



## Pathos and Comfort of the City Against the “Torrents of Progress”: Ignatius Reilly’s New Orleans in John Kennedy Toole’s *A Confederacy of Dunces*

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Viewed from the perspective of the trickster-type main character Ignatius Reilly and his engagement with his surroundings and other characters as citizens in a series of picaresque adventures, the city of New Orleans in the novel *A Confederacy of Dunces* (1980) becomes a space of pathos and comfort, indicative of Ignatius’s paralysis and inability to leave it, caused by his innate paranoia of the doctrine of progress in the modern age. At a point in history when the postcolonial and postindustrial city is trying to rebrand itself as a tourist haven, the chronotope of New Orleans functions as a place of suspended modernity, offering comfort in the pathos of its entropy, stagnation and nostalgia against the raging torrents of modernity that reign outside its city limits in the rest of the country.

**Keywords:** New Orleans, port city, *A Confederacy of Dunces*, modernity, progress, the picaresque, pathos and comfort of the city, nostalgia.

With over two hundred years of literary tradition and a reputation of mythical status in the American and world imaginary, New Orleans has long been depicted in literature and art in general as one of the iconic American cities, complex and multicultural, borne by its geographical, architectural, cultural and social core.<sup>1</sup> Ever since its publication in 1980 (some 20 years after it was originally written), John Kennedy Toole’s novel *A Confederacy of Dunces* has been repeatedly referenced by critics and readers as one of the “quintessential New Orleans novels.”<sup>2</sup> In 2018, the main New Orleans newspaper *Times Picayune* celebrated the city’s tercentennial by showcasing 300 profiles of relevant locals, proudly displaying both the author of *A Confederacy of Dunces* and the main character Ignatius J. Reilly as featured local icons, thus paying a tribute to this locally oft contested literary contribution. This was an interesting choice, when we consider that it is not unusual for a city/space to reject its representations that do not divulge in primarily positive and apologetic views of the place; John Kennedy Toole received a similar reception.<sup>3</sup> The author was praised for achieving a certain sense of place in his novel, which unapologetically depicted not only the positive, but also integrated the city’s less flattering sides. He subverted them both by offering a critique from the point of view of a character so outside of the progressive narrative (a medievalist opposed to the modern age) in the form of a picaresque farce, thus offering an entirely different viewpoint of the debate.

Toole describes New Orleans as a city of both culture and crime, a place of collision of its turbulent past’s romantic image and a site of suspended modernity firmly placed in the West’s tradition of

<sup>1</sup> See Dixon, Larson, Fertel, Azzarello, and Johnson.

<sup>2</sup> See McKinney, MacLauchlin, Larson, and Murphy.

<sup>3</sup> See MacLauchlin.

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the Enlightenment, which the main character Ignatius Reilly so ruthlessly subjects to criticism. Although today clearly perceived as a postcolonial and postindustrial city in the American South characterized by contradictions and a complicated cultural heritage, at the time when the novel was written (the late 1950s to the early 1960s), the city of New Orleans found itself in one of its more liminal and uncertain phases. The post-World-War-II technological development simultaneously meant progress in certain areas, such as petroleum industry, as well as decline in others.<sup>4</sup> In the true picaresque tradition, much like Cervantes' Spain in *Don Quixote*, Toole's New Orleans is also seemingly at a highpoint but actually past its zenith, and therefore in search of a hero that would make sense of its complexities and uncertainties. Toole finds it in the form of Ignatius, the ultimate New Orleans "picaresque anti-hero . . . whose basic motivation is survival in a cruel world" (Williamson 19), who is submitting to criticism the underlying societal values, in this case the American veneration of technological progress.

Although full of contempt for his own city and inhabitants, Ignatius is unable to leave it, and there is a visible element of paralysis caused primarily by his fear of the outside world, where the unpredictable "vortex" (Toole 22) of progress and modernity rages. Ignatius thus endures more easily the comfort of the contested but familiar spaces of his hometown than the fear of the unknown. He criticizes the society in its entirety, as he encounters different individuals within his city who have done him some imagined injustice. Yet, he decides to treat these as predictable and bearable offences of New Orleanians, thus justifying his choice of an uneventful life, comforting in the chaos of the outside world in which he himself cannot function. He does not operate within his own city even on a civic level, such as when interacting with authorities or locals in everyday situations. Nevertheless, throughout the novel and through his active involvement in the street life, both provoked and unprovoked, Ignatius finds a way to influence the lives of others in an unexpected and usually positive way, even though unintentionally. His own arc includes transcending the perceived soothing and comforting entropy of a city in decline and finding personal agency beyond its urban limits.

John Kennedy Toole was unable to find a publisher for his novel in the early 1960s, which ultimately ended in the young author's suicide. The novel's publication in 1980 and its subsequent winning of a posthumous Pulitzer Prize suggest that the time was right for understanding the critique of the processes the author had extrapolated.

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*A Confederacy of Dunces* portrays the tragicomedy of the limbo and liminality that the particular historical chronotope of New Orleans presented within post-World-War-II America, at a point of declining paranoias of the McCarthy era and "awakening social conscience," making the South in the early days of Civil Rights Movement "America's designated hell" (Codrescu B7).<sup>5</sup> New Orleans' own history of racial, class and social tensions in general has been one of the central focal points of its literary tradition, but there is an intrinsic awareness of nuance that goes beyond the general discussions of identities. New Orleans as depicted in the novel focuses not on the actualities of the history or geography (e.g., the made-up parish of St Odo, reversed position of the setting sun and a city street) but rather on the provinciality of the city's working classes of European heritage in their various iterations, the banality of their mundane existence as contrasted to the folly of the ideal of modernity that is losing its meaning. The novel makes allusions without explicitly stating references to real-world events or people such as persons of authority or power. Rather, the only allusions made are to historical figures such as the local pirate Lafitte, movie stars or the saints that individual characters pray to – all figures of mythical quality

<sup>4</sup> For example, the expanding containerization technology changed the ways the port traffic operated, reducing the need for labor, thus leaving the city's port in a less advantageous position compared to other smaller ports. Furthermore, the gentrification trend influenced processes of urbanization that brought about displacement from city center of previous denizens and an increasing decline in the city's population. Finally, the revolutionary civil rights movements had profound implications for the entire country, leaving the city in a state of unpredictable flux (see Campanella).

