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 The Journal of Mind and Behavior  
 Summer and Autumn 2013, Volume 34, Numbers 3 and 4  
 Pages 285–298  
 ISSN 0271–0137

**Butterfly in the Typewriter: The Tragic Life of John Kennedy Toole and the Remarkable Story of *A Confederacy of Dunces*.** Cory MacLauchlin. Boston and New York: Da Capo Press, 2012, 319 pages, \$26.00 hardcover.

*Reviewed by Leslie Marsh, University of British Columbia*

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The book is not autobiography; neither is it altogether invention. While the plot is manipulation and juxtaposition of characters, with one or two exceptions the people and places in the book are drawn from observation and experience. I am not in the book; I've never pretended to be. But I am writing about things that I know, and in recounting these, it's difficult not to feel them.

No doubt this is why there's so much of [Ignatius] and why his verbosity becomes tiring. It's really not his verbosity but mine. And the book, begun one Sunday afternoon, became a way of life. With Ignatius as an agent, my New Orleans experiences began to fit in, one after the other, and then I was simply observing and not inventing . . . .

John Kennedy Toole [pp. 178–179]<sup>1</sup>

Where does the boundary between the protagonist George Arthur Rose (*Hadrian the Seventh*, 1904) and his creator Frederick Rolfe (a.k.a. Baron Corvo) lie? The same question can be asked of a handful of other twentieth-century literary titans, including Franz Kafka, Robert Musil, and Yukio Mishima. Joseph K. has been taken to be Kafka's alter ego in *Der Prozess* (*The Trial*, 1925), as has Ulrich in Musil's *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (*The Man Without Qualities*, 1930–1942), and Kochan for Mishima in *Kamen no Kokuhaku* (*Confessions of a Mask*, 1949). To this very select group one

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The discussion here has benefited from the generous comments made by Cory MacLauchlin, Aaron Mishara, Jane Bethune and especially Corey Abel and, as ever, David Hardwick, my University of British Columbia colleague. Last, but by no means least, Raymond Russ the editor of *The Journal of Mind and Behavior*, who so meticulously engaged with me over the course of nine months on both substantive and stylist aspects. The usual disclaimers apply. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Leslie Marsh, Office of the Special Advisor for Planning, Dean's Office, Medical School, University of British Columbia, 317–2194 Health Sciences Mall, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada V6T 1Z3. Email: leslie.marsh@ubc.ca

<sup>1</sup>All page numbers that appear in brackets refer to MacLauchlin, 2012.

must add John Kennedy Toole and his creation Ignatius Reilly in *A Confederacy of Dunces* (1981).<sup>2</sup>

One cannot help but feel that one is communing directly with Toole when Ignatius opens up his feverish letters with “Dear Reader,” a style of writing that displays a conceptual precision and biting observation that is more plausibly Toole than the whimsy of Ignatius. This autoscopic<sup>3</sup> phenomenon had particularly deep implications for Toole, clearly exacerbated by a prevailing cultural antipathy to an autotelic<sup>4</sup> conception of aesthetic experience. This Gordian knot of the autoscopic and the autotelic presents a philosophical minefield for any would-be biographer.

With this in mind, Cory MacLauchlin’s new biography judiciously and deftly fills the lacuna between the low-grade psychological speculation that marred an earlier biographical work (René Pol Nevel and Deborah George Hardy’s *Ignatius Rising*, 2001)<sup>5</sup> and the unabashedly affectionate but still informed memoir by Joel Fletcher entitled *Ken and Thelma: The Story of A Confederacy of Dunces* (2005). The former, an exercise in “farthing” journalism, shamelessly rides on the coattails of *Confederacy*. The latter was issued as a promissory note, awaiting someone with the right motivation and finesse to come along: MacLauchlin’s book fulfils this promise.

The discussion that follows is very much in keeping with MacLauchlin’s own methodological stance, sidestepping the hackneyed trope of the troubled artist: “I neither aimed to diagnose him, nor cast him in the mold of the tortured artist” [pp. xiv, 216]. The body of discussion falls broadly into two sections. In the next section I discuss the notion of autoscopia as it relates to literature, discussing the “blurred” sense of self between the author and his creation. The section that follows focuses on the notion of autotelic art, the idea that art should *not* answer to any extrinsic considerations, political, economic, or scientific. This scaffolds the publishing backstory to *Confederacy* and the role of the didactically inclined editor — Robert Gottlieb — the then head (1957) of Simon and Schuster. The closing section offers a few concluding remarks.

### *The Autoscopic Author*

A small but growing empirically orientated academic literature on autoscopic phenomena exists (Aglioti and Candidi, 2011; Anzellotti, Onofri, Maruotti, Ricciardi, Franciotti, Bonanni, Thomas, and Onofri, 2011; Dieguez, 2013; Garry, 2012; Occhionero and Cicogna, 2011; Sacks, 2012; Sforza and Blanke, 2012). It is a phenomenon that has implications not only for clinical psychology but also for philosophers of mind and identity theorists (Mishara, 2009).

<sup>2</sup>All references refer to the 1981 UK edition, first published in the United States by Louisiana State University Press in 1980.

