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Full page image of Durer's Melancholia, 1514, from the Haggerty Museum of Art at Marquette University.

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H. Vernon Leighton

THE DIALECTIC OF AMERICAN HUMANISM: JOHN KENNEDY TOOLE'S A  
CONFEDERACY OF DUNCES, MARSILIO FICINO, AND PAUL OSKAR KRISTELLER

A Confederacy of Dunces (Confederacy) by John Kennedy Toole is on its surface a farce about life on the edge of respectability in New Orleans.<sup>1</sup> Its main character, Ignatius Jacques Reilly, is a lazy, haughty, and clumsy thirty-year-old who has pushed his widowed mother to the edge of financial ruin and who maintains a correspondence with an eccentric and difficult young woman in New York. On another level, the novel is a critique of competing definitions of humanism and their associated worldviews. Ignatius expounds but inverts a Renaissance philosophy articulated by Paul Oskar Kristeller, who was at the height of his influence as a scholar at Columbia University when Toole studied there. The other characters in Confederacy live out shallow existences mired in modern consumer culture, the consequence, according to Ignatius, of a flawed modernist worldview. That modern worldview is similar to the one which was associated with the established school of American humanism against which Kristeller campaigned. The social upheavals created by Ignatius and his eventual expulsion from New Orleans comically resolve Confederacy's plot and renew the lives of the other characters in the novel, suggesting a dialectical synthesis of these two forms of humanism, the traditional and the modern.

In Confederacy the mythic symbol that translates the farcical chaos of the plot into the intellectual discourse behind that plot is the planetary god Saturn, with whom Ignatius Reilly is connected in multiple ways. I showed in an earlier study that Ignatius is associated with disorder itself and the ill fates of Saturn as described by Chaucer's Knight's Tale. Ignatius also displays behaviors which have been associated with Saturn by others, including the medieval Arab astrologer Abu Ma'shar and the Italian Renaissance philosopher Marsilio Ficino. Ficino developed his ideas into a theory of the melancholy Genius as a Child of Saturn, which influenced English literature from Spenser to Shelley. As the title of Toole's book indicates, Ignatius is a parody of a genius and is therefore under Saturn's influence—parody here meaning “repetition with critical distance” (Hutcheon 6).

Ignatius Reilly is a personification of disorder and chaos in Confederacy. Close study shows that the disruptions in the novel stem from Ignatius's tricks and lies (Leighton 26-27). Richard K. Simon had interpreted Ignatius as a personification of Fortuna herself (113), but a more accurate reading interprets Ignatius as Fortuna's wheel in the tale: he

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is often seen as careening into other characters; contact with him causes the fortunes of those characters to change; and when his mother learns to bowl, she learns to stand up to him (Leighton 27).

At the time of Toole's undergraduate study of Chaucer, the planetary god Saturn in the Knight's Tale was identified with disorder itself. Not only is Ignatius, like Chaucer's Saturn, an agent of disorder, but many of the fates discussed and experienced in Confederacy are ones that Chaucer explicitly associated with Saturn (Leighton 27-29). Chaucer's Saturn claimed influence over many ill-fates including falling buildings, drownings, stranglings, and imprisonment. In

Confederacy, the action begins with Ignatius's mother knocking down a balcony (23). Later, Ignatius discusses drowning (103, 336); his first impulse upon seeing Myrna is to strangle her (331); and many of the novel's characters fear prison (12, 38, 124).

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While Ignatius is associated with Chaucer's fates of Saturn, he is associated with Saturn in a deeper way. Within medieval astrology and Renaissance humanism, the child of Saturn had further qualities which were not represented in Chaucer's Knight's Tale, but which appear to have influenced Toole. In a 1923 study written in German and called Dürers 'Melancholia I', Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl explored the development of Saturn's qualities, beginning with the medieval Arab astrologer Abu Ma'shar and culminating in the concept of the Melancholy Genius as first articulated by the Renaissance philosopher Marsilio Ficino and then later elaborated on by humanist Albrecht Dürer.