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion on how *A Confederacy of Dunces* depicts an "immersion in a city representing the perverse heart of modernity" (MacKethan 36), see MacKethan's study.

rather than actual persons. It also functions as a collection of ephemeralia of the 1960s NOLA – Dr Nut, hot dog cart vendors, movie-going atmosphere of cinemas, and since the city features so many of its historical relics and artefacts, they are part of this setting as well.

Toole's approach to the human carnival of nineteen-sixties New Orleans in the novel is farcical, portrayed through the lens of the trickster-type character of Ignatius J. Reilly, who has famously been described by the book's editor and another literary great from the city, Walker Percy, as "slob extraordinary, a mad Oliver Hardy, a fat Don Quixote, a perverse Thomas Aquinas rolled into one" (viii). The novel follows the escapades of the obese, unemployed, condescending medievalist, stuck in a parallel universe of thought full of contempt for the contemporary society and its lack of grace, as well as "offenses against taste and decency" (Toole 1), while simultaneously overindulging himself in various weaknesses and self-soothing behaviours<sup>6</sup>, from too much fast food and soda drinks, excessive masturbation, to enjoying pop-cultural phenomenon such as TV shows and cinema. He obsesses over his bodily functions such as bloating and the irritation of his pyloric valve, disregarding any social convention in clothing, and, finally, living in an unhappy household with his mother, who herself is unable to make him cut the oedipal cord that ties them together.

Ignatius aspires to (misread) medieval scholasticism and the writings of the Roman philosopher Boethius, who was active in the in-between period at the brink of the Middle Ages. Ignatius's favourite book of his is *The Consolation of Philosophy*, about the inevitability of faith in life, as each person's path is decided by the goddess Fortuna, whom Ignatius himself so often invokes: "Oh, Fortuna, blind, heedless goddess, I am strapped to your wheel" (Toole 35). The idea of the great Wheel of Fortune (*Rota Fortunae*) spinning for everyone offers Ignatius consolation of fair justice coming for all, but also consolation for his own inadequacies of functioning within the society, failing to take risks or responsibilities and effectively displacing himself from it. Ignatius's worldview rejects the modern ideal, as he finds progress and anything following medieval times to have pushed the world into a downward spiral, a vortex of modernity representing the downfall of man.

Despite being a local, Ignatius does not feel part of any of the city's public or community spaces, nor does he feel an attachment to anything beyond his own home, cinemas and similar locales he frequents. At the very beginning of the novel, his inertia is interrupted by a central rupture event, a car accident that leaves his penniless mother no alternative but to urge him to find a job, thus propelling Ignatius on a pilgrimage through the city's various milieus, each implying specific social mores, nuances in language, mimics, codes of conduct, and folkways as a way of establishing and organizing meaning, easing the complexities of diverse societal realities. The idea of such possibilities of upward social mobility is a modern theme visible in the picaresque tradition that was also characterized by aspirations in the era of *Lazarillo de Tormes* (Elze 13). Ignatius defiantly declines anything that he perceives as a rise towards middle class prosperity and ideal, although such possibilities exist. As the character of Burma Jones concedes, he would gladly use the opportunities Ignatius is so inconceivably turning down, as will be shown further.

The novel's and Ignatius's quixotic, trickster and picaresque<sup>7</sup> quality have been noted by various scholars, but perhaps not in as much detail as it deserves; Winifred Morgan argues that Toole's novel belongs in the European-American variety of trickster tale, a trickster "seeking his fortune", or more specifically a type of Southern Literary Tricksters (Morgan 73). The novel belongs to the same literary tradition that had been developing the trickster mechanism from its earlier forms such as picaresque tradition, Menippean satire and tales of South-western and frontier humour, thus embedded in the American literary tradition (Morgan 88). The novel's editor Walker Percy notes that Ignatius is a "mad Don Quixote" (viii), firmly establishing from the start a perception of the novel as adventures of a knight-errant. Only a few scholars have moved on beyond merely describing either the novel or the character of Ignatius as quixotic, picaresque, even gargantuan and grotesque, nor have they elaborated on what specifically makes him suitable for such reading-interpretation, even less so in his relationship to the city of New Orleans as a particular place, rather than American society as a whole. Toole intimated his position

<sup>6</sup>For a discussion on consumerism, see, for instance, Benjamin and Jameson.

<sup>7</sup> See Bell, Childres, Freese, Lickhardt, Palumbo, Patteson and Sauret, Sherrill.

with his choice of introductory quotes prefacing the novel by identifying NOLA as Mediterranean, thus firmly embedded in the world marked by the picaresque, Don Quixote and the trickster, all of which tackle difficult and deep incongruences within a community and serve as a corrective to the hypocrisies of their societies. North America has its own important tradition of the trickster archetype, which brings an emotional relief from the complex tensions of the contemporary American society (Morgan 1 – 14).