<sup>3</sup>“Autoscopic”: from the Greek *autos* (self) and *skopeo* (looking at). A dream-like apprehension of a duplicate self. Other literary names that are invoked in connection with autoscopic phenomena include Dostoevsky, Goethe, Hoffmann, de Maupast, de Musset, Nabokov, Poe, Richter, Shelley, and Stevenson (Mishara, 2010b; Sforza and Blanke, 2012).

<sup>4</sup>“Autotelic”: Greek *autos* (self) and *telos* (end). A self-complete artifact that doesn’t depend on any extrinsic considerations.

<sup>5</sup>As MacLauchlin summarizes it: “[T]hey also depict Toole as a man suffering from an Oedipal complex, suppressed homosexuality, alcoholism, madness, and an appetite for promiscuity” [pp. xiii–xiv, 214–216]. But even a clinical psychologist such as Mishara resists the idea of diagnosing Kafka’s supposed schizophrenia on the basis of his literary work (Mishara, 2010a, p. 24).

That Toole's family had a history of mental disorder is beyond doubt: Toole's father exhibited severe bouts of ever-deepening paranoia, his great uncle committed suicide before Toole was born and his uncle George on his mother's side, was deemed to be profoundly mentally ill [pp. 28–29, 75, 189–199, 205–206, 222–223]. Of course, this alone didn't necessitate Toole's eventual mental decline but it certainly suggests that he was predisposed, a disposition that must surely have been activated by the protracted dealings with Robert Gottlieb.<sup>6</sup> As already indicated the discussion that follows is not an assessment or diagnosis of Toole's descent into mental illness per se but in his total psychological (autoscopic) investment or immersion in his work, a phenomenon that is not necessarily indicative of any mental illness.<sup>7</sup> It behooves one to explain in what sense we will be discussing autoscopic phenomena, a notion that has profound implications for philosophical conceptions of the self.<sup>8</sup>

A leading autoscopic theorist is Aaron Mishara: Mishara will be my primary guide on the grounds that: (a) he not only happens to have a deep interest in autoscopic phenomena in a literary context, most notably in the work of Franz Kafka (Mishara, 2010a); (b) Mishara also understands that the phenomenon can only really be approached from a phenomenological perspective and; (c) he retains a contextual awareness of the differing levels of description that any discussion of the self involves. In a nutshell, Mishara's project takes literature as a document and as a record of "cognitive and neural processes of self with an intimacy that is otherwise unavailable to neuroscience" (Mishara, 2010a, p. 3). The discussion on offer here is suggestive, it is a first pass for a larger project, and in no way approximates Mishara's close-grained study of Kafka.<sup>9</sup>

In very generic terms, autoscopia connotes a cluster of experiences whereby a "double," external to one's perceptual (visual or somatosensory) apparatus, is discernable. Medically speaking, the etiologies of autoscopic phenomena are many and not necessarily related: the range includes epilepsy, brain tumors, labyrinthine vertigo, schizophrenia, depression, drug intoxication, trauma-related dissociative experiences, the hypnagogic/hypnopompic hallucinations associated with sleep paralysis, and in individuals with high fantasy proneness (Mishara, 2010b, p. 592). Mishara proposes a fourfold idealized taxonomy, of course more holistic as a phenomenological experience (Mishara, 2007, 2010b, pp. 593–606).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>"He had suffered a nervous breakdown in the offices of Simon and Schuster" [p. 177].

<sup>7</sup>"The lifetime prevalence of autoscopic phenomena is approximately 10 per cent. The phenomena are not necessarily pathological and can occur in the healthy population, for example when drifting into or out of sleep. However, the phenomenon can also be a manifestation of a neurological or psychiatric disorder" (Garry, 2012, p. 17). Furthermore, "Irrespective of aetiology, the clinician must be mindful that autoscopic phenomena are associated with an increased risk of suicide" (Garry, 2012, p. 21).

<sup>8</sup>Phelan (2003, p. 132) talks of a multileveled rhetorical doubling in Nabokov's *Lolita* involving author and audience on the one hand and narrator and audience on the other hand.

<sup>9</sup>Mishara brings a fascinating fact to our attention. He writes: "Kafka was familiar with the phenomenological movement or at least some of its principles. Nevertheless, he was skeptical about any effort to observe and put subjective experience into words: 'There is no such thing as observation of the inner world, as there is of the outer world . . . . The inner world can only be experienced, not described'" (Mishara, 2010a, p. 13).

<sup>10</sup>From the first-person point of view (i.e., phenomenology) the structure of consciousness is experienced as a holistic experience, whatever the modular architecture of the mind that may be posited.

