# LETTERHEADS AT LOGGERHEADS – THE TROUBLED EDITORIAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN JOHN KENNEDY TOOLE AND ROBERT GOTTLIEB

Dan Nicolae Popescu
"Ştefan cel Mare" University Suceava

***Abstract:*** *The paper outlines the two-year-long editorial epistolary relationship between J.K. Toole and R. Gottlieb, occasioned by the aspiring novelist's attempt to take American literary stage by storm with his gargantuan novel, which fails to impress the exigent New York editor. Misunderstandings over apposite observations on topics concerning narrative style and composition are placed in the broader context of the sixties, when the South was the scene of major historical transformations. The Toole-Gottlieb negotiation for the publication of Confederacy, labeled as 'anatomy of a rejection', is analyzed with an emphasis on discourse hypertrophy, both fictional and real, as the editor's Jewish background eventually caused dissatisfied Toole and his mother to make anti-Semitic remarks that unfortunately marred the correct understanding of a process that was to bring about both tragedy and success.*

***Key words:*** *John Kennedy Toole, Robert Gottlieb, Confederacy of Dunces, epistolary exchange, metonymy, authorship, posthumous recognition*

It has become part of the literary legend surrounding John Kennedy Toole's life and creation that the dismissal of his *Confederacy of Dunces* by New York publisher Simon and Schuster was the turning point which sank the young author into despondency and paranoia, ultimately leading to his untimely death. Indeed, Toole's human and professional contacts with editor Robert Gottlieb are part of the key-mystery of the former's fatal gesture. Some biographers picture Gottlieb as "the villain in the Toole myth" (Heilman, 2001), although his extant correspondence with the New Orleans aspirant shows a conscientious and compassionate editor at work, whose observations on the novel's flaws are, if gently mouthed, well-grounded, at least with regard to novelistic construction and a handful of characters.

Gottlieb's most severe objection to *Confederacy* was that the novel was not really about anything. Indeed, in December 1964, almost a year after he had received the unsolicited manuscript, he sent Toole a letter exuding editorial competence, which reads: "But that, all this aside, there is another problem: that with all its wonderfulness, the book – even better plotted (and still better plottable) – does not have a reason; it's a brilliant exercise in invention, but unlike CATCH [22] and MOTHER"S KISSES and V and the others, it isn't really about anything. And that's something no one can do anything about" (*quoted* in Nevils & Hardy, 2001: 131).

It is not difficult to imagine how such an editorial verdict must have mortified the overconfident Toole, who, otherwise, enjoyed a copious amount of beginner's luck in initiating prospective publication arrangements with such a prestigious publishing house. If Gottlieb's objections to the loose structure of the book and to the apparent lack of thematic scope are formally correct for the most part, as some dissatisfied readers and critics assent, the note of irrevocableness he strikes as to the future destiny of the novel is, sadly, a tactless demonstration of misunderstanding. It is indeed a great pity that Gottlieb did not assent to the novel's use of

BDD-A19917 © 2014 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:59:47 UTC)

counterpoint and symmetry in resolving the subplots, wherein everything gravitates around the nodal point of the Night of Joy incident. Apparently, Robert Gottlieb did not grasp the metonymical quality of Toole's novel and merely regarded it as a tiring accumulation of grotesque details and comic situations, wherefrom one can derive the sole pleasure of sound, at times burlesque, laughter. Not for a moment did he concede that Toole's funniness and mimicry of New Orleans accents may lend themselves to more than just high and/or low comedic modes: in general, an editor's primary concern is to publish books that sell, irrespective of how much metaphor they contain.

Otherwise, as Michael Kline states in his analysis of the novel's rhetoric of humour, "The role of metonymy in the creation of textual pleasure has to do with the reader's ability and desire to bring together periodically causal chains within the course of the narrative" (1999: 285). Since Toole's novel is almost entirely built around such causal chains that the protagonist fails to properly recognize as he deliberately mistakes Providence for Fortuna, we can affirm that Gottlieb is likely to have had the ability to bring these causal chains together, but not the desire. It is a greater pity that Toole did not decipher Gottlieb's slightly disparaging comment upon the book ("it isn't really about anything") in a paradoxically positive manner: if the novel isn't about anything, then, by way of logic, it is about nothing or, to be more precise, set against the background of urban alienation, it heralds the absurd quality of the human condition and epitomizes the uselessness of modern man's pursuits as they are all bound for the Great Nothingness.[1]

