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The Body Dyspeptic: The Grotesque Body in John Kennedy Toole's Novel *A Confederacy of Dunces*

As soon as John Kennedy Toole's novel *A Confederacy of Dunces* begins, readers are plunged into the carnival of Toole's New Orleans and its carousel of comic characters, a place where a green-capped giant, hot dog vendor bums, and "Harlett O'Hara" with her cockatoo stripping partner forge a chaotic coexistence (331). Toole's focal point amongst all this commotion is, however, the enormous, eructating, and exceptionally idiosyncratic protagonist, Ignatius J. Reilly. It is through Ignatius' misadventures that Toole weaves his way through the city, hyperbolizing everybody to the point where it does indeed appear that Ignatius lives in "a confederacy of dunces," himself included. Ignatius' physical presence, reminiscent of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the "grotesque body," plays a large role in the novel's progress, as his grotesqueness not only moves the plot along, but also creates eddies of meaning beneath its surface (26). In Ignatius, Toole creates a contemporary, Americanized version of the traditional grotesque body figure, using Ignatius' physicality as jumping off point for the larger theme of how to make sense of life in a postmodern, consumerist world.

Before discussing Ignatius' role as a grotesque body in *A Confederacy of Dunces*, it is necessary to discuss Bakhtin's explication of the concept. In his landmark critical text *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin argues that portrayals of comedically exaggerated bodies have their roots in the medieval carnival (10). As he notes, in a highly structured and hierarchical

society, carnival celebrations provided “temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order” (Bakhtin 10). In parallel with this, Toole’s magnified vision of New Orleans, filled with costumed characters and dramatic interactions, is quite the carnivalesque scene, particularly when considering that Mardi Gras is a traditional carnival celebration (Bakhtin 8). As the flamboyant character Dorian Greene remarks, “[t]hat’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” (Toole 256). Bakhtin also notes that the speech between people during carnival is more fluid than normal, as “verbal etiquette and discipline are relaxed and indecent words and expressions may be used” (16). This carnivalesque speech is typified in Toole’s incredibly deft depiction of New Orleans dialects in the novel, particularly when contrasted with Ignatius’ stiff, formal, and pseudo-intellectual speech. Furthermore, underneath the novel’s carnival atmosphere runs an undercurrent of medieval thought, present most clearly in Ignatius’ obsession with the Roman philosopher Boethius’ work *The Consolation of Philosophy*.

With Toole’s world of carnivalesque excess in mind, Ignatius’ conspicuous corporeality gains connotations that fall in line with Bakhtin’s idea of the “grotesque body” (26). Bakhtin defines the grotesque body as a physical manifestation of the carnival mindset, representing the carnival’s spirit of egalitarianism through a focus on “those parts of the body that are open to the outside world” (26). As Sara Cohen Shabot adds in her essay “The Grotesque Body: Fleshing Out the Subject,” the grotesque body is one that is “excessive” and that “constantly outgrows itself and escapes from its own skin,” always in opposition to the “clean, closed, well-defined, clear-cut, beautiful bodies” typical of classical ideals (59). Ignatius’ body is certainly “excessive,” and Toole is quick to establish him as the grotesque body of his New Orleans

carnival world. The first part of Toole's world that we are introduced to is "[a] green hunting cap" that "squeezed the top of the fleshy balloon of a head" (1). Toole continues, describing how

the green earflaps full of large ears and uncut hair and the fine bristles that grew in the ears themselves, stuck out on either side like turn signals indicating two directions at one. Full, pursed lips protruded beneath the bushy black moustache, and, at their corners, sank into little folds filled with disapproval and potato chip crumbs. (1)

Immediately, Toole's dense description brings to mind a monstrous character imbued with an intensity of excess, with a head ready to burst like a "balloon," ears that are "large," and lips that are "full." Ignatius' head is "fleshy," reduced to the crude features of ears, hair, and mouth, and Toole's use of the word "balloon" brings to mind an impression of the carnivalesque. This is also a uniquely contemporary monster, as evidenced by ear hair that is like "turn signals," and a mouth that is lined with "potato chip crumbs."