Abu Ma'shar provided an extensive list of saturnine traits, many of which directly relate to Ignatius Reilly. Among the positive attributes, Saturn presides over Bedächtigkeit ("deliberation"), Beharrlichkeit ("persistence"), Rücksichtnahme ("consideration"), Erbschaften ("tillage" or "legacy"), Schätzung ("judgment"), Wahrhaftigkeit ("honesty"), and treu in der Liebe ("devoted love" or "loyalty"). Within his astrologically unfavorable aspect, the list of qualities Saturn presides over includes Hochmut ("haughtiness"), Hartherzigkeit ("hard-heartedness"), Anmassung ("impudence"), List ("trickery"), Einsamkeit ("loneliness" or "solitude"), Menschenscheu ("unsociability"), Gefräßigkeit ("gluttony"), Trägheit ("sluggishness"), schwerfällige Leute ("clumsy people"), Verderben ("decay"), Verwaisung ("orphanhood" or "widowhood"), Schicksalschläge ("reversals of fortune"), Vergewaltigung

(“violation” or “rape”), Bedrängnis (“financial straits”), and schwierige Lage (“a hard life”) (5-8, 81-92). The disparities in this list give an inconsistent character type, but Panofsky and Saxl

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argued that one could make sense of the Vielfältigkeit (“many facets”) of Saturn’s influence by studying the history of its development (9).

Marsilio Ficino combined these astrological qualities of Saturn and Saturn’s children with the traditions surrounding both Aristotle’s concept of melancholy and Plato’s concept of divine madness, and he used that triple combination to glorify the melancholy genius who is influenced by Saturn.<sup>2</sup> Panofsky and Saxl quoted Ficino as stating, “selten gewöhnliche Charaktere und Schicksale bezeichnet, sondern Menschen, die von den andern verschieden sind, göttliche or tierische ... ” (“rarely are normal characters and destinies signified [by Saturn]; rather, they are persons who are different from others, divine or beastly”; 19).<sup>3</sup> Of Ficino’s two saturnine personality types, the divine one can be given over to contemplation, theology, or moments of genius, while the second is beastly and is plagued by madness and misfortune. By the time of Dürer, Saturn’s association with astronomy prompted thinkers to call him Herrscher der Geometrie ‘ruler of geometry’ (62). At that time, the dog was the animal most associated with Saturn: “Der Hund ... galt in der Zeit Dürers als melancholisches Geschöpf ... Anfällen des Irreseins ausgesetzt ...” (“the dog, considered in Dürer’s time a melancholy creature, ... [was] given to fits of insanity”; 69). Finally, one Renaissance aspect of Saturn that is actually at odds with Chaucer’s presentation is Saturn’s relationship to Venus. In the Knight’s Tale, Venus is Saturn’s dear daughter, while in Ficino’s account, she is the strongest anti-saturnine influence: “der größte Gegensatz besteht zwischen Saturn und Venus” (“The greatest opposition stands

between Saturn and Venus”; 45n1).

This selected list of saturnine qualities fits the characteristics and behavior of Ignatius well. He eats gluttonously and even discourses on substituting a desire for food for sexual desire (143). When he plays the lute, he sings about legacy: “Tarye no longer; toward thyn heritage” (88). He is unsociable, lazy, hard-hearted, and haughty. He stumbles and is clumsy. He screams “Rape her!” at the screen in a movie house (249). His yard is decayed, and those who come in contact with him experience financial straits and reversals of fortune. He refers to his mind as both wanton and god-like (231), and he declares, “My being has many facets” (218). He criticizes the theology and geometry of others (1, 37, 140, 184, 200, 233).<sup>4</sup> He is also strongly associated with dogs: he fantasizes about sex with a dog (28), and he regularly shows his paws and barks. Others accuse him of being insane (20, 141, 211 225, 291), and Ignatius describes himself as showing “psychotic dedication” (105). Finally, just as Saturn opposes Venus, Ignatius vehemently opposes sexual contact with other people (69). Those who want his mother to end her widowhood and return to an active sexual life are Ignatius’s enemies.

