

Sociological Commentary on Kennedy Toole's A Confederacy of Dunces

England: Penguin Books (1980)

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In the first pages of the novel *A Confederacy of Dunces*, written by John Kennedy Toole, the protagonist, Ignatius J. Reilly, who acknowledges he is writing a monumental diatribe against modern society, puts before the reader his vision of history, his interpretation of social change. I quote:

“With the breakdown of the Medieval system, the gods of Chaos, Lunacy, and Bad Taste gained ascendancy.” Ignatius was writing in one of his Big Chief tablets.

After a period in which the western world had enjoyed order, tranquillity, unity, and oneness with its True God and Trinity, there appeared winds of change which spelled evil days ahead. An ill wind blows no one good. The luminous years of Abelard, Thomas à Beckett, and Everyman dimmed into dross; Fortuna's Wheel had turned on humanity, crushing its collarbone, smashing its skull, twisting its torso, puncturing its pelvis, sorrowing its soul. Having once been so high, humanity fell so low. What had once been dedicated to the soul was now dedicated to the sale.

“That is rather fine”, Ignatius said to himself and continued his hurried writing.

¹ Translated from the original text in Spanish by English Native Academy.

Merchants and charlatans gained control of Europe, calling their insidious gospel “The Enlightenment”. The day of the locust was at hand, but from the ashes of humanity there arose no Phoenix. 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. (See Reilly, Ignatius J., *Blood on Their Hands: The Crime of It All, a Study of some selected abuses in sixteenth century Europe*, a Monograph, 2 pages, 1950, Rare Books Room, Left Corridor, Third Floor, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University, New Orleans 18, Louisiana. Note: I mailed this singular monograph to the library as a gift; however, I am not really certain that it was ever accepted. It may well have been thrown out because it was only written in pencil on tablet paper.) The gyro had widened; 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. And a vicious fate it was to be: now he was faced with the perversion of having to GO TO WORK.” (Kennedy Toole 1983: 25-26)

From then on, Ignatius, our protagonist, lives through numerous adventures and vicissitudes in the city of New Orleans, introducing us to the personalities and activities of the most diverse characters of that southern city; they are the focus of his medievalist, outdated point of view, just like a new Don Quixote. And the fact is that, just like the outmoded nobleman from La Mancha, this perspective cannot but lead him to being beaten and battered once and again for challenging the conventional behaviour of the other characters that he comes into contact with, albeit allowing the reader to experience the most deranged and amusing situations.

In a review published in *The New Yorker*, the author, Tom Bissel (2021), asks himself with certain ambiguity if the novel can be described as reactionary or not, or as some have said, *theofascist*. But where does such a term come from? We understand that, indeed, if we have faith in the capitalist society,

if we take for granted that modernity will lead to success, and that it even helps to set human relationships free, Kennedy Toole's work could be questioned for its recurring reactionary pleas, a return to an ecclesiastically organised bygone society, that could no longer be imposed on us, except forcibly by a fascist government. (If at all).

But if, on the other hand, we think, (and especially if we *feel*) that this so-called progress is in fact a dead-end, that capitalism is building increasingly anomic and dangerous societies, in this case, in *The Confederacy* there is something more, much more, than that which unsettles the *yankee* critic – as Kennedy Toole may have said himself (MacLauchin 2015).

It is that Ignatius looks upon the modern world from a premodern perspective, criticizing it mercilessly and fiercely. And given that this modern world of ours is indeed built upon the systematic, routinary deauthorisation of the ancient world, based on cliches, his point of view *deconstructs* our modernity, revealing some of its most bizarre concomitant realities, for example:

“After almost thirty minutes of pulling at his hair and chewing on the pencil, he began to compose a paragraph.

Were Hroswitha with us today, we would all look to her for counsel and guidance. From the austerity and tranquillity of her medieval world, the penetrating gaze of this legendary Sybil of a holy nun would exorcize the horrors which materialize before our eyes in the name of television. If we could only juxtapose one eyeball of this sanctified woman and a television tube, both being roughly of the same shape and design, what a phantasmagoria of exploding electrodes would occur. The images of those lasciviously gyrating children would disintegrate into so many ions and molecules, thereby effecting the catharsis which the tragedy of the debauching of the innocent necessarily demands.” (Kennedy Toole 1983: 40)

Once again: if one puts all one's faith in the direction this society is heading, if despite everything, one still believes in it, then this medievalist point of view has no more validity than mere literature; *The Confederacy* thus becomes a succession of jokes, and reading it is nothing more than a politically trivial act. But, as I have said, if one is increasingly suspicious of the planetary society which is being organised by capitalism, then things are different, and at least bearing in mind a religious criticism of the world, by whichever of the ancient religions, may in fact be worthwhile. It may even be useful, if in the future - for whatever reason - we are forced to change direction.

I'm not saying that Kennedy Toole considered all this back in 1963; he was merely writing a work of fiction - he intentionally leaves the social essay to his protagonist, Ignatius. But if his novel has been translated into 30 languages and has been particularly successful in countries with ancient cultures, like Japan and Spain (where it's on its 40th edition!), perhaps the reason is because many readers, from those countries and others, from time to time cannot help but cast a glance at the world today from *the world we have lost*.

(And how subtle and marvellous is the human spirit; it unwittingly springs forth in a far-off city, for its own purpose, with its own logic, and can suddenly make many unknown spirits quiver here in Spain, for their own purposes, with their other logic!)²

² It seems that the novel was not so well-received in the United States, despite winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1981. Perhaps because, as explained by Tocqueville "Americans never use the word 'peasant' because they have no idea of the peculiar class which that term denotes..." (Tocqueville 2006, vol 1, cap. 17, part iii). Their country is the only western country that lacks a historical peasant past, this is what American *exceptionalism* consists of.

Any text that falls into our hands is read from our own particular and respectable point of view, but we (we) see something deeper in *The Confederacy* than a string of witty jokes - something nourishing, beyond that entertaining reading that we also enjoy.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Nevertheless, Kennedy Toole is also an enormously popular author there. And his works are extensively read and studied in schools, universities, and at literature seminars. The fact is that we have before us a classic of universal literature, and just like any classic, there are endless possible readings and interpretations.