

Fine Finish Can't Redeem Reilly's Repetition

A CONFEDERACY OF DUNCES

By John Kennedy Toole. 338 pages.
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In Dickens' "Nicholas Nickleby" that super-hypocrite, Squeers, holding up a glass of watered slop to the pinch-bellied boys of Dotheboy's Hall, utters the classic lip-smacking line, "Here's richness!"

I thought of this line after I had finished "A Confederacy of Dunces," and then leafed back to read the introduction, which is by no less — and no more — an authority than Walker Percy.

Among other encomiums Percy offers is this one: "A great rumbling farce of Falstaffian dimensions."

Rumbling? Yes, the chief character, or anti-hero, or patsy, or whatever other label you want to drape on him, does have a surfeit of stomach trouble. But — Falstaffian? Sir John Falstaff would, I think, take one sweetly assessing look at this renegade from a New Orleans roach-crack and flip him away like a fly.

For, though the infinite comic possibilities of

Paul Darcy Boles' 11th book, "Night Watch," will be published in November.

this Ignatius Reilly are drawn through wearisome knotholes of detail — I have seldom encountered so much repetition, even in the "begats" section of the Old Testament — the man himself is a globule of gelatin, a mound of quivering plasma. As unfinished as a possum, he stumbles, creeps and oozes from one traumatic adventure to the next, treating us, along the way, to perfectly unedited swatches of his own limping prose and more or less Boethian philosophy. All this he scrawls in Big Chief writing tablets, while holed up in his noisome bedroom to avoid the shrewish clack-tongue of his mother.

Now, invective in the right hands can be beautiful; in fact, it is one of the continuing glories of the language. But to be pointed, poignant, and memorable, a native talent for denunciation needs the true flash of the sword — the steel beneath the skin. An Ignatius Reilly, tossed like a sweating bundle of microbes on the particularly petty winds of smelly New Orleans nightlife, is a poor, sad bubble of a man — never tragic, simply and grayly pitiable; never once, in innumerable tries, the royal rebel on whom our imaginative lives depend, but always the sad and third-rate clown.

There is a laughter here, all right; but a kind of desperate, hands-thrown-in-the-air laughter that leaves the throat sour and the psyche discouraged. John Kennedy Toole, the author who, we're told, died by his own hand in 1969, had a real gift for weaving the lives of societal rejects and the baffled and bumptious rich into a tapestry of farcical figures, all dancing around death, and their vague con-

sciousness of it, in Brueghelian abandon. Toole was, also obviously, a lover of dialogue embedded in sharp cartoons — the not-so-minor character of Jones, a black man with unstoppable indignation, charmed me every time he opened his mouth; "For twenty dollar a week, you ain running a plantation in here —" and I kept wishing to God for more of him. There are other built-in natural vital virtues as well — a succession of scenes toward the end, when the tangled threads of what plot there is are gathered in skillfully realized knots that go a long way toward justifying the arid patches that have gone before.

But it's not enough. Repeatedly bogged in the morass of decaying vegetation and whale-spouting spume which pass for the personality of Reilly, I kept wondering why a university press of sterling reputation couldn't, somewhere along the line, have borrowed the services of an objective, mean-minded editor with an eye for form and the wit to carve at least a minor masterpiece out of all this. Whoever did edit the manuscript must have been looking out of the window — I think LSU is coeducational — most of the time. There are passages here which nearly elevate the typo to an art-form. John Kennedy Toole hasn't been done right by — either in the handling of this posthumous publication, or in the somewhat arch and certainly overblown foreword to the book, no matter who wrote it.

So — here's richness. But watch out for that damned taste at the bottom of the glass.