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The use of this mythic interpretation of Ignatius Reilly offers a powerful explanation for many otherwise diverse or inexplicable aspects of his character. It ties together his promotion of disorder, his haughtiness, his financial difficulties, his references to heritage, and his hostility to sexual contact. The contrast between how Ignatius sees himself and how the narrator and other characters perceive him drives the humor of the book. In his own self-description, Ignatius identifies with Ficino’s divine type of the saturnine individual, who is a contemplative genius; in the narrator’s descriptions of his body and actions, Ignatius is identified with Ficino’s second saturnine type, a beast who is a carrier of misfortune.<sup>5</sup> In this way, Ignatius burlesques both

Ficino's melancholy genius and, arguably, the practice of myth criticism as well—myth criticism being at its most recent apogee within American literary circles while Toole was writing Confederacy in the early 1960s.<sup>6</sup>

If one were to argue that Toole knew and consciously intended to incorporate this saturnine pattern into Confederacy, a skeptic might reasonably ask, “How could Toole have learned about the contents of Panofsky and Saxl's book?” After all, the book was in German, and Toole's undergraduate transcript in the John Kennedy Toole Papers at Tulane University suggests that Toole's knowledge of German was rudimentary (Tulane). There was a revised and expanded version of that book that would have provided this knowledge of Saturn in English, but it was published in 1964 (Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl), too late to be a possible influence on a work that was planned in 1961 and largely written in 1963. Two books associated with Toole's undergraduate studies do discuss Ficino's influence on English Renaissance culture (Tillyard 41; Einstein 82), but only in passing. Panofsky's later, more popular text, Studies in Iconology (1939), does discuss Saturn and Ficino, but not in adequate depth. On its surface, the hypothesis that Toole's conscious intentions were actually influenced by Panofsky and Saxl appears implausible.

The most likely path from Panofsky and Saxl's study to Toole was a scholar by the name of Paul Oskar Kristeller. According to his obituary in the New York Times, Kristeller “was a particular expert on Marsilio Ficino,” and he “traveled up and down the country giving hundreds and hundreds of lectures” about the Renaissance (Pace). Kristeller taught at Columbia University from 1939 to 1973, and he was president of the Renaissance Society of America from 1957 to 1959. Toole arrived at Columbia in the autumn of 1958 to study (mostly Renaissance) English Literature and may have socialized with Kristeller's circle. In Kristeller's 1942 book The

Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino, he wrote, “In their beautiful book Durer’s Melancholia I [sic], Panofsky and Saxl have examined the whole group of these concepts [about Saturn], ... and they are apparently inclined to

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believe that all later speculations [about genius as melancholy] ... are directly derived from Ficino’s De vita” (212). If a path of actual influence from Panofsky and Saxl’s study to Toole existed, then it could very well have passed through Kristeller or his circle. Thus it is that pursuing an apparent mythic pattern (the Saturn type) within Confederacy leads us to Kristeller, Ficino, and deeper meanings of Toole’s work.

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When Paul Oskar Kristeller arrived in America in 1939, he was a Jewish refugee from European fascism. A scholar of ancient and Renaissance philosophy, he had left Germany after Hitler took power and spent most of the 1930s in Italy. Kristeller had an iron constitution for digging through archives, libraries, and manuscript collections, and he spent his time in Italy mining rich collections of Renaissance manuscripts, many of them previously unknown to modern researchers (Kristeller, “Life,” 343-344). Trained by the best German philologists and philosophers of his age, he had the skills to recreate the literary and philosophical context of Renaissance humanism, and he was able to establish that the (then) current understanding of the relationship of Renaissance humanism to modern philosophy was wrong (Kristeller, “Life,” 346). Once in America, he eventually obtained a position at Columbia University, which at the time some considered to be the center of America’s pragmatically-oriented school of

philosophical humanism (Hankins 585). Over the ensuing decades, he used his encyclopedic knowledge of original manuscripts to overturn the basic paradigm of American interpretations of the humanism of the Renaissance.

Of two families of definitions of the word humanism, the older meaning relates humanism to a literary and educational tradition that began in the Renaissance (Hankins 573). An earlier tradition of scholasticism was oriented toward professions: law, medicine, or the church. In contrast to scholasticism, Renaissance humanism was anti-utilitarian and imparted the literary skills that facilitated a role in court and civic life. Humanista was in the early sixteenth-century a slang term for a professor of rhetoric, grammar, or poetry (Witt 257). Students of humanism learned from classical sources rhetorical techniques that made their addresses and letters more persuasive.

