

Closure in *A Confederacy of Dunces*,
Or, The Tragicomic Menippean Exultation in the Lack Thereof

Christopher Brown

Literary Study II: Prose Fiction

Dr. Waterman Ward

9 May 2009

As the minx Myrna Minkoff's Renault flees New Orleans with the fugitive Ignatius Reilly embedded in the back seat, the narrative of *A Confederacy of Dunces* cuts short, leaving a tantalizingly ambiguous taste in the mouth of the reader. While full of the same elation that overlays the other characters' righteous fates, the shallow optimism of these final pages fails to assure the reader of any happy closure. Ignatius "gratefully" kisses Myrna's pigtail, which perhaps portends some deep change in Ignatius, but his savior verbalizes what the reader must be thinking in these moments of non-apotheosis: "Ignatius, all at once you're your old horrible self. All at once I think I'm making a very big mistake" (Toole 393). Ignatius responds "sweetly" in the negative, and via free indirect discourse, the novel concludes with an irrational hopefulness as Ignatius trusts Fortuna to spin him somewhere better, "so different from anything he had ever known" (Toole 393-4).

This is not closure; closure is "when a narrative resolves a conflict" (Abbott 56). The conflict of *A Confederacy of Dunces* lies in Reilly's antagonism toward his anachronistic fate; born a medieval man in the twentieth century, he lashes out at almost every modern convention. Yet, as an ending, it holds some special weight; Marianna Torgovnick writes that, "It is difficult to recall all of a work after a completed reading, but climactic moments, dramatic scenes, and *beginnings and endings* remain in the memory and decisively shape our sense of the novel as a whole" (3, emphasis mine). Nevertheless, the inconclusiveness is a poetic paradox, highlighting this choice of ending. Frank Kermode ridicules the typicality of some works that have predictable closure, writing that, "We should expect only the most trivial work to conform to pre-existent types" (24). Expectations that are too insistent result in a "disastrous attempt to impose limited designs upon the time of the world" (Kermode 88). Nevertheless, it is natural to desire some aspect of closure!

But Ignatius has not changed; his momentarily convincing excitement about Manhattan cannot be understood as anything but irony:

“I can’t wait,” Ignatius said, packing his scarf and cutlass. “The Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building, the thrill of opening night on Broadway with my favorite musicomedey stars. Gab sessions in the Village over espresso with challenging, contemporary minds.” (Toole 390)

Ignatius’s favorite musicomedey stars are nothing more than choice targets of his derision. And if there is anything that Ignatius hates more than gab sessions with other minds, it must be gab sessions with other *contemporary* minds. The only contemporary figure that Reilly condones is Batman—that costumed, transcendent superhero of intractable morals whose values emanate from himself and who acts alone. That the impending, inevitable clash of Ignatius and Manhattan would make for a good sequel demonstrates the openness of the novel.

Critic Kevin Collins, convinced that the final chapter literally contradicts the prior narrative, claims the escape is nothing more than a product of Ignatius Reilly’s desperate imagination—a dream that transparently becomes narrative while Reilly rides in the back of the ambulance sent to take him to Charity Hospital’s mental ward. While intriguing, this conclusion is fundamentally unjustified; Ignatius distorts much of his experience when speaking to his mother or Mr. Levy or when writing in his journals, but he never supersedes the narrator. The contradictory ending must perform, somehow, as an element of the holistic novel.

In another attempt to read closure into the ending, it is tempting to consider Myrna Minkoff as a redemptive figure; she enters the scene just as Ignatius’s mother, Irene, steps out. In the final chapter, Ignatius’s mother finally extricates herself from Ignatius’s clutches, taking Santa Battaglia’s advice and leaving Ignatius to the care of a mental institution. Her final kiss to Ignatius is not reciprocated; instead, Ignatius brushes her off (although he immediately bemoans her absence when she leaves). Myrna’s unexpected arrival seems the perfect resolution to Ignatius’s Oedipal debilitation; she offers to become the new female figure in his life, rectifying all his sexual reticence and frustration. But Myrna’s effect on Ignatius is superficial, and Ignatius’s

real conflict lies much deeper than at the sexual level. The real conflict—Ignatius’s anachronistic dissatisfaction with the world in which he lives—promises rather to be aggravated by Myrna than remedied. Ignatius has become accustomed to New Orleans, and it seems likely that New York City will be an environment very disagreeable to his taste, considering the deep scarring inflicted upon his psyche by his one and only other excursion out of New Orleans, when he traveled to Baton Rouge.