Although the novel's beginning with a reference to Holden Caulfield (Ignatius is also wearing a hunting cap) seems to suggest an unfinished bildungsroman, instead we get a picaresque-style episodic novel with Ignatius as a reluctant picaro (cynical and prejudiced, self-proclaimed as an underdog, failing as a shape shifter, contrary to self-reliant, inert, introverted and a slob, reluctant even to the Campbellian call to adventure, a liminal character that has plenty of chances for social mobility but fails miserably at them). He is a knight errant who is neither noble nor romantic, an inverted Don Quixote whose Rocinante is the hot dog cart he rides through the city. Likewise, as Childres notes, his Dulcinea is Myrna Minkoff, whom he is not idealizing or trying to win over but rather wishes destruction upon (31).

Ignatius sees himself as a someone who exposes social corruptions brought on by modern way of life, while still disparaging people from humble walks of life (as if he himself were not a member of that group, coming from a poor neighbourhood as he does and being unemployed). He likens himself to a crusader against the windmills of modernity and humanity that has allowed progress and the Enlightenment to corrupt the world, the one who has come to terms with the fact that nothing can be done, and therefore stands in disdain towards the world in a state of outraged indignation. In reality, he is the phantasmagoria in the academe, the unemployed and sterile scholar who cannot deal with the magnitudes of an encroaching world, and yet sees himself as the only one who can recognize it. Even so, he lacks potency to do anything about it, as he has lost all faith in mankind (his inferiors) and all the greats belong to the past (Boethius). Ignatius is a by-product of the modern age and his surroundings, marked by paralysis and inability to act, stuck in extreme moralism. Despite his belief that he holds the moral high ground, those around him see him as leading a delinquent lifestyle by choice (picaresque quality),<sup>8</sup> unemployed, living with his mother, and without responsibilities.

Ignatius is so far removed from everyday experience that he defies convention by accepting what others would consider substandard. His own standards are so ethereal and theoretical that they do not have a rendition in the physical world. Since their aesthetic value cannot be achieved, no value is necessary. This way he gets an inadequate job by his mother's, as well as the neighbourhood's, criteria (selling hot dogs in the street); he dresses for "creature comforts" (Toole 14) thus defying any concept of propriety; he does not work in a field appropriate to his level of education (as his expectations of academia cannot be satisfied) – all in all, the dunces are in confederacy against his genius. Ignatius has found himself displaced from everyday life by his own choice, through inertia. He has come to terms with the fact that nothing can be done, and that his hopes for a better future include a complete turnover of society by regression to a medieval system and monarchy. Since his concept of utopia cannot be achieved by his own actions, he remains inert: If nothing can be done, why bother doing anything? His position is not one of despair, but rather of indignation and outrage, since he has become a spectator and commentator of life and the world in passing, as well as a consumer of its products, trying his best not to be affected by it.

In this particular picaresque iteration, New Orleans serves as a constant against which the character of Ignatius unleashes his misguided quest for "taste and decency," for "theology and geometry" (Toole 50). His primary tension with his surroundings arises because he radically declines to conform to any social mores he finds offensive, effectively alienating almost anyone he encounters. As a trickster-lens, he turns any expectation on its head, as he is full of contradictions and unable to stick to his own convictions, thus impacting other people's lives. Codrescu pinpoints Ignatius's relevance for other characters:

Everyone was a pathos-filled victim whose existence was rigorously predicated on a no-exit stupidity from which no faith or superstition would ever free them. Ignatius J. Reilly, a late-'50s, early-'60s Don Quixote, tilted at the windmills of a provincial world barely shaken by the gale-force winds loose in the rest of America. Like Don Quixote, Ignatius was a one-man

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the picaro as a delinquent, see Parker.



compendium of shabbiness fighting an imaginary future with equally imaginary values. His presence guaranteed disaster, yet no one emerged unchanged . . . (B7)

On his newly embarked quest to find employment, Ignatius visits various spaces around the city and tries out types of work in different fields. In multicultural New Orleans, the in-between proximity of different social spaces, including those of different cultural heritage, is often romanticized as perceived cosmopolitanism, but it is more commonly an amalgam of mores and codes that allow for categories of spaces and people that inhabit them to coexist, as in many other port cities throughout history. The locales Ignatius visits are diverse: beyond his own decaying neighbourhood, he goes to the decrepit industrial districts of the Levy Pants clothing factory; a seedy Bourbon Street club called Night of Joy; art exhibitions in the Pirate Alley in the French Quarter; the city streets; and the gentrified stucco buildings off Bourbon Street. Ignatius is able to inhabit them thanks to his own liminality, not unlike the city's own, which testifies to his privileged access to social mobility.

Ignatius is obviously an unreliable narrator inasmuch as he is delusional, continuously misreading situations and narratives, thus creating a comic effect and leaving the reader relieved that his misguided actions will quickly be seen through by others as being futile and/or dilettante. While Ignatius himself plays around, trying out various parts, he fails in each of them, leaving a distinctive mark on everyone he encounters. We see his misadventures from his staging a sorry-excuse for a revolution for the workers of the Levy Pants factory by attempting to lead a strike under a banner he fashioned out of his soiled sheets to his dressing up in a makeshift pirate costume for his new job as a hot dog vendor pushing his cart around the city centre. In both cases, Ignatius is perceived as a fraudster and dilettante. Although he initially fitted into the bureaucratic setting of the clothing factory when he started working there (he "passed"<sup>9</sup> for an administrative clerical worker), the workers abandoned the revolution before it even started since they recognized Ignatius as someone who will get them fired (their stakes for losing the job are much higher than Ignatius's own). He fails miserably as a hot dog vendor by trying to impress tourists with a little show he puts on in a poorly-made pirate suit, who instead pity him, thinking him a disabled person in need of charity. The latter episode showcases his displacement from the city in which dressing up in costumes is a year-round occurrence in New Orleans, as the city prides itself on its Mardi Gras carnival and other festivities – Ignatius fails even there, in one of the most typical manifestations of the performative character of the city, causing not only pity in onlookers, but also feeling of shame in his own mother.