Beginning in the Romantic era of the early nineteenth-century, a second family of definitions of humanism arose. As James Hankins describes it, “Dechristianization left many newly-minted atheists and agnostics culturally disoriented and deeply concerned that the end of religious belief would create a kind of ethical vacuum” (575). This new humanism was a philosophy of man that advocated reason, science, and service to the

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greater good of humanity in this natural and temporal world. In Europe, these philosophers used the term humanism because they believed, first, that Renaissance humanists “created a new philosophy which destroyed the systematic metaphysics of medieval scholasticism” (Pine 213) and, second, that the Renaissance was the point of origin for ideas of man’s radical autonomy, in what has been called the Modernist Paradigm (Hankins 595). In America, this type of humanism was strongly influenced by John Dewey’s pragmatism, and, in contrast to their European peers,

some proponents of this American humanism—such as Corliss Lamont—were overtly hostile to a classical education (Hankins 585).

Kristeller's approach, by contrast, "envisaged humanism within the social and political context of its time" and "stressed continuity ... and was presented with an erudition that carried conviction" (Witt 257). Kristeller demolished the historical claims that had supported the new philosophical humanism (Grendler 108), and he showed with overwhelming counterexamples that no break between medieval and Renaissance philosophy had occurred. For example, "what was thought to be Pico's 'modern' affirmation of human freedom and the human power of autopoiesis turned out on closer inspection to be near-quotations from Boethius and the Cappadocian Fathers" (Hankins 588). Though he was personally diplomatic, "Kristeller ... had something bordering on contempt for American humanism," and in particular, he thought Lamont was a fraud (Hankins 586). Finally, Kristeller rejected the practice of directing scholarship toward a political position or a current ideology. As Margaret King wrote of his rejection of the project of women's history, "The scholar, in his view, should be anything but engagé; rather he should remain detached and disinterested from issues of the moment, often dismissed as 'fads'" (141).<sup>7</sup>

Knowledge of Kristeller adds meaning to one's reading of Confederacy. Others have identified the source of Ignatius Reilly's hyperbolic mannerisms to be Robert Byrne, a professor of English with whom Toole shared an office when they were both teaching at Lafayette, Louisiana (Fletcher 16). However, the ideas that Ignatius expounds can be seen as a burlesque of the ideas of Paul Oskar Kristeller and his interpretation of Marsilio Ficino. Instead of simply showing the continuity between the philosophical ideas of the medieval and Renaissance periods (as Kristeller did), Ignatius rejects the modern worldview outright in favor of the medieval.

Whereas Kristeller intellectually demolished the historical claims of the Modernist Paradigm, Ignatius exposes the ignorance of Professor Talc (Confederacy 110, 201, 294). Just as Kristeller's scholarship was disconnected from a pursuit of contemporary social issues, Ignatius isolates himself from immediate social concerns: "Myrna was, you see, terribly engaged in her society; I, on the other hand, older and wiser, was terribly dis-engaged"

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(108). Kristeller's contempt for modern philosophical humanism is translated in the novel into Ignatius's contempt for "that dreary fraud, Mark Twain" (103), for whom the medieval era was the nadir of human ignorance, poverty, and oppression (Britton 20).<sup>8</sup>

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Beyond the superficial similarities between Ignatius and Kristeller, Confederacy can be viewed as a parody of ideas found in Kristeller's The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino (PMF). Relevant parallels suggest an actual influence, though the coincidence may be due to a common reference to the Catholic intellectual tradition. They range from major aspects of the novel to minor details of the plot. In all cases, they identify Ignatius with a carnival inversion of Ficinian thought. By exploring them, one can discover Toole's critique of Ficino and the novel's proposed synthesis of the two forms of humanism.

According to Kristeller, the cornerstone of Ficino's philosophy and theology is the internal experience (PMF 205-230; ch. 11).<sup>9</sup> In that inner contemplation, love of God allows the human soul to ascend beyond the sensible, external world to a knowledge of God (226). In Confederacy, Ignatius Reilly strives toward having a "rich inner life" (2, 184, 196); however, he

has turned this upward striving on its head, and his inner life features masturbation, where he descends to bestiality through love for the memory of his dog (28).