Nonetheless, if allowed to strike a chord of belated concord in this sad editorial relationship, which Joel Fletcher calls the "anatomy of a rejection" (Chapter Eight in his Toole monograph *Ken & Thelma* bears this name), we could say that it was all a misunderstanding of tragic proportions; in retrospect, as Fletcher notes, Toole gained the upper hand, even though posthumously – a blockbuster and a cult classic, *A Confederacy of Dunces* eventually managed to secure both popularity and textual authority that ultimately vindicate Toole's authorial ambition and validate his artistic vision:

> Re-reading my notes about Coles' lecture[2] these many years later, I remembered Robert Gottlieb's dismissive comments about Confederacy… In what was subsequently a brilliant career, it was one wrong call, and one he must regret… "The book could be improved and published. But it wouldn't succeed," Gottlieb wrote Ken, but by the time of the Coles lecture the book had sold more than half a million copies and been translated into half a dozen languages. Today it has sold at least a million more copies and achieved the status of a classic. (2005: 139)

---

[1] According to Hugh Ruppersburg, "*A Confederacy of Dunces* shares much in common with the urban literature of alienation which flourished during the 1950s and 1960s. J. D. Salinger, Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, and Joseph Heller explored in varied forms the contrarieties of modern life, whose nexus is the city" (1986: 125). Apparently, Robert Gottlieb failed to find any thematic filiation between Toole and the more famous writers listed in the quotation above.

[2] Robert Coles' lecture was held on September 18, 1981, on the campus of the University of Southwestern Louisiana at Lafayette. Bibliographically it was indexed Coles, Robert. "Gravity and Grace in the Novel A Confederacy of Dunces." The Flora Levy Lecture in the Humanities, 1981, Vol. II, Lafayette, Louisiana: the University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1983. It was later published in the volume Times of Surrender: Selected Essays by Robert Coles (1988).

BDD-A19917 © 2014 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:59:47 UTC)

While Toole did not adopt a more poignant self-explanatory attitude in his letters to Gottlieb, being in general soft-spoken, sometimes even Boethian, in his defence of the manuscript, the letters to his friends (Joel Fletcher and Nicholas Polites, in this case) present us with a completely different person. The references to his epistolary exchange with Simon and Schuster and to the editorial work on the novel, under the direction of Robert Gottlieb, teeter on the edge of cultural chauvinism and are heavy with sarcasm, calling to mind Ronald Bell's allegation that Toole, "while a highly sensitive and talented writer of fiction, was beset with caustic notions of society and harboured a fatalistic, negative viewpoint throughout his life" (2000: 4).

A letter by Ken (Toole's name for family and friends) dated May 1965, addressing Fletcher and Polites, reads:

> Since both of you know of my writing project, I must say that eight air mail letters and one hour-long long distance call from Simon and Schuster later, I am still faced with revisions. Although I am "wildly funny often, funnier than almost anyone else around," the book is too 'intelligent to be only a farce.' It must have 'purpose and meaning.' However, it is full of 'wonderfulness' and 'excitements' and 'glories.'
>
> But they worked 'more than three years on Catch-22.' If and when it does appear, it will be unbearably 'significant,' I imagine. Also, I am like 'one of those geniuses who turn up in Tanganyika or New Zealand.' Poor New Orleans. Suppose I had sent the thing in from Breaux Bridge… or Parks. Broken and leering toothlessly, I may yet be on some book jacket (*quoted* in Fletcher, 2005: 31).

However, no serious blame can be put on the editor: what he knew about Toole's family milieu was next to nothing, and he couldn't have possibly understood that it was no ordinary first novel what he had been entrusted with. Lacking in significant information about his writer's personal background, Gottlieb failed to see Ignatius's intimidating verbosity for what it really was: an appropriation of identity built around a hypertrophy of discourse, an almost hysterical linguistic overproduction as both agent and cure of neurosis.

For its most part, the epistolary exchange between the New York editor and the New Orleans writer was a war of attrition waged with polite phrases of formal reassurance. It was surely frustrating for both parties, as the editor suggested revision and the novelist had no idea whatsoever in what direction to proceed, firmly convinced that his narrative spoke on its own behalf. The bottom line was that the novel Ken had submitted in manuscript form and eventually withdrew was not publishable without consistent revision. Gottlieb even advised him to take up a new writerly project, unbeknownst to the special bond that Toole had developed with his 'first-born'. It was this attachment, teetering on the edge of parental sentiment, which paralysed whatever resolve he may have had to comply with the editor's request. Unable to produce changes about a work he felt to be complete and articulate, he clang to a salvaging change of Gottlieb's mind as to the novel's fates, which "prolonged the agony of a final break" (*ibid*: 136).

