

British-European Entanglements

M.G. Sanchez' *The Escape Artist* and the Case of Gibraltar

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1. British-European Entanglements

The Brexit vote in June 2016 hit Europe like a small earthquake. While Britain had been known as one of the more reluctant members of the European Union, it was widely expected that the 'Remainers' would prevail. While politicians cast about for solutions to the problem created by the Leave victory, the British Euroscepticism (cf. Spiering) that led to this outcome is investigated with renewed urgency. In order to understand what happened, I would argue, we need to explore the history of Britain's riddled relationship with Continental Europe and the role that Europe has played in British discourses of national identity. When we deal with such large and complex entities as 'Europe', it is tempting to take recourse to geopolitical arguments implying an *a priori* existence of geographical first space believed to determine historical events and cultural dispositions. However, while geography is undeniably significant, if it *matters*, how, precisely, does it matter? Is it really true that Brexit is the inevitable consequence of the existence of the English Channel, which creates an 'island mentality' that makes the British incapable of being part of a European project (cf. Kamm/Sedlmayr)? Studying the impact of space on cultural identity reveals the 'pseudo-logic' of such 'geographical' arguments that is often deployed for political purposes. In fact, while the Channel is undoubtedly 'there', both connecting and dividing England and France in a liminal space, it is far from clear what that presence means. In order to trace this meaning, we have to look beyond political and economic history to analyse myth making, stereotyping, cultural memory and the cultural imaginary as crucial ingredients of what I will term 'cultural topographies': cultural

constellations that comprise material objects, historical sources, social interactions *and* geographical environments. Such cultural topographies can be analysed in a great variety of cultural artefacts including travel writing, guidebooks, and literary fictions (Habermann 2008 & 2018, Berberich et al. 2012 & 2015, Habermann/Keller, Riquet/Kollmann).

Focussing on literature, I take my cue from the French literary critic Bertrand Westphal, who has introduced the notion of *géocritique*, which emphasizes the epistemological role of fiction in a postmodern and poststructuralist context characterised by an “interpenetration of scientific and imaginative modes of thinking” (Prieto 14). Literature has subtle ways of evoking space and place, of creating worlds which critically reflect our own. Literature “can insert itself at a critical phase in the process of concept formation between that of the vague intuition and that of the established concept” (*ibid.*). The work of Westphal and others such as Franco Moretti and Barbara Piatti has given rise to ‘literary geography’ as a sub-field within literary criticism (Moretti, Piatti; see also Tally 2011, Tally/Battista 2016), taking the literary study of space and place beyond any traditional notions of setting and studying in detail how imaginative work helps to change the construction and perception of space. This latter aspect also links up with issues of embodiment and the sensory perception and evocation of space – an aspect foregrounded in the topo poetic approach to literature, which emphasizes the ‘presencing of place’ in language (see Moslund 2011 & 2015) and can thus add to an analysis of cultural topographies on the crucial levels of perception and affect. In what follows, I will first discuss the spatial theory that informs my argument about Britain and Europe in more detail and then proceed to a case study analysing the work of the Gibraltar writer M.G. Sanchez in which ‘the Rock’ emerges as the epitome of British-European entanglement. Gibraltar as a piece of Britain attached to the Iberian peninsula in the Mediterranean is a ‘topological hotspot’ which, as I will argue, is especially affected by Brexit, embodying the aporias of nationalist discourse.

2. Engaging with Space

Engaging with space presents two difficulties: first, space is such a complex notion that we are always simultaneously dealing with various layers of meaning impossible to disentangle, and second, related to the first problem, spatial analysis always needs to address the intrinsic relation between discourses, practices and the material world. Space, perhaps more so than time, is related to, if not to say contaminated by, material reality and referentiality, always begging the question how that ‘real’ is cognitively processed, conceptualised and experienced. To engage with space is thus to open a Pandora’s box of phenomenological, philosophical and also political problems. I would urge, however, although some think that the *spatial turn* has run its course as a critical paradigm (cf. Schneider), that it is still necessary to engage with space: in order to understand the intricate relationship between material reality, discourse and social interaction in the construction of our living environment, the study of culture needs to be informed by a “geographical sensibility” (Gilbert et al. 250), or as Edward Soja puts it in *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, “we are becoming increasingly aware that we are, and always have been, intrinsically spatial beings, active participants in the social construction of our embracing spatialities” (1). Thus, even when analysing cultural phenomena or artefacts without a blatantly obvious spatial dimension, one should always be aware of the frames, settings and environments of such phenomena or artefacts. The label I use for such complex and multi-level constellations is ‘cultural topographies’. Studying cultural topographies implies a need to study culture in terms of layered structures, including an attention to place, to local concerns, individual spatial practices and affective relations to the environment. Henri Lefebvre theorized those layered structures in his classic *The Production of Space*, where he demanded that we address firstly “the *physical* – nature, the Cosmos; secondly, the *mental*, including logical and formal abstractions; and, *thirdly*, the social” (11), which leads him to a conceptual triad of spatial practice, representations of space and representational spaces (33, 38), or “the Triad of the perceived, the

conceived and the lived” (39). Lefebvre’s thinking remains highly influential precisely because it does justice to the complexities of spatial analysis.¹

The impact of geography within a cultural topography can be assessed for example by analysing mythical landscapes, as in specifically English topographies (Berberich et al. 2012 & 2015, Habermann/Keller). If the focus of inquiry is relational, as in British discourses of Europe, it makes sense to address what I call ‘topological hotspots.’ Originally, topology had been a sub-field of mathematics which famously emerged in the early eighteenth century with Leonhard Euler’s solution of the ‘problem of the Königsberg bridges’. Asked whether it was possible to walk through the city of Königsberg, using every bridge only once and also doing a round trip, Euler proved that this was impossible since each four parts of the city were connected by an uneven number of bridges. Euler’s achievement was that he solved the problem in a mathematical and structural way rather than by trial and error, disregarding any local topographical specificities. Topology thus deals with space in a formal way, with relational connections, continuity and connectivity. Geometric shapes are seen as topologically equivalent, or homeomorphous, when they can be transformed into each other without cutting or gluing. Topology is highly important to modern science, to cybernetics, information technology and network theory. In chemistry, topology denotes the spatial organisation of macro-molecules, and in geography, it indicates the relations between geo-data which are crucial for Geographic Information Systems (GIS).

Transposed into the spatially informed study of culture, topology enables us to look beyond geographical first space in its infinite variety to certain structures and more abstract spatial features. Topological hotspots, I suggest, include strategically placed islands, frontier regions and disputed territory, rivers, passes on mountain ranges, coastlines, or such man-made features as divided cities, canals, roads, railway lines. It is no coincidence that the Suez crisis

¹ For a social analysis of space see also Massey 1994 & 2005 as well as Whatmore.

in 1956 was the historical event to bring it home to Britain and the world that Britain's power had diminished, that the British Empire was a thing of the past, that Britannia no longer ruled the waves. In a nutshell, it was their failure to control that topological hotspot, the Suez Canal, which grants access to the Northern Indian Ocean. The canal had been built in the latter part of the nineteenth century by the Suez Canal Company, and the crisis was prompted by the Egyptian president Nasser's nationalisation of the canal. Britain and France started an invasion, but had to back away due to American pressure, making it abundantly clear that the centre of gravity in the political world had shifted to the other side of the Atlantic. A fascinating history of the world could be written looking at such topological hotspots as the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus, the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Gibraltar, the Northwest Passage, the Strait of Malakka, the Torres Strait between Australia and Papua New Guinea, and the Suez and Panama Canals.² These spaces grant or limit access, which means that they are of strategic importance, both economically and in terms of military operations. They both connect and divide territories and peoples, often producing liminal spaces, border areas and contact zones which become the sites of constant negotiation, mingling, conflict and collaboration.

It is therefore evident that topology, which complements the notion of 'mapping' that had great critical currency over a number of years, is a highly suggestive and productive spatial concept. Having said that, it is problematic that the logic of topology is essentially binary; it carries a residue of old-style cybernetics in the dual notion of 'connected' or 'unconnected'. This logic has been complicated with recourse to Homi Bhabha's notion of 'third space' and Yuri Lotman's concept of the 'semiosphere', and I suggest that we add the notion of

² On this basis, I conducted a research project at Basel University from 2014 to 2017 that was devoted to British literary and cultural discourses of Europe, for which we singled out topologically significant spaces: individual PhD students focussed on the English Channel, the relation between East and West, including the divided Cold War Berlin, and on the Mediterranean. Rather than studying the relationship between Britain and France in terms of, for example, the historical and political emergence of nation states or focussing on cultural stereotypes, we looked at the discourses prominent in the contact zones. The following theses are in progress: Melanie Küng, "Bordering Europe: The Cultural and Literary Production of the English Channel in the 20th and 21st Centuries", Blanka Blagojevic, "Europe East and West: Literary Negotiations of a Blurry Borderline", and Daniela Keller, "Germany and Physics in Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century British Fiction".

‘entanglement’, a term originally derived from quantum physics, which has become rather a buzz word in cultural analysis in recent years. Mindful of ‘entanglement’ as a powerful metaphor for interconnectedness and focussing on the ‘topological hotspots’ previously identified, we can look at the ways in which nation states, cities or regions are interconnected within Europe, and how this in turn relates to the global perspective. Britain and Continental Europe should thus be seen as entangled, despite, or rather because of the presence of the English Channel, because of the ways in which Britain meets Europe in Ireland, and because of British Gibraltar.

3. European Faultlines and Contact Zones: The Politics of the Rock

Gibraltar is without a doubt a ‘topological hotspot’, situated at the Western end of the classical world, the site of the northern pillar of Hercules at the mouth of the Strait of Gibraltar which divides, and connects, the continents of Europe and Africa. The history of Gibraltar as a British Overseas Territory goes back to the War of the Spanish Succession; after Gibraltar was captured by an Anglo-Dutch force in 1704, the territory was ceded to Britain ‘in perpetuity’ in the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713. During the Great Siege of Gibraltar from 1779 to 1783 – one of the many sieges Gibraltar faced historically – Spain and France tried unsuccessfully to take Gibraltar from the British in order to break British control of the Mediterranean Sea. Despite everything, the British managed to hang on to the Rock, but since Spain still claims the territory, the Gibraltar issue continues to rankle and to produce tensions between Spain and Britain.

Gibraltar has an outstanding strategic importance since it is possible from there to control entrance to the Mediterranean Sea, and the peninsula has great natural defensive advantages. During World War II, the Royal Navy had an important base there, and in recent times, the geo-strategic importance of Gibraltar, which had dwindled somewhat in the latter part of the twentieth century, has increased again. Both in 1967 and in 2002, the Gibraltarian people voted to remain part of the United Kingdom. In response to the loyalty of the

Gibraltarians to Britain in the 1960s, the Spanish dictator Franco closed the border in 1969, severing all connections and creating another siege-like situation which turned the strategically placed Rock almost into a backwater of life. The border was only partially re-opened in 1982, and fully in 1985 as part of the European integration process. In the 1990s, the British Labour government's support of the process of devolution and self-determination led to a reform of the Gibraltarian constitution which took effect in 2006 and grants Gibraltarians greater freedom. The relationship with Spain remains problematic, however, and after the Brexit vote, the call for joint Spanish-British control, or a Spanish take-over has been renewed (cf. Abulafia, Aldrich/Connell, Archer, Holland).

Gibraltar as a truly European, if not a global crossroad thus remains a bone of contention within Europe, a pawn in inter-national power politics which focusses tensions between European nation states, most of all of course between Britain and Spain. More often than not, the Gibraltarian population of just over 30,000 people, along with thousands of workers from Spain, is at the receiving end of the power play, being besieged, being cut off or subjected to punitive border control mechanisms. There is a long history of habitation on the Rock; the peninsula was occupied in ancient times by the Vandals, the Goths, the Visigoths; it was part of the Byzantine Empire, under Muslim rule throughout the Middle Ages and then under Spanish rule from the early modern period until the British capture. Due to a long history of migration, the population is extremely mixed, but there are also Gibraltarian families of very long standing. In terms of language, apart from English and Spanish, a local vernacular is spoken, *llanito*, which is a mixture of Andalusian Spanish and English. The economy rests on tourism, online gambling and financial services. In many ways, Gibraltar is best characterised by the postcolonial concept of hybridity: there is a strong British element, transformed by Gibraltar's immediate Iberian environment. Faced with Spanish hostility and forced into the exclusionary logic of nation states, the population identifies overwhelmingly with Britain,

although an allegiance to Gibraltar is not prominently acknowledged, let alone embraced, in British society (see for example Boffey, Boffey/Rankin).

As the Gibraltar writer M.G. Sanchez relates, he faced hostility and xenophobia in Britain, both when he studied and lived in the UK years ago, and also more recently, after the surge of nationalism following the Brexit vote. Unsurprisingly, the Gibraltar loyalty to Europe is strong, since the cultural concept of Europe and the political commitment to EU integration are designed to ease the tensions between contending nation states. In the intrinsically racist language of ethnic and national purity, according to a binary, exclusionary logic and in the face of claims of precedence, Gibraltar is an anomaly; it should cease to exist, and its people truly belong nowhere. Once cultural hybridity is embraced, however, acknowledging the existence, and the rights of a culture and society which have evolved over hundreds of years, there is a place for Gibraltar, preferably as part of a united Europe. In this respect, Gibraltar could even be ahead of the queue, providing an example of lived European-ness. However, the wind is currently blowing from a different direction. Instead of celebrating the union, nation states, and most of all Britain, are seeking to disentangle themselves from it.

4. M.G. Sanchez, the Escape Artist

Sanchez is the writer who, both in his fiction and non-fiction, has most deeply and subtly explored the Gibraltar predicament. For him, salvaging the stories of the Rock is partly a political project: Following Chinua Achebe, Sanchez believes that if you do not tell your own stories, others will (Sanchez, website). But what takes precedence for Sanchez as a creative writer is the urge to explore the reservoir of stories, the rich sediment of lives that this small territory has to offer. Sanchez studied literature at the University of Leeds and wrote a PhD-thesis about dramatic depictions of anti-Spanish sentiment in Elizabethan times. He has travelled widely and lived in the UK, in Japan, and in India, always returning to his native Gibraltar. In his non-fiction, Sanchez has delved into the past, salvaging and recording

Gibraltar stories. Recently, he also published a personal memoir which tells the story of his own family, and the great difficulties they faced in 2013 during a phase of diplomatic hostilities when bringing the body of his father home after he had died of a heart attack in Spain (Sanchez 2016). Sanchez has written three novels to date – his first novel *The Escape Artist* (2013; reprinted 2015), which will be discussed below, as well as *Jonathan Gallardo* and *Solitude House*, both published in 2015, set in Gibraltar and telling the stories of two very different protagonists similarly haunted by Gibraltar's past.

The Escape Artist is a first person-narrative told from the perspective of a character called Brian Manrique, covering the period during the closure of the border from 1971 until the early 1980s. Manrique, coming from a humble background, wins a scholarship to go to Cambridge University to study French and Italian literature. Though his greatest dream has come true, the reticent and shy Manrique actually finds it extremely difficult to settle in Cambridge, battling intense feelings of homesickness for his safe and small home in Gibraltar. Crucially, *The Escape Artist* is the story of a friendship, as indicated in the opening sentence of the novel: “The first time I saw Henry Portas I was in the Philosophy section of Cambridge University library” (Sanchez 2013: 1). While Manrique and Henry Portas are entangled by the fact that they are fellow Gibraltarians, they are also each other's alter-egos: Manrique the reticent, humble scholarship boy; Portas from a rich dynasty of entrepreneurs, good-looking, athletic, sexually confident, adventurous and imaginative, transgressive and easy-going, a naturally predatory character in open rebellion against his family. Manrique is drawn out by Portas and eats the crumbs that fall from his table with a mixture of devotion and resentment. The phase of intense friendship in Cambridge is followed by profound estrangement when both men are back in Gibraltar, with Portas, despite not taking his degree, successfully involved in his father's business, and Manrique living with his mother in a government flat, languishing in an insignificant library job. After years of stasis and smouldering resentment, Manrique finally gets the opportunity to take revenge on Portas when the latter comes to him totally distraught,

admitting that he ruined the whole family through risky financial gambles and that his whole life was a sham. He asks Manrique to visit Portas' beloved, emotionally unstable sister Sophia in the family's country house in Opayar in the Spanish hills, to deliver an explanatory letter, keep her company and phone Portas immediately to confirm that all is well. Manrique does go to Opayar, but betrays Portas by not delivering the letter and sleeping with the young woman. After a while the news comes through that Portas has hanged himself. Manrique absolves himself from guilt and prepares to slip back into his insignificant life.

The trajectory of this novel is remarkable since it starts out as a coming-of-age story, a *Bildungsroman*, an amusing campus novel, only to take a sharp turn towards tragedy at the end. In the last section, the story goes completely off the rails: the text acquires an oneiric quality, shifting into a Gothic mode with the Spanish setting. The weird scenario of the young, sexually starved woman waiting in an Edwardian country house in the Spanish hills recalls Garcia Lorca's *House of Bernarda Alba* with its emotionally charged atmosphere of claustrophobia and barely suppressed hysteria. A polite conversation in the garden that echoes scenes from Jane Austen novels leads to a frenzied sex scene as the clichéd 'Latinate' conclusion to an English comedy of manners. In a sense, therefore, this is not quite a British novel despite the echoes of such intertexts as Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*.

On his way to Opayar, Manrique himself toys with the idea of an allegorical application of his story. Could his relationship with Portas be like that between Gibraltar and Spain, or rather like that between Britain and Gibraltar? However, this explanation appears too facile, almost like a red herring, and Manrique's thoughts remain inconclusive as he is left above all with a personal sense of betrayal. It seems more promising to abandon allegory as a rather blunt tool, and to look at the novel's more subtle explorations of space and identity. This includes setting, on the one hand, and the characters' movements and spatial practices on the other. Strikingly, all actions and human encounters are strongly determined by setting: Though both Manrique and Portas hail from Gibraltar, they come together in Cambridge, a traditional

English seat of learning that holds out the promise of fulfilment through education. Though class is always an issue, it can be temporarily shelved in this environment. True to his name of 'Portas', Henry opens doors for Brian Manrique – doors of perception, doors to intellectual and aesthetic experiences, doors to women, as the two young men grope their way, by trial and error, to a mutually fulfilling friendship. This is no longer possible back in Gibraltar, where they are both determined and imprisoned by the stultifying atmosphere of a city stewing in its own juice, cut off by the closed border. In this environment, both Brian and Henry, diametrically opposed to each other in terms of background, looks, wealth and temperament, end up in the same place, with their faces towards the wall. Finally, while Cambridge spells liberation and Gibraltar means stasis, the move into Spain is positively disastrous. This last door that Portas opens for Brian provides access to his sister and to his own soul. Sending Brian on a preposterous triangular journey, by ferry to Tunis and thence to Algeciras in Spain and by taxi to Opatar, situated only a few miles from Gibraltar across the closed border, appears like a great scheme, a final gamble, betting on, and hoping for, Manrique's complete integrity. But Manrique is intent on playing out a Spanish revenge tragedy, taking advantage of the woman's vulnerability, and as he concludes his account with the words "If you ask me, I'd say the circle was now complete" (262), there is no hope of redemption, or even of recognition, which might serve as a prelude to change. Going back from Opatar to Gibraltar, as if acting under a spell, he completes the vicious circle that circumscribes his Gibraltarian prison house, epitomized by suffocating interiors such as the small library where he works and his late mother's government flat filled with twenty-four statues of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

In the earlier days of their acquaintance, Manrique and Portas' movements and spatial practices spell out the ways, suited to their temperaments, in which they try to escape from the Gibraltarian predicament. Manrique indulges in long walks which have the character of fugues. Psychologically speaking, a fugue is in fact an escape from the pressures of everyday life – people acting on an impulse, just walking out of their home, disappearing and walking for days

in a kind of trance. In his early Cambridge days, Manrique walks to get to know the area, to escape from his student hall; he perambulates in order to reflect on Britishness and Gibraltarianness, back in Gibraltar during vacation he walks to think about Cambridge, in Venice he walks to cope with his loneliness, and back in Gibraltar for good, he walks to re-connect with the beauty of the place. The extent to which Manrique is a frustrated Romantic becomes obvious in this statement about his Gibraltarian walks:

The problem with all this, of course, is that if you carry on walking the same streets again and again, if you continue making your way down Queensway every morning, for example, and then heading up Rosia Road before turning around at Rosia Parade and returning to Laguna via Main Street and the Casemates car park, you will soon reach a point where, just like your more settled and untravelled compatriots, you desensitize yourself to your surroundings and once again start taking things for granted. (145)

Later, after his mother's death, Manrique stops walking and retreats to the Cathedral where he sits "in his private and protected space" (184), as he puts it. During all his walks, he has not found an escape route. Nor has he found it through telling his story, which begs the question who is the 'Escape Artist' of the novel's title.

While Manrique's fugues and perambulations are horizontal, branching out and meandering through space, Henry Portas engages in a kind of perpendicular fugue in Cambridge, becoming a stegophilist – a person addicted to free-climbing buildings. Portas performs his feats in broad daylight, wearing a Zorro mask. For Portas, this clandestine, devious and illegal activity is a liberating exercise, freeing his mind and helping him to unwind. As he tells Brian later, he looked on his financial gambles as a continuance of the climbing: "The higher and more difficult the building, the more I wanted ... no, the more I *had* to climb it. It was just like that with the stock market, Brian. The more difficult and risky the venture, the more I was compelled to take it on" (199). After the final disaster, his escape route is suicide. Just as imagined in the nightmares that haunt Brian, Portas steps off the world into the void, finally extricating himself from a Gibraltar ruled, as he sees it, by the predatory law of eating

or being eaten. In Brian Manrique's opinion, this sad world-view emerges from a "partisanship that acts like some kind of dense mental fog, freezing our rationality and stopping us from understanding the positions and aspirations of the other participants in this unholy ménage à trois. The Spaniards suffer from this mental fog. So do the Gibraltarians. Even the British, usually so diplomatic and even-handed, cannot free themselves from this stultifying sense of entrenchment" (228).

Though Brian Manrique and Henry Portas respond very differently to the Gibraltarian predicament, their actions are equally doomed. Through the Portas-Manrique triangle, *The Escape Artist* brings it home to the reader that while gender, class, personality and temperament partly determine the way that things play out for the individual characters, the Gibraltarian context drastically limits their options. They are entangled in a destructive way, as the Spanish and the British are entangled destructively in Gibraltar. Maybe it is the true escape artist's task never to stop reaching out to others, to try to make contact, and to explain, like the author M.G. Sanchez himself. Significantly, Brian Manrique starts out like this: at the beginning, his account is brimming with questions, addresses to the reader and rhetorical devices designed to attract attention. Especially when referring to the Gibraltarian situation, Manrique's narrative switches to a variant of the second person narration, with sentences such as "That's what happens, incidentally, when you come from a small place like Gibraltar" (2). Enlisting the reader's support for his cause, Manrique opens up a dialogic space that draws the reader in. Almost ingratiating in his eagerness to communicate, he takes readers into his confidence, in contrast to the reticence he displays on the level of the action, making the reader privy to every nook and cranny of his quirky personality. During the long, frustrating years in Gibraltar as a minor library attendant, a job he got through nepotism and for which he is grotesquely overqualified with his foreign languages degree from Cambridge, this "you" disappears from the account. When it reappears towards the end, it is sneeringly addressed to Portas – "Well, what do you know, look at us now: you lying there like some penniless drunk in the gutter while I, Brian

Manrique, the eternal nobody, the little churchgoing flunky, mount your precious little sister and then, just to finish the job, tell her that her brother has frittered away her entire fortune” (252). Manrique has turned his back on the world, and when he addresses his implied reader finally with the sentence already quoted – “If you ask me, I’d say the circle was now complete” (262) – there is a strong sense of closure and exclusion. While Sophia Portas, having sunk into a Spanish twilight, disappears entirely from the picture, the two friends stage their ‘escape’ through suicide and inner emigration. Perhaps the true escape artist is the author himself. If there is one at all on the level of the story it may be Manrique’s young sister Mariella, who marries an English soldier in the Royal Anglians and, pregnant with their first child, embarks on a nomadic Army life, leaving behind her broken-hearted mother and resentful brother. To stay in British Gibraltar and to thrive is apparently not an option.

5. Presencing Place

The focus on a topological hotspot such as Gibraltar has not only taken us right into the heart of the conflicted relationship between Britain and Europe, but leads us to face a more general current European problem: nation states (re-)asserting their independence, their homogeneity and purity and aggressively denying change, movement and hybridity. As we have seen, this discourse, and the resulting political action, can turn an attractive crossroad, a meeting place of peoples and cultures such as Gibraltar, into a backwater, an anomaly, and a space that stunts the growth and development of its inhabitants. By revisiting the period when the border was closed, M.G. Sanchez’ *The Escape Artist* explores this situation, both giving voice to the people affected by it and evoking the atmosphere for readers unfamiliar with the Gibraltarian predicament. This latter effect is mainly achieved by the way that settings are used in the novel. Brian Manrique does not respond to Cambridge; there is no celebration of the ‘English countryside’ or of Cambridge as the venerable and ancient seat of learning similar to the loving evocation of Oxford’s dreaming spires in Dorothy Sayers’ campus novel *Gaudy Night*.

Although Manrique occasionally comes across “truly wonderful places that seemed to match the hedged and thatched stereotype of English village life that had been drummed into me during my colonial upbringing” (19), for him the town acquires a “Jack-the-Ripperesque” (21) quality, “as if you’d accidentally wandered into the set of a Hammer horror movie – what with the wispy bands of fog, the lamp posts that hardly gave off any light and the echo of footsteps bouncing off old medieval stone” (21). Once, he makes an abortive attempt to visit a nearby country estate, having read that “Wimpole Hall was one of the finest country houses in the East of England” (41).³ Once there on a rainy November day, he is repelled by ‘Private property’ signs and high fences. These experiences effect an erosion of Manrique’s identity as a British Gibraltar, thought to be “as British as Big Ben or Earl Grey Tea, as Marmite or Mary Poppins” (22) and suddenly confronted with the English conviction that he must be “as Spanish as paella or flamenco dancing” (12).

This different accent, or perspective, is also noticeable in Brian’s reaction to Venice, where he spends his year abroad. “I could make out the smudgy, half-formed silhouettes of domes and bell towers in the distance, with the famous Campanile transiently reduced to a faded red brushstroke between them. So this is Venice, I thought to myself” (88). Manrique experiences none of the challenges familiar in English literature from E.M. Forster’s or Henry James’ characters in Italy – from his Gibraltar perspective, Venice does not appear ‘Southern’, or decayed, or debauched in any way. It is just a place deplorably full of tourists and tedious foreign exchange students. Suffering from a kind of dissociation, Manrique does not notice his surroundings much, taking no interest in the architecture and preferring to sit by the sea, which, if one thinks about it in topological terms, connects him with his home in Gibraltar. While he is unable to relate to Cambridge or Venice, Gibraltar is always with him, “embedded in your subconscious, engraved into your psyche” (19). Addressing the reader, he

³ This is actually true, since Wimpole is a large and imposing estate, now owned by the National Trust. Incidentally, at the time *The Escape Artist* is set, Rudyard Kipling’s daughter was living in the house.

explains: “you develop an almost hyperaesthetic awareness of your surroundings, you become almost umbilically linked to everything around you – the sights, the sounds, the smells, the quality of the light, the various cloud formations, the different blues of the sea” (19). Through the detailed observation and the sensory perceptions Manrique evokes, Gibraltar comes alive in ways that the other places do not:

Although you may not even be aware of it, there is a part of you that knows that the first lamp post outside the Trafalgar cemetery gates buzzes slightly differently from the other lamp posts nearby. Or that the crack on the second flagstone on your right as you come out of the Catholic cathedral looks remarkably similar to the Christian ‘Chi Rho’ sign. Or that halfway up Hospital Steps there is a two- or three-metre stretch of wall which, inexplicably, for God knows what reason, always smells of dog’s urine. (18)

Fittingly, the most preposterous events in the novel happen in the most preposterous environment: The Portas family’s country house in the Spanish hills near Opayar is an Edwardian villa set in 35 acres of land. Portas relates that his great-grandfather “had named the house *White Haven* and had even imported twenty tons of finest Cumbrian turf to reinforce the illusion of Englishness” (53). In this walled and gated piece of England on Spanish soil, which could be seen to stand metonymically for Gibraltar, the men of the Portas family play at being English country gentlemen. The Gothic atmosphere is enhanced by the reference to imported earth which recalls Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, a story that also short-circuits the notions of soil and identity, relating that the Count on his mission to infiltrate and corrupt London needs to sleep in his native Transylvanian soil. The house makes a profound impression on Manrique:

[T]he most remarkable thing about the view before me was neither the sinister black gates nor the monumentally long drive nor even the two lines of rustling, billowing fir trees; it was simply the fact that there, at the end of it all, some hundred yards from where I stood and a mere couple of miles from the centre of Opayar, stood a house so typically and so characteristically Edwardian, so absolutely and so cringingly English in layout and design, that for a moment I thought that I had to be hallucinating. It was almost like I was beholding a homesick Englishman’s desiderata, a piece of England that had been carefully uprooted and lovingly transplanted into the arid, dusty, sun-cracked Andalusian soil. Deep bay windows, exposed roof rafters, wide eaves with triangular brackets, even one of those goddamned neo-Tudor red-brick turrets – every

single Arts and Crafts feature you could think of was visible at the end of that drive. (233)

As Manrique passes through the gate, it feels as if he is entering a different world, and there is a distinctly oneiric quality about the scene. Manrique is over-sensitive to the rustling and crunching sounds (234), the chills and flowery fragrances in the air and the “almost diaphanous light” (241); in the twilight inside the building, he has the impression of being submerged under water (234). In the garden, Sophia Portas’ face is “illuminated by the crepuscular indigo light radiating from behind the distant hills” (245). The scene of frantic copulation is remembered in disjointed snapshots, followed by a nightmare set in Gibraltar’s Sandy Bay during a thunderstorm. Portas appears to Manrique as a Zombie spouting strange phrases, and the Gothic flavour intensifies as Manrique oscillates between dream and waking. Once back home, having excoriated his infatuation with Portas, Manrique is left with a vaguely bad feeling. Arguably, the Gibraltarian nightmare continues, and will continue as long as the gates are closed.

It is M.G. Sanchez’ achievement to make his readers aware how it feels to be inside a prison house that is at the same time the only home of people viscerally connected to the place – a home unhomely, and deeply uncanny. To a certain extent, Sanchez’ evocation of Gibraltarian hybridity echoes that of postcolonial writers such as Sam Selvon or V.S. Naipaul, but the problem is that the context is not strictly post-colonial: Gibraltar still belongs to Britain as a barely acknowledged outpost in Southern Europe, and given the size of the territory, independence is not an option. So if European nation states abandon the European project and withdraw into splendid isolation again, this will leave Gibraltar in no place at all – a Rock adrift in the Mediterranean Sea.

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