In PMF, the contrast to the contemplative inner experience is the worldly, outward life. For Ficino, “all outward life which is directed away from contemplation must be qualified as bad and imperfect” (353). Just as Saturn is associated with the contemplative life, “Venus [becomes] the symbol of the imperfect, outward life” (358). Nevertheless, Ficino associated Venus with a positive form of outward life because she represented a form of love. He differentiated this worldly love from the entirely negative experience of lust, which had no love. Within Confederacy, two of the female characters who are associated with sexuality and an outward life are Myrna Minkoff and Lana Lee. Myrna crusades to reform society by encouraging people to liberate themselves sexually (108, 152). She shows genuine love, though: she expresses concern for Ignatius and urges him to enjoy the world and open his heart (185). Myrna’s own efforts to liberate society end in failure, as she is repeatedly taken advantage of by men who feign interest in her causes (156, 261, 335). Myrna’s letters to Ignatius challenge him both sexually and politically. He begins his own outward crusades in response to what he sees as her provocations (70, 216). When he addresses the masquerade for “Peace through Degeneracy,” he explains, “There is a girl who must be attended to, a bold and forward minx of

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a trollop” (275). Ignatius, with his rich inner life, is contrasted with Myrna’s politically and socially engaged outward life and her Venus-like promotion of sexuality.

On the other hand, Lana Lee, the strip club owner, prostitute, and pornographer, represents lust; she has gained wealth and power from sex, but she does not love. Lana oppresses Burma Jones, her janitor, and Darlene, her B-girl and stripper; she worships money (64); and she

says, “I never liked mothers, not even my own” (21). Ficino claimed that evil itself does not exist but is an absence of qualities or a limitation on goodness (PMF 64-65), and when Ignatius first meets Lana, he tells his mother that Lana is, “a negation of all human qualities” (Confederacy 21). In PMF, Ficino argued that each being has natural desires, and when the being is in the presence of the object desired, desire turns to joy (183). The human soul has a natural appetite for God (190), so the ascent of the soul toward God is accompanied by “perfect joy” (227). Ficino indicates that wickedness manifests itself in the human failure to choose infinite blessings over inferior ones (PMF 355)—that is, the failure to choose eternal joy over temporary joys. In Confederacy, Lana is the proprietress of the Night of Joy. For Ficino, when an individual dies, that human soul continues in the direction it was tending before death. The good soul continues to rise toward God, and the corrupted soul is trapped for eternity away from God in the awareness that it is deprived of perfect and eternal joy. The damned soul is tortured by Furies, which are “simply bad passions to which the impure Soul is subject” (361). In Confederacy, after her fall from power, Lana is imprisoned with the violent, lustful, and Fury-like lesbians (298).

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In PMF, Ficino articulated three different approaches to dealing with fate, which he labeled as good, better, and best. First, “it is good to fight against Fortune with the arms of prudence, patience, and generosity.” Ficino here claimed that an active resistance to fate is not bad. Second, “it is better to withdraw and flee from such a war.” This second strategy of avoiding fate is a departure from the first. Ficino’s third and supposedly best strategy, “to make peace ... with [Fortune] ... and to go willingly where it indicates ...” (PMF 298), is nearly the

opposite of strategy number one, active resistance. Kristeller for his part did not explain or defend this inconsistency.

Ignatius's words echo Ficino's advice regarding worldly fortune, but Ignatius's deeds comically contradict that advice. In Confederacy, Ignatius verbally agrees that acquiescence to the whims of Fortune is best: "There was no use fighting Fortuna until the cycle was over" (45-46). Ignatius's

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flight with Myrna at the end of the novel accords with Ficino's second, "better" strategy, fleeing from fate. However, through most of the novel, Ignatius's consequential actions do not fall into any of Ficino's three strategies: Ignatius actually drives the plot by acting the part of fortune's carnivalesque agent, dispensing fate as Fortuna's wheel. Again, Ficino's perspective is presented but then inverted.

One can discover Toole's sharpest criticism of Ficinian philosophy—and hints of a dialectical synthesis of the two forms of humanism—when one examines how Ficino and Ignatius handle the concept of dignity. The philosophers who constructed the Modernist Paradigm celebrated the empowered individual, and they identified the origin of this individualism in the writings of the Renaissance philosopher, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. In the text known as the "Oration on the Dignity of Man," Pico imagines God explaining to man what gives man his dignity: "Thou, constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine own free will, in whose hand We have placed thee, shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature" (225). To philosophical humanists, human dignity derives from a freedom to choose one's nature rather than to achieve perfection within a fixed nature.

