mental health facility to which he had so cunningly sent Mr. Levy.

**Conclusion**

Toole’s stunningly inventive novel tells a story that unfolds in a fast sequence of surprising and comic encounters and keeps its readers in suspense until its convincing double-pronged ending. Its grotesque protagonist is an inimitable character who combines the unsavory elements of man’s corporeality with rhetorical flights of fancy and whose one-man’s fight against the world offers an intriguing depiction of the conflict between two warring *weltanschauungen*. This conflict touches upon crucial philosophical questions through a wide range of both direct and implied allusions to writers from Boethius and John Lyly to Mark Twain and Walker Percy and to popular culture heroes from Batman to Yogi Bear. The many supporting characters represent different ethnicities and employ various registers that offer not only what is probably the most comprehensive fictional portrait of multicultural New Orleans but also provide a veritable treasure trove of the city’s linguistic diversity. And the narrator’s lexical versatility and metaphorical inventiveness allow him to unfold his intricate plot with idiosyncratic humor.

Yet in spite of these accomplishments, the novel has also some shortcomings that result from Toole’s ambition to achieve too many things at once. Thus, whereas some of the supporting figures such as the unique Burma Jones, the life-affirming Santa Battaglia, and the hen-pecked Angelo Mancuso come to life as fully-fleshed ‘round’ characters, others such as the one-dimensional Levys remain ‘flat’ cardboard figures who are hardly more than carriers of Toole’s satirical thrust, and Myrna Minkoff remains, in her creator’s own resigned admission, “a cartoon.” A similar contrast is obvious with regard to Ignatius, in whom Toole combines the wild exaggerations appropriate in satirical exposures with attempts at providing the psychological believability expected in realistic novels. His half-hearted attempts to give Ignatius some historical depth by explaining his behavior as the result of traumatic childhood experiences do not really convince, and it is hardly believable that the prude “virgin” can produce the advanced sexual puns his creator allows him to make. Similar inconsistencies mar the novel’s constitutive contrast between medieval philosophy and modern pragmatism, which was one of Toole’s major interests (see MacLauchlin 49) but is blurred by the self-contradictory expostulations of his protagonist. Robert Gottlieb’s mixture of praise for the novel’s many “wonderfulnesses” with his scathing critique that “it’s a brilliant exercise in invention, but […] it isn’t really about anything. And that’s something no one can do anything about” is certainly too severe (qtd. in Nevils and Hardy 131), but one must admit that the different levels of the sprawling narrative do not coalesce into a unified whole. Nevertheless, Ignatius’s reference to Thomas Babington Macaulay’s observation that “a great writer is the friend and benefactor of his readers” (129) might well be applied to *A Confederacy of Dunces*, for in the same way in that a true friendship takes time to grow, Toole’s multi-layered novel needs to be read more than once before it can be adequately enjoyed.
Works Cited


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