Toole continues with similar description as Ignatius' lumbering figure comes into larger view and animates, "[s]hifting from one hip to the other in his lumbering, elephantine fashion," sending "waves of flesh rippling beneath tweed and flannel" (1-2). This figure then begins to feel "discomfort" as "his whole being was ready to burst from his swollen suede desert boots" (Toole 1-2). Toole's descriptions of Ignatius are quite in line with Bakhtin's conception of the grotesque body as one that contains a protruding essence and "all that seeks to go out beyond the body's confines" (316). His "waves of flesh rippling" out and his swollen flesh certainly exemplify the idea of the grotesque body bursting out of its confines and into the world. Ignatius' "elephantine" figure also reflects the tradition of "popular-festive giants" as "protagonist[s] of carnival parades," and in this light he may be seen as the giant of New Orleans (Bakhtin 343). By starting

his novel with such a bodily presence, Toole ensures that readers focus upon Ignatius' physicality as an essential part of the novel—it is impossible to ignore the enormous freakishness of this absurd character.

Toole also calls to mind the grotesque body with his frequent comparisons of Ignatius to fruits, vegetables, and animals. Instead of hands, Ignatius has “paws”; he bathes in the “warm water” of his tub “like a pink hippopotamus” and gives “one whalelike snort” (Toole 50, 175, 171). In the car he looks “like the tip of a promising watermelon,” his hot dog vendor outfit “made him look like a dinosaur egg about to hatch,” and when sitting on the stool at Levy Pants “he looked like an eggplant balanced atop a thumbtack” (Toole 25, 158, 84). These descriptions are not merely amusing and creative, but also align with the miscellanea that comprise Bakhtin's grotesque body. As he explains, one iteration of the “grotesque character” tends to “adopt the animal form or that of inanimate objects” (Bakhtin 316). Further than this, the etymology of the word “grotesque” refers to “a specific art of the grotto” in Nero's palace, the “first-century Domus Aurea,” that contained images that “unconscionably mingled and interfused human, animal, vegetable and mineral” (Clark 18). Thus, the animal and vegetable imagery that Toole uses to depict Ignatius' body places his novel not only within the tradition of the carnivalesque grotesque body, but also within the larger historical artistic *mélange* of unsettling, humanoid figures that straddle the real and fantastical¹. Ignatius escapes categorization into the one term “grotesque body,” instead reflecting a larger history of manipulating the human body into an absurd object.

This more general concept of the grotesque naturally brings us to the idea of the humor present in Toole's novel, as Bakhtin notes that the grotesque body is an integral part of the “people's festive laughter” of the carnival (12). It is not hard to find comedy in Ignatius' claim

that walking too fast will cause him “to have a hemorrhage,” in the image of his body spilling over into “two adjoining” movie theater seats that he fills with “three Milky Ways, and two auxiliary bags of popcorn,” in his claim that Mr. Clyde, the owner of the Paradise Vendors hot dog business, is envious of “the grandeur of my physique,” and in his “huge, spherical, white figure” as he “lumber[s] down the tracks” that he lodges his hot dog cart in (Toole 8, 53, 226, 285). Here, Ignatius’ body is the cause of his immense buffoonery, and readers find themselves laughing at the sticky situations he gets himself into, glad to experience such humiliating scenes vicariously. It is not hard, then, to imagine Ignatius as the grand fool of Toole’s New Orleans carnival—his immense body and clumsy, often oblivious actions make him an easy target for laughter.