Without an all-resolving ending, the novel adheres to the open form, “which includes a major unresolved conflict with the intent of displaying its unresolvedness” (Adams 13). That form in itself is hardly notable, and Robert Adams argues strongly for the universality and value of the open form, which he likens to the concept of ambivalence—one of the treasure troves of all literary criticism. Adams finds openness, intentional or not, in some way to exemplify “the fallen state of human nature” (204). Henry James agrees that reality is not closed: “Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so” (5). By ending *A Confederacy of Dunces* with an ellipsis, Toole refuses to draw a complete circle, leaving one small, overpowering gap that renders the work more true to life than James’ work (albeit, perhaps, less *artful*). Toole’s masterful balance between “formlessness and the formulaic”¹ plays off the expectation of comedy by manifesting all of the traits of comedy (the *contrapasso* punishment of evil, the comedic fulfillment of hopes, even the implication of a wedding), and then neglecting to resolve Ignatius’s end. By leaving open only the fate of Myrna and Ignatius, who comprise the only gap in the Jamesian circle, Toole accentuates its unresolvedness.

Curiously, Ignatius is responsible for most of the characters’ outcomes, in some off-hand or not so subtle way, imparting closure to their stories. Ignatius plays the carnivalesque role of the

¹ Credit goes to Dr. Andrew Moran for this alliterative epigram that so aptly describes Toole’s technique.

“Lord of Misrule,”² casted in the position of the beggar-become-king. In the moment of this book, everything is upturned and the unlikely Ignatius enjoys a taste of fame. The carnival is a cathartic event; inverting the normal Apollonian hierarchy and allowing Dionysian disorder to manifest itself dissolves the tension between the two. The carnival must come to an end, however; the figurehead of the carnival must be magnificently deposed so that order can be reinstated. In *A Confederacy of Dunces*, Ignatius becomes the scapegoat; as unintentionally as he was chosen to become the “Lord of Misrule,” the pain of the inevitable restoration of order falls on him. Chapter Thirteen begins with Ignatius in the hospital, literally beaten, with his head in bandages, and continues to describe how his descent the night before had its conclusive effect on the other characters.

In a montage that fully closes all of the subplots, the penultimate chapter subdivides neatly into sections that seal off each character’s fate: Burma Jones escapes the degrading Night of Joy; Mancuso gets his big break and an award; publicity catapults Darlene into the strip-club scene; Lana Lee is imprisoned in a cell with three lesbians; Mrs. Levy sets off in a freighter to be reunited with her mother; Miss Trixie gets her retirement and Easter ham; and Mr. Levy evades the Abelman lawsuit, musing that “[Reilly] had saved himself, Miss Trixie, and Mr. Levy, too, in his own kook way” (Toole 377). The police corner George in his home; Mr. Clyde fires Ignatius; Dorian Greene resolves to find new lodgers; even Dr. Talc reappears to lament the shameful reflection that Ignatius’s exploits will have on his own reputation among his students. Ignatius’s mother and her lover Claude elope. Only a very few characters, the ones that Toole has left flat, like Mr. Watson and Santa Battaglia, simply fade away. By the end, most of the characters are better off, or at least suffering in poetic justice.

But the final, fourteenth chapter finds Ignatius’s own fate still awaiting closure, as he lies in his bed “napping fitfully and attacking his rubber glove during his frequent, anxious moments

² Thanks to Dr. Robert S. Dupree for the idea of casting Ignatius as “Lord of Misrule.”

of consciousness” (Toole 378). The contrast between Reilly’s irresolute departure and the painstaking resolution of the myriad minor characters’ stories surely signifies some great difference—something individual about Ignatius. In a sympathetic sense, the inconclusiveness disturbs the reader. By this point, Ignatius has become a likable character; he has achieved a connection with the reader despite his grotesque hypocrisy and universal disapprobation. Instead of distancing him, passages like the following fragment of Irene’s parting conversation, “You learnt everything, Ignatius, except how to be a human being,” invoke an empathetic feeling between the reader and Ignatius (364). Darlene was right when she told Ignatius, “You sure treat your poor momma cruel,” but he has a peculiar, indelible charm that keeps him from becoming the reprehensible fool to which a caricature would reduce him (294).