Ignatius continuously displays his own incompatibility with the surrounding world, which he freely navigates but never fully belongs to. Although his social mobility allows for him to be falsely perceived as legitimate in any of the roles he tries on (worker, son, academic, customer, activist, etc.) in many different milieus he visits, he fails to incorporate himself into the work force and the everyday life, remaining the person out of place in his own city. By merely appearing at these sites among their customary inhabitants, Ignatius is in fact entering into conflicts, subsuming expectations, violating codes and overstepping boundaries, unable to recognize and adhere to their social codes. He is futile in his attempts to find his place through the performative: he plays a pirate; he creates a make-believe revolution; he impersonates someone when sending a menacing letter that threatens to bring down the Levy Pants business; he violates the sensibilities of the ladies' auxiliary whose exhibition he crashes; he ruins everybody's evening at Dorian Greene's party in French Quarter with dictatorial demagoguery; at his mother's house, he embarrasses her when she has company over and does not conform to her rules and expectations; he agitates undergraduate students who are supposed to be in his care; he is a bad customer at the Night of Joy club, where he is immediately recognized by the owner Lana Lee as the "kiss of death" for her business, since people like him ruin the Quarter and potentially her investment (Toole 28); he is an inconsiderate moviegoer who yells at the screen in the cinema disregarding others; he eats up more hot dogs than he sells, etc. Even on the street in French Quarter, a public heterogeneous place full of tourists and various other characters, Ignatius stands out and catches the attention of patrolman Mancuso, who

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<sup>9</sup> In the context of the city's troubling colonial history, "passing" was a term applied to the possibility of social mobility available to people of biracial descent whose complexion was fair enough to be able to "pass for white."

asks him: “Are you local?” (Toole 4), causing a cognitive dissonance in Mancuso, unable to “locate” and place him in any of his mental maps, not even as a potential “Quarter character” liable to be arrested.

The language Ignatius uses is full of hypochondriac clichés, twisted lies for personal gains, and yet again hypocritically he has no qualms in taking up the language of the capital and bureaucracy he so despises for his own personal gain: adding the title of Esquire to his impersonating signature to appear as a person of relevance, using empty threats such as, “You will hear from our attorneys” and “We can take our trade elsewhere” (Toole 27, 28); he uses the lingo but without coverage. Nevertheless, he still imagines himself as a martyr, “forced to exist on the fringes of its society, consigned to the Limbo reserved for those who do know reality when they see it” (Toole 141); he does not realize that the fringe, the limbo of incomplete modernity of the city is precisely what allows him to live *de facto* life of leisure, without working, having his mother as a caretaker and provider. For all his higher education, he self-sabotages adequate positions offered to him in the academia, and rather attempts working in positions for which he is overqualified. His complaint about the serfdom in modern age has become moot, due to his inability to recognize his own advantageous position afforded to him by the social circumstances in the city.

His errant mistrust of entire humanity and his surroundings manifests itself in every day interactions, full of disdain towards people from all walks of life. More indicatively, however, it finds a metaphoric expression in his own conditioned inability to physically leave the city – the most defining aspect of the relationship between Ignatius and New Orleans – that sends him signals of flight reflexes against venturing beyond the city limits, his body literally protesting against it. As he recounts on numerous occasions, he only once attempted to venture outside the city limits, on a bus trip to the nearby Baton Rouge where he was supposed to be interviewed for his first vocational job in academia. The episode is recounted continuously throughout the novel as the single most traumatic experience of his life that leaves him with severe psychosomatic symptoms, showing his paralysis and inability to leave his hometown and face the world “outside the city limits” (Toole 12), which seems far less threatening in its predictable offences.

Ignatius’s own attitude towards the city, seemingly suspended in a continuing decadent phase of modernity, is ambivalent. He sees it as a “comfortable metropolis which has a certain apathy and stagnation which [he] find[s] inoffensive. At least its climate is mild” (Toole 141), as he extolls these aspects in a manuscript which he writes on “New Orleans, City of Romance and Culture”. On the one hand, he perceives the city’s shortcomings as being a place of “degeneracy” and “corruption”, a “sinkhole of vice . . . Sodom and Gomorrah” (Toole 246), 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, all of whom are only too well protected by graft” (Toole 4). Simultaneously though, he finds himself in a strange state of equilibrium in which the city becomes a safe harbour from the “winds of change” (Toole 33) blowing outside the door, in the vortex outside the city, as he muses in the comfort of his office in the declining factory while contemplating ships and seafaring, “watching the harbor traffic and jotting some notes about the history of shipping and Marco Polo in a Big Chief tablet” (Toole 247):

I have many plans for my filing department and have taken – from among the many empty ones – a desk near a window. There I sat with my little gas heater at full force throughout the afternoon, watching the ships from many an exotic port steaming through the cold, dark waters of the harbor. Miss Trixie’s light snore and the furious typing of Mr. Gonzalez provided a pleasant counterpoint to my reflections. (Toole 89)

