

TOM SHARPE AND WILT: AN INTERVIEW

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Ana Moya - In the opening paragraph of the novel, when Wilt takes his dog for a walk, we are told that: "Wilt's walk was an interior one". Would you say that the novel is somehow the portrayal of Wilt's interior walk from his initial insecurity to the moment when, after defeating Flint and becoming Head of Liberal Studies, he is able to reaffirm himself as a person?

Tom Sharpe - I don't know that I would extend the metaphor of the interior walk so far. In one sense, yes, everything that happens to us is transmuted into an interior experience and forms part of the landscape of our past but if we follow that line we end up without the distinction between those people who are like Wilt and live for the most part internal lives (I suppose they are the INTROVERTS of Jungian psychology) and the others like Eva who live externally in actions which they initiate (EXTROVERTS). For instance, I always felt when writing about him that becoming Head of Liberal Studies meant very little to him. Momentarily, it might have but Wilt has so little time for titles and posts that, while he might have a sense of triumph immediately, it wouldn't be long before he saw that he was much the same man he had always been. The interior walk I was writing about at the very beginning was something I think we all do in one way or another. I know I do. In essence it is to wonder what would happen if I did something or other. "What if" is at the heart of every story. It can be a very frightening phenomenon when it intrudes involuntarily. But that is a side issue. I'm not altogether sure I wholly agree with that "reaffirm himself as a person". I think that reaffirmation has already taken place during the interrogation by Flint and it lasts only as long as that interrogation. I'm not at all sure there is any lasting benefit to be gained from such a victory. By this I mean that Wilt's attitude to himself hasn't been changed by his reaction to the ordeal or that if there has been any change it is only very small. Yesterday's hero can just as easily be today's coward.

A.M. - At the beginning, Wilt is said to pass "unnoticed out of the Tech". We are told that he has no "cause". At the end of his interior walk, Wilt will have won his cause and is no longer "unnoticed". He will not only have reaffirmed himself as a man, but also before the world. Nevertheless, the ending is in no way a victorious one. Looking at that quote at the end of

chapter twenty ("For a moment [...] Wilt thought of love...") that you rewrote in pen for me ("For a moment [...] Wilt thought of telling Eva he loved her"), together with the fact that the novel ends on one of Eva's better days, we could say that even though Wilt has won a battle, he has "acted" for once in his life, nothing seems to have changed and the world is much what it was for him. Do you feel that Wilt could be considered in some way as an anti-hero?

T.S. - I have great difficulty with the term "hero" and particularly when it is applied to a character in a novel. "Anti-hero" is even more awkward. I certainly have never thought of him as such any more than I've thought of him as a hero. It is much the same with the concept of a saint and I can see merit in the Roman Catholic practice of canonising people only several hundred years after death by which the reality of a personality has long since disappeared. So, no, I thought of an ordinary little man doing the same sort of job I'd once had done and having fantasies about being the initiator of actions rather than someone who has no control over his destiny. Since we had both taught the same classes and exactly the same courses (all the Tech stuff was absolutely accurate even down to the Principal's belief in "exposing apprentices to culture") much of Wilt's opinion of educative methods was my own. But to get back to the notion of "hero" and "anti-hero", these are terms literary analysts apply to fictional characters when they are dissecting books; they are not factors that enter authors' mind when a book is being written.

A.M. - It seems to me that an important element in the novel is the sense of isolation of the main character. This sense is stressed with the use of the doll and with the reaction of the Tech staff to Wilt's detention, for instance. Added to this, there is also his feeling of being insignificant: "An insignificant little man to whom things happened and for whom life was a chapter of indignities". Isn't Wilt's attitude to Flint and the Police a rebellion against his insignificance, the indignity of his life and even his feeling of isolation?

T.S. - I think Wilt's sense of isolation is justified. We don't, if we ever did, live totally communal lives or share defined values and this sense of isolation, which in many ways we value, is increased by his division between the city and the suburb, between the Tech and his house. But Wilt's sense of isolation and insignificance also springs from his failure to gain recognition in the Tech for his talents. He doesn't get promotion and pay increases while less talented teachers do by accepting administrative duties. On a wider level any individual who imagines he or she is a significant force in

the world must surely be suffering from delusions of grandeur and this has always been the case and isn't, as so many people like to think, a product of industrialism, the H bomb, urbanization or materialism. Peasant communities can give an individual a sense of insignificance as strong as any ugly city. The doll certainly is proof that the relationship between Sally and Gaskell is flawed, to put it mildly. But there is nothing particularly new about such substitutes. They have been around for thousands of years. What infuriates Wilt is that Sally uses force to humiliate him with the thing.

A.M. - Could we say that many times you use Wilt to put forward your own ideas as for example when he thinks that the Pringsheims "...were everything he loathed, false, phoney, pretentious, a circus of intellectual clowns, ...", whereas at other moments you are critical of him yourself, e.g. his conforming to his situation in the first part of the novel? What are the reasons for your duality of feelings?

T.S. - Don't you think everyone has mixed feelings about themselves? Clearly Wilt thinks very little of himself and of his conformism at the beginning of the book. On the other hand he detests the Pringsheims and the society they represent and he is quite sure "he is better" than they are. They don't relate to one another as humans who care about one another even slightly; Gaskell has money and Sally can gratify his sexual fantasies. Of course every relationship is based to some degree on this sort of use; what distinguishes the Pringsheims is the total lack of any warmth between them. They have absolutely zero sense of responsibility.

A.M. - In his conversation with Dr Pittman, Wilt argues that: "in my opinion man is capable of reasoning but not of acting within wholly rational limits". This opinion, as expressed by Wilt, connects with Swift's statement that man is not a rational animal but only capable of reasoning. Do you see yourself in any way as a twentieth century Swift?

T.S. - No, I really don't identify with Dean Swift or any other writer though I was interested in what you say he thought about reason.

A.M. - You said in your interview with *Tiempo* in Barcelona that gladly there is a lack of leaders in the world, that you do not want leaders, a personality cult. Can Henry Wilt be taken as the antithesis of a leader?

T.S. - I think one has only to look at the "leaders" of this or any other century to understand why I don't want to be led. Leaders presuppose followers; leaders demand obedience instead of allowing freedom of the intellect and

of course this answers the need of some people to be provided with answers (apologies for that dreadful sentence - let me rephrase it) and as an excuse many people choose to follow a leader because he provides easy, simple and ready answers. Give a leader power and all problems will be solved simply - that is the message he puts out. And the result of giving any politician, or anyone else for that matter, power is to put freedom in jeopardy. The character of the leader is of no consequence. It is irrelevant. A saint who asks to be given power is no longer a saint. This is the meaning of the third temptation of Christ (Luke 4, verses 8 to 11 and Matthew 4, verses 5-8). At the very heart of the matter there is the fact that Christ was always an example and never a leader. I leave readers to make up their own minds where Wilt stands.

A.M. - When you were here in Barcelona, you also talked about Wilt and Eva representing two sides of human nature (Wilt being the mind, the "rational", while Eva gives life to the instinctive, the physical, the "primeval", to use your own words). In what ways may this idea be exemplified in the book? How does the following quote reflect, if it does, this point?: "While [Wilt] lived a violent life in his imagination, Eva, lacking any imagination at all, lived violently in fact".

T.S. - Wilt is always wondering what would happen if he did something. He throws himself into an imagined situation to find out in his own mind what he would do. There is a form of rationality in this form of mental activity. In any case where Wilt is deficient is in the practical aspects of life. He lacks the conviction of his own rightness to assert himself physically and must always indulge in a dialogue, even with himself. Eva on the other hand acts impetuously and does things to find out whether they are good or not. If you like, Wilt's method is that of the introvert while Eva's is that of the extrovert. Eva's physical reaction on the boat and her swim ashore when she learns what really happened at the party are examples of her ability to act. But when I made the remark I was thinking rather more of her behaviour in the other two Wilt books.

A.M. - There are essentially three female "characters" in the novel: Eva, Sally and Judy. By means of them you caricature different aspects of woman. Woman as a sexual object may be thus said to be portrayed in Judy. Do you think that Eva could be interpreted as a caricature of woman before "Lib" (as Sally says) and Sally as a caricature of woman after it? Are you satirising women's emancipation in that you see it as a process that has been reduced somehow to what Sally sees in it?

T.S. - I disagree with you: the doll is just a doll. It is not a woman. It can be argued that for some men women are always only sexual objects; for all or most men women can sometimes be no more than sexual objects, for instance in brothels, or in male fantasies, but no matter how these men treat them or regard them women remain women and independent thinking and feeling human beings. They may be very unhappy and have all sorts of freedoms restricted by men but they cannot have their identity as women ultimately destroyed even by the most bestial treatment. A doll, I repeat, is a doll and cannot be anything else. If men project their sexual desires towards a doll and make it a sexual object, it doesn't become a woman or more womanly. Over the centuries people have found sexual desirability in the most extraordinary things extremely remote from women or human beings.

What I am "sending up" in the book is this tendency in some people to avoid having to reach a level of understanding and compromise with another person in a relationship by substituting for a person an object. You can't have a relationship with an object unless we redefine the meaning of this word. What we are really talking about is a "projected" form of self-love.

I'm not even sure I was caricaturing anyone in this book. Looking back on it I think I was portraying something real. And my portrayal of the Pringsheims was a description of language and attitudes in some Californians which frankly I found, and still find, arrogant and stupid to the point of insanity. The attitude that we are free to be anything we choose seems to me to be particularly poisonous and to fly in the face of all the evidence. It is also highly objectionable because it ignores the experience of over 99% of the world's population who work and struggle to make ends meet. But it is as an idea that I find this absurd optimism so dangerous. On one level it justifies an egocentricity that takes no regard whatsoever of other people or any well being other than that of the individual, and on another it can be used as a weapon against other people which is what Sally does in the case of the Wilts. In this world of "Free to Be" there are no obligations, the notion of responsibility and duty is unknown - in fact we are back in a state of social infancy where selfishness is all and everything. That is what I was attacking in the Pringsheims.

So you can see that I wasn't caricaturing Eva as "woman before liberation" or Sally as "woman after". That wasn't in my mind. I was dealing with the misuse of power. It would make no difference what sex Sally is, she/he represents power at any cost and I portrayed her as an attempted murderess in contrast to Wilt who is incapable of "disposing" of a doll. Or in contrast to Eva who is capable of killing, not in pursuance of any gain but in defence of her family.

But really, a writer doesn't think of these abstractions when writing a novel and I certainly don't conceive characters as puppets to which are attached ideas. I wish I could conceive books in this way but I'm afraid I don't.

A.M. - Sally and Gaskell represent everything that is superficial and degenerate in the novel. They stand for the degeneration of Western civilization. How can the fact that they are the only Americans in the novel be interpreted?

T.S. - I think I have probably just answered this question. One of my targets was the decade of the Sixties when the pathetic and monstrous ideas of some American ideologues held sway.

A.M. - To what extent does your open criticism of the English educational system and of the police represent your disillusionment with the Establishment?

T.S. - The loss of educational standards beginning, I believe, in the Sixties has been deplorable. Again I come back to this false "Free to Be" idea as well as a false egalitarianism which did not argue in favour of equal opportunity but demanded that everyone be equal. What this meant in reality was that highly intelligent children were neglected while children who were normally intelligent were not encouraged to excel. But the failure of the educational system began long before that and may almost be said to be endemic to English society (Having said that I am reminded that Trinity College here in Cambridge has through its students and Fellows more Nobel prizewinners than the whole of France which has such an excellent educational system and a population of 50 to 60 million). Long before I was at school in the thirties and forties the attitude was to regard scholastic ability as of dubious value; science in particular was despised as opposed to Greek and Latin; but above all the chief purpose of education was seen to be moral, the building of character embodied in Juvenal's "mens sana in corpore sano". This grew from the importance of the Church in the nineteenth century and the need to supply the Empire with administrators who could not be corrupted by financial or sexual bribes. I am speaking now of the private schools (as you know, in England private schools are called public schools because entrance via exams was open to anyone whose parents had the money to afford the fees) but the attitudes there filtered down into the state schools, though it has to be admitted that the top state schools -the grammar schools were often very good indeed and their disappearance, for the most part, during the Sixties and Seventies lowered standards a great deal. But the real fault for the drop in standards lay in the policy adopted by the Education Authorities in regard to the educational

levels required by students applying to enter Teacher Training Colleges. To increase student numbers and therefore their own responsibilities and thus their own salaries.

I don't think I had the Establishment in mind when I wrote *Wilt*. My criticism of the system of education was aimed quite specifically at what was then called Liberal Studies for apprentices and also the absurd system whereby the only way a good teacher could get promotion and a better salary was by giving up practically all teaching and becoming a bureaucrat and administrator. Since the politicians and government education officials had created a payment structure that made these absurdities possible I suppose I was criticising the "Establishment" indirectly. It is a vital civil act in any society to make fun of the police. When you can't, you've already landed in a dictatorial state.

A.M. - Finally, J. Swift said that "Satire is a sort of glass wherein beholders do generally discover everyone's face but their own, which is the chief reason for the kind of reception it meets in the world, and that so very few are offended with it". Do you consider *Wilt* to be the work of a satirist?

T.S. - I leave definitions to critics. All writing and painting and music spring from play.