It is in Ignatius’s beliefs that we can descry a synthetic way of regarding him and his inconclusiveness. The *Consolation of Philosophy* is the leading, if not only, professed figment of “*weltanschauung*” to which Ignatius adheres (Toole 51). Perhaps it is best to start with Dante’s description of Boethius:

There on the total good enraptured gazes
 That joy who strips the world’s hypocrisies
 Bare to whoever heeds his cogent phrases;
 The flesh they reft him from, Cioldoro sees
 At rest in earth; himself came forth from sore
 Exile and martyrdom unto this peace. (*Paradiso* 10.124-9)

What is notable in the *Consolation of Philosophy* is that Boethius, like Ignatius, does not in the end achieve freedom, but only, in a sense, consolation. Our attention to Ignatius can be likened to Mancuso’s reaction to Boethius:

Patrolman Mancuso felt sorry for the guy [Boethius] and felt obliged to read what he had written. So far he had only covered about twenty pages and was beginning to wonder

whether this Boethius was something of a gambler. He was always talking about fate and odds and the wheel of fortune. Anyway, it wasn't the kind of book that exactly made you look up to the brighter side. (Toole 189)

As a manifesto, the *Consolation of Philosophy* renders a dreary perspective on life.

Notoriously, the last book of the *Consolation* ends not in an exultant section of meter, as do the previous four books, but in Boethius' final admonition to himself and those undergoing similar tribulations of Fortuna's wheel; it has no beatific ending. Joel Relihand writes of Boethius' concluding declarations, "This is not the language of escape from the prison, but of acceptance of the world as *not* a prison" (Boethius 196, emphasis mine). The consolation which philosophy lends Boethius is a state of mind, a lens by which to rationalize his predicament. Boethius had been at the height of privileged life when fortune's wheel inverted and King Theodric sentenced him to death for treason. Like the *Consolation of Philosophy*, *A Confederacy of Dunces* has a false ending that celebrates the *contents* instead of a final resolution, albeit in a slightly different way. Whereas the *Consolation of Philosophy* celebrates a stoic contentment with one's physical situation, *A Confederacy of Dunces* exults in episodes of the quotidian, the grotesque, and the hilarious.

Each episodic thread of *A Confederacy of Dunces* interweaves delicately and effortlessly with the others to create a meticulous web, even though the web's connections to the external world are hazy. The merit of the novel derives *precisely* from this intricacy, and so the beginning and the end escape becoming laden with too much responsibility of significance. In carnivalesque terms—for *A Confederacy of Dunces* assuredly is an act of sublimation that descends into the free expression of the carnival—these webs form the carousel ride. The characters are simply irresistible; take Miss Trixie's introduction:

"Good morning, Miss Trixie," Mr. Gonzalez called in his effervescent tenor. "And how are we this morning?" "Who? Oh, hello, Gomez," Miss Trixie said feebly and drifted off

toward the ladies' room as if she were tacking into a gale. Miss Trixie was never perfectly vertical; she and the floor always met at an angle of less than ninety degrees. (65)

The technical detail that goes into the interleaved, interwoven plot lines, along with the audacious humor of the book, is impressive in its effortlessness. How offhandedly and naturally Toole overlays this plot with humor invites the reader to spend more than one go-round on the carousel, or to return later to this roller coaster of jocularity.

In tune with his misconception of Boethius, Ignatius exclaims, "Optimism nauseates me. It is perverse" (59). There is a morbid, cynical, but postmodern trend in regarding life as "a trap we've always known: we are born without having asked to be, locked in a body we never chose, and destined to die" (Kundera 26). This is the same novel-generating cynicism that Kermode writes of here:

Men, like poets, rush 'into the midst,' in medias res [into the middle of things], when they are born; they also die *in mediis rebus* [in the midst of things], and to make sense of the span they need fictive concords with origins and ends. (7)

To this challenge, the novel becomes "the poetry which is 'capable,' in the words of Ortega, 'of coping with present reality'" (Kermode 128-9). It is not only a mode to explicate the skepticism of the human condition and its fragility; it is a way to confront and deal with that very problem.

A Confederacy of Dunces, in very personal terms, can be perceived as cathartic for Toole himself; the autobiographical resemblance is all too apparent—the controlling mother—the feeling of intellectual solitude. With uncanny prescience, Ignatius remarks to Myrna, "There are all of my notes... We must never let them fall into the hands of my mother. She may make a fortune from them. It would be too ironic" (388). One critic claims that "The novel is, among other things, a four-hundred-page suicide note" (Simon 104). In the same strain, it has become a trend among many critics to excoriate Simon and Schuster, the publisher that ultimately killed Toole's hopes of publishing *A Confederacy of Dunces*, for practically killing Toole (Fletcher 121).

