

Tom Sharpe's Riotous Assembly: A Pragmatic Analysis

Cristina Larkin Galiñanes

Universidad de Vigo

Es muy difícil definir las causas del éxito - o fracaso - de un chiste o de cualquier otra manifestación humorística. Sin embargo parece claro que los actos comunicativos de este tipo dependen íntimamente para su funcionamiento de factores extra-textuales o extra-lingüísticos que son tanto sociales y culturales como situacionales. Esto hace que el humor sea particularmente apto para el análisis pragmático, que nos ofrece una forma de estudiar la comunicación y el significado que tiene en cuenta los factores extra-lingüísticos que gobiernan la utilización de la lengua en situaciones de uso concretas. En este artículo, por lo tanto, intentamos analizar desde el punto de vista de la Pragmática cómo el narrador de *Riotous Assembly* manipula al lector para lograr fines perlocutivos específicos, estableciendo a través de actos ilocutivos indirectos un sistema de significación que el lector percibe como humorístico, pero también como fundamentalmente crítico y satírico.

The suitability of humour as an object of pragmatic analysis is something that jumps immediately to mind. That humour is a type of communication that depends fundamentally on communicative context is something that has been stressed by speculators and theorists from Plato and Aristotle until today. Both social-behavioural theories of humour and cognitive-perceptual ones lay emphasis on this. While the former stress the importance of taking into account and sharing positive and negative identification groups in the creation of humour, the latter extend the idea into the field of semantics by emphasising the importance of shared semantic scripts for its appreciation. Also, if, as is commonly agreed, humour is based on incongruity - social, moral, or aesthetic - then it seems obvious that an awareness of incongruity must be based on a corresponding awareness of the congruous, of the acceptable and accepted, and therefore on what we could broadly term social contextual considerations, be these of whatever type.

The successful production and transmission of humour, therefore, depends on a process of negotiation between joker and receiver working

on common ground which lends itself perfectly to pragmatic analysis, which in turn provides a way of studying meaning which takes into account not only its physical vehicle (the linguistic structures in which it is encoded) but also those principles which govern the *use* of language in communication, that is to say, the conditions which determine the use of specific utterances produced by specific speakers in specific communicative situations and their interpretations by their receivers.

My purpose in this article, therefore, is to make a pragmatically-orientated analysis of the intentionality of the text of Sharpe's *Riotous Assembly* as it is appreciated by the reader, and of how its narrator tries to negotiate with his audience conditions propitious to the desired perlocutionary effects, not only humorous, but also critical. My thesis is that Sharpe here tries to establish a meaning system which transcends the humorous or farcical, employing them for satirical purposes and winning the reader to his point of view through a series of illocutionary acts which quite clearly, though indirectly, implicate his meaning. Of course, I am aware of the fact that my concern with such elements as illocutionary acts and implicature puts me in the danger of reducing my work into an exercise in subjective interpretation. But both the appreciation of implicatures and that of humour are based on the receiver's experience and encyclopaedic knowledge - as is on the other hand inevitable in any type of critical commentary. As James F. English remarks, «contemporary approaches to the comic bear a marked resemblance to reader response approaches to literature. Both enterprises rely on a theory of communication whose 'ground plan', as W.Iser expresses it, is formed by the poles of text and reader [or joke and laughter], together with the interaction that occurs between them» (1986, 132).

Riotous Assembly has an extradiegetic, heterodiegetic narrator, and opens on the level of interaction narrator-reader with two categorical and definitely omniscient statements: «Piemburg is deceptive. Nothing about it is entirely what it seems to be» (7). Since we have no context in which to interpret otherwise we must take the propositional content of the utterance at face value. As we read on we find that Piemburg is described on two planes: that of its present state, which is described, in fact, in the first paragraph in the Present Tense, and that of its past history. On the level of the present the initial proposition is confirmed and reinforced by

a series of locutions which underline the theme of false appearances through a series of verbs which implicate the narrator's lack of commitment to the propositions he is proffering. Thus the narrator tells us that Piemburg is «a tiny town that seems to have died and been embalmed». It is «by popular accounts quite dead. Sleepy Hollow they call it. ... And certainly at a first glance the city's lack of animation seems complete.» The comment that it is «Half the size of New York Cemetery and twice as dead» is attributed to «an American visitor» (7) who in his condition as such would also be a dupe to appearances. Another salient characteristic of Piemburg, implied by all these locutions is that it is dead. However, the image of a dead Piemburg is tied to the theme of false appearances, and the remarks which the narrator himself makes categorically implicate something quite different; Piemburg is not dead, but asleep. It is «huddled among the foothills of the Drakensberg and crouching at the feet of a great flat-topped hill» and «it lies curled in its valley under the African sun and sleeps» (7). Of these two metaphors the second is repeated almost literally, with only a little more elaboration, at the end of the chapter, after the intervening section on the town's history: «Piemburg fell asleep. Like a replete puff-adder coiled and bloated it lay under the African sun and dreamt of its brief days of glory» (9). These metaphors have strongly salient characteristics and therefore high organizing power, making strong implicatures¹. The verbs employed all suggest an animal; «crouching» suggests a lying in wait, while «curled under the African sun» already implies the image of the snake which is explicitly confirmed later. The implicature here is that Piemburg is not dead, but merely asleep, and, if wakened, potentially dangerous. The narrator confirms this explicitly, taking us back to the puff-adder:

«Piemburg's mediocrity was venomous and waited gently on events»². The narrator thus prepares the reader ominously for action, creating quite specific expectations as to what sort of thing is going to happen.

Simultaneously, however, he also creates expectations of humour. The propositional content of the first paragraph contains a description of Piemburg which the reader's encyclopaedic knowledge, and his awareness of genre makes him situate in the category of the traditional, romantic travel book. Thus we have the city's geographical situation picturesquely described (through the metaphors already alluded to), as well as its more

outstanding characteristics: «its red iron roofs and wrought-iron balconies bespeak a distant age of long-forgotten enterprise. Its roads are lined with jacarandas and its gardens are lush with flowering dark verandahs.» The traveller is specifically mentioned: «Travellers whose trains to Johannesburg stop ... beneath the rusting sheet-metal gingerbread of its station roof, or who whisk past on the National Highway ...», and the narrator, once he has given a brief physical description, which is done in the present Tense, as befits the genre, proceeds to provide the reader with a historical account of the city³:

«The capital of Zululand, it sprang up with the British Empire's conquest of the Zulu nation. In the first flush of that resounding victory, Piemburg was transformed from a tiny settlement long deserted by its Afrikaaner founders into a capital city. Civic buildings multiplied in a rash of colonnade and red Victorian brick. The Governor's mansion bloomed with Italian marble floors, Venetian glass and all the trimmings of Imperial splendour. The railway station, a paragon of metal fretwork and faïence, provided a suitable staging post for the Viceregal trains that passed through Piemburg on their way to farther and less attractive Imperial dominions in the hinterland of Africa.» (7)

Throughout the paragraph historical «fact» is blended with a discourse replete with locutions implicating superlatives in a combination which is typical of its genre. There is at first nothing in the discourse or in its context to indicate any deviant attitude at all. However, at the end of the paragraph the reader is abruptly confronted with a deviation from the expectations created in him by the narrator's discourse up to this point. After all the talk of conquest, resounding victory, Imperial splendour, and Viceregal trains, we find that the «august burden» carried by «the great steam engines» go to an early death not in battle or valiant deeds, as we would expect from the tenour of the discourse thus far, but «by tsetse fly or malarial mosquito», and that «monocled and moustached men would gaze serenely down on the capital of Zululand and murmur, 'A gem, a gem set in a green and yellow ring', and then turn back to study the wholly inaccurate survey maps of their new territories» (8). The Cooperative Principle is here flouted by the narrator in that, having engaged the reader in a discourse which carries strong implicatures as to genre, he proceeds to give information which is incongruous in the context, not only because

of the information in itself, but also because the propositional content of his utterance carries generalizing implicatures which counteract the heroic connotations of what has gone before⁴.

Again we are dealing here with discourse which makes strong implicatures by virtue of the fact that these reinforce each-other. Thus in case the reader is not sufficiently startled by the tsetse flies and malarial mosquitoes, the narrator repeats the incongruity with the image of the monocled and moustached men whose serene gaze evokes Queen Victoria, as does their comment about the gem and the ring⁵, and who then go back to the inaccurate survey maps. On the level of micro-structure this last incongruity presents a pattern which the reader immediately applies to the macro-structure of all the passage surrounding it. It also provides a good example of the joke as understood by Victor Raskin and other theorists on the cognitive functioning of humour. The «punch-line», or point of greatest deviation from the reader's expectations comes at the end with the narrator's mention of the «wholly inaccurate survey maps of their new territories» which the «august characters» are bent on studying. There is no ambiguity in the locution itself here, as would seem to be required by Koestler etc, quite the opposite, but the propositional content of the utterance is such as to implicate that the nature of the illocutionary act which has preceded it is totally different from what it appeared to be on first appearances. The reader is therefore made to go back over what has been said thus far, and to solve the problem of this apparent anomaly by reinterpreting what the narrator has implied. The Viceregal characters are now seen as duped fools, and the whole set-up of Piemburg and its garrison as based on ignorance (not only not knowing, but also ignoring) of the real situation it is built on⁶. The humour of this initial passage of *Riotous Assembly*, therefore, is based on the gap which exists between the narrator's locutionary act and his illocutionary act, between sentence meaning and the speaker's meaning as revealed in the context by the presence of incongruous elements. Apart from humour, of course, we also have irony present in that the narrator may be said to employ the type of thought attributed to a specific genre dissociating himself from it with ridicule and possibly also with scorn⁷.

The effect of the tsetse flies and the survey maps is decisive for the reader's interpretation of all that follows⁸. It indicates the narrator's attitude

and marks his text for humour and irony, bringing the Cooperative Principles into effect in a new context. So that when the narrator describes how the Viceregal characters pass through Piemburg station on the way to their destinies and a few months later pass back in a «coffin borne in a carriage draped in black and drawn by a locomotive draped in wreaths», and immediately adds «and in the intervals between Imperial progress and Imperial retreat, the capital of Zululand would adorn itself with new bandstands and botanical gardens and the amusement of a tiny metropolis» (8), the reader does not hesitate to interpret «Imperial progress and Imperial retreat» on two levels which produce humour because of their incongruity. In other words, on the one hand he takes the propositional set of entailments included in the utterance (the sentence meaning), and on the other he makes these entailments interact with the set of propositions available in the context, coming to the conclusion that what the narrator is really referring to is the coming of live and going of dead Viceroys.

A similar technique to that which has already been described above as having such a decisive and sweeping effect on the communicative content of the opening paragraphs of *Riotous Assembly* is employed on a minor scale in many jokes in the paragraphs which follow. The narrator continues to play with the genre originally evoked, constantly deviating from it, and undermining its literary, grandiose style with very down-to-earth details which cause laughter and draw the reader's attention by their incongruity. Thus he describes how in the «great parade ground» at Fort Rapier «Thousands of putteed legs would stamp or turn about, and the glittering bayonets would eddy to and fro across the brilliant square» (8), and immediately adds, «In the town itself the streets were prickly with waxed moustaches. Blanco and brass polish stood high on the list of life's necessities.» In this way he juxtaposes the prickliness of the moustaches with the bayonets, and the brilliance of military life with Blanco and brass polish, on which, it is implied, it very much depends. The Imperial Hotel, also, with its mornings and afternoons made «liquid among potted plants and wicker chairs with the music of a Palm Court orchestra» is immediately juxtaposed on Sam Browne belts, whalebone waist-pinchers and the whine of violins. Strange collocations are also used to create humour and implicate irony. The shires and parishes of England are recalled «with thankful melancholy» by Piemburg's officers and their wives. The incongruous collocation of adjective and noun here, all the more forceful

by virtue of the oddness of such a combination, is explained a little further on by the narrator's account of where these people proceed from: «the terraced suburbs and semi-detached houses of South London», from which the ladies have been swept «to the grandeur of the lawns and shrubberies of Piemburg by the surprising good fortune of having married husbands ...» and the reader expects to see something like «of particular talent», or valour, or money, or anything that would be generally considered good fortune; but no, the narrator continues «whose mediocrity won for them the reward of being posted to this distant sliver of the Empire»⁹.

The narrator's intention is, to say the least, critical. It constitutes a very defined point of view and a very defined attitude, the fictional world of the novel being seen principally through his eyes. Though the characters themselves also act as focalizers on many occasions, Kommandant van Heerden being the chief of these, they are seen constantly by the reader through a lens coloured by the narrator's very explicit stance, which is shared, at least in the first instance, by none of them. In this case, therefore, the narrator forms an identification group with the reader which is not shared fully with any of the characters¹⁰, but which is nonetheless very much present, and from which the humour of the novel is to be appreciated. The narrator's attitude to his characters may be well exemplified by his presentation of his main character, Kommandant van Heerden. This character is not presented at the beginning of the novel as is the case in all those novels in which a character is to act as the main focalizer, but at the beginning of the second chapter, the first chapter being devoted entirely to the narrator, which, in the general framework for this type of novel, goes to confirm our former statement as to the importance of the narrator's viewpoint. The Kommandant is, however, the first of the characters presented, and the one to whom most space is devoted, so that the reader is immediately made to conclude that he is to be the protagonist. Chapter Two thus opens with the following statement, which is the amply elaborated on by the narrator:

«Kommandant van Heerden had few illusions about himself and a great many about everything else. And it was thanks to these illusions that he found himself in charge of the Police station in Piemburg»(10).

The narrator then launches into an intercrossing network of ironies and incongruities which makes for a discourse richly textured as to humour.

The fact that the narrator is not going to recruit the reader's sympathy for his protagonist is indicated by the external point of view from which he is treated: «it had been felt at Police Headquarters in Pretoria that, while Kommandant van Heerden's appointment might push the city's crime rate up, it would at least serve to lower the waves of violence and theft that had followed his posting to other more enterprising towns. Besides, Piemburg deserved the Kommandant»(10). The narrator implies that Kommandant van Heerden, who is supposed to be in charge of the maintaining of law and order, causes waves of violence and theft. This is obviously incongruous and causes a problem for the reader, who however, in the light of the previous chapter, now knows that he is working within a humorous genre, so that things are not necessarily to be taken literally, since double interpretations, irony, etc must be allowed for. However, the following proposition proffered by the narrator, that van Heerden is imposed on Piemburg as the Government's revenge for continuing to fly the Union Jack from the town hall, seems to reinforce rather than solve the incongruity. Van Heerden, therefore, is considered a menace by his superiors. He, in his turn, being a man with «few illusions about himself», thinks that he has been sent to Piemburg because he has a deep understanding of the British, with whom he believes he has something intimately in common so that if he could «have chosen his place of birth, its time and nationality, he would have plumped for Piemburg in 1890 and the heart of an English gentleman». Given what we have already been told about the inhabitants of Piemburg, and putting together the narrator's proposition and the context, the implicatures about Van Heerden, and his illusions are fairly obvious. He has no illusions about himself because if he thinks he is like the colonial British of Piemburg (i.e. conventional, mediocre, middle class, snobbish and stupid), he is, it is implied, quite right. But he has a great many illusions about other things in that obviously, his admiration for the British, though based on a sense of identification, cannot be based on the same judgement as that of the narrator, which if we follow the novel with humour, is ours at least for the course of its duration. Therefore the very first proposition in the chapter constitutes an ironic and humorous illocutionary act since it does not entail as it usually does an internal approach to a character, but rather a completely external narratorial judgement. We do not realise this, however, until we have appreciated to the full the implicatures provided later in the chapter, which make us go back and reinterpret what we have already read¹¹.

In any case, as usual in humorous literature, we are dealing with strong implicature, so that it is difficult that the reader should miss the implications intended by the narrator. Thus van Heerden is called stupid and inept at least three times, discounting the first, when we do not yet know the reasons for his bosses' evidently bad opinion of him and are puzzled by the fact that a police officer should send up the crime rate, and each time we laugh. Another one of the reasons for van Heerden's appointment to Piemburg is «the reputation of his grandfather, Klaasie van Heerden, who had served under General Cronje at the Battle of Paardeberg and had been shot by the British for refusing to obey the order of his commanding officer to surrender»(10). Again, this appears incongruous when put with Police Headquarter's other reasons for sending him to Piemburg, and also when considered in the context of the Kommandant's love and admiration for the British. This incongruity, however, is solved by yet another as this «patriotic» deed is further described: «He had instead stayed put in a hole in the bank of the Modder River and shot down twelve soldiers of the Essex Regiment who were relieving themselves there some forty-eight hours after the last shot had been fired»(10). The narrator's slight change of register here from the formal, almost heroic one in which the previous proposition has been expressed to the more colloquial one of «stayed put in a hole» already signals the fact that the previous statement is not to be taken at face value, and this is confirmed by the specification that the deed of valour has consisted in shooting twelve soldiers who «were relieving themselves». The scatological element brought in here belongs clearly to the comic repertoire so amply employed by Sharpe. The effect is rounded off by the explanation that Klaasie had in fact been asleep during the battle, and therefore knew nothing about the order to cease fire, a fact which «was discounted by the British during his trial and by later generations of Afrikaans historians. Instead he was accounted a hero who had been martyred for his devotion to the Boer Republics and as a hero he was revered by Afrikaans Nationalists all over South Africa»(11). Here we find a classical joking structure based on the word «discounted» which is given a double meaning by its context so that both semantic connotations are suggested simultaneously and incongruously; on the one hand the term means held as of no excuse when referred to the British, and on the other held as of no importance when referred to the Afrikaans.

«It was this legend,» the narrator tells us, «that had helped Kommandant van Heerden to his present rank. It had taken a long time for his incompetence to live down the reputation for cunning that had been bequeathed him by his grandfather, and by that time it was too late for Police Headquarters to do anything about his inefficiency except put him in command of Piemburg»(11). In this way the incongruity of Pretoria's third reason for the Kommandant's posting is fully solved through a series of propositions that implicate an attitude of detached and multiple irony on the part of the narrator, as well as the fact that van Heerden's incompetence is carried in his genes. The legend of cunning and heroism which surrounds his grandfather is based on an episode of dire ineptitude. Van Heerden's grandfather was a bungler and he is too.

The implicatures entailed in the narrative up to this point are almost exclusively based on the narrator's omniscience. Though he now turns to his protagonist's point of view the texture of the discourse reveals that the narrator's stance continues to be omniscient, and, above all, ironically detached:

«The Kommandant believed that he was one of the few Afrikaaners who really understood the English mind. ... There was something about their blundering stupidity that appealed to him. It called out to something deep within his being. He couldn't say exactly what it was, but deep called to deep If he had one regret, it was that his own mediocrity had never had the chance to express itself with anything like the degree of success that had attended the mediocrity and muddleheadedness of the rulers of the British Empire. Born an English gentleman in Victorian Britain he might well have risen to the rank of field-marshal. His military ineptitude would surely have been rewarded by constant and rapid promotion.»(11)

The propositions expressed here, we must conclude from our knowledge of human nature, cannot possibly really translate van Heerden's point of view, however few illusions he has about himself, and however much he is aware that «his appointment was not due to his success in the field of criminal investigation»(10). This is an implicature which is easily derived from the interplay and juxtaposition of unexpected and incongruous elements such as mediocrity/success, mediocrity and

muddleheadedness/rulers of the British Empire, military ineptitude/rewarded by constant and rapid promotion, as well as by the more explicit statement about the blundering stupidity of the English calling out to something deep (blundering stupidity) within van Heerden. The humour here lies in the incongruity between the Kommandant's point of view and that of the narrator, and, in turn, between the former's view of the matter, (ironically quite correct, it is implied by the narrator), and the latter's, as well as in the implied comment on van Heerden. The narrator's external point of view is embedded in the Kommandant's internal one, and the implicatures reach not only the latter, but also, again, the nature of British colonialism as a whole. In this way the reader is made aware of the fact that, though van Heerden may serve as a focalizer, and though he may be, in effect, the principal character in the novel, the point of view will not be his, but that of the narrator.

Riotous Assembly contains none of the palpable reference to everyday life and normal experience present in other humorous novels such as the Wilt series, or most of those written by Kingsley and Martin Amis, or William Boyd, to name a few examples. Its relation to reality is totally different, being based on the reader's acquaintance with an external context rather than on the internal context created by the novel itself. In *Lucky Jim* or *Wilt*, for example, the reader is gradually manipulated through the interaction of textual and external contexts into arriving at a series of conclusions about possible external references and criticism or comment on the part of the implied author. It is the context provided by the discourse in its development which guides the reader to make a series of connections and deductions which situate it in relationship with his life and experience. The narrator's wish to have the reader make these connections is constantly indicated in the discourse itself. Hence, for example, his adherence to one only point of view in *Lucky Jim*, and his constant reference to easily-recognisable situations and elements of external reality in both this novel and in *Wilt*.

In *Riotous Assembly* there is no pretence at this sort of realism. Its connection with reality is established at the beginning through implicature, together with the narrator's attitude. The knowing reader is given a great many hints which help him to recognise the external situation the narrator is referring to - the historical circumstances and recent political situation

of South Africa - and it is this background, initially established, that gives meaning to the novel and to the extreme distortion that characterises it. A specific distance, as well as specific bonds with reality are established by centering the plot on the fictional Piemburg, which is, however, connected by rail to Johannesburg, and by history to British colonial expansion and the Boer War. Both this distance and these bonds are representative of those which are maintained throughout the novel. The narrator presupposes from the beginning that the implied reader knows what he is talking about, and is aware of the political situation reigning in South Africa until very recently, and will therefore be capable of making the immediate connections with the real situation implied in the attitude of his characters towards «blacks», for example, or in Verkramp's anti-communist witch-hunts for the Bureau of State Security in Pretoria and Van Heerden's fear of falling under his suspicions.

All this, of course, gives the narrator leeway for a treatment of character and plot in which all resemblance to «reality» is utterly distorted by means of gross exaggeration and caricaturisation. The reader is plunged in a surrealistic world of violence and extreme incongruity in which all considerations of the possible or probable are left aside. It is, indeed, we think, this total absence of «realism», together with the narrator's attitude of critical detachment, that allow the reader the distance necessary to laugh at many of the distinctly gory and objectively horrifying passages in the novel. As Heather McDonald writes, «the three major police figures in *Riotous Assembly* represent generalised fixations - all destructive. The thoughts and actions of all three represent perverted, instinctive obsession, for van Heerden is blindly Anglophilic, Verkramp remains a 'knee-jerk' anti-communist, and Els is simply a sadistic and murderous racist» (1993, 21). As in the case of Kommandant van Heerden, already commented on, most of the characters are first presented through description by the omniscient narrator, who has established his authority on the performative level in the first chapter of the work. This authority and the initial descriptions are thereafter confirmed by the implicatures generated through the words, actions, thoughts and reactions of the characters throughout the novel. The plot, triggered off by a telephone call from the elderly, British Miss Hazelstone of Jacaranda Park to say that she has just murdered Fivepence, her Zulu cook, leads to a series of situations which often border on farce through the narrator's extremely liberal use of incongruous and

utterly improbable factors. Hence, for example, situations such as that of Els' fight with Miss Hazelstone's Dobermann Pinscher, described as a battle of equals:

«The dog, which had at first bitten Konstabel Els' ankle to the bone, had transferred its attentions to his groin and once there had developed all the symptoms of lockjaw. Els, conservative as ever, and having nothing else to bite on except the Dobermann's backside, was applying his knowledge, gained in several thousand interrogations of Africans, of what he cheerfully called 'ball-bashing' but which in the autopsy reports on some of his patients was termed severe contusions to the testicles».(22-23)

The two are eventually separated, but only by the application of ammonia to their snouts, and it is Els who first loses his hold, the dog continuing in his «attachment to Els' groin», to the accompaniment of «the agonized screams of [the] assistant». To these the Kommandant turns a deaf ear, and immediately orders Els «to retrieve the remains of Fivepence from the lawn and from what was clearly an unscaleable blue gum, an order which the Konstabel tended to dispute on the grounds that he was in need of immediate and prolonged hospital treatment for multiple and severe dog bite, not to mention battle fatigue and shell shock»(25). However, despite the Konstabel's protests, he obviously carries out the orders, for when van Heerden shortly afterwards looks to see what he is doing, he has «regained his head for heights, not to mention Fivepence's, and had somehow managed to reach the ground where he was busily seeking promotion by kicking the Indian butler into collecting the scattered remains of the Zulu cook and putting them into a pillowcase»(31). The narrator's recreation in violence, incongruity, and sheer improbability here need hardly be commented on.

In *Riotous Assembly*, indeed, the narrator's discourse is characterised by an exploitation of violence and destruction well symbolized by the dire effects of the late Judge Hazelstone's elephant gun¹², and adorned by an abundance of incongruous detail often created by the description of minor contingencies, and often by the fact that most of the time none of the characters know what the others are doing and that the action is told through constantly changing focalisers by the omniscient narrator. Given the characters he is dealing with and their total ineptitude, this affords

him the possibility of playing with the (mis)interpretations given by each to what is going on around him, thus creating jokes like that of «the Ming»(55), or Els' view of Verkramp and his two volunteers reconnoitering in camouflage as «three remarkably agile agglomerations of vegetable matter [which] scuttled across the road»(56). The narrator uses his omniscience and therefore the reader's awareness of the overall context at each point to create jokes based on multiple incongruities, drawing on all possible sources of humour. Hence, for example, in the scene we have just mentioned, Luitenant Verkramp is bitten by a spider. This is a detail which, in the context of wholesale battle, should hardly seem relevant, but which is magnified with almost sadistic insistence:

«The spider that had bitten him on the nose as he tried to disentangle himself from its web had been of a size and malevolence he would never have believed possible if he hadn't seen it with his own one eye, the other being obscured by the spider's three feet which it had fastened there to give it a good foothold while it injected 50 cc of toxic venom into his left nostril. ... The poison spread so fast and with such evident effect that even after the giant spider had been good enough to let go of his cornea he still couldn't see out of it. That side of his face was pulsating alarmingly and his sinus appeared to be filled with some caustic liquid.»(56)

The description of the huge spider hanging on to Verkramp's cornea and injecting poison into his nostril has the grotesque effect of something taken out of a cartoon. At the same time, Els perceives the Luitenant's predicament in rather different terms:

«The sounds reaching him from the hedgerow seemed to indicate that his enemies were already suffering some trepidation. To the sounds of breaking twigs that had accompanied their progress were now added the occasional whimper and what appeared to be chronic catarrh»(57).

There are various sources of incongruity here: Verkramp and company are described as a hedgerow; camouflage is designed not to be seen or noticed, and the Luitenant and his men are obviously highly conspicuous, among other things because of the noise they make; and it seems hardly apt that a character like Verkramp should «whimper»¹³, while the description of his laboured breathing as sounding like «chronic catarrh» suggests a «script» to the reader hardly in place in this context, and creates

humour through the mechanism of «bisociation of ideas» described by Koestler and Raskin.

Intertwined with the activities of the police characters are various other «story-lines» which contribute strongly to give the novel its particular tone of farcical humour. One of these is Miss Hazelstone's account of her «passional» relationship with the unfortunate Fivepence. Despite her age and apparent primness (she is described as «a thin, angular, almost frail, elderly lady dressed in dark chiffon with lace to her throat»(20)), she has been engaged in an affair with what turns out to have been a transvestite Zulu(91), founded on a shared rubber fetish, which, despite «little incompatibilities in [their] attitudes, not to mention [their] physical attributes» and Fivepence's propensity to «*ejaculatio praecox*»(29), has proved satisfactory thanks first to the application of three contraceptives «one on top of the other, to desensitize his glans penis», and finally to the administering to the same part of Novocaine injections used by Miss Hazelstone's dentist as local anaesthetics¹⁴. Despite the fact that the relationship has presumably had other aspects (Miss Hazelstone's «catalogue of Fivepence's virtues as a sentimental and spiritual companion» is mentioned on at least two occasions), the narrator glosses over these, and concentrates instead on the more scandalous sides of the affair, outlined above. This is done for various reasons. In the first place, a description of the «spiritual» aspects of the affair might easily introduce a note of sentimentality which would be completely out of place in the narration, whereas the incongruity introduced by its physical aspects maintains the distortion which characterises the novel as a whole. In the second place, the lavish detail in which the old lady describes her relationship to van Heerden produces humour not only because of its intrinsic content, but also because of the Kommandant's shock, disgust, and distinct unwillingness to hear such things from the lips of one who has, up to this point, been his model of uprightness and distinction. Indeed, one of the elements which produces humour is what in Pragmatics would be considered an excess of information¹⁵. Much more detail is given by Miss Hazelstone than is strictly speaking necessary or than Kommandant van Heerden wants to know. It is he who reacts like a prim old lady:

«Kommandant van Heerden didn't think. He was doing his best not to listen. He rose unsteadily from his chair and closed the french doors that led out onto the stoep. What this ghastly old woman

was telling him must on no account reach the ears of Konstabel Els. ... the Kommandant paced the room, frenziedly searching his mind for some means of hushing the case up.»¹⁶

Several other themes are used by the narrator specifically, we think, to create humour and grotesqueness and add to the farcical tone of the novel. The first, and perhaps most prevalent of these is Rubber. Integrated in the plot by Miss Hazelstone's fetish, it gives rise to such scenes as that in which Kommandant van Heerden sleeps in the old lady's latex sheets and, unconscious of the nature of the material by which he is surrounded, sweats so profusely that he thinks he has been guilty of incontinence and, full of an embarrassment totally incongruous in the figure of a redoubtable South African policeman, hastily gets into bed again to try to dry it out with his body heat(75-77). Later on, forcibly attired in an over-tight pink latex nightdress, he is virtually raped by Miss Hazelstone dressed in a salmon pink double-breasted latex suit with a yellow pinstripe, shirt of white latex and «mauve rubber tie complete with polka dots»¹⁷, an attire which she is to wear again later on in the novel when she tries to hand herself in to the police(125). She uses, as a coercitive weapon, a Novocaine injection. The scene ends when van Heerden, still attached to the large double bed to which Miss Hazelstone has tied him, throws himself out of the bedroom window, and is left strung up on high to the view of the aghast Sergeant de Kock (his name is particularly suggestive, given the context), who is standing below, and who judges, quite rightly, that «the corpulent creature in the pink nightdress who squirmed and struggled against the wall of the house some twenty feet up» cannot be Miss Hazelstone, since «she wasn't fat like that, she wasn't hairy like that, and above all, he felt sure she didn't have reproductive organs like that»(106). The Bishop of Barotseland, also, is made to spend most of the time clad exclusively in a rubber bathing cap, and at the very end of the novel an unnamed couple travelling on a plane for London is rendered immediately recognisable to the reader as the Bishop and Miss Hazelstone by the «catalogue of rubber goods» the lady is reading(202).

Another of the leitmotifs used ubiquitously by the narrator to create humour through its total incongruity is the figure of a vulture first seen «waiting with evident prescience» in the branches of an oak tree¹⁸ near the scene of the wholesale slaughter wrought by Els on the South African

Police corps, and shortly afterwards sighted by the Bishop of Barotseland as he floats in the swimming pool of Jacaranda Park, and taken by him as a manifestation of the Almighty. It is thereafter seen hovering over scenes of bloodshed and eliciting the reader's amusement by the various (always ludicrous) guises in which it appears. Finally it disintegrates, struck by a volley of bullets, in a shower of lights, feathers and police buttons, all over Sergeant de Kock, who staggers about the garden in a state of shock «enveloped in a cloud of feathers and draped with what appeared to be the half-digested contents of a stomach that had recently indulged in an enormous meal of raw meat»(106), so that to Kommandant van Heerden, hanging from Miss Hazelstone's bedroom window in his pink latex nightie he looks as if he had «just emerged from a nasty accident in a turkey abattoir»(109). De Kock's uniform, covered in feathers and lights, continues to be used for comic effect in later passages, until it is finally worn by the Bishop of Barotseland in the farcical identification parade set up to inculcate him with the murder of Fivepence and the slaughter of twenty-one policemen(117).

The reader is therefore plunged into a text that is notable for its farcical treatment of character and plot, which are in no way credible from a normal, every-day, «realistic» point of view. In such a context the positioning of the narrator is important. As an omniscient narrator he does not partake consistently of any one character's point of view or solicit our sympathy for that character, but jumps with equal detachment from one to the other. Thus what is played with here is the fact that the narrator shares his omniscience with the reader, who knows everything that is going on, in contrast to the characters involved, each of whom has a very limited knowledge. This use of «dramatic irony» creates a great deal of humour, since the characters' interpretations are often incongruous in the extreme. It is also significant on the level of the implicatures generated by the discourse, since we are dealing, most of the time, with a wide-scale police operation whose total lack of coordination hardly says much on behalf of this force. However, and most important, the reader is thus placed on a plane above the characters which he shares with the narrator, and this communion in itself makes for the formation of an identification group between them. This identification is reinforced by the patently ridiculous way in which the characters are portrayed and the ludicrous situations in which they are placed, both of which preclude any sort of sympathy with

them. At the same time, the running jokes we have referred to above, while being appreciated by the reader because of the sympathy established with the narrator, simultaneously help the latter to maintain the relationship between the two, since the reader's recognition and appreciation of them creates a complicity with the narrator which is renewed every time they come up.

It would not, however, be altogether true to say that the reader does not sympathise at all with any of the characters of *Riotous Assembly*. As the novel progresses, we do come to see two of them in a different light. One of these is Jonathan Hazelstone, the Bishop of Barotseland, who is placed in a sympathetic situation principally because of the way in which he is victimised by van Heerden and the South African institutions, but also because on a subliminal level he is manipulated by the narrator into a position closer to that of the reader and his own by the fact that he shares the encyclopaedic knowledge of both, whereas the police characters who deal with him do not, and is therefore the source of a great deal of the humour directed against them. Something similar may be said of the narrator's treatment of Miss Hazelstone, hardly a sympathetic character in principle, but one who is also subtly brought nearer to the identification class of reader and narrator by the same means as those used in the case of her brother. Also, of all the characters in the novel she is the only one in full possession of the truth which the others try to distort (the Bishop is also later put in a similar situation), and furthermore, the only one who questions the working of the world she is immersed in. In contraposition to van Heerden's acclaim of her as an arbiter of taste, the «doyenne of English society in Zululand» and practically a «national institution», she says, «If people choose to follow my advice to put maroon wallpaper next to orange curtains, who am I to say them nay? People who believe that having a pink skin makes them civilized, while having a black one makes a man a savage, will believe anything»(141). Her statement undermines radically van Heerden's deepest convictions, but, most noticeably, it is made extensive to South African «society» in general. Miss Hazelstone says of her articles on «fashion and tasteful living»: «I had great fun thinking up the most awful combinations of colours. Everybody took my recommendations seriously too. I think I can honestly say that I have made more homes unliveable in than all the termites in South Africa». In the context of the implicatures generated by the narrator's

discourse the reader interprets these assertions as damning to the basic criteria on which South African society is founded, and as an explicit statement of the criticism implied in the text thus far. Miss Hazelstone, therefore, despite her evident eccentricity, comes towards the end of the novel to constitute a voice which confirms the implicatures derived by the reader from the text, being thus brought into the identification group of the narrator and the reader. This, of course, causes us to reinterpret some of her attitudes, so that, for example, we see her treatment of van Heerden and company not only as a manifestation of snobbishness towards social inferiors, but also as one of real disdain towards figures representative of the society in which she lives.

It is, indeed, the fact that the implicatures derived from the narrator's discourse go beyond individuals and individual situations and incident to sweeping comments about the South African situation that removes it from the category of farce into that of satire. On a global level of reading the accumulation of passages generating implicatures which point to political or social comment overrides the grotesque caricaturisation of individuals such as van Heerden, Verkramp and Els, and causes the reader to put them into perspective as «tip-of-the-iceberg» representatives of a situation that is profoundly vitiated. Hence, for example, the importance of passing comments such as that made on South African justice in the passage concerning the native milk-delivery boy on whom Els tries out Luitenant Verkramp's electrical-therapy machine(13-14). After prolonged application of «electric-shock therapy» to various parts of the boy's body, the latter is willing to confess to anything, thus proving the utility and efficacy of the new machine: «At that point Luitenant Verkramp confessed himself satisfied with the experiment and the milk-delivery boy was charged with being out without a Pass, obstructing the police in the course of their duties and resisting arrest, which charges got him six months' hard labour and satisfied the magistrate that his injuries were justified if not actually self-inflicted»(14. My underlining). The implicatures generated in this passage are rotundly confirmed in the course of Jonathan Hazelstone's trial. He has, it is true, been framed by the police and tortured into signing a false confession. But the crimes he confesses to are patently ridiculous and unbelievable. However, the judge is heavily prejudiced, the attorney for the defence inept and accommodating, the jury «hand picked from close relatives of the murdered policemen»(154), and the

Bishop's confession is manipulated by the Bureau of State Security in Pretoria, which «decided to intervene in the interests of Western civilisation incarnate in the Republic of South Africa and using the powers bestowed on it by Parliament, ordered the suppression of nine-tenths of the confession», thus rendering it totally damning. The system, it is clearly implied, is totally corrupt, and its victims have no hope of surviving.

Other generalising implicatures are generated by the text on the subject of apartheid, and constantly confirm and reinforce each-other throughout, from the first pages, when Els describes killing a black cook as «garbage disposal»(16), to the point where Jonathan Hazelstone is found guilty of murder «twenty-one and a quarter times over»¹⁹, to that other, near the end of the novel, where van Heerden rotundly rejects the transplant of a «kaffir's heart» and accuses Dr Erasmus of being «an enemy of South Africa» and «a bloody Communist» for even suggesting such an idea on what are (to the reader) perfectly reasonable medical grounds(177-178). Most direct are Miss Hazelstone's biting comments when in Fort Rapier Mental Hospital, transcribed (significantly) in the narrator's voice: «When she looked around her, there didn't seem to be any significant difference between life in the mental hospital and life in South Africa as a whole. Black madmen did all the work, while white lunatics lounged about imagining they were God»(149). Also significant is the narrator's recreation of passages of the history of the conquest of South Africa, such as his description of the Battle of Bulundi(19-20), the implicatures of which are reinforced at the end of the novel by Miss Hazelstone's pageant at Fort Rapier in which «the history of South Africa unfurled before the spectators in a series of blood-curdling battles in which the blacks were invariably massacred by the whites»(185).

In *Riotous Assembly*, therefore, a political reality that is tragic is taken as a starting point, and is transformed into satirical comedy of the most extreme sort. One is inclined to think that the extremity of the reference justifies that of its referent. The distortion of reality visible in the narrator's treatment of his theme seems symbolic of the distortion of human values and rationality present in the «real» situation. Although we are constantly provoked into laughter as we read the text, the prevailing impression that remains once we have finished it is one of violence, stupidity, ignorance and corruption. As Thomas Nollet writes, in this work Sharpe «deliberately avoids presenting his character sketches realistically

and concentrates instead on making them ludicrous in their foibles, hypocrisies and vices. ...All of them are in different aspects, insane. Such is Sharpe's method of satirizing racism. He creates a deranged world which is exasperatingly ludicrous in its distortions but which depicts nonetheless the insanity he feels informing and supporting South African society»(1992, 11 & 13). In his vision of South Africa, indeed, we are made to feel that the implied author subscribes entirely to Miss Hazelstone's words when she says «One has to conclude that insanity is a poor substitute for reality»(149)

1. Merrie Bergmann, 1991.

2. p.10. Since we have a third-person, omniscient narrator, on the performative level he does have the authority to assert this. See Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, 1986, p.103: «A covert extradiegetic narrator, especially when he is also heterodiegetic, is likely to be reliable», and Marie-Laure Ryan, 1981, p.534: «Since unreliability cannot be demonstrated in impersonal narration, the impersonal narrator enjoys absolute authority for the fictional world. This absolute authority does not derive from a literary convention, ... but from a logical necessity». This fact is reinforced here by the narrator's implied claim that he knows what is under the appearance of Piemburg.

3. p.7. There is nothing in the first paragraph to suggest that the narrator's attitude is in any way deviant. The performative mode is that of assertion, and the only hint that it might be otherwise lies in the rhyme *jacarandas / verandahs*, but since there is nothing in the context to confirm his suspicions, the reader passes over it.

4. An isolated case of death by tsetse fly or malarial mosquito would have been acceptable within the genre. But the narrator generalises: «And as the great steam engines blustered up the winding gradient to Empire View, ... carrying with them their august burden to an early death by tsetse fly or malarial mosquito ...» and «monocled and moustached men would gaze serenely ...»

5. The words «A gem, a gem set in a green and yellow ring» echo ironically Queen Victoria's reference to India as «the jewel in the crown»,

but, of course, without their symbolic content - one thing is the crown and quite another a ring, let alone a «green and yellow ring», which seems rather a stretched metaphor.

6. This new interpretation is explicitly confirmed by the narrator slightly further on when he says describing the social structure of Piemburg and with reference to the Boers: «At the bottom of the scale came private soldiers in the pay corps. Below these pariahs there was nothing left. ... What happened down there was simply nobody's concern. All that one had to know was that somewhere even lower than the loyal Zulus and the treacherous Pondos there were the Boers. ... Boers didn't wash. Boers were cowards. Boers were stupid. Boers were an excrescence that blocked the way to Cairo. Piemburg ignored the Boers. And then came the Boer War and as the Boers shot the monocles out of the eyes of the officers of Fort Rapier, waiting deliberately for a semaphore reflection of the sun to signal a suitable monocled target, a new respect was born in Piemburg. The Boer could shoot straight. The Boer was cunning.» (p.9.)

7. See Sperber and Wilson's definition of irony: «Irony results when the thought entertained by the speaker is a more or less literal interpretation of an attributed thought, and the speaker, moreover, dissociates herself from this thought with ridicule or scorn» (1988, 147).

8. And also of all that preceded. It gives comic dimension to the American's description of Piemburg: «Half the size of New York cemetery and twice as dead», trenchantly categorical and to the point, and incongruous amidst the narrator's carefully qualified assertions, full of verbs implying a lack of total commitment to the propositions presented by the speaker, and to the also incongruously poetic rhyme of «Its roads are lined with jacarandas and its gardens are lush with flowering dark verandahs». And it confirms the reader's suspicion of the presence of humour behind the elegiac description of Piemburg's grotesque development «in a rash of colonnade and red Victorian brick»(p.7).

9. pp.8-9. On the level of the micro-speech-act this is similar to what Sharpe has already done on a larger scope. Also note «Many would never return and those who stayed and were not buried in the military cemetery in Fort Rapier would build their houses as close to the Governor's mansion as their seniority [...] and overdrafts allowed»(p.8).

10. Though two of them (Miss Hazelstone and her brother, the Bishop of Barotseland) are, in the course of the novel, brought to partake in the same group.

11. See Suls' account of the problem-solving strategies employed in processing a joke (1972, 87), and Raskin's description of the working of the «script-switch-trigger» (1985). Appreciating humour is described as similar to reading a text, except that there comes a point where incongruity arises and then the receiver has to go back and re-read.

12. For example when Els fires from the blockhouse its effects are described in the following way: «The great wrought-iron gates of Jacaranda Park lay a twisted and reeking heap of partially molten and totally unidentifiable metal. The stone gateposts had disintegrated. The boars rampant sculpted in granite that had surmounted the posts would ramp no more, while the roadway itself bore witness to the heat of the gases propelling the shells in the shape of four lines of molten and gleaming tarmac which pointed down to what had once been the thick bushes that had obscured his view of his adversaries. ... The cover his enemies had used was quite gone. The hillside was bare, barren and scorched and it was doubtful if it would ever regain its original look»(p.48).

13. This narrator frequently uses terms whose semantic scripts are totally incongruous with the surrounding context. Thus, for example, members of the police forces give «a nervous giggle» (65).

14. p.30. The effect of Miss Hazelstone's description of her sexual practises with Fivepence is heightened by the implicatures generated by the text. If she says that the three contraceptives were used to retard Fivepence's ejaculations but that they «tended to restrict his circulation a teeny bit and he did complain that he didn't feel very much. after an hour I would get him to take one off and that helped him a bit and finally he would take the second one off and we would have a simultaneous orgasm», then the reader jumps to the conclusion that with the use of Novocaine sexual intercourse must have lasted as long as the effects of the anaesthetic did!

15. Grice's Cooperative Principle is broken under what he denominates the Maxim of Quantity: «Do not make your contribution [to a communicative exchange] more informative than is required». (1975, 308).

16. p.28. What most preoccupies van Heerden, of course, are the possible repercussions which the revelation of Miss Hazelstone's affair might have on South African society: «Miss Hazelstone and Jacaranda House were practically national institutions. Her column on refined living and etiquette appeared in every newspaper in the country, not to mention her frequent articles in the glossier women's journals. If the doyenne of English society in Zululand were known to have murdered her black cook, or if falling in love with black cooks was to come into the category of refined living and the fashion spread, as well it might, South Africa would go coloured in a year. And what about the effect on the Zulus themselves when they learnt that one of their number had been having it off with the granddaughter of the great Governor, Sir Theophilus Hazelstone, in Sir Theophilus' own kraal, Jacaranda Park, freely, practically legally, and at her insistence? Kommandant van Heerden's imagination swept on from wholesale rape by thousands of Zulu cooks, to native rebellion and finally race war». The implicatures of this passage, in view of South Africa's regime of apartheid, are obvious, despite the ludicrous nature of the situation created by the narrator's discourse and underlined in this passage by the hyperbolic generalisations about Zulu cooks and the incongruity of the ideas connected with them. The notion of a Zulu cook in itself seems to us pretty incongruous - Zulus are normally connected with war-like activities - let alone that of a transvestite Zulu cook.

17. p.98. One of the characteristics of Sharpe's narrators is their way of getting carried away with what they are describing and of heaping on effects in really thick layers. In this passage, as in many others, we have, again, gross exaggeration and insistence on the most incongruous details, here not only of situation, but also visual (in the horribly clashing colours).

18. p.51. Note the incongruity here. One hardly associates vultures with oak trees.

19. p.155. The first figure (twenty-one) refers to the policemen he is supposed to have killed; the quarter is the Zulu cook.

BIBLIOGRAPHY.

Sharpe, Tom, 1971. *Riotous Assembly*. London: Pan Books.

Bergmann, Merrie, 1991. «Metaphorical Assertions». In Steven Davies (ed) *Pragmatics: A Reader*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 485-494.

English, James E. 1986. «The Laughing Reader: A New Direction for Studies of the Comic». In *Genre XIX*: 129-154.

Grice, H.P. 1975. «Logic and Conversation». In Cole and Morgan (eds) *Studies in Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts*. New York: Academic Press, 41-58.

Koestler, Arthur, 1989 [1964]. *The Act of Creation*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Nollet, Thomas, 1992. «Tom Sharpe and the Satire of Racism: Caricature and Farce in 'Riotous Assembly'». *The Modern Language Association of America*, 11-18.

Raskin, Victor, 1985. *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*. Dordrecht and Boston: Reidel.

Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith, 1983. *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. London and New York: Methuen.

Ryan, Marie-Laure, 1981. «On the Why, What, and How of Generic Taxonomy». *Poetics* 10:2\3, 109-126.

- 1981. «The Pragmatics of Personal and Impersonal Fiction». *Poetics* 10, 517-539.

Sperber, D. and Wilson, D. 1988. «Representation and Relevance». In Kempson, R. (ed) *Mental Representations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Suls, Jerry M. 1972. «A Two-Stage Model for the Appreciation of Jokes and Cartoons: An Information-Processing Analysis». In Goldstein and McGhee (eds) *The Psychology of Humor*. New York: Academic Press, 81-100.