In contrast to this apparently radical empowerment, Kristeller explains in PMF that

Ficino's view of the sphere of Being is fundamentally hierarchical, and that whatever "makes things in nature" is capable of dignity. Ficino stated, "We see clearly that some things in nature make and that some are made; the first precede in dignity, the latter follow" (77). However, "the variety of Being always involves various degrees of dignity and perfection" (76). According to Ficino, each being should strive toward the perfect existence of God within its rank, and each being is capable of a different degree of dignity (83). So the dignity of Ficino's makers of things in nature derives from striving to be as perfect within one's type as is possible.

This rather abstract philosophical debate over the nature of being and dignity frames the intellectual context around the African American struggle for civil rights, a struggle that was on the verge of a major breakthrough in the early 1960s. Part of the historical justification for the oppression of blacks by whites had been the claim that whites were in some essential way superior to blacks. In Confederacy, Ignatius explicitly draws on a hierarchy similar to Ficino's to frame this exact issue. He writes a lengthy journal entry prior to his effort to organize the black workers at the Levy Pants factory. He writes "it is apparent that many of the Negroes wish to become active members of the American middle class" (105). He later states, "I consider this [upward] movement a great insult to their integrity as a people" (106). Ignatius imagines that, were he black, he

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would militate violently against being raised to the middle class and that he would enjoy being kept in "ambitionless peace" (106). When he does organize the black factory workers, instead of organizing them in a campaign for human dignity in which they could strive to make of their lives what they choose (after the fashion of the Modernist Paradigm), Ignatius organizes a "Crusade for Moorish Dignity" (119). "Moorish dignity" suggests not universal human dignity

but a dignity to which blacks would rise as inferior beings and, as factory workers, ones who make things in nature. Like Ficino, Ignatius sees dignity as perfection within one's place in the hierarchy. But this Ficinian crusade for limited dignity fails, and it fails because of Ignatius's inability to interact with others in the corporeal world. As Helga Beste has pointed out, "doch im entscheidenden Moment kündigen sie Ignatius die Unterstützung auf, weil dieser nicht in der Lage ist, einen sinnvollen Dialog mit Mr. Gonzalez zu führen" ("at the decisive moment, the workers withdraw their support for Ignatius, because he is not capable of leading a meaningful dialogue [of their grievances] with Mr. Gonzalez"; 138). The slapstick failure of the Crusade for Moorish Dignity is caused by Ignatius's inability to conduct an outward life, and it stands as part of Toole's harsh satire of Ficino's Renaissance philosophy, that philosophy's focus on internal experience, and its limited concept of dignity.<sup>10</sup>

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My claim in this paper is that Confederacy rejects both the Modernist Paradigm and Ficinian philosophy and points toward a dialectical synthesis of the two. McCluskey and other critics have noted already that Confederacy criticizes the crass materialism of modern society effectively. McNeil and others have shown earlier that Ignatius's critical position, which represents a carnival version of Ficinian philosophy, is itself criticized through reverse satire. Toole's novel seems to ridicule and reject both Modernist humanism and its Renaissance antithesis. I claim that this double rejection leads dialectically to a philosophical synthesis of the two. Others might question this positive view with the suggestion that perhaps the book is an example of comic nihilism, which rejects both worldviews without transcending them to a positive alternative. What evidence is there to suggest that Toole did have a positive dialectical

resolution in mind?

Some commentators have claimed that Toole was a fatalist, a nihilist, or possessed of a dark vision (Leighton 31), or that he was a lapsed Catholic who had lost his faith (Kunze 13, Palumbo 64). It is noteworthy to point out that, according to the memoir of his college friend Joel Fletcher, Toole and Fletcher were both fond of Flannery O'Connor and Evelyn Waugh (16), two authors who were practicing Catholics and who were able to incorporate a philosophically positive dimension into their

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fiction.<sup>11</sup> This interest in fiction that points to a positive interpretation suggests that Toole did not intend to stop merely with a rejection of earlier worldviews.

