THE POEM I'LL NEVER WRITE

LITERARY FESTIVAL TALK, NOVEMBER 2018

Hello and welcome - thank you for coming. I'd like to express my thanks to Prior Park school for sponsoring this event.

I'm going to trick you - I'll start off not by talking about the poem I'll never write - that poem, lost in the wispy world of mere hypothetical conjecture - but about some that I did write and publish in my first collection 'West.'

But even before that I'll speak a bit about myself so that anyone who doesn't know me can get an idea of who I am and the background to my writing. You'll soon see how tightly autobiography and literary production are linked.

I'll also have some digressions on identity and the nature of poetry - in fact, there'll be digressions everywhere. I wanted to pack so much into this talk that it has become a bit of a monster.

SLIDE

I was born here in Gibraltar in 1981. My parents were teachers: my father was Head of English for many years at the girls' comprehensive and my mother taught French and Spanish in that same school. My mother, originally from Belfast, met my father while studying at St. Andrews. I also have a sister.

I grew up in a house we shared with my grandparents in the Upper Town on Castle Road. The Upper Town, with its shabby charm and evening light, is the setting of some of my poems and provides the mood for others.

An important feature of Gibraltar, especially in those days, was a sort of egalitarian atmosphere but perhaps we didn't realise it then.

Let me explain: with only one private school, and that one only providing education up to the age of 12, a child growing up in 1980s Gibraltar would go to the state school in his or her catchment area regardless of socioeconomic background. You'd then go to the local comprehensive: Bayside for boys, Westside for girls.

In the UK, you generally tend to have good schools in areas where house prices are high

and rising and underperforming schools are typically found near so-called sink estates.

The result is an early segregation between children from certain backgrounds: the sons and daughters of doctors, lawyers, civil servants, and the offspring of the unemployed or low-skilled workers - these groups will probably never meet and live in different worlds.

So what did this mean for my childhood, and how has it coloured my poetry? It meant that, although my parents were teachers, I went to school with other kids whose parents were bin men, dinner ladies, tobacco smugglers, store men - such a mix is, I think, highly unlikely in many parts of the UK.

Some people I got to know then ended up in prison (more on that later) but others became doctors and accountants. What it gave me was a connection to a whole hidden world, and an openness towards people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

This mixed environment granted me entry into two worlds which I still slip in and out of today in a frictionless way, and, importantly, an

appreciation for both the higher and the lower pleasures.

We lived side by side, and this was to continue until the early 1990s when a series of large housing projects allowed many families to move away from the Upper Town, including my own.

The effect on my poetry is that I am drawn to describing and celebrating what one might regard as unsavoury characters and their sordid lives, people who live on the margins like fairground entertainers, the lonely, the terminally drunk. These lives possess a kind of harsh beauty, even if it's just the flicker of light filtered through a whisky glass.

These characters are not in our history books, those are overpopulated by generals and admirals, but they show something crucial about what it means to be Gibraltarian that is left out of academic narratives - again, more on this later.

So I grew up enjoying the often unruly influences around me and with, it must be said, no great desire to read or write.

SLIDE

This changed when I was in my mid teens and started reading the set texts for GCSE English Literature and picking up my dad's books on Freud, philosophy and religion. Round about this time, I wrote a few inept verses in an attempt to emulate Keats, whose poetry represented for me an intoxicating, sensuous pleasure. I still have a fragment somewhere, something about lying "under a senescent moon / dreaming of ephemeral love." Of course I later rhymed "love" with "above" but there we go…

My guide in these explorations was always my father - his encyclopaedic knowledge of English literature and his good memory for lines of poetry. He relished the sound and power of certain passages and it was quite common, when I was young, for him to recite - unprompted by anything outside him - a random line of resonant verse as we sat down to have supper. If I liked the sound of the quotation, I'd ask him where it was from and this would lead to other discussions. Although he was a teacher, there was never anything dry or didactic about my father's conversation. It was always born from a deep love of literature, a lively curiosity and intellectual hunger which continue undimmed to this day.

These suppertime chats led me to the poetry of Donne and Hopkins - I found them difficult and puzzling in different ways. Donne because of the depth of his thought, Hopkins because of the unusual words, but I had a strong sense that this was important stuff.

The sign that a poem had something important to say was the way certain lines would lodge themselves in my mind - I'd latch onto one and carry it around inside me for days, a bit like a catchy tune, but one whose power never wore off despite obsessive repetition.

Later, during A-Levels, I turned to the urban misery of T.S. Eliot, his "burnt out ends of smoky days" and his "dingy shades in a thousand furnished rooms" - both lines from his 'Preludes', a poem that still makes my hairs stand on end.

What struck me then, and it's something I still keep with me now, was the range in tone of Eliot's work; he could reach some metaphysical height and then suddenly drop down to the sewer. Snippets of humdrum conversation one minute; elevated description the next. Poetry, if one could write it, should be like this, I thought -

it should encompass all of human experience, it should reflect this complexity and raise up dirt, boredom, despair and transform them into things of beauty and wonder.

SLIDE

At university in London, I studied Philosophy for five years. It was here, while living off Finchley Road, taking long bus journeys to the Strand to discuss my thesis which was about the role of inner speech in human thinking, that some more mature poetic stirrings took place within me.