As Kermode points out, criticism is the attempt “to make sense of the ways we try to make sense of our lives” (3). *A Confederacy of Dunces* was indeed, for Toole, a way of making sense of his life. In this respect, the Menippean tone of the novel becomes notable (Menippean satire, as opposed to simple satire, poses a salvific aspect), and ultimately manifests itself as an escape into laughter. Ignatius is a hedonistic cynic, paradoxically; although he may seem pugnacious, at times even repugnant, he enjoys himself. He prizes his incongruity in the world; he self-righteously lets “out a monstrous belch” when he proclaims, “I am an anachronism” (Toole 59). His sense of fun is utterly compelling; take this instance of Ignatius explaining the “bo-bos on [his] hand” to his mother: “Ignatius looked at the scratches he had received in trying to persuade the cat to remain in the bun compartment,” and said, “I had a rather apocalyptic battle with a starving prostitute” (Toole 213). He attends the cinema so that when he perceives the depravity of his world portrayed in full Technicolor glory, he might disparage it in that very distilled form. His relatively zealous project of a journal in Big Chief tablets is bound for nowhere, yet Ignatius seems content to let it hover without completion. Myrna cannot stand his narrow-mindedness, and advises Ignatius in a letter, “Get out of that womb-house for at least an hour a day” (215). But Ignatius feels completely different about venturing out of doors: “I should have known that every time I open the door of my room I am literally opening a Pandora’s Box” (117).

And yet, the novel notably pokes fun at Ignatius’s endless complaints and cloistered lifestyle. If one considers Ignatius as some cameo of Toole himself, the portrayal is an image of self-indulged self-degradation. David McNeil’s concept of reverse satire, wherein “the satirist... makes his attack and is ironically ridiculed himself,” aptly describes the satire of *A Confederacy of Dunces*, as Ignatius “epitomizes the very perversions against which he rages” (33, 35). Consider Jonathan Swift’s titular epigraph:

When a true genius appears in the world,
you may know him by this sign, that the dunces

are all in confederacy against him. (Toole v)

Ignatius would certainly consider himself the “true genius” of Swift’s eponymous epithet, and Toole assuredly felt the same way when what he knew was a masterpiece was unanimously rejected by publishers. Thus, Toole mocks himself when he renders Ignatius as a grotesque buffoon.

Our age is peculiar; Kermode writes, “The fiction of transition is our way of registering the conviction that the end is immanent [existing within] rather than imminent [about to happen]; it reflects our lack of confidence in ends, our mistrust of the apportioning of history to epochs of this and that. *Our own epoch is the epoch of nothing positive, only of transition*” (102, emphasis mine). This sense of teleological stasis (despite ceaseless movement), enervating as it is, explains Ignatius’s predicament. He cannot realistically hope to accomplish anything notable among such a gathering of dunces, but only stoically to grin and bear the worst and enjoy ridiculing the rest. Likewise, the ambivalence toward conventional justice that runs throughout the political aspects of the book weakens the sense of finality of Toole’s ends. The “Crusade for Moorish Dignity,” though Ignatius conceived it for the wrong reason of putting Myrna’s crusades to shame, has in one respect a valid concern—the fair treatment of low-wage factory workers (Toole 137). Nevertheless, it fails miserably in Ignatius’s hands as Mr. Gonzalez easily disbands the hesitant proletariats, the uprising as soon forgotten as the workers who constituted it. Similarly, Ignatius’s plan to “Save the World Through Degeneracy” is compelling, at least in theory, but Ignatius’s claim that “Degeneracy... will now signal peace for a troubled world” fails with the same anticlimactic apathy as did the Crusade (Toole 269-70). These valid social concerns and hopes for world peace are swept aside as Ignatius trudges along to the next exotic bar.

Thus, what Toole uses to drive Ignatius and conclude the narrative is a peculiar species of cynical exuberance. When Irene forces Ignatius out of the house to find work, “He twisted his

face into a mask of suffering. There was no use fighting Fortuna until the cycle was over” (Toole 52). *A Confederacy of Dunces*, as reverse satire, “is organically cyclical, it derives much of its comic energy from this kind of treadmill quest [i.e. having a goal, but no conceivable way to pursue or achieve it]” (McNeil 46). Much like the Red Queen’s predicament (of looking glass fame), modernity has no end, but we must run madly, anyway, just to keep up. Toole shows us, in a novel that evades being labeled tragedy, comedy, or epic, that one of the best ways to run is to laugh—at others, at ourselves—at the world.