These images evoke an emotion intrinsic in our experience of the horizon, which philosopher Didier Maleuvre describes as the source of universal “infinite longing”. We see both Ignatius and the factory owner Mr. Levy musing at the horizon; Ignatius meditating on the great explorations of Marco Polo and the history of shipping, as the horizon offers him comfort, and his thoughts can flow through the Mississippi to the Gulf and the sea connecting it to the rest of the world. Mr. Levy too was comforted as he listened to his employee snoring at the office and “watched the Monrovia freighter moving out into the harbor and turning downstream toward the Gulf. His mind grew calm for the first time in several

days. . .” (Toole 442). Ignatius therefore finds comfort in the nostalgia<sup>10</sup> about the city’s grand past and the great seafaring ages of exploration, the remnant of (failed) promises of modernity, and progress for a city like New Orleans. The city’s added liminality is derived from its Mediterranean heritage, the “cradle of those founding Classical and Christian cultures which fused to form the culture of the West” (Pechey 195), and its history as a port city, the key liminal space of modernity:

Without port-cities, there would be no civilizational project associated with nineteenth-century liberalism . . . Port-cities emerged as an essential dimension of western expansion against the backdrop of free trade and the gold standard, the two pillars of British domination of the global system. They were primarily populated by men pursuing commercial interests; but they quickly became cities approximating the nineteenth-century ideal form, accommodating rapidly modernizing urban populations. These new populations inhabiting new urban spaces, served as “agents of change” in the terminology of modernization theory of a later vintage . . . As new cultures flourished, these new populations shaped ever-expanding spaces into a new urban form: the peripheral version of the nineteenth-century city, carrying modernity. Port-cities flourished in liminal spaces where Europe could expand because the local state receded. (Keyder 14)

As a declining port city whose long tradition of prosperity was based on slave trade and its colonial past, New Orleans can be read as a place of suspended modernity, its progress in a state of entropy thanks to a combination of reasons, the foremost being its unfortunate geolocation that renders it liable to any number of natural and man-made catastrophes (its survival thus far ensured by its significance as a port).<sup>11</sup> For Ignatius, the city’s faults are at least predictable and therefore more acceptable than anything going on beyond its outer limits, the rest of the United States representing the great unknown where the torrents of progress are raging. In his description of the “horror” of the short bus ride that took him “through the vortex to the whirlpool of despair” (Toole 247, 141) as the pivotal moment and the single most traumatic experience of his life, Ignatius recounts vomiting several times and deciding he would never travel again, under the pretence of not having a comfortable way to travel outside the city:

although certain sections of North Africa [Tangiers, etc.] have from time to time excited my interest. The voyage by boat, however, would probably enervate me, and I am certainly not perverse enough to attempt air travel even if I were able to afford it. The Greyhound Bus Line is sufficiently menacing to make me accept my status quo . . . Those things really must be removed. Simply knowing that they are hurtling somewhere on this dark night makes me most apprehensive. (Keyder 14)

In the above quote, Ignatius views the commercial Greyhound buses as a metaphor for a menace that lurks in the back of his mind, connecting the city to the outside world he finds so threatening: “Leaving New Orleans also frightened me considerably. Outside of the city limits the heart of darkness, the true wasteland begins” (Toole 12). Setting aside for a moment the obvious intertextual allusion to the modern and postmodern classics of Western Anglophone canon, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, when read in connection to the actual city, referring to the fecund swamps and bayous teeming with wildlife around New Orleans as a “wasteland” seems an improbable metaphor. “Heart of darkness”, on the other hand, seems more applicable to the actualities of the fertile subtropical wetlands of the Mississippi Delta. Even without the knowledge of the two intertexts, a reader is struck by the incongruity between the two metaphors, whereby the impact of the literary references is amplified when we consider Ignatius’s attitude towards the perceived threat beyond New Orleans, where the terror of progress reigns. For Ignatius, everything outside the city are swamps followed by deserts and the rest are swaths of provincial hinterland where “rural rednecks . . . attack vehicles which to them represent

<sup>10</sup> Andrei Codrescu, an avid chronicler of the New Orleans condition, famously said that nostalgia was a full time business in New Orleans. We see Ignatius, too, as its avid consumer. For literary notions of nostalgia referring to a sense of general disillusionment with the modern world of unfulfilled promises, see Shawver.

<sup>11</sup> For precarious nature of the city’s landscape, see Powell.

symbols of progress” (Toole 13), which a city clearly is. If the “horrors” of the imperialist “heart of darkness” are in the South, then its colonial project surely results in the nothingness and a “wasteland” of high modernism, its consumerism, corruption and reign of technological terror where all that was prophesied is bound to happen at some point (again a reference to Eliot) and the man is a slave to labour and the machine. Furthermore, he refers to everything outside the city as the vortex, evocative of another modernist reference, the modernist avant-garde movement Vorticism with Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis. Wyndham Lewis’s vortex is a metaphor of a dynamic movement around a still core (Materer); Ignatius’s vortex consists of the outskirts referring to the dynamic of the mechanical age, and the core (in this case, the city) is still and not in motion. Ignatius thus remains safely protected from the chaos outside within the confines of his city, a secure harbour, a place suspended in time and progress, not exactly the “city as utopia” (Mumford 271) or the Biblical sheltered garden, but rather womb-like, like his mother’s house.

Ignatius’s arch nemesis and “lost love” (Toole 7), the “liberal doxy” Myrna Minkoff (Toole 252), a bourgeois leftist student from the Bronx, is the one who makes the reference to his Oedipal imprisonment in the decaying city (Toole 213). She urges him to set aside his inability to leave his mother’s “womb-house” (Toole 252), since “if [he] could just decide to cut the umbilical cord that binds [him] to that stagnant city, that mother of [his], and that bed, [he] could be up [there] in New York having opportunities” (Toole 95). This dichotomy between a psychosomatic reaction to the outside world and verbal critique of the private space of familiar chronotope of New Orleans mirrors his reactions to Myrna (corporeal) as opposed to the perceived offences of his mother (verbal). Myrna believes that the problem lies in the fact that Ignatius does not identify with anything, not even the city he is so unable to leave, nor the people he so despises, and is also not willing to start living in the present, which to him is full of “filth and sin”, unlike the Medieval times he is so diligently clinging to for consolation.

Here is a further description of Ignatius’s formative journey: “the Mississippi River . . . is famed in atrocious song and verse; the most prevalent motif is one which attempts to make of the river an ersatz father figure” (Toole 140 – 41). The substitute “father figure” is a reference to the perception of the river as Old Father Mississippi<sup>12</sup>, which to Ignatius seems like a projection of fantasies, and therefore an atrocity. Furthermore, he finds offense in the existing body of works that have epitomized the Mississippi in the American imagination, namely books by Mark Twain, an icon of Southern literature and South-western humour, to whose canon *A Confederacy of Dunces* itself belongs, but whose “veneration” Ignatius perceives to be “one of the roots of [society’s] current intellectual stalemate” (Toole 55):

Actually, the Mississippi River is a treacherous and sinister body of water whose eddies and currents yearly claim many lives . . . polluted brown waters, which seethe with sewage, industrial waste, and deadly insecticides. Even the fish are dying. Therefore, the Mississippi as Father-God-Moses-Daddy-Phallus-Pops is an altogether false motif begun, I would imagine, by that dreary fraud, Mark Twain. This failure to make contact with reality is, however, characteristic of almost all of America’s “art.” Any connection between American art and American nature is purely coincidental, but this is only because the nation as a whole has no contact with reality. (141)

This sentiment about the lack of reality in American art stands in opposition to the quote by another giant of Southern literature, Flannery O’Connor, who wrote that New Orleans was a city where “the devil’s influence [was] freely recognized” (Bass). Contrary to Ignatius’s perception, for her New Orleans is a place that has not lost contact either with (human) nature or reality by acknowledging its spirituality and the awareness of Faustian deals it has made for its existence and its intrinsic complicity in the project of modernity. Ignatius, however, ignores this and proves himself to be the one who has no contact with reality or knowledge about the underlying processes that have shaped the city: “I have never seen cotton growing and have no desire to do so” (Toole 141). He has never been in direct contact with the planta-

<sup>12</sup> At one point, Ignatius himself concedes his own quest for a father figure, which he attempts to project onto his radically honest employer, Mr. Claude, the owner of Paradise Vendors.



tions outside the city, a historical site of the national trauma that was the Atlantic slave trade era, with New Orleans as its nexus and the most important port, a fact of the city's history.

The abovementioned reference to Eliot also function as a literary metaphor reminiscent of another "Eliotic contemporary landscape" (Reynolds viii), namely the "valley of ashes" (Fitzgerald 16) from *The Great Gatsby*, both allusions to modernist disillusionment regarding technological progress in the post-war era. This interpretation may be further substantiated by Ignatius's later statement, as he enters his new workplace, a clothing factory whose manufacturing process is predominantly serviced by African American workers:

The total effect is rather surreal, especially when one sees *Les Africains* moving about attending to their tasks in this mechanized setting. The irony involved caught my fancy, I must admit. Something from Joseph Conrad sprang to my mind, although I cannot seem to remember what it was at the time. Perhaps I likened myself to Kurtz in *The Heart of Darkness* when, far from the trading company offices in Europe, he was faced with the ultimate horror. I do remember imagining myself in a pith helmet and white linen jodpurs, my face enigmatic behind a veil of mosquito netting. (Toole 142)

The quote starts out as a plausible reference to the continued serfdom of the modern man, as Ignatius observes the irony of its obviousness in the manual labour of black citizens within a factory setting, but quickly spirals into a burlesque of cringing effect before sliding into self-centred macabre fantasies of colonial nostalgia. Ignatius fails to notice the injustice of the African Americans serving as the factory's manual working force, and instead of criticizing the real underlying problems of the heritage of slavery still felt in the society, in his delusions he dwells on petty issues. He fails to recognize that the "horror" of colonization done in the name of progress from *Heart of Darkness*, which the character of Kurtz recognized in the Congo, was the same horror that the *Confederacy*'s character of Burma Jones references when mispronouncing the name of Scarlet O'Hara as "Scarla O'Horror" (Toole 88), the epitome of American projections of nostalgia about the plantation era.

Although the city's slave trade days are long gone, its echoes are deeply interwoven into the fabric of the city. The novel manages poignant effects with such references to the era of slavery and the city's colonial history by means of casual comments, allowing the reader to extend their own imagined horror. If we consider that Toole was growing up at the time when the city's identity was being retouched into a palatable nostalgic version of its grand past for touristic consumption,<sup>13</sup> we find the parallel that only Burma Jones, the employee of the Night of Joy club, recognizes for what it is, an exploitative commodification of serfdom, a "modern slavery", by telling his employer, the dubious entrepreneur Lana Lee, that for such small wages she "ain running a plantation" (Toole 83). Jones recognizes the elements of the exploitative system in which the business is run by a white person and he as a black man provides coerced labour, all in support of selling a story of the same plantation nostalgia of virgin Southern Belles, repackaged into a cheap colonial-inspired striptease act starring Harlett O'Hara. He is aware that losing a job, however underpaid or exploitative, would render him vulnerable to arrest for vagrancy: "If I call a po-lice a cawmniss, my ass be in Angola right now" (Toole 17); Angola prison being an ever present referent in the mind of local citizens, a satellite place of the city's crime scene and projection of fears for those members of society who are suspect to being arrested on flimsy grounds (particularly African Americans). Nevertheless, Jones finds some agency in his altercations with Lana regarding his working status and threatens to publicly call her out on television for her exploitative practices. In his case, modern technology allows for a promise of more freedom and progress, and less exploitation:

"Times changin'", Jones said, adjusting his sunglasses. "You cain scare color peoples no more. I got me some peoples form a human chain in front your door, drive away your business, get you on the TV news. Color peoples took enough horseshit already, and for twenty

<sup>13</sup> For examples of narrative mythmaking processes in New Orleans used specifically for the purposes of tourism, see Gotham, Souther, Stanonis, Thomas, Vesey, and Dimanche.

dollar a week you ain piling no more on. I getting pretty tire of bein vagran or workin below the minimal wage. Get somebody else run your erran". (Toole 85)

Unlike Burma Jones, Ignatius never fears being devoid of freedom, as is clear when he opposes a patrolman in the city street who questions his behaviour. In fact, Ignatius does not find any comfort in the opportunities for work available to him. He views labour as a despicable result of the downfall of civilization, when he describes a bureaucrat at the office as an "obvious appendage of officialdom . . . an arm of the bureaucracy. You can always tell employees of the government by the total vacancy which occupies the space where most other people have faces" (Toole 242 – 43) or when he writes in his notes:

WITH THE BREAKDOWN of the Medieval system, the gods of Chaos, Lunacy, and Bad Taste gained ascendancy. . . What had once been dedicated to the soul was now dedicated to the sale. . . Merchants and charlatans gained control of Europe, calling their insidious gospel "The Enlightenment." . . . The humble and pious peasant, Piers Plowman, went to town to sell his children to the lords of the New Order for purposes that we may call questionable at best. . . The Great Chain of Being had snapped like so many paper clips strung together by some drooling idiot; death, destruction, anarchy, progress, ambition, and self-improvement were to be Piers' new fate . . . the perversion of having to GO TO WORK. (Toole 33 – 34)

Furthermore, Ignatius is entirely oblivious to what an opportunity for finding regularly paid work means for the African-American citizens he encounters, and fails to see the privilege of his own position as someone who is provided for. Burma Jones, for example, has aspirations for a life of a regular citizen; he fantasizes about a job that would provide him creature comforts of middle-class existence like air conditioning in the city's subtropical climate. Still, he is aware of the reality of his position, as he attempts to position himself better by becoming a police informant, thus distancing himself from the criminal milieu he is forced to inhabit by circumstances. Despite his hopes for a better future, he accepts the underpaid position at the nightclub because it is the only thing that separates him from prison. Also, for the factory workers at the Levy Pants factory, a strike means potentially losing their jobs and livelihood, despite their precarious working circumstances and the implication of servitude in their work that is reminiscent of slavery as their personal heritage. Ignatius, on the other hand, fails to understand their plight, carelessly endangering them by initiating the strike. For himself, the stakes are much lower, as the job at the factory is not a question of survival, since his mother provides for him, allowing him to effectively behave as a man of leisure, of however meagre means.

Another example of causal reference to slavery is the mentioning of "slave quarters" (Toole 365) in the grand stucco house in a coveted French Quarter area, home of the exaggerated flamboyant caricature of a gay man who invites Ignatius to a party. The party is perceived by Ignatius as an offence to "taste and decency" and an example of "degeneracy" (Toole 50, 371) of the modern world. The slave quarters are mentioned casually as a place where a young drunken man dressed as a sailor was chained up to the wall for fun. He experiences an unease of being tied down but his distress is caused more by getting dirty from rust than from a reference to slavery. Once again, Ignatius misses the original function of the manacles and chains, musing to their potential usefulness as a means of punishment in contemporary family life (367 – 68).

The pathos of the city of New Orleans is derived partly from the historical colonial experiences that form the city's shadow, which has not been fully integrated into a uniform story. Another uneasy dichotomy coexisting in the city is a tension between true cosmopolitanism and utter provincialism; not the supposed cosmopolitan conviviality of people but rather the coexistence of these contradictions that bring about an equilibrium of sorts, an aporia. The local cityscapes are trapped in what Shannon Dawdy terms "heterotemporalities", "comprised of multiple pasts, presents, and futures" (8), creating an illusion of New Orleans being suspended in time, as opposed to the rest of the world, which to Ignatius offers comfort. Other characters are also not impartial to the city's more unthreatening charms, e.g., a sense of belonging and freedom that is especially appreciated by those who did not have it elsewhere: "Oh, New Orleans is such freedom" (Toole 364), says Dorian Greene, revealing that his own family from Nebras-

ka did not accept him for being gay. He appreciates the city fully: “That’s what’s so wonderful about New Orleans. You can masquerade and Mardi Gras all year round if you want to. Really, sometimes the Quarter is like one big costume ball. Sometimes I can’t tell friend from foe” (301). Similarly, when we encounter patrolman Mancuso on his way to visit Mrs. Reilly’s house, he is enjoying a motorcycle drive down St. Charles Avenue, one of the city’s main and most picturesque roads. He feels in control and the city seems unthreatening:

Patrolman Mancuso enjoyed riding the motorcycle up St. Charles Avenue. . . The siren, a cacophony of twelve crazed bobcats, was enough to make suspicious characters within a half-mile radius defecate in panic and rush for cover. . . The forces of evil generated by the hideous – and apparently impossible to uncover – underground of suspicious characters seemed remote to him this afternoon, though. The ancient oaks of St. Charles Avenue arched over the avenue like a canopy shielding him from the mild winter sun that splashed and sparkled on the chrome of the motorcycle. Although the days had lately been cold and damp, the afternoon had that sudden, surprising warmth that makes New Orleans winters gentle. Patrolman Mancuso appreciated the mildness . . . [he] inhaled the moldy scent of the oaks and thought, in a romantic aside, that St. Charles Avenue must be the loveliest place in the world. From time to time he passed the slowly rocking streetcars that seemed to be leisurely moving toward no special destination, following their route through the old mansions on either side of the avenue. Everything looked so calm, so prosperous, so unsuspecting. (Toole 41 – 42)