A distinction must be drawn here, however, between the humorous and the satiric. On a superficial level, Ignatius’ grotesque body is quite funny, but beyond this, and alongside the satire of the novel as a whole, his body transforms into an engine of satirical criticism. As Ignatius shovels dozens of hot dogs, made from a mystery combination of, perhaps, “rubber, cereal, [and] tripe,” stuffing the “foot of red plastic and dough” into his throat, there is a deep sense of disgust (Toole 153, 162). His hypocritical admonition that George requires “vegetables and orange juice and whole wheat bread and spinach and such,” rather than hot dogs—all the while his own body is putting on weight alarmingly fast—brings to mind ideas of deformed consumerism (Toole 161). This aspect of Ignatius is uncomfortable because it is not entirely detached from typical experience. While his gigantic figure and animal nature are clearly fiction, this side of him isn’t. Ignatius may guzzle Dr. Nut “by the case,” and gorge on dozens of cakes, but have we not all given in to such mindless culinarian excess at one point or another in our lives, if only at a minimized level? (Toole 10, 4). Such scenes depict what David McNeil calls

“reverse satire,” a satiric technique where characters attack what they are themselves (36).

Though Ignatius derides contemporary society and the fact that “[w]hat had once been dedicated to the soul was now dedicated to the sale,” his rotund body shows that he is as much a product of consumerism as anyone else (Toole 28).

Ignatius’ physical characteristics are thus linked with satire, but Bakhtin disagrees that the grotesque body can be satiric; he argues that satire undermines the carnivalesque ideas of communal laughter and joviality (12). As John R. Clark notes in his book *The Modern Satiric Grotesque and Its Traditions*, however, “grotesquerie has been a dominant feature in major satiric art” for years (Clark 21). Toole is able to link the grotesque body with satire precisely because he embraces the carnivalesque community aspect of laughter. No one in his novel is exempt from criticism, and this includes the reader. Ignatius is hilarious as he attempts to satiate his endless gluttony with popcorn, cakes, hot dogs, and Dr. Nut, all the while complaining about how degenerate society has become, however his words give one pause. Perhaps a society that is more concerned with framing a black man for swiping cashews than it is about holding perfidious business owners like Lana Lee accountable is, in fact, in need of change (Toole 24-25). As Jonathan Greenberg argues in his book *Modernism, Satire, and the Novel*, the union between satire and the grotesque is both funny and fearful, writing that “the laughter provoked by the grotesque is always uneasy, nervous laughter, never wholly free from disquiet” (9-10). Ignatius and his grotesque body force us to face our fears with both derision and guilty laughter. We detest his body partly because we fear that we could become him.

Bakhtin’s concept of the grotesque body also includes the idea that “the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world,” and that this is expressed by an obsession with the “hyperbolization...[of] eating, drinking, defecation, and other elimination” (317). Toole

approaches this topic most noticeably with Ignatius' capricious digestive system. Ignatius' "developed" pyloric valve acts as a signpost for his distress, closing whenever a situation rises to a pitch that he cannot handle² (Toole 48). He is often "bloated," and mentions "his pyloric valve snapping shut indiscriminately and filling his stomach with trapped gas" (Toole 29). If, as Bakhtin suggests, the grotesque body's release of bodily substances can be seen as an opening up to the world, then Ignatius' valve closures reveal an unwillingness to connect with others. His indigestion, then, is a physical manifestation of his inability to cope in a chaotic, self-centered, capitalist, and consumerist world. Ignatius' failure to function and connect with others is also apparent in his abnormal choices of sexual release. Rather than share sexual pleasures with, or even to, someone else, he masturbates to the image of his childhood pet Rex, opening up his body and emissions not to a human, but to a dog (Toole 30-31). This scene is particularly disturbing, and portrays a twisted, dark version of the grotesque body. But with this a question also comes up: is the society that Ignatius ridicules not the same one that created this monstrosity? Ignatius' neighbor, Miss Annie, notes that Ignatius "was okay until that big dog of his died" and his mother and the church failed to allow him the compassion of a proper funeral³ (Toole 360-361). Perhaps, then, Ignatius' grotesque body is a sad result of society failing its duty to create functioning, normal adults.