Works Cited

- Abbott, H. Porter. *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Adams, Robert M. *Strains of Discord: Studies in Literary Openness*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958.
- Boethius, Anicius Manlius Severinus. *Consolation of Philosophy*. Trans. Joel C. Relihan. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2001.
- Collins, Kevin. "Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces* Chapter 14: Psychological Bankruptcy?" *Notes on Contemporary Literature* 36.2 (March 2006): article not paginated. Literature Resource Center. Blakley Library. University of Dallas, Irving, Texas. 28 January 2009.
- Dante, Alighieri. *Il Paradiso*. Trans. Dorothy L. Sayers and Barbara Reynolds. London: Penguin Group, 1962.
- Dupree, Robert S., Andrew Moran, et al. Senior Novel Panel Presentation Commentary. English Department. University of Dallas, Irving, Texas. 16 April 2009.
- Fletcher, Joel L. *Ken & Thelma: The Story of A Confederacy of Dunces*. Gretna, Louisiana: Pelican Publishing Company, 2005.
- James, Henry. *The Art of the Novel*. "Preface to *Roderick Hudson*." New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934.
- Kermode, Frank. *The Sense of an Ending*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1967.
- Kundera, Milan. *The Art of the Novel*. Trans. Linda Asher. New York: Grove Press, 1986.
- McNeil, David. "*A Confederacy of Dunces* as Reverse Satire: The American Subgenre." *Mississippi Quarterly* 38.1 (Winter 1984-5): 33-47.
- Simon, Richard Keller. "John Kennedy Toole and Walker Percy." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 36.1 (Spring 1994): 99-116.
- Toole, John Kennedy. *A Confederacy of Dunces*. New York: Grove Press, 1980.

Torgovnick, Marianna. *Closure in the Novel*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981.

A Confederacy of Dunces is a picaresque novel by American novelist John Kennedy Toole which reached publication in 1980, eleven years after Toole's suicide. Published through the efforts of writer Walker Percy (who also contributed a foreword) and Toole's mother, Thelma, the book became first a cult classic, then a mainstream success; it earned Toole a posthumous Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1981, and is now considered a canonical work of modern literature of the Southern United States. Confederacy of Dunces is the Forrest Gump of literature and I'd like to never have another conversation about this book as long as I live. NC ...more. flag 675 likes · Like · see review. View all 160 comments. Sam All time legendary review - it seems the dunces are all in confederacy against you my g. -your working boy Apr 06, 2021 07:20PM. Jonah I recommend Batman especially, for he tends to transcend the abysmal society in which he's found himself. WARNING: 'A Confederacy of Dunces' is extremely hilarious and is known to have caused uncontrollable laughter in several cases. Read it in public at your own risk! ...more. flag 667 likes · Like · see review. mean, you had a confederacy of dunces defending him in impeachment, Scarborough opened his rant. Their arguments were absolutely stunning. He added as the panel laughed and agreed, If irony weren't already dead and buried years ago, it was Ken Starr yesterday talking about how abuse of power is not sufficient to impeach a president, you need a crime. He literally dragged the corpse of irony out of the grave, he meticulously tied the corpse's neck bone to the back of a tractor, and he ran that tractor throughout the graveyard of stupidity and ran over every headstone. This, before once a A Confederacy of Dunces. Probably my favourite book of all time Billy Connolly. #15 in the Series: Penguin Essentials. John Kennedy Toole. Walker Percy (Foreword by). But is he bothered by this? No. For this misanthropic crusader against an America fallen into vice and ignorance has a mission: to rescue a naked female philosopher in distress. And he has a pirate costume and hot-dog cart to do it with . . . 'I succumbed, stunned and seduced, page after page, vocal with delight. A masterwork of comedy' New York Times. 'A fine funny novel. This is the kind of book one wants to keep quoting from' Anthony Burgess. Read more. Imprint: Penguin. Published in 1980, 11 years after the suicide of author John Kennedy Toole, A Confederacy of Dunces is often hailed as one of the funniest novels ever. Consider his heightened interest when he finds out Harlett O'Hara will be performing with a "pet", or the fact that his masturbatory fantasy is a happy memory of his late dog. Big "OMG!": Ignatius tends to bellow "Oh, my God!" whenever anything offends his sensibilities.