

Appearance of genius

By Harold Beaver

JOHN KENNEDY TOOLE:

A Confederacy of Dunces

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"For sheer pleasure", Osbert Lancaster observed, "few methods of progression can compare with the perambulator. The motion is agreeable, the range of vision extensive, and one has always before one's eyes the rewarding spectacle of a grown-up maintaining prolonged physical exertion." Above all, there is the pasha-like power of infants, derived from the mere act of jettisoning a teddy-bear or rattle, that can readily quell any tendency of grown-ups to independence.

Ignatius J. Reilly, of *A Confederacy of Dunces*, is just such an infant, inflated to grotesque dimensions. Like Ignatius, his author too had apparently been still living with his mother at the age of thirty. It was Thelma D. Toole who relentlessly hawked her son's manuscript, which had been unanimously rejected in the 1960s, until she elicited an enthusiastic commendation from Walker Percy. John Kennedy Toole's posthumous fiction was finally published last year by the Louisiana State University Press. To a universal chorus of praise. It is a masterpiece.

Until the mother publishes her own memoir, it will be hopeless to try to disentangle fact from fiction. For what at one point sounds like hilarious satire of American junk culture, at another sounds like self-satire. The loathing shifts remorselessly to self-loathing. The title derives from Swift: "When a true genius appears in the world, you may know him by this sign, that the dunces are all in confederacy against him." That must have been John Kennedy Toole speaking. (Ed Lindlof's jacket illustration is clearly based on Toole's photograph.) For he committed suicide in 1969, at the age of thirty-two, depressed at his failure to get the novel published.

That suppressed "true genius" was his own. Who else is the mock-hero of this fiction? Who else this grotesque pasha, this southern Oblomov wallowing in his flannel nightshirt in a back bedroom in New Orleans? This lumbering, bloated, belching, hypochondriac slob who is literally a weight round his mother's neck? Mercilessly Ignatius J. Reilly tyrannizes over his mother. Relentlessly he manipulates everyone by his monumental sloth and size. A true southerner of the old school, he rants against the modern world. A royalist and medievalist at heart, he yearns for the luminous age of Abelard and Thomas à Becket. Boethius's *De Consolatione*, Hroswitha and Batman are his guides as he swings up and down - mostly down - the cycles of Fortuna

This inert blob of domesticated tissue (like the hero of Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*, 1963) is compulsively drawn to movies, greedily studying the credits for performers, assistant producers, even hair designers that had previously roused his loathing, nauseating himself on close-ups, inspecting smiles for cavities and fillings: A purulent mess, he seeks out his mirror image in the world. His gloating lust is all expended on the movies and TV (that hang-up was all too true of the 1950s and early 60s), while he lashes out at heterosexuals, homosexuals, Protestants, "newspaper reporters, stripteasers, birds, photography, juvenile delinquents, Nazi pornographers". He dreams of terrorizing the white proletariat:

The Negro terrorizes simply by being himself; I, however, must browbeat a bit in order to achieve the same end. Perhaps I should have been a Negro. I suspect that I would have been a rather large and terrifying one, continually pressing my ample thigh against the withered thighs of old white ladies in public conveyances a great deal and eliciting more than one shriek of panic.

This man-mountain of heaving fat - all lethargy and rancour - is a wholly novel compound; both rabelaisian, with his

gargantuan farts, and melancholy as melancholy Jaques, and coyly virginal as Oliver Hardy. Inflated with gastric gas, when his pyloric valve snaps shut, he bumbles and floats into disaster-prone, knockabout regions of pure farce, like another Pyecraft.

But Ignatius is not the only memorable character. There is also a supporting cast of zany patrolmen, bag-ladies, night-club proprietors, hustlers, strippers, queers, Jewish industrialists, black vagrants, hot-dog vendors and female militants crisscrossing the wide sweep of the Crescent City from Canal Street to the suburbs, from the French Quarter to the wharves along the Mississippi. Bourbon, Royal, Chartres, St Peter, Dumaine: all the lovely names of the Quarter resound. All the accents resound: of the black spivs, the flitty queens, "the German and Irish Third Ward". Mark Twain himself might have saluted such an achievement. A spirit of revelry, of Mardi Gras, hovers over all as Ignatius (now a hot-dog vendor), an Italian patrolman, a Negro doorman and a variety of homosexuals wander about the Quarter in festive drag.

The plot itself is explosively inventive. Again and again I burst out laughing. But it must be remembered that something like a twenty year gap divides this text from the 1980s. Like *Sister Carrie*, *A Confederacy of Dunces* has reached us after a long and painful detour. John Kennedy Toole himself died in 1969, a year of revolt and rejuvenation. His novel is still rooted in an earlier decade of snug, sly, cynical seclusion - of verbal sabotage from the dark wombs of cinemas, family bedrooms, bars, bus terminals, rest-rooms, pool-halls and the back rows of seminars. Twice Ignatius sallies out (bugged by his mother to find work) to be incongruously transformed: first into a rabble-rousing leader of sweat-shop labour; next, into a sexual campaigner. For, in a grand finale, he attempts to organize an international takeover, "Save the World Through Degeneracy":

In those reactionary countries in which the deviates seem to be having some trouble in gaining control, we will send aid to them as rebels to help them in toppling their governments. When we have at last overthrown all existing governments, the world will enjoy not war but global orgies conducted with the utmost protocol and the most truly international spirit, for these people do transcend simple national differences. Their minds are on one goal; they are truly united; they think as one.

None of the pederasts in power, of course, will be practical enough to know about such devices as bombs; these nuclear weapons would lie rotting in their vaults somewhere. From time to time the Chief of Staff, the President, and so on, dressed in sequins and feathers, will entertain the leaders, i.e., the perverts, of all the other countries at balls and parties. Quarrels of any sort could easily be straightened out in the men's room of the redecorated United Nations.

But this Satyricon of disguises and depravities and chance encounters necessarily moves to a comic resolution. The mother remarries; the Jewish proprietor returns to his factory; his psychobabbling wife is worsted; the stripper hits the big time; the vagrant lands a job; the bag-lady is retired; and Ignatius is rescued by his activist college girl-friend. The havoc littering his trail turns out to be wholly beneficial. This costive buffoon on the prowl - this obese onanist - turns out to be the trickster hero of the Carnival City. The anarchy that surrounds him is restorative and mysteriously creative.

As Ignatius drags his girl out of the front door, she asks: "Don't you want to pack anything?" "Oh, of course" he recalls. "There are all of my notes and jottings. We must never let them fall into the hands of my mother. She may make a fortune from them. It would be too ironic." Just how ironic John Kennedy Toole himself was never to know.

A review of the American edition of A Confederacy of Dunces appeared in the TLS of July 18 1980.