Toole doesn't leave readers with this sad image, however, as at the novel's denouement Ignatius' grotesque body begins to fall apart. As he realizes that his Boethian dream girl does not exist, Ignatius runs out of the Night of Joy bar, faints, and is nearly hit by a bus (Toole 333). This moment is startling, as it is a reminder that his body is more than just symbolic—it is real and can be destroyed just like anything else. Ignatius then wakes up in the hospital, an obvious place of import when concerning the body (Toole 336). Grotesque bodies are not real, so to see one in

a hospital is disturbing. It soon becomes clear that the carnival is fading, giving way to fleshy realism⁴. Toole expands on this even more when, towards the end of the novel, there is a sudden profusion of new bodily imagery. In the hospital, Ignatius “spray[s] a little nervous saliva on the sheet,” and as he tries to get back to normal after his travails he finds that his favorite libation, Dr. Nut, “tasted like gall...as an acid gurgling down into his intestine,” causing him to have “great eructations” (Toole 336, 379). Suddenly Ignatius’ body is rebelling not only to the world outside, but also to the sanctuary of his own bedroom. Then, as Ignatius escapes New Orleans with Myrna, a miracle happens: his valve opens (Toole 394). In this profound moment, Ignatius’ body finally surrenders, taking in the “purgative” air, and the world outside New Orleans no longer causes him to vomit profusely (Toole 394, 10). As they move further and further away from the city, his headache fades and for once he feels grateful (Toole 394). Ignatius has finally broken free from the carnival, and in turn he escapes his grotesque body on the way to real, human freedom.

In *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin makes sure to note that the grotesque body has a much more important role than simply that of the spectacle or human study. He writes that the “carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things” (Bakhtin 34). Toole undoubtedly injects this contemplative aspect into his novel, as Ignatius’ grotesque body turns our eyes to the ills of society. Ignatius is our postmodern anxieties— anxieties in a dynamic world of civil rights, increasing sexual freedom, degenerate consumerism, and violence— embodied. In his gluttonous, slovenly, obese monstrosity of a body, filled with “Paradise gas,” we see what happens when consumerism is taken to the extreme (Toole 177). In his novel, Toole creates a contemporary, American version of the grotesque body in a world that is the

amalgamation of the historical ideas of grotesquerie, carnival, and satire. In this new world, and with its uniquely corpulent antihero, we find the realization that we must face the fears of our postmodern world of consumerism and capitalism, embracing its flaws, all the while looking for our chance to escape. In *A Confederacy of Dunces*, through the hot dogs, cakes, Dr. Nut, gas, fat, and flesh that comprise Ignatius J. Reilly, there is yet hope that we may find a way for all of us to open our valves and breathe in the fresh air of what it means to be a living, breathing, belching human being.

Notes

1. This animal imagery also extends beyond the narrator's viewpoint, as Dorian Greene and his fellow partygoers proceed to treat Ignatius as a circus animal before tearing him down with insults largely pertaining to his body: "beast," "madman," "grotesque," "horrible," "unbelievably gross," "so monstrously huge," "a bad, bad dream," "filthy" (Toole 321).

2. Ignatius' hands also have a tendency to "break out in small white bumps" when he is under distress (Toole 11). This further contributes to his grotesque body imagery, suggesting sickness and an "allergy" to stressful situations.

3. As a child, Ignatius wouldn't be expected to understand death, and holding a "real" funeral for his dog seems reasonable.

4. Interestingly, in her paper "Feast of Fools: The Carnavalesque in John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces*," Julija Potrč argues that "for the grotesque body, disease and death represented a chance for new birth, but in the case of Ignatius this universal and positive aspect is lost—his health problems only pose a threat and danger" (88). On the contrary, it is exactly Ignatius' enormous, unhealthy body's conspicuousness that gets people to recognize him and leads to the events that create the opportunity for his escape with Myrna and the opening of his valve. The fact of his grotesque body landing in the hospital does, in fact, lead to his rebirth beyond the boundaries of the heady New Orleans culture.

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