This was early in 2006. I was working all day on the thesis, and preparing for the three papers I did as my final exams on the Philosophy of Mind, the Philosophy of Language and the work of John Locke.

In the evenings, those sad early evenings in winter, I'd take a break from this and watch episodes of Futurama or read a novel.

I bought the complete poems of Larkin and Heaney in a branch of Books Etc. (remember them?) and started reading through them. They remain my key influences: Heaney for his earthy

descriptions, Larkin for his tone - this half-conversational bluntness that he mastered.

I returned to Gibraltar and continued reading poetry but never had the urge to write. Then, in September 2016, something changed.

My route from the gym back home took me past a block of flats for the elderly - Bishop Canilla House. I got a waft of bleach coming from the street level windows, I saw an old woman walking her Yorkshire Terrier nearby and the traditions of that generation, the richness of lives conducted behind lace curtains, memories of my grandparents, the smells of my grandmother's kitchen, their ailments, all came together as a significant jumble which could be summarised or given expression in lines of poetry.

SLIDE

When we turn an experience into poetry we transform it, we give it a new shape. One explanation of why certain found objects like Duchamp's urinal are considered art is because the practice of isolating them and presenting them in an artworld context - in a gallery, with a short note - engages our aesthetic sensibility.

Look at this, appreciate its properties as art, this practice says.

The same happens in poetry - by placing these experiences, these people, at the heart of a poem, we raise them up and encourage readers to pay attention, to note aspects that are normally hidden in everyday cycles.

A woman is cleaning her house with bleach - nothing could be more unremarkable. Place it in a poem, give it significance, imbue it with a sense of wonder, of reverence, and you have something else entirely.

Tennyson seems to capture this when he writes in 'Will Waterproof's Lyrical Monologue': "I look at all things as they are / But through a kind of glory." Looking at things "through" something else puts me in mind of poetry as a sort of lens that filters and alters - the result, when successful, is a burnished version of the dull original.

SLIDE

I sometimes think about what subjects to write about and the best explanation I can find for

why I choose some and not others is circular: I write poetry about things that have poetry in them. I see something and think “there’s poetry in that” - it’s like an ore you have to mine, but the signs are there from the beginning. There is no other way I know of specifying how this works.

Ok, so there I was, inspired by the sounds and smells of those approaching their final days - the result was the first poem of my collection named, with great originality, “Bishop Canilla House.”

That was September 2016 - I had found a tone, I was happy with the poem and moved on to write other pieces about Gibraltar: a poem about the Alameda Gardens and Brexit, one about Main Street, one about our noisy gulls and the levanter cloud and sea fog.

But I also found myself writing about Spain - the great cities of Andalucia: Sevilla, Malaga, Cordoba and their Catholic rituals and festivals. Once again, there was poetry to be squeezed from these gaudy displays of blood, gold and suffering, a splendour which I could contrast with another aspect of Spanish life: the pursuit of pleasure, a love of food and drink.

I also explored my memories of my five years in London - could I recreate the chaos, the thrill of possibility that I felt as I walked from Bloomsbury to Oxford Street? I tried - it was one way of thinking about and preserving the past.

Then came other poems, poems that were more philosophical; some that dealt with death, with genetic determinism, with loss and longing.

At this point, I still had no intention of publishing them. I had shown them to friends and family and gave two poetry readings in a local bar. The feedback was positive but nothing pushed me further until I spoke to fellow local writer Mark Sanchez who's also at this festival - he speaks tomorrow.

He argued that it was important to get my work out there and explained how easy it was to do so via a publishing platform. I went ahead.

My routine in the lead up to the publication was highly structured:

I have a three-year-old daughter. It is understandably impossible to read or write

when she is awake so I had to get all my work done in the mornings between 5:30 and 7:30.

In those two hours, with bin men in the background and noisy gulls, fuelled by cups of strong black coffee, I would write poems, polish others and edit the collection. The rest of the day was work - I led two lives.

The book was launched in December last year and is on sale in the festival's bookshop next door.

SLIDE

'West' is divided into four parts. The first part contains poems about Gibraltar, growing up here, our weather. The second section is about Andalucia, its ageing churches and the Easter processions. The third bit has the London poems - poems about post-industrial edgelands. The last section collects all those poems which don't fit these categories - they're inspired by trips abroad, meditations on ageing and the afterlife and pungent whiskies. Overall, the tone is elegiac - the works gaze back at something lost or altered forever. Although it's my first work of poetry, in some sense it reads like my last.

Allow me to focus on that initial tripartite division in the contents page: Gibraltar, Spain, UK. These are the three places where I've spent most time in my life but they are also the three most influential elements in the Gibraltarian psyche.

What comes first? There's the Gibraltar ingredient. We have an indigenous culture, a sense of a nascent microstate, an identity tied to our collective and largely politically determined experience of the last 60 years.

Then we have an important Spanish influence: the food we eat, that language we speak (although that is sadly changing), our lifestyle, our surnames, our, for want of a better word, 'spirit'. Some people avoid calling this by its proper name and say that our spirit is "Mediterranean" - I'll come back to this practice later when I speak about clichés.

Spain, of course, represents a complex element. We are culturally attracted to many aspects of Spanish life but repelled by Spