

Reserved collection, University of Girona — Presentation

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Vice-rector Dr. Francesc Roca; Dr. Anna Maria Geli; Mayor of Palafrugell, Mr. Juli Fernández; Head of the library, Miss Antònia Boix...

There would be many acknowledgements, and I do not want to expand on them because they would take too much time. However, I always keep them in mind, because there are things that can only happen thanks to the cooperation of many people.

I would like to especially thank the work of the former Rector of the University of Girona, Dr. Anna Maria Geli, because she was the one who initiated the project of cooperation that concludes today, with a letter written in August 2013, offering the custody of Tom Sharpe's legacy within the Reserved Collection of the Library of University of Girona; my thanks to the Mayor of Palafrugell, Mr. Juli Fernández, who immediately offered his support to create a foundation in memory of Tom; to the Vice-rector Dr. Francesc Roca, for all the facilities he gave; to the Head of the University Library, Ms. Antònia Boix, for her enthusiasm and dedication; to professors José María Pérez Collados and Joaquin Rabaseda, and to the professors from the University of Barcelona Anna Caballé and Isabel Verdager, for their invaluable help; and to the lawyer, Josep Maria Prat Sàbat, for his great wisdom in the practice of law and his infinite patience. Without all their valuable efforts, we would not be here today.

Some of you may ask: why is Tom Sharpe's legacy in Girona? A British writer whose work revolves almost permanently around the satire of English society, a professor at Cambridge, an admirer of Evelyn Waugh or Woodhouse's work... That is, considering his deep Anglicism, would it not be more logical that his literary archives and his private library were kept in an English city? I do not have words to express the deep gratitude I feel to the University of Girona for making it possible to have an alternative and ensuring that Tom Sharpe's stay in the Costa Brava for 21 years will last forever through his legacy and, consequently, through the possibility that it will offer researchers to study and analyse his work and keep it alive within the Catalan and universal culture.

One of the most frequent reasons for Tom Sharpe's annoyance was the typesetting of his literature. His are humorous novels, hilarious in fact, and many of them are corrosive and impudent. We could talk about a 'dirty realism' that in his case has not received the academic aura that other writers have achieved, such as American Raymond Carver. In this sense, I am convinced that Tom Sharpe's unpublished papers and the perusal of his

manuscripts and letters will allow, in the future, a more mature and profound reinterpretation of his work.

“To all, I am only a writer of fun books. NOBODY SEEMS TO UNDERSTAND THAT UNDER THE COMEDY AND THE FARCE I ATTEMPT, although it is only hasty, TO SAY SOMETHING. Here (that is, in Catalonia, from where he writes this letter to his brother Phil in 1996), they understand this”, he said satisfied, because he felt himself better read in Spanish and Catalan than by his natural readers: the English speakers. “They understand, Sharpe continued, “that my books attack social injustice and I think that any other English writer does it at the moment and as effectively as I do”. Sharpe goes on “And he adds, even more satisfied “Saint Jorge’s day, the day in which most of the books are sold in Spain, the combined edition of *The Midden*, in Catalan and in Spanish at the same time (this book has not been published yet in Britain; it will be released in September), here this novel was translated as *Lo peor de cada casa*, it achieved great success. It sold 230,000 copies in three weeks. And this happened after 10 years of silence.

Therefore, in Catalonia, Tom Sharpe, from his place in Palafrugell, felt more comforted intellectually and emotionally than he had ever felt in his experience in Britain.

His novels portrayed what he called «hobbled by terror». In November 1959, he wrote: «My books are the story of my life, disguised, transformed and twisted into a frozen bowl ». And this is, in my opinion, the aspect of Tom Sharpe’s work which has never been enough analyzed: the fact that his caustic humour was the expression of his very deep feelings and fears, which he was only able to release in a humorous way. He used laughter as the crying mask of a child who was overwhelmed by experiences that exceeded his capacity for understanding. Tom Sharpe could never detach himself from that boy overwhelmed by the paternal presence and by the consequences of his political and religious beliefs: « My shadow is my black beast, which creates fear, destroys my self-confidence and impedes my complete fulfilment », we can read in a newspaper from the 50s. Or: « I have to kill my childlike shadow ». Poignant comments that reflect the neurosis which he lived. That is to say, Sharpe’s work, beyond appearances and its attempt to make people laugh (which he loved), wanted to go further, much further. Nothing in him was unconscious.

As Llàtzer Moix wonders in his book *Wilt soy yo*, is Wilt really Tom Sharpe? I will read part of a letter he wrote to his friend Mrs. Tarling, in 1997, about the characters Wilt and Eva: « I’m Wilt and Eva at the same time. I’m as ridiculous and absurd as Eva, but also determined and I have wild enthusiasms. Many people despise Eva, but I do not. Without Eves in this world, Wilt would be lost. Everyone has a gift, unfortunately not many people ever discover this. I was lucky when, at the age of 41, I accidentally discovered that I was a clown and I made people laugh ».

Lights and shadows. Celia Vázquez, Professor of English Philology at the University of Vigo, who personally knew him and collaborates with the Foundation, wrote a thesis and a book, *El humor como mascara del desencanto en las novelas de Tom Sharpe*, where she addresses how Sharpe uses humour to express his most painful feelings, to denounce unjust social situations, to make fun of fanaticism and of human ineptitude. In short, he succeeds in making readers laugh at their own weaknesses.

Humour releases accumulated tension and, at the same time it can be used as a defence mechanism. Sharpe's humour is an antidote to disappointment, a mask used against the anxiety that daily life may produce ; it is, therefore, cathartic. He does not intend to be pedagogical, Sharpe does not preach understanding against human stupidity and incompetence, he only portrays them, puts them on display, like an absurd sovereign that makes our life impossible. His novels of grotesque and wild farce portray intellectual and cultural concerns, although Sharpe never intended to consider them in a way other than mockery. During his childhood, he was immunized against big words. No more 'big words' for him, despite the fact that that big words –love, happiness, sympathy– always beat in his locked inside.

Therefore, Sharpe's humour is not just a literary technique, although it may seem so, but an allegorical vision of life and the world. The difficulties he was encountering in his life seemed so absurd and absorbing that he learned to get rid of them through humour and incongruity. His sense of humour consists in the removal of all logical or moral motivations to reduce human acts to absurdity.

His criticism and disenchantment extended to the political and also to the publishing world. Despite the fact that Sharpe confessed in his interviews that he did not favour any political tendency, in his work he criticizes all ideologies, either through conservative characters or through totally radical characters. He shows the inconsistencies between the political ideals and the lifestyle of those people who preach certain ideals but do not put them into practice and, therefore, do not believe in them.

He told me several times: «When you write my biography, you will face a colossal task. How will you classify me? It will be an impossible task. I live in mental anarchy. Nazi in my youth until my father died when I was 15, deported as a communist from South Africa; anarchist? liberal? socialist?».

He did not agree with the political evolution of his country, ruled at that time by Margaret Thatcher. We all know what that government meant to Great Britain: the dismantling of the industrial network and the benefits that the working class had acquired over time. There could not be two people who were more opposed than Thatcher and

Sharpe. Two ways of understanding life that were diametrically opposed. Tom Sharpe fled from a country, his country, which was becoming an alien and inhospitable place. That is, he came to the Costa Brava in a time of a deep personal and professional crisis, which had led him to excessive drinking and wasting his talent looking for an exit he could not find. When he landed at El Prat airport on 20th April 1992 he was an exhausted, unhappy and disoriented man. He would say to himself, remembering Yeats (his father's favourite poet), that England was not a country for old men.

There is little information about his stay in South Africa, between the years 1951-1961. However, those were decisive years, which he always had in his inner world, because during this period he was first married to Criquette, and also divorced her. Those were years of political commitment against apartheid and of the discovery of photography, as a tool for social criticism. Sharpe was a close friend of Alan Paton and Alberto Luthuli, President of the American National Congress and Nobel Peace Prize winner in 1960. He often accompanied him on motorbike from Durban to Pietermaritzburg. The South African experience ended abruptly. The New Age newspaper on 16th November 1961, linked to the African National Congress, reported that the Ministry of Justice of the South African government had given Sharpe ten days to leave the country. He was defined as a member of the Pietermaritzburg branch of the Congress of Democrats, playwright and professional photographer, author of a tough and sarcastic criticism of apartheid and photographer of Sofberg detention camp.

Sharpe would stated « South Africa, a country where racial discrimination and economic exploitation shake hands, savage repression of human rights that takes place there should be exposed to the whole world ».

He wrote a message to South Africans saying that he was convinced that only the Alliance of Congress fighting for a new constitution based on the principles of the Freedom Charter could change things and provide real prosperity to all races living in South Africa. Needless to say, history would prove him right and the architect would be the great Nelson Mandela.

As for the world of publishing, Tom Sharpe knew it well, since *Wilt* was a worldwide phenomenon, with millions of copies sold worldwide. However, Tom disliked its inner workings; marketing gradually taking over control of publishing companies and exerting excessive pressure on authors. Sharpe realized that marketing was becoming more important than writers and that advertising and sales would condition literary creation. His reaction would be, as always, to parody the publishing world in a sarcastic way in "The Great Pursuit" Here, he foresees that in the future vast amounts of money will be needed to be invested in advertising, and these amounts will only be recovered if the promoted

book is a bestseller He had many battles for this reason. This was one of the reasons for his distancing from the Anglo-Saxon world and his final refuge in Anagrama, a select publishing house which respects writers.

That is, Tom Sharpe, once in Catalonia and from his place in Palafrugell, felt more recognized intellectually and more akin to a way of understanding life than in his experience in Great Britain. The conversations with his editors, Jorge Herralde and Lali Gubern, with his literary agent, Gloria Gutiérrez, and with the journalist Llàtzer Moix (out of which a very attractive book would come out) were, for him, not only a constant stimulus but the proof of having chosen the right path. He had a good relationship with all of them: he kept several letters addressed to Jorge Herralde where he said he would never leave him, that their relationship was more important than any other offer. All this contributed to the fact that Tom Sharpe, a foreigner in a foreign country, adopted Catalonia as his permanent residence.

«I'm here to stay», he wrote to his brother Phil in June 1996, two days after formalizing an important decision: to leave the hotel Llevant after five years of living there and buy a house in Llafranc, just a few meters from the sea.

The letter where he lets his brother know that he will stay in Catalonia refers to the purchase of the house «Els Arcs» in Palafrugell, owned by an English woman who was unexpectedly very reluctant to leave it, to the point that Sharpe had to threaten to report her if she did not leave the house, which was already sold to a new owner: himself. These were hard times.

The letter to his brother goes on: « The house where I live is not only of my favourite kind, but it is in the most exclusive and expensive part of the Costa Brava, and I like that. During the week, there is no one; I am like a pea in an empty pod. The only sound is the wind and now the Beethoven's violin concert that sounds .In an interesting way, I'm happy in this solitude. Maybe it's because I had a lonely childhood; we moved so much that it was impossible to make myself a friend of other guys. Now, sitting in a chair, with the windows opened and the garden lights burning bright, I get a sea breeze mixed with the Beethoven's violin and I can say that I FEEL COMPLETELY FREE AND HAPPY ».

What I wanted to highlight in my speech is that Tom Sharpe was a man much more complex than what the interviews and his work's stereotypes have implied. I understand that it is an obligation of the Foundation I lead to reveal the hidden truth which has given rise to his hilarious novels. Sharpe wanted to be a poet, another of the voices that *Wilt* faded, and I would like to finish by reading this poem written in 1963:

«My face the night

The dark my sight
My eyes the light
In which I see
In my the stream
In my the gleam
In me the dream
Of what I'll be
When the dream ends
When the dark sends
When Heaven sends
The Rose to me»

He never stopped getting roses when he was alive and he still gets them after his death

Many thanks for your attention