A nearby decrepit neighbourhood initially causes him to feel unease, but is later on described more favourably, as the approaching meal-time stirs a sense of community, accompanied by an attack on the senses:

The day had been a balmy day; a south wind had been blowing steadily from the Gulf. Now the evening was still warm. Heavy odors of Mediterranean cooking floated across the congested neighborhood from the opened kitchen windows in every apartment building and double house. Each resident seemed to be making some contribution, however small, to the general cacophony of dropping pots, booming television sets, arguing voices, screaming children, and slamming doors. (Toole 312)

A sense of community and belonging is especially potent in New Orleans. In *A Confederacy of Dunces*, we find examples of how the community stands up against the injustices of officials, whose policies are never associated with the city itself, but rather construed as an outside agent affecting the lives of the citizens. This can be seen at the beginning of the novel when a crowd gathers to defend Reilly being interrogated by a policeman who thinks him a “suspicious character”, and an old man from the crowd starts blaming the communists as outer agents to blame for the state of the city. By the end of the novel, most of the narrative conflicts are resolved in the city streets, with the city becoming a catalyst for escalating dissatisfaction. We witness not only Ignatius’s successful escape from the scapegoat tactics of the lunatic asylum, but also see him finally leaving the city limits without feeling the Sartrean existential nausea. In order to metaphorically take on the actual realities of the dreaded progress, Ignatius needs to confront them in the very nexus of its reign, in his case Manhattan, New York, the “center of mechanized horrors” (Toole 149). The landscape beyond the city limits finally no longer seems menacing:

last twinkling streetlight of the last swampy suburb. Then they were in darkness in the center of the salt marshes. Ignatius looked out at the highway marker that reflected their headlights. U.S. 11. The marker flew past. He rolled down the window an inch or two and breathed the salt air blowing in over the marshes from the Gulf. As if the air were a purgative, his valve opened. He breathed again, this time more deeply. The dull headache was lifting. (Toole 461 – 62)

The moment that Ignatius realizes that his freedom and life are truly endangered, as even the final cords of his sense of security are cut, he decides to take action and survive. By overcoming his paranoia

and fear, he finally cuts the cord to his mother (who herself experiences emancipation by remarrying and deciding to distance herself from her son) and to the city as he flees to New York with his saviour Myrna into a new life.

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As Myrna Minkoff so astutely explains, Ignatius Reilly's lulled existence goes beyond his "Oedipal" relationship to his mother and their tiny home, extending to the entire city of New Orleans. In order to break free from the inane paralysis visible in his co-dependent relationship to his mother, he should also by extension have to break free and overcome his inability to go beyond the city limits. As we have demonstrated, it is not the comfort of his mother's womb-like house that offers him the greatest solace, but rather the city itself, which presents a placenta, a barrier between him and the world, the liminal in-between, the calm centre of the vortex, a limbo into which he is burying himself deeper, instead of breaking free from it. It is the equilibrium of the city's pathos that gives him comfort, an insulation against the world, which, like Ignatius, is suspended in time. New Orleans is not a utopia for Ignatius, but rather a persona like his oedipal mother, whom he criticizes but cannot leave; the city has always been more beneficial to people who embrace it, actively seek it, and he is not one of them.

Although Ignatius does not seem to possess agency, his crusade is based in an inertia that is initiated from the outside. A picaro should offer a realistic picture of society, but Ignatius himself is so delusional that he does not seek any redemption through his own efforts – he eventually achieves it by fleeing the city thanks to Myrna and the fact that he was scapegoated by the entire community. Contrary to Ignatius's self-inflicted paralysis, the novel requires personal agency and change facilitated by a figure who dethrones and inverts (picaro), where the sacred becomes an object of profanity (work and money in the modern age), the mundane an object of worship (pop-cultural products). In *A Confederacy of Dunces*, Toole has devised a lens in the character of Ignatius through which he views the city and its inhabitants, themselves an amalgam of types in a highly idiosyncratic mode, whose unique point of view is so far detached from lived experience of life in contemporary world not just in an American city, but even in a city as diverse and tolerant towards idiosyncrasies as New Orleans. By practicing passive/paralyzed indignation of an existence, he is not even a philosopher but simply a consumer of the worst commodification of the city's genuine cultural artefacts, a bona fide local outsider. We may concede that one knows an age by its knight errant – Ignatius showed us the incompatibility of seeking solace in philosophy in a world where everything is left to chance (wheel of fortune); it is rather personal action and taking responsibility that drives those around him to succeed in life – the era of progress is an era of personal agency.

Contrary to the current ideas of progress, the novel illustrates an inherent wisdom in living within a space that acknowledges folkways, storytelling, local myths and narratives of a place. Therefore, the denizens of a multicultural port city like New Orleans are offered a multitude of such worlds and existences, along with a possibility of carving one's own place within them. And yet, there is an intrinsic logic, a grammar of understanding, an ethical, even aesthetic code of conduct in these spaces; they have become part and parcel of the living city, no longer undefined, but sensed. Even though Ignatius does not realize it himself, there already is a sense of theology and geometry in the polyvocality of these milieus, just not the one he shares with them. Thus, the dichotomy between the idea of progress and the pull of the past continues in the city of New Orleans and in its literature.

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