The two-year correspondence between Toole and Gottlieb evinces at least one instance in which the former chose to do away with his reserved nature and traded cool-minded self-restraint for emotive self-disclosure. The letter from March 5, 1965 practically bares Toole's soul to the editor and produces further evidence of his long-term exposure to the enactment of a distorted

BDD-A19917 © 2014 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:59:47 UTC)

Oedipal scenario: “I feel very paternal about the book; the feeling is actually androgynous because I feel as if I gave birth to it too” (*ibid.*).

If Toole ever regarded the missive-writing to Gottlieb as part of a potential loss therapy, we will never know. What is certain is that Ken, not ready yet to consign to the drawer an effort he didn't suffer to even look at for revision, ended the above-mentioned letter soliciting for an upbeat, in what can be easily recognized as a bargaining stage, according to the Kübler-Ross model of the five stages of loss[3]: “I don't want to throw these characters away. In other words, I'm going to work on the book again. I haven't even been able to look at the manuscript since I got it back, but since something of my soul is in the thing, I can't let it rot without my trying. I don't think that I could write anything else until this is given at least another chance. Will you bear with me?” (*ibid*: 140)

Robert Gottlieb did bear with Toole, at least until January 17, 1966, the date of the editor's last letter, in which he shows concern for the book's destiny and expresses hope that its author will get out of the deadlock by dint of significant revision. However, the reasons behind the editor's ultimate decision not to publish the book must have been somewhat more complex than the blunt and disconcerting argument that *Confederacy* wasn't really about anything. Any attempt to surmise these reasons is bound to transgress the realm of speculation. The ethnic and racial diversity of Toole's characters, as well as their complex interactions, may have appeared a little too visionary, if not disturbing, to a mainstream editor of the American sixties.

The Civil Rights Movement was at its peak and backwater New Orleans may have rung a bell of subversion in Gottlieb's mind, enough for him to give careful thought to the political appropriateness of the novel's publication. In those days, a Southerner didn't have to be a white supremacist or a secret admirer of the Klan, for that matter, to elicit mistrust, or at least circumspection. Extreme views in this direction regard Gottlieb's gesture as an instance of censorship imposed upon a Southern voice; milder views simply affirm that Gottlieb wasn't as visionary as Toole (which is difficult to believe if we remember that Gottlieb played an active part in the publication of *Catch-22*).

Another explanation for the novel's rejection is connected to Robert Gottlieb's being Jewish, and Thelma Toole clang to this argument to the end of her days. Her interviews record disparaging remarks as to Gottlieb's ethnicity; embittered by her son's unsuccessful endeavour, she bedevilled the editor reserving him the key-part in a conspiracy against her Ken's novel: “She took it as a Jewish conspiracy against her son, whose Myrna Minkoff, the Jewish liberal firebrand, was an unattractive and unsympathetic character. Thelma was furious with Robert Gottlieb and remained so until the day she died” (Nevils & Hardy, 2001: 148).

Toole himself may have become aware that the burlesque industrialist Mr. Levy and his wife, and especially Myrna Minkoff , the New York Jewish beatnik activist, forever fighting for whatever cause and milking her rich daddy for funds, were rather tongue-in-cheek for a Jewish-American editor. But he needed the Levys in the parallel scenario of Oedipal debilitation underwent by Mr. Levy and in his satire of psychoanalysis as cure for societal hysteria, the

[3] Kübler-Ross and Kessler write about the bargaining stage: “After a loss, bargaining may take the form of a temporary truce… Guilt is often bargaining's companion. The “if onlys” cause us to find fault with ourselves and what we think we could have done differently. We may even bargain with the pain. We will do anything not to feel the pain of this loss. We remain in the past, trying to negotiate our way out of the hurt” (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005: 17). The fragment quoted aptly describes Toole's feelings for the manuscript he was not willing to let go of.

BDD-A19917 © 2014 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:59:47 UTC)

choice target of which was Mrs. Levy. For reasons of narrative causality, obnoxious Myrna was even more indispensable in the novel's economy as she proves to be the catalyst of every abortive social scheme of Ignatius.

While admitting to the objectionable compositional flaws to be found in his Jewish characters, "Myrna turned into a cartoon in a book where almost everyone else was basically real, but she was supposed to be very, very likable; if, to an objective reader, she is a "pain in the ass", then she's a debacle." (*quoted* in Fletcher, 2005: 114), his correspondence with Gottlieb takes precautions not to hurt the editor's ethno-religious sensibilities, apart from isolated instances of ironic undercutting (a reader of fiction is anything but objective), and makes laudatory mention of Bruce Jay Friedman, whom supposedly Toole viewed as a writerly model to follow. However, how much of this was genuine admiration for Stern and how much kowtow to Gottlieb's self-esteem is hard to determine: "… Stern is my favorite modern novel; I had an intense personal reaction to the book; I love it. As a matter of fact, it was after reading Stern that I mailed this book to Simon and Schuster; I even copied your address from Stern" (ibid.).