- (1) Type I: Visual hallucinatory autoscopy
  - I is mirrored by a me (body or self as object)
- (2) Type II: Delusional (dream-like) autoscopy (usually called heautoscopy)
  - I becomes a me, i.e., the mirror image (ironically) of the other I who usurps the feeling of being a self
- (3) Out of body experience
  - The I separates from the physical body and views it from an elevated position: I (body as subject) and me (body as object) are experienced as separate
- (4) Feeling of a shadowy presence
  - Another I is sensed but not seen

Based upon MacLauchlin's excellent reconstruction of Toole's writing process (and shadowed by some excerpts from *Confederacy*), Toole falls more or less into Type II. Type II autoscopic "doubles" are accessible to all perceptual modalities. I put the term "double" in scare quotes because it gives the impression of a mirror-like exactitude. It should be noted that the double need not resemble the subject's outward appearance — the sartorially dapper Toole [p. 167] is very much at the opposite end of the spectrum to his alter ego Ignatius Reilly's gait and presentation.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, age and gender are not material to the double. What of course matters is that the double's personality and worldview are more or less aligned. In short, autoscopic experience does not depend on *the phenomenological characteristics of the spectre but on how the subject constitutes the experience* (Mishara, 2010b, p. 597, emphasis in original). This form of autoscopic experience has more in common with a dreamlike state, feeding off the actual state of consciousness of the ontologically real persona.

Three aspects of Kafka's writing *modus operandi* as presented by Mishara strongly resonate with Toole's:

1. Kafka deliberately scheduled his writing during the night in a sleep-deprived state; deprivation may serve as a non-drug "psychotomimetic" model.
  - a. Toole: "and now it had unleashed with consuming urgency . . . could hear the clacking of the typewriter at all hours of the day and night . . ." [p. 151].
  - b. Toole: "Writing feverishly, I have completed three chapters . . ." [p. 152].
  - c. Toole: "The 'creative writing' to which I turned about three months ago in an attempt to seek some perspective upon the situation has turned out to have been more than simple psychic therapy" [p. 155].
  - d. Toole: "Russy noticed that there was a 'remoteness' about him . . . for a moment she thought he might be depressed. What she previously identified as depression, she now recognized as an astoundingly deep immersion in his manuscript. She noticed that Toole acted as if his mind was split between reality

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<sup>11</sup>Bobby Byrne (a teaching colleague of Toole's) and Maurice Duquesne, a professor of English at the University of Southwestern Louisiana, were both credible candidates for aspects of Ignatius to have been based upon [pp. 10, 48, 151, 166, 173]. In much the same way, there is the temptation to definitively pry apart the Wittgenstein–Oakeshott amalgam that supposedly inspired the character Hugo Belfounder in Iris Murdoch's picaresque novel *Under the Net* (1954).

and his book, not as if he couldn't distinguish between the two, but because he had poured his soul into the novel. "The center of his existence had become his book," she observed. "When he walked on campus, he looked straight forward, not making eye contact, and every once in a while he would kind of chuckle to himself as if something just struck him as absurd" [pp. 168–169].

2. Kafka is avoidant of unnecessary stimulation; the avoidance or withdrawal from photic and social stimulation; for Kafka, a prerequisite for the self-induction of hypnagogic-like trances.
  - a. Toole: "It is rolling along smoothly and is giving me a maximum of detachment and release from a routine which had long ago become a somewhat stale second nature" [p. 152].
  - b. Toole: "In the unreality of my Puerto Rican experience, this book became more real to me than what was happening around me; I was beginning to talk and act like Ignatius" [p. 155].
  - c. Thelma "noticed something different about him. He seemed quieter, as if completely absorbed by his book" [p. 165].
  - d. "While Toole's writing had provided him relief, it also caused him to retreat . . . he became further detached from everything and everybody" [p. 156].
3. Kafka marveled at the automaticity of his own writing.
  - a. Toole: "I am writing with great regularity. It seems to be the only thing that keeps my mind occupied; I have never found writing to be so relaxing or so tranquilizing . . ." [p. 152].
  - b. "The language started to pour out. Pent up energies of a decade flowed, filling page after page . . ." [pp. 2, 182].

In Kafka's work, the writer's self is doubled in the protagonist in different ways. The narrator's and protagonist's perspectives collapse into one another; the protagonist stands in for the author as a double, but takes on a life of his own (Mishara, 2010a, p. 28). Again, consider Toole and others' thoughts on the matter:

- c. Toole: "Whenever I attempt to talk in connection with *Confederacy of Dunces* I become anxious and inarticulate. I feel very paternal about the book; the feeling is actually androgynous because I feel as if I gave birth to it" [pp. 177, 219].
- d. MacLaughlin: "In a twist of roles, Toole, who had spent so much time observing people around him, had placed himself into his character he created to re-envision his world" [p. 179].
- e. Toole: ". . . but since something like 50 percent of my soul is in the thing" [p. 180].
- f. "And at times he could take on that supercilious tone so evident in Ignatius Reilly" [pp. 167, 154–155].
- g. "Seemingly at a loss as to how to edit his novel without destroying it, unable to spill the blood of his creation, his master plan now lay unraveled in his hands" [p. 187].
- h. "He was not egotistical, but it was something deeper. He believed in the exceptionalism of the book, but he had anxiety about it. It had very much to do with his identity and profound sense of self. It seemed he had given himself over to his creation, as if the actual people surrounding him were shadows

and the truth lie in the pages that he continued to edit. It was not a task to display his literary prowess. He had created something far more alive than an academic argument" [p. 169].