One can find evidence for how such a dialectical motion within Confederacy operates by examining the examples of two minor characters, a potential employee, Burma Jones, and a potential employer, Gus Levy. On the one hand, modern consumer culture has alienated Burma Jones: instead of life, Burma is given Life magazine (54), where he sees the products to be consumed in the good life. That culture has also alienated Gus: his wife encourages him to receive therapy so that he can enjoy the profits of his materialistic culture without moral qualms (130, 204). To escape the confinement of his life, Gus longs to sell his father's factory. On the other hand, Ignatius, that representative of Ficinian philosophy, also fails worker and owner in a carnivalesque way. To the black workers he brings the threat of jail, and to the factory owner he brings the threat of bankruptcy.

The comic resolution to the novel comes about because the minor characters actively resist their fates, rejecting Ficino's so-called best strategy. Burma helps in the arrest of Lana Lee, and Gus chooses to accept a false confession that saves his business. At the moment of Gus's

decision, he has an epiphany in which he sees that Ignatius has saved him from his domineering wife and has inspired him to embrace his business. At that moment, Gus watches “a freighter from Monrovia depart with a dockful of International Harvester tractors” (322). Just as Levy’s factory will now offer blacks, including Burma, more meaningful employment in New Orleans, American machinery will help blacks in Liberia strive toward human dignity.<sup>12</sup> Earlier in the novel, Mrs. Levy for her own selfish reasons had urged Gus not to sell his business and abandon his heritage (204, 238), and, through the slapstick crisis caused by Ignatius, he has embraced that heritage. The end of the novel resolves comically: Burma Jones, the alienated worker, has taken positive action in the world and successfully resisted his fate, and Gus Levy, the alienated owner of the means of production, has resolved to finally attend to his business and the workers it employs. Ignatius, acting as a saturnalian Lord of Misrule, has upended the social relationships that were trapping Burma and Gus.

The intellectual discourse of the novel, for its part, resolves into a synthesis: the corruption and alienation of the consumer culture and its philosophical humanism are at least temporarily defeated by its antithesis, a carnivalesque version of Ficino’s Renaissance philosophy. That farcical version of an older humanism is in turn made a scapegoat and expelled from the community, but not before it has changed the relationships of the characters in the novel toward one another. Like Ignatius’s comical cross dedicated to “God and commerce” (98), this renewed society is a synthesis of the two strains of humanism.

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## NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> Not too surprisingly, Ficino himself was born astrologically under the sign of Saturn.

<sup>3</sup> In Ficino's original Latin, the statement is, "Saturnus non facile communem significat humani generis qualitatem atque sortem, sed hominem ab aliis segregatum, divinum aut brutum, ..." (Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl 253).

<sup>4</sup> Robert Byrne claimed that the phrase "his theology and geometry are all wrong" was his, and that he took it from H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu (Palumbo 65). Even if that is a proximate source, Toole could have adapted it to a saturnine purpose.

<sup>5</sup> The myth pattern of the planetary god Saturn also resonates with Confederacy's use of Carnival. Two popular accounts of the history of New Orleans Carnival published during Toole's youth referenced Frazer's Golden Bough and stated that Carnival began in the festivals of Saturnalia, which featured a scapegoat Lord of Misrule (Tallant 85, di Palma 14). I first reported this in an earlier study (Leighton 30n16).

<sup>6</sup> Burlesque here means parody with ridicule (Hutcheon 32). The formal act of parody may also be part of Confederacy's critical commentary on the concept of genius, especially genius as understood by the Romantic poets, with whom Toole was quite familiar (Leighton 16).

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“Parody’s overt turning to other art forms implicitly contests Romantic singularity and thereby forces a reassessment of the process of textual production” (Hutcheon 5).

<sup>7</sup> Another author who reacted negatively to the Modernist Paradigm of philosophical humanism was Flannery O’Connor. Brad Gooch’s biography of O’Connor describes her confrontation over the issue with a college professor (113-114). Toole in turn was enthusiastic about O’Connor’s fiction and was said to have planned to write his Ph.D. thesis on her work (Coburn).

