

***A Confederacy of Dunces:* Ignatius Reilly's Sensory Universe**

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What is there about Ignatius Reilly – the protagonist of John Kennedy Toole's novel, *A Confederacy of Dunces* – that makes him such an unforgettable character? This study aims to analyse a series of sensory nuclei around which Ignatius's eccentric personality becomes manifest. The sensations and perceptions of the character and the ones elicited by him in others represent a good pretext for Ignatius to express his critical attitude towards a vitiated society characterized by mediocrity, hypocrisy and shallowness. By means of the analysis of these sensory nuclei this study aims to better understand the fascination Ignatius Reilly exerts on his readers.

Keywords: *John Kennedy Toole; sensory nuclei; eccentric personality.*

There are characters, such as Ignatius Reilly – the protagonist of John Kennedy Toole's novel, *A Confederacy of Dunces* – who last in the reader's memory due to the force of their personality, of their life-story structure, but also due to the sensory salience their external image gives off.

In his forward to the novel, Walker Percy succeeds in capturing these two facets of the *reillyesque* universe, one appealing to the reader's framework of ideas, beliefs, conceptions of the world, and the other one to the reader's physical sensations and perceptions:

Here at any rate is Ignatius Reilly, without progenitor in any literature I know of – slob extraordinary, a mad Oliver Hardy, a fat Don Quixote, a perverse Thomas Aquinas rolled into one – who is in violent revolt against the entire modern age, lying in his flannel nightshirt, in a back bedroom on Constantinople Street in New Orleans, who between gigantic seizures of flatulence and eructations is filling dozen of Big Chief tablets with in-rective. (2011: vi)

This bipolar reception – cognitive and sensory – to which Toole's novel invites us crystallizes even from the very beginning of the book. Undoubtedly, there is a certain connection between the way a person dresses and his or her inner world, preferences, interests and values, but as concerns Ignatius Reilly, this connection acquires huge proportions. The opening paragraph of the novel presents Ignatius critically analyzing the outfits of the crowd in search “for signs of bad taste. Several outfits, Ignatius noticed, were new enough and expensive enough to be properly considered offences against taste and decency. Possession of anything new or expensive only reflected a person's lack of theology and geometry; it could even cast doubts upon one's soul.” (1)

Thus, the “tension between material and spiritual values” to which McCluskey (2009: 10) refers is achieved by Toole through this opposition between what the eye can see – new and ex-

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pensive outfits – and the invisible realm of the soul.

However, the material strangely meets the spiritual in Ignatius's outfit. While describing the clothes of the protagonist, Toole insists on the functional importance of each of his articles of clothing, eliciting physical sensations in the reader in such a way that when the correlation with Ignatius's inner life is made, a humorous effect is achieved:

Ignatius himself was dressed comfortably and sensibly. The hunting cap prevented head colds. The voluminous tweed trousers were durable and permitted unusually free locomotion. Their pleats and nooks contained pockets of warm, stale air that soothed Ignatius. The plaid flannel shirt made a jacket unnecessary while the muffler guarded exposed Reilly skin between earflap and collar. The outfit was acceptable by any theological and geometrical standards, however abstruse, and suggested a rich inner life. (1)

It goes without saying that physical descriptions of characters are a common literary technique. However, there are characters whose physical image is so powerful that it acquires a special place in the unfolding of the events and in the reader's mind.

Thus, in the opening paragraph of the novel, when painting Ignatius's portrait, Toole chooses to use green for the character's cap. Green is the second word of the novel and it somehow dominates the initial description achieved by Toole: "A green hunting cap squeezed the top of the fleshy balloon of a head. 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 once." (1)

Trying to demonstrate that colours may have different functions in human memory, Kuhbandner and Pekrun (2013: 375) show, in a psychological study, that green might enhance memory for positive information. Indeed, despite Ignatius's grotesque appearance, laziness, aggression, hauteur, social maladjustment, vocation for getting into trouble and driving his mother to despair, the reader tends to grow fond of him. This is not to say, of course, that such an emotional reaction of the reader is caused by Ignatius's green cap. However, green has its specific function in the opening paragraph of the novel. It makes the image of the character more likeable and it makes it last in the reader's memory. No reader could ever imagine an Ignatius Reilly with a red cap.