- i. "In 1980 in the *Bloomsbury Review*, Michael O'Connell merges the author and protagonist into a single entity, claiming, "Toole-Ignatius despises living in the world, inveighs and scolds; Ignatius in his Big Chief diary and Toole in his fiction'" [p. 234].

Artistically speaking, autoscopic phenomenon is not confined to the literary realm. In much the same way as Toole became so closely identified with Ignatius, so too did David Bowie with his fictional rock star Ziggy Stardust. The best example from the realm of cinema is that of Klaus Kinski with his deep association with a screen character (*Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes* among others), further complicated by Kinski being Werner Herzog's alter ego, starkly set out in the documentary *My Best Fiend* (see Atkinson, 2006, p. 16).<sup>12</sup>

#### *Autotelic Art*

Robert Gottlieb, the then rather young editor at Simon and Schuster who registered appreciation of *Confederacy* but who made such heavy weather of dealing with Toole's manuscript, is the most troublesome part of the tripartite of the major personalities — i.e., John Kennedy, his mother Thelma, and Gottlieb.<sup>13</sup> MacLauchlin's advocacy on behalf of Gottlieb, trying to give a fair and balanced account of his role, is most admirable, but ultimately it doesn't ameliorate Gottlieb's failings. John Fletcher (Toole's chum) makes the point in Sanford's documentary on Toole that in all probability it wasn't Gottlieb's decision alone, but a committee decision to pass on *Confederacy*. There is much to commend this view were it the current state of affairs but I think that it is undermined by Gottlieb's then status. Furthermore, the nature of the correspondence shows him for the most part to be representing himself.<sup>14</sup> Gottlieb's faltering ruminations on *Confederacy* range from the obscure to the banal interspersed with blatant arrogance. Gottlieb's dilly dallying was a function of his calcified urbane smugness. Despite his ostensible sophistication, he was philosophically ill-suited to be arbiter of *both* literary merit and marketability — therein lies the rub. Had he definitively chosen one or other as the imperative rather than make each of these domains somehow conversable or "reconcilable," then Gottlieb would pretty much be absolved of professional ineptitude. Had he not been beset by philosophical confusion he'd have made *qualitative* considerations the *only* imperative. *Confederacy* may have sold in respectable quantities; it might have been a "sleeper"; or it might have fallen, as Hume famously said of his *Treatise*, "dead-born from the press." But

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<sup>12</sup>As Atkinson says "... maybe Kinski knew Herzog well enough to see within his friend dynamics and impulses that matched his own, even if Herzog was able to contain and channel his impulses effectively" (2006, p. 16). Herzog admits as much in the documentary.

<sup>13</sup>I have nothing to add to MacLauchlin's excellent characterization of the familial dissonance that Toole was subject to: "he had mired under the binds of filial duty" [p. 219].

<sup>14</sup>These days, decisions clearly are committee decisions, few (if any) editors or agents having the power that Gottlieb could wield.

unless it *was* on the market there would be *no way* to gauge its commercial possibilities.<sup>15</sup> MacLauchlin comments that “Gottlieb must have become fatigued with the indulgences writers afforded themselves as they operated in a creative pursuit initially outside the marketplace” [p. 180]. Tiresome as *primo uomo* behavior is, Gottlieb mistook Toole’s comportment for self-indulgence; he was uncomfortable with Toole’s existential investment in the work and tacitly found *Confederacy’s* philosophical orientation falling foul of the prevailing progressivism zeitgeist. (Ignatius’ scheme “to save the world are more about legitimizing [his] own place in society, rather than a sincere attempt at social reform” [pp. 200–201].<sup>16</sup> Even if driven purely by marketocratic considerations, Gottlieb should still have *required the book to be published*. Gottlieb’s problem was that he never dispensed with the masquerade of qualitative considerations, “a midwife to the creative process” [p. 170]. No-one, and especially Gottlieb, could have foreseen the number of copies *Catch-22* sold.<sup>17</sup> The veneer of artistic nurturing is as disingenuous as Metro–Goldwyn–Mayer’s motto *ars gratia artis*.

MacLauchlin is well aware of the bind that an editor of Gottlieb’s standing must have felt — that is, negotiating the conflicting teleology of art and commerce [pp. 171, 176, 202, 214, 235]. MacLauchlin provides an eminently fair assessment of Gottlieb’s social role and to an extent sketches Gottlieb the man, but in my view, MacLauchlin is way too magnanimous. MacLauchlin’s magnanimity is, I surmise, informed by the fact that Gottlieb: (a) is still alive and active; (b) has ostensibly cogitated over this story now for most of his life; and (c) has generously not only granted permission to publish portions of his Toole correspondence<sup>18</sup> but entered into correspondence with MacLauchlin, no doubt not an easy psychological place to revisit after some 40 years.

Bereft of any sound artistic or commercial rationale from Gottlieb, Toole himself “confesses that he felt ‘somewhat like a bouncing ball,’ never finding a clear path to gain Gottlieb’s approval” [p. 180].<sup>19</sup> Toole was *never* going to secure that approval: Gottlieb himself was conceptually stuck and ultimately compromised any ethical high ground he might have claimed by resorting to the feeblest of reasons for not getting the book into print. As Michael Oakeshott writes:

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<sup>15</sup>“The sale of my writings may bring some profit” (Toole, 1981, p. 195). “Oh, of course. There are all of my notes and jottings. We must never let them fall into the hands of my mother. She may make a fortune from them. It would be too ironic” (p. 333). “What had once been dedicated to the soul was now dedicated to the sale” (p. 25). “I would like very much to know what the Founding Fathers would say if they could see these children being debauched to further the cause of Clearasil” (p. 37). “Ain’t he writing something?” “Some foolishness nobody never gonna feel like reading” (p. 174).

<sup>16</sup>This liberal doxy must be impaled upon the member of a particularly large stallion” (Toole, 1981, p. 185). This perceived anti-progressivist or, perhaps more accurately, anti-consumerist stance (Leighton, 2012; McCluskey, 2009) has commonalities with a mélange of social satire: Chappism, Dadaism, The Goon Show, Monty Pythonism, Peter Cook, and Wodehousianism.

<sup>17</sup>Heller lost out to Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer* (1961) for the National Book Award. Indeed *Catch-22* never entered the *New York Times* Bestseller List and didn’t become a best seller until it appeared as a paperback (Daugherty, 2011). It was, of course Percy, who championed *Confederacy* and who eventually wrote the forward to the first edition. Irony upon irony.

<sup>18</sup>Unlike Neil and Hardy who did not [p. xiii, 260].

<sup>19</sup>“Gottlieb’s fluctuations between praise and critique drove Toole’s mother wild” [p. 176].

The changes poets are apt to make in their work are not, strictly speaking, “corrections.” That is to say, attempts to improve the “expression” of an already clear mental image; they are attempts to imagine more clearly and to delight more deeply (1991, p. 525, note 24).

This is echoed by noted Toole scholar Jane Bethune:

He [Gottlieb] just said, it needs more work, it needs more work. And as an artist I don't think that Toole was ready to do that. Nor should he have because what he had was a gem, a masterpiece. And he knew it. But the authority figure didn't know it and asked him to do something else with it – which would have destroyed it.<sup>20</sup>

It was of course Gottlieb's prerogative to pass on *Confederacy* and, had he done so, his reputation would have been only slightly dented since all top-tier editors have passed over a work that has gone on to be either a critical or commercial success under the aegis of another editor and publisher. But instead Gottlieb opted for what would be the most inappropriate course of action: that is, suspending *Confederacy* (and Toole) in a slowly suffocating limbo.<sup>21</sup> Gottlieb's attempt to assuage Toole rings hollow: “We can't abandon it or you (I will never abandon Mr. Micawber)”<sup>22</sup> [pp. 174, 242]. Gottlieb in one short comment reveals his arrogance, certainly not tempered by a passive-aggressive “compliment”: “Not that I'm not good at my job, because I am and no one is better; but that I'm just someone, and a great deal less talented than you” [p. 181]. It really is beside the point that “. . . while Gottlieb has long been vilified as the one that ruined Toole, there was no way for him to understand the pressure building inside the Toole home” [p. 186]. Gottlieb's stance is a good example of what Sartre termed as *mauvaise foi* or “bad faith.” Gottlieb's supposedly having “taste and decency” failed Toole as an editor and as a man.

From the perspective of a profoundly injured mother with a provincial sensibility, Gottlieb — the literary establishment's top gatekeeper — was bound to be a convenient focal point of frustration and demonization, even though she herself wanted her son

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<sup>20</sup>Bethune speaking in Joe Sanford's documentary *John Kennedy Toole: The Omega Point*: <http://jktoole.com/johnkennedytoolehome.html>. Oakeshort reminds us of Orbaneja the painter's dictum in *Don Quixote* “whatever it turns out to be” (1991, p. 527). “Thou art right, Sancho,” said Don Quixote, “for this painter is like Orbaneja, a painter there was at Ubeda, who when they asked him what he was painting, used to say, ‘Whatever it may turn out; and if he chanced to paint a cock he would write under it, ‘This is a cock,’ for fear they might think it was a fox. The painter or writer, for it's all the same, who published the history of this new Don Quixote that has come out, must have been one of this sort I think, Sancho, for he painted or wrote ‘whatever it might turn out’ . . . (Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, chapter LXXI). This also brings to mind Magritte's painting “The Two Mysteries” (1966) whereby an image of a pipe and the words “Ceci n'est pas une pipe” on a stretched canvas resting on an easel (referencing an earlier painting by Magritte) together with, as part of the larger canvas that we are contemplating, a significantly larger pipe. I note that Hofstadter (1979, p. 701) and Mishara (2010a, p. 35) also find this painting referentially intriguing.

<sup>21</sup> “. . . I am apparently trapped in a limbo of lost souls. However, the simple fact that they have been resounding failures in our century does give them a certain spiritual quality” (Toole, 1981, p. 195). “My psyche would crumble in that atmosphere” (p. 181).