<sup>8</sup> Another possible influence on Toole as he created Ignatius’s worldview and tone could be Mortimer J. Adler. Adler wrote a strident essay entitled “God and the Professors,” which argued that one had to accept all of the propositions of his (rather anti-modern) philosophical position or one was a positivist whose ideas led straight to Hitler. His essay was reprinted in an essay collection entitled Pragmatism and American Culture, edited by Gail Kennedy, a book that was listed among Toole’s books at the time of his death by the antiquarian book dealer Rhoda Faust, who had created a bibliography of his library in preparation for its sale which is now located in the John Kennedy Toole Papers.

<sup>9</sup> Kristeller specifically identifies Ficino’s internal experience with Kierkegaard’s concept of existence (PMF 205). Earlier critics have seen in Toole’s novel a repetition of Kierkegaard and Walker Percy’s use of Kierkegaard within the novel Moviegoer (Simon). Just as Toole’s road to Boethius passes through Chaucer (Leighton 31-34), Toole’s road to Kierkegaard seems to pass through Kristeller and Ficino.

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<sup>10</sup> Many other parallels between PMF and Confederacy exist, but these do not contribute toward an altered interpretation of Confederacy, so they will only be briefly mentioned. First, in PMF, Kristeller wrote, “[Ficino] compares the Soul which obeys the desires of the body to the indulgent mother of a spoiled child” (93). This metaphor neatly explicates and links together Confederacy’s theme of Ignatius as a beastly glutton and its well-discussed theme of Ignatius having been spoiled by his mother (Williams 188; Gardner 88; Gatewood 17). Second, in PMF, Ficino explicitly states that the young cannot achieve a contemplative life because bodily growth distracts the soul from contemplation (366). In Confederacy, Ignatius’s body keeps growing larger (200, 233). In both these instances, the Ficinian gloss shows that Ignatius’s soul has failed to transcend his body. Third, in PMF Ficino claims that leading a worldly life causes spiritual misery and that the most miserable persons are those who are unaware that they are miserable (211). In Confederacy, Ignatius insists that his mother is miserable, even though she insists that she is not. “Ignatius, I ain’t miserable. If I was, I’d tell you” (52). Fourth, both Kristeller’s Ficino and Toole’s Ignatius have to deal with accusations of homosexuality and gender ambiguity. As Kristeller explained in PMF, Ficino originated the concept of Platonic Love (285), and to demonstrate his love for other men, Ficino filled his correspondence with passionate imagery that was subsequently interpreted as homoerotic. As a consequence, Kristeller felt it necessary to state explicitly that Ficino was not a homosexual (282). As for Ignatius, he is regularly questioned about his gender. In the opening pages of Confederacy, Patrolman Mancuso defends his attempted arrest of Ignatius because he looked like “a great big pervert” (14). Myna worries about his becoming homosexual (69), Lana Lee tells him he looks like a queer (252), and Dorian assumes that he is a cross-dresser, “Like Bette Davis with indigestion” (212). The critic Tison Pugh has said that this queerness is a defining characteristic of Ignatius (87). Lastly, Ficino saw

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his own translation of Plato and Ficino's Neoplatonism as a rebirth of classical philosophy and a rebirth of the soul (PMF 22). Within Confederacy, one of the most discussed themes is that of the womb and both Ignatius's and Gus's rebirth (Gardner 88; Lambert 17; Britton 20; Pugh 93; Miller 33; Beste 53). However one interprets the wombs and births within Confederacy, they are clearly not the sort of rebirth Ficino had in mind; rather, they are forcing Ignatius and Gus out of isolation into engagement with the outside world.

<sup>11</sup> Beyond Fletcher's claims, further evidence survives to support Toole's interest in these writers. In addition to the above mentioned report that Toole had planned to write his dissertation on O'Connor, Toole visited Andalusia, O'Connor's home, on the trip that he took before he committed suicide. For evidence of his interest in Waugh, according to Rhoda Faust's bibliography, the condition of many of his books was "fair," while the condition of his paperback copy of Brideshead Revisited was "very poor, pages darkening and falling out" (Faust).

<sup>12</sup> The image of International Harvester tractors can be seen also as a reference to a positive attribute of the planetary Saturn, who was associated with "die Werke ... des Pflüges" 'the fruits of the plow' (Panofsky and Saxl 5). Saturn was seen by Roman legend as an early king who brought agriculture and a Golden Age to Italy (Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl 134); hence, his association with tillage.

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