After the novel's definitive rejection, the relish Toole had taken in the "tremendous beginner's luck in even attracting the attention of an editor of Gottlieb's caliber" (Heilman, 2001) dissipated, along with all his hopes of becoming a professional writer. Bitter resentment towards Gottlieb took over his mind as he sank deeper and deeper into a vortex of hurt pride, dismay, and frustration. By now, "his memories of their interactions became distorted, for reasons that probably had less to do with Gottlieb than with the daily reality of life at home" (ibid.); indeed, Thelma, instead of showing her son her resilient, supportive side (that would prove instrumental in the eventual publication of *Confederacy*), took active part in Ken's increasingly paranoid fantasies about a New York-orchestrated conspiracy against him, whose mastermind, none other than the editor, was planning on simply stealing his novel.

Giving up all hope in the publication of his novel, John Kennedy Toole chose to surrender his fight for acknowledged authorship and exit life as a suicide in March 1969. It is now into the hands of literary historians to determine why a writer with such an impressive potential forsook his cause so unnaturally early. An overburdened single child with an almost clinical perception of the absurd, tormented by misgivings about his sexual identity and a history of alcohol abuse, ultimately unable to snap out of depression, Toole gave in to his self-destructive impulses, and in so doing he deprived us of the bulk of fiction he could have written.

John Kennedy Toole's writerly life began, so to speak, about five years after his human life ended. Determined to do justice to her son's memory, let alone to establish some sort of mystical connection with his spirit, Thelma Toole dedicated a lustrum of her late years to advocating the cause of *Confederacy* to several publishers across America. Had it not been for her unswerving perseverance, her son's novel may have ended up as an old piece of family memorabilia, or worse, as waste paper rotting in the landfill. Her most brilliant move, a curious mixture of daring, ingratiating self-confidence, and dedication to the cause, was the successful attempt of coaxing the influential Southern novelist Walker Percy into becoming the authoritative voice that would champion the manuscript into print. Thelma's peculiar mannerisms had Percy cornered, while the tragic story of Toole's suicide, dramatically retold by a persuasive insider, can't have gone unnoticed with the Kierkegaardian existentialist that the author of *The Moviegoer* was. All these strenuous efforts paid off when Louisiana State University Press published *A Confederacy of Dunces* in the spring of 1980: despite original fears that it would be just another Southern hit, the book sparkled nation-wide, with its 20,000 copies printed by May

BDD-A19917 © 2014 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:59:47 UTC)

1980. Meeting with such an unexpected success, it was more than mere poetic justice that the novel earned John Kennedy Toole the Pulitzer Prize for fiction on April 13, 1981, the first time that this prestigious prize was awarded posthumously. As for his resilient mother, until her death in 1984, Thelma relished safely in the jeer that Simon & Schuster, Gottlieb's publishing house, was yet to publish a Pulitzer Prize winner, which, ironically, they pulled off two years later with Larry McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove*.

**WORKS CITED:**


Bell, Ronald Wayne. *The Nihilistic Perspective of John Kennedy Toole* (MA Dissertation), California State University, Dominguez Hills, 2000;

Coles, Robert. "Gravity and Grace in the Novel *A Confederacy of Dunces*", *Times of Surrender: Selected Essays by Robert Coles*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1988. 119-125;

Fletcher, Joel L. *Ken & Thelma: the Story of 'A Confederacy of Dunces'*, Gretna: Pelican Publishing, 2005;

Heilman, Heather. "Ignatius Comes of Age", *Tulanian*, (26 November 2001): 15 Jan 2014. <http://tulane.edu/news/tulanian/ignatius_comes_of_age.cfm>;

Kline, Michael. "Narrating the Grotesque: The Rhetoric of Humor in John Kennedy Toole's A Confederacy of Dunces", *The Southern Quarterly* (1999: Spring-Summer). 283-291;

Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth, Kessler, David. *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief through the Five Stages of Loss*, New York: Scribner, 2005

Nevils, René Pol, Hardy, Deborah George. *Ignatius Rising – The Life of John Kennedy Toole*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001;

Ruppersburg, Hugh. "The South and John Kennedy Toole's A Confederacy of Dunces", *Studies in American Humor*, (1986: Summer-Fall). 118-126;

Toole, John Kennedy. *A Confederacy of Dunces*, New York: Wings Books, 1996.



**BDD-A19917 © 2014 Ovidius University Press**

**Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:59:47 UTC)**