<sup>22</sup>Gottlieb's condescension is palpable in his self-cast allusion to Dickens' Mrs. Micawber: “I will never abandon Mr. Micawber!” [p. 181].



to capitulate to Gottlieb's editorial demands with the hope that would get the book into print. MacLauchlin is absolutely right to give short shrift to the idea that there was a single direct causal link between Gottlieb's rejection of *Confederacy* and Toole's tragic demise [pp. 213–214, 235, 241–242]. But while Gottlieb rightly should be absolved of being the single sufficient determinate to Toole's demise, it was a demise that in all likelihood was overdetermined: there was more than one antecedent event, any of which would have been a sufficient condition for his early death.

Gottlieb commits an *ignoratio elenchi*, the problem of irrelevance, a notion that Michael Oakeshott had in mind in his defense of art from the debasing tendencies of those who'd make art answerable to politics or commerce. In his essay "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind,"<sup>23</sup> Oakeshott sets out the philosophical confusions, that arbiters and doorkeepers such as Gottlieb (and these days "literary" agents) are prone to (Oakeshott, 1991, pp. 488–541).<sup>24</sup>

First, aesthetic experience is essentially a contemplative attitude of "delight." As such, if art is to maintain its authenticity, it should not be subject to propositional incursions from the scientific, historical or the practical (political or economic).<sup>25</sup>

Second, as an experience of delight it does not involve the bifurcation of first the experience and contemplation thereof, followed by a rendering (expressed, conveyed, mimicked, copied, reproduced, exhibited): there is no undifferentiated poetic imagination, never mere entertainment nor merely the conveyor of wisdom.

This threefold outlook protects the independence and as a consequence the authenticity of the aesthetic, even "radical" imaginings, for if we really did already know the nature of things through other forms of experience, there would be no space at all for the aesthetic vision (Oakeshott, 1991, p. 523). This is what is meant by autotelic art or more familiarly the sloganized *l'art pour l'art*.<sup>26</sup>

With this let us examine the main lines of criticism Gottlieb leveled at *Confederacy*. I deal with them in order. First, the book's length; second, Ignatius; third, the Jewish characters; fourth, the picaresque plotting; and fifth, the lack of meaning.

That the length of the book [p. 174] was even considered an issue, smacks of insincerity, an excuse that has little or no substantive validity to the execution of *Confederacy*. What is the metric? The 1994 edition of *Catch-22*, running to 519 pages, exceeds the length of *Confederacy*.

Regarding the character of Ignatius, Gottlieb writes: "He is not as good as you think he is. There is too much of him" [p. 174]. Where shouldn't Ignatius be? This

<sup>23</sup>Originally published as a self-standing monograph in 1959, latter collected in the volume that made Oakeshott (1962).

<sup>24</sup>For a fine-grained explication of Oakeshott's aesthetics see Abel, 2012.

<sup>25</sup>Though Oakeshott did not dwell on the commercialization of art, he would accept, for example, that a gallery owner must face the problem of how to sell and market art, even art that understands itself and is understood as non-practical.

<sup>26</sup>This notion has provenance in Edgar Allan Poe (2009), *The Poetic Principle*. Reprinted in *Edgar Allan Poe: Critical Theory, the Major Documents*, Stuart Levine and Susan Levine, Eds. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, pp. 175–211; Walter Pater (1980), *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, Donald L. Hill, Ed. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, p. 190; James A. McNeill Whistler (1967), *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*. Mineola: Dover; and T.S. Eliot in R. Badenhausen (2005), *T.S. Eliot and the Art of Collaboration*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

just doesn't make any sense if one grasps the autoscopic nature of the work as set out in the previous section.

This thread-bare rationale gives some credence to Toole entertaining the impression that Gottlieb was harboring a sub-text motivating his disapproval, namely "that Gottlieb never accepted the novel on the basis of its representation of Jews, particularly Myrna Minkoff and the Levys" [pp. 241–242].

Gottlieb never provided any rationale for the ambivalence he had about these characters, which only succeeded in sowing seeds of self-doubt in an already fragile Toole. It is fair to surmise that Gottlieb's response was at base a conditioned, synthetic hypersensitivity to anything that might vaguely have a whiff of anti-Semitism, a phenomenon that Toole sensed while teaching at Hunter College.

Minkoff is a social type: she is brazen, brassy and belligerent. She is *equally* bright and amusing. Despite Gottlieb's ambivalence it is *Myma* who comes to Ignatius' rescue from the mental asylum horrors that are about to befall him.<sup>27</sup> Mrs. Levy, arguably the most obnoxious of *Confederacy's* characters, has a gauche though well-meaning obsession for the well-being of Miss Trixie, the senile octogenarian assistant accountant. And it is through Gus Levy that Burma Jones, no more than "worm sweat" on the New Orleans "social totem pole," at last receives a deserved hand up. As with *all* of the characters, they are shot through with unremitting frustrations, rich instantiations of the crooked timber that is humanity.