Proceeding with the physical description of his character, Toole, once more, combines unexpectedly commonplace sensory details with allusions to Ignatius's inner world: "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) The effect achieved by means of such a semantic juxtaposition is complex.

On the one hand, it has a significant humorous valence. Disapproving is an intellectual attitude which requires seriousness and a highly critical thinking. Under no circumstances can such an attitude afford being contaminated by the sound of crunchy chips or by their rancid smell. Humour occurs precisely because of this incongruity, because the reader holds two contradictory ideas in his or her mind at the same time: disapproval and chips. With regard to this theoretical framework of humour and from a psychological perspective, Rod (2007: 63) points out that "Indeed, it is this simultaneous activation of two contradictory perceptions that is the essence of humour."

On the other hand, the juxtaposition of sensory elements and abstract concepts in Ignatius's physical portrait mirrors his personality and his existential tribulations. Much as he may endeavour to rise above a mass consumption society, shallow and degraded, Ignatius ends up being swallowed by the temptations of his physical environment to such an extent that he could be "accused" of incurable sloth and gluttony. In her conversation with a saleslady, Ignatius's mother complains: "My boy's floating around in our tub all day long. I can't hardly get in my own bathroom no more. (...) Look, you wanna gimme half a dozen wine cakes, too? Ignatius gets nasty if we run outta cake." (4) Later on in the novel, when Ignatius eventually manages to get a job, Toole eloquently depicts the protagonist's sloth:

Behind the bathroom door Ignatius was lying passively in the tepid water pushing the plastic soap dish back and forth across the surface with one finger and listening now and then to his mother on the telephone. Occasionally he held the soap dish down until it filled with water and sank. Then he would feel for it on the bottom of the tub, empty it, and sail it again. His blue and yellow eyes rested on an unopened manila envelope on the top of the toilet. For quite a while Ignatius had been trying to decide whether or not he would open the envelope. The trauma of having found employment had affected his value negatively, and he was waiting until the warm water in which he wallowed like a pink hippopotamus had a calming effect upon his system. Then he would attack the envelope. (176-177)

A pink hippopotamus, addicted to cakes and long baths. Through such unexpected brush-strokes Toole succeeds in appealing to the reader's senses, turning Ignatius into one of the most memorable characters of American literature.

There are also other visual and auditory nuclei in which Ignatius's individuality is concentrated so that the novel seems to be impregnated with his presence. It seems that Ignatius's maladjustment in a vitiated society is reflected in the functioning of his body. His proverbial pyloric valve closing periodically throughout the novel and causing him great discomfort alludes to the sound made by the gases in one's stomach and this vocal physiological revolt may be considered a counterpart of Ignatius's indignation towards various ills of his social environment:

'Oh, my valve! It's closing!' Ignatius groaned loudly. 'Are you happy now that you have ruined me for the rest of the evening?' (...) 'What are you doing? Are you fooling with that valve again? Nobody else got him a valve but you. I ain't got no valve.'

'Everyone has a valve!' Ignatius screamed. 'Mine is simply more developed. I am trying to open a passage which you have succeeded in blocking. It may be permanently closed now for all I know.' (47-49)

Social note: I have sought escape in the Prytania on more than one occasion, pulled by the attractions of some technicolored horrors, filmed abortions that were offenses against any criteria of taste and decency, reels and reels of perversion and blasphemy that stunned my disbelieving eyes, that shocked my virginal mind, and sealed my valve. (101)

In fact, what saves Ignatius from being just a risible thirty years old man, lazy, gluttonous and unemployed is his apparently coherent conception of the corrupt society in which he is forced to live. Ignatius is trying to depict this conception by means of a diatribe against modern society. The virulence of this diatribe he is writing in bed acquires comical nuances, even grotesque, and therefore, all the more sad:

'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. (...) Looking at the dozens of Big Chief tablets that made a rug of Indian beaddresses around the bed, Ignatius thought smugly that on their yellowed pages and wide-ruled lines were the seeds of a magnificent study in comparative history. Very disordered, of course. But one day he would assume the task of editing these fragments of his mentality into a jigsaw puzzle of a very grand design; the completed puzzle would show literate men the disaster course that history had been taking for the past four centuries. (29)

And yet, Ignatius's fight against a sick society is a lost cause. He cannot change the system unless he is inserted in it and this is precisely what the protagonist refuses to do, although his mother presses him to get a job. He rejects being part of a system which tends to homogenize interpersonal differences, suffocating critical thinking, originality and creativity. Since Ignatius cannot find an adequate context in which to express his own aesthetic conception of the world, he resorts to innocuous situations in order to shoot his aesthetic arrows. This is what happened to him during his two-week job in the New Orleans Public Library:

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'Employers sense in me a denial of their values.' He rolled over onto his back. 'They fear me. I suspect that they can see that I am forced to function in a century which I loathe. That was true even when I worked for the New Orleans Public Library.' 'All you did was paste them little slips in the books.' 'Yes, but I had my own esthetic about pasting those slips. On some days I could only paste in three or four slips and at the same time feel satisfied with the quality of my work. The library authorities resented my integrity about the whole thing. They only wanted another animal who could slop glue on their best sellers.' (51)

Indeed, Ignatius seems to perceive the world in colours invisible to others, but what the others can see in terms of colours when it comes to the protagonist's person is, sometimes, a doubtful yellow. Yellow accompanies the first clue the author provides with regard to Ignatius's prolonged and unnatural dependence on his mother: "Inside D. H. Holmes, Mrs Reilly was in the bakery department pressing her maternal breast against a glass case of macaroons. With one of her fingers, chafed from many years of scrubbing her son's mammoth, yellowed drawers, she tapped on the glass case to attract the saleslady." (4)

Moreover, a yellowed sheet and not a grandiose banner is what the workers from Levy Pants see when Ignatius, recently employed here, is leading his "Crusade for Moorish Dignity" (139) in order to improve their working conditions:

'Friends!' Ignatius said grandly and lifted the arm that was not holding the sheet. 'At last the day is ours.' (...) 'Now this we will carry with us in the vanguard!' Ignatius shouted over the last sprinkled applause. He dramatically whipped from his pelvis the sheet, flapping it open. Among the yellow stains the word FORWARD was printed in high block letters in red crayon. Below this Crusade for Moorish Dignity was written in an intricate blue script. (138-139)

The riot organized by Ignatius has a grotesque dimension and it seems the yellowed sheet which was supposed to pass for a banner weakened the workers' trust in Ignatius: "I wonder who been sleeping on that old thing", the intense woman with the spiritual bent, who was to be the leader of the choir, said. 'Lord!'" (139)

When one of the crusaders confronts the protagonist with reality pointing out the inadequate image of the sheet which could hardly pass for a banner, Ignatius, obstructed in his position as a leader and in his fabricated mission, begins to deliver an enthusiast speech embellished with elevated words through which he is trying to give weight to the riot and thus convince the workers – devoid of imagination from his point of view – of a reality which in fact does not exist:

'How come we gotta take that old sheet with us?' someone asked. 'I thought this suppose to be a demonstration dealin with wages.' 'Sheet? What sheet!' Ignatius replied. 'I am holding before you the proudest of banners, an identification of our purpose, a visualization of all that we seek.' The workers studied the stains more intensely. 'If you wish to simply rush into the office like cattle, you will have participated in nothing more than a riot. This banner alone gives form and credence to the agitation. There is a certain geometry involved in these things, a certain ritual which must be observed' (139)

Thus, because of the yellowed sheet the "Crusade for Moorish Dignity" failed and so did Ignatius's first job. His second job at Paradise Vendors, Incorporated, as a hot dog street vendor, is preceded by Ignatius's experiencing an intense moment of olfactory pleasure produced by boiling hot dogs:

Among the afternoon pedestrians who hurried past Paradise Vendors, Incorporated, one formidable figure waddled slowly along. It was Ignatius. Stopping before the narrow garage, he sniffed the fumes from Paradise with great sensory pleasure, the protruding hairs in his nostrils analyzing, cataloging, categorizing, and classifying the distinct odors of hot dog, mustard, and lubricant. Breathing deeply, he wondered whether he also detected the more delicate odor, the fragile scent of hot dog buns. (154)

Here we see Ignatius acting as a genuine gourmand although some commonplace hot dogs would hardly call for such skills which the protagonist does not hesitate to extol in his conversation with the owner of Paradise Vendors: “I thought that the vibrissae about my nostrils detected something unique while I was outside.” (155) Actually, this proclivity towards exaggeration seems to be a constant of Ignatius’s personality, a way of coping with the platitudes of his daily life. He endorses the same attitude while reacting to the whistling of the owner of Paradise Vendors. It seems that, as far as Ignatius is concerned, some simple harmless sounds can stand for a perfectly reasonable pretext to start reviling against the degradation of the society:

Ignatius chewed with a blissful savagery, studying the scar on the man’s nose and listening to his whistling.

‘Do I hear a strain from Scarlatti?’ Ignatius asked finally.

‘I thought I was whistling Turkey in the Straw.’

‘I had hoped that you might be familiar with Scarlatti’s work. He was the last of the musicians,’ Ignatius observed and resumed his furious attack upon the long hot dog. ‘With your apparent musical bent, you might apply yourself to something worthwhile.’

Ignatius chewed while the man began his tuneless whistling again. Then he said, ‘I suspect that you imagine ‘Turkey in the Straw’ to be a valuable bit of Americana. Well, it is not. It is a discordant abomination’ (155)

It is obvious that the mental universe of the protagonist does not fit the objective world in which he lives. This incongruity is even sadder since Ignatius, without a proper professional status, does not have a socially valid opportunity to express his ideas and indignation towards a society eroded by hypocrisy, bad taste and shallowness. This is the reason why Ignatius cavils at insignificantly blamable realities that he can see, hear and smell in the street or in his immediate vicinity. Nevertheless, when such sensory realities concern his own person, however blameworthy they might be, Ignatius’s attitude changes. When it comes to him, everything has a profound justification. For example, when his mother complains about the fetid smell in his room, Ignatius ventures in intellectual digressions:

“And all the shutters closed. Ignatius! It’s still light outside.”

“My being is not without its Proustian elements,” Ignatius said from the bed, to which he had quickly returned. (...)

“It smells terrible in here.”

“Well, what do you expect? The human body, when confined, produces certain odors which we tend to forget in this age of deodorants and other perversions. Actually, I find the atmosphere of this room rather comforting. Schiller needed the scent of apples rotting in his desk in order to write. I, too, have my needs”. (47)

Similarly, when their neighbour Miss Annie complains about the annoying sound of Ignatius’s lute, the protagonist becomes very categorical as concerns his musical aptitude: “It’s poor Miss Annie next door. This morning she took a little fainting spell in the alley. Nerves, babe. She says you woke her up this morning playing on your banjo.’ ‘That is a lute, not a banjo,’ Ignatius thundered. ‘Does she think I’m one of these perverse Mark Twain characters?’” (77).

In a hostile world unable to absorb his eccentricity, there is one single person willing to take the risk of saving him from being taken to the Charity Hospital: Myrna Minkoff, his ex-girlfriend. If the novel begins with a visual image, it closes with a tactile one: “He stared gratefully at the back of Myrna’s head, at the pigtail that swung innocently at his knee. Gratefully. How ironic, Ignatius thought. Taking the pigtail in one of his paws, he pressed it warmly to his wet moustache” (396-397).

Perhaps endeavouring to denounce the ills of a corrupt society will get one nowhere. Perhaps trying to affirm one’s individuality, creativity and originality is useless. Perhaps there will always be a confederacy of dunces to clamour you down. Perhaps the essence of life is the irony sensed

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by Ignatius: a sweetheart's pigtail on a man's wet moustache.

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