It is astounding that Gottlieb and colleagues failed to contextualize *Confederacy* within the highly distinguished tradition of the picaresque novel. *Confederacy* is about everything — and nothing. The almost cartoonish carnival of characters are different lenses through which to delight in this kaleidoscopic parade called humanity harking back to Don Quixote [pp. 162, 233, 256]; (see also Percy in Toole, 1981, p. vi; Leighton, 2011, 2012). "From this vast parade, Toole selected, merged, refined, and wove characters together with all the absurdities that form the human condition" [p. 151]. Toole "developed a sensitive ear and a sharp eye for the subtle quirks in a personality, even in a city brimming with eccentrics" [pp. 2, 227].

Gottlieb was flummoxed by the book's ostensible lack of meaning, a not dissimilar scenario to the *Seinfeld* episode wherein Jerry and George pitch a show "about nothing" to NBC executives.<sup>28</sup> "There must be a point to everything you have in the book, a real point, not just amusingness forced to figure itself out," writes Gottlieb [p. 172, my emphasis]. Had Gottlieb grasped the notion of the picaresque, the vulgar demand for meaning would be redundant. It is no wonder that "Gottlieb seems at a loss as to how to direct Toole" [p. 174]. Perhaps a "moral" of the story is "that striving was meaningless" (Toole, 1981, pp. 106, 255, 203) and that life so portrayed is a process, not a destination.

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<sup>27</sup>A novel contemporaneous with *Confederacy* was *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, the protagonist, McMurphy, reflecting much of Ignatius' imaginings. "They would try to make me into a moron who liked television and new cars and frozen food. Don't you understand? Psychiatry is worse than communism" (Toole, 1981, p. 263). "Once your case was in the psychiatric journals, they'd be inviting him to Vienna to speak" (p. 306). "It was just like her, with the very best of intentions, to have her child harnessed by a straightjacket and electrocuted by shock treatments" (p. 329). "A hose would be turned on him. Some cretin psychoanalyst would attempt to comprehend the singularity of his worldview." "In a mental ward they tampered with your soul and worldview and mind" (p. 330). "Every asylum in this nation is filled with poor souls who simply cannot stand lanonlin, cellophane, plastic, television, and subdivisions" (p. 263).

<sup>28</sup>"The Pitch," the third episode of the fourth season.

Be this as it may, “meaning” is not “something expressed” or “something derived” from aesthetic experience — a conception that wouldn’t have satisfied Gottlieb’s didactic impulse. This might explain why under Gottlieb, George Deaux’s *Superworm* (1968) saw the light of day *Confederacy* did not. MacLaughlin summarizes the contrast as follows: in *Superworm*, the plot drives the characters whereas in *Confederacy* the plot is the medium — requiring time, space, patience and a willingness to enter into sympathetic alliance with the characters [p. 201]. Had Toole assimilated all of Gottlieb’s suggestions, *Confederacy* would be a very different book and, as has already been said, the worse for it.

In language and tone Toole would have relished, the most scathing characterization of traditional editorship (and now their outsourced acolytes, literary agents) comes from the great Latinist A.E. Housman:

An editor of no judgment, perpetually confronted with a couple of MSS. to choose from, cannot but feel in every fibre of his being that he is a donkey between two bundles of hay. What shall I do now? Leave criticism to the critics, you might say, and betake himself to any honest trade for which he is less unfit. But he prefers a more flattering solution: he confusedly imagines that if one bundle of hay is removed he will cease to be a donkey.

So he removes it. Are the two MSS. equal and do they bewilder him with their rival merit and extract from him at every other moment the novel and distressing effort of using his brains? Then he pretends that they are not equal: he calls one of them “the best MS.,” and to this he resigns the editorial functions which he is himself unable to discharge. He adopts its readings when they are better than its fellow’s, adopts them when they are no better, adopts them when they are worse: only when they are impossible, or rather when he perceives their impossibility, is he dislodged from his refuge and driven by stress of weather to the other port.

This method answers the purpose for which it was devised: it saves lazy editors from working and stupid editors from thinking. But someone has to pay for these luxuries, and that someone is the author; since it must follow, as the night the day, that this method should falsify his text. Suppose, if you will, that the editor’s “best MS.” is in truth the best: his way of using it is nonetheless ridiculous. To believe that wherever a best MS. gives possible readings gives true readings, and that only where it gives impossible readings does it give false readings, is to believe that an incompetent editor is the darling of Providence, which has given its angels charge over him lest at any time his sloth and folly should produce their natural results and incur their appropriate penalty. Chance and the common course of nature will not bring it to pass that the readings of a MS. are right wherever they are possible and impossible wherever they are wrong: that need divine intervention; and when one considers the history of man and the spectacle of the universe I hope one may say without impiety that divine intervention might have been employed better elsewhere. How the world is managed, and why it was created, I cannot tell; but it is no feather-bed for the repose of sluggards.

Apart from its damage to the author, it might perhaps be thought that this way of editing would bring open scorn upon the editors, and that the whole reading public would rise up and tax them, as I tax them now, with ignorance of their trade and dereliction of their duty. But the public is soon disarmed. This planet is largely inhabited by parrots, and it is easy to disguise folly by giving it a fine name. (1961, pp. 35–37)

Thelma Toole was very much more laconic. “When asked why she thought so many publishers rejected *Confederacy*, she answered, ‘Stupidity!’” [p. 225], no doubt Gottlieb being the preeminent instantiation of . . . a dunce. One would have thought that the intervening years had given Gottlieb some wisdom as opposed to a false modesty. In an interview from 1994 Gottlieb says of himself:

I used to feel I was a fraud because I had had so much success and done so little to deserve it. And then I realized, you don't have to be a genius to be an editor. You don't have to have a great inspirational talent to be a publisher. You just have to be capable, hard-working, energetic, sensible, and full of goodwill. Those shouldn't be rare qualities, and they don't deserve a lot of credit, because you're either born with them or you're not. It's luck. And that's why you can be as good an editor your first day on the job as on your last; you're not developing some unique and profound gift.<sup>29</sup>

What is one to make of this? By his own admission, superficially Gottlieb is deep; deep down he's superficial: picking books as bestsellers might just as well be akin to a chimp picking "hit" television shows.<sup>30</sup> Whatever achievements Gottlieb can legitimately claim, the irony is that Toole and he are welded together, a relationship that will forever color Gottlieb's legacy (*Catch-22* notwithstanding) — all because of a book he *didn't publish!*<sup>31</sup>

### Concluding Thoughts

The phenomena of the autoscopic and the autotelic was perhaps too rich a mix for Gottlieb, a rarified psychological state that is incongruent with the neat and tidy categories that the *business* of publishing demands. Exceptional writers need exceptional editors: how different would the world's intellectual landscape have been were it not for the insight and foresight of Max Brod, Kafka's literary executor?<sup>32</sup> Whatever the flaws of *Confederacy* they do not detract from the palpable quality of the writing, the authenticity of the voice and the sheer delight millions of readers from many countries and all walks of life, have derived from reading it. *Confederacy* was a promissory note for greatness that came perilously close to oblivion.

Given his elusive quarry and the complex issue of Thelma Toole's highly modulated interpolation, MacLauchlin has offered up a meticulously researched and elegantly written biography, an exemplar of good taste and connoisseurship. Perhaps one of the best compliments one could pay MacLauchlin is because of his very Oakeshottian assessment of Toole's distinctiveness:

His predecessors, such as William Faulkner and Tennessee Williams, had missed the greatest lesson of New Orleans: that its texture does not come from its gritty underbelly but rather from its centuries-long ability to enfold new voices, while never losing track of its elaborate roots, a cultural value that comes from living on the edge of existence. [p. 163]

<sup>29</sup><http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1760/the-art-of-editing-no-1-robert-gottlieb>

<sup>30</sup>I refer to the Disney film *The Barefoot Executive* (1971).

<sup>31</sup>Even after *Confederacy* saw the light of day, the rather awkward comments by luminaries such as Andrew Sinclair, Christopher Wordsworth, Harold Beaver, and Anthony Burgess gracing the cover of the Penguin edition of *Confederacy* suggest that they (and Penguin) never properly understood the novel and/or its creator either.

<sup>32</sup>See: [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/26/magazine/26kafka-t.html?ref=magazine&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/26/magazine/26kafka-t.html?ref=magazine&_r=0) and the follow up story: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/15/world/middleeast/woman-must-relinquish-kafka-papers-judge-says.html>

Unlike many, MacLauchlin rejects the idea that ascriptions of genius cannot be based upon one novel: "And if we base our measure on quality, then the prolific writer has no more value within the literary canon than the individual who composes a single masterpiece" [p. xii–xiii]. Maybe Gottlieb has come round to this view.

While MacLauchlin's *Butterfly* is a very different creature from A.J.A. Symons' classic biography of Rolfe (*The Quest for Corvo: An Experiment in Biography*, 1934), MacLauchlin is more than adept at wonderful turns of phrase. MacLauchlin's book should be a standardly prescribed text for any writing or literature course: it works as a biography but perhaps more importantly as a compelling account of the sociology of the publishing industry. Would-be writers should be skeptical of literati dedicated to promoting the insipid, the earnest, the theory-laden, and the overly detailed. As Housman asserts, since editors set themselves up as sophisticates, their intellectual vulgarities are heightened.

Walker Percy and Thelma Toole would be gratified to know that Toole's life has at last received some deserved coherence: a sensitive, balanced, though not uncritical assessment of the brightest of shooting stars.<sup>33</sup> Toole would be right at home with the Scriblerians, friends that included Swift and Pope. Swift, of course, provided the title to *Confederacy*. Pope's phrase "Who breaks a butterfly upon a wheel?," finds resonance in Toole's own prescient words: "Crushing a butterfly with a typewriter key."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>MacLauchlin rightly gives credit to the women in the Thelma–John Toole orbit for recognizing the virtues of *Confederacy*, most notably Bunt Percy who on Walker's insistence read it first and recommended it to him [pp. 227–232]. Elizabeth Corey, a well-known Oakeshott scholar and native Louisianian, identifies Percy as being a thoroughly Oakeshottian writer (Corey, 2006, p. 1). Perhaps that is why, unlike Gottlieb, he could recognize the virtues of *Confederacy*.

<sup>34</sup>MacLauchlin has been instrumental in coproducing a documentary film on Toole, freely available to view at: <http://jkttoole.com/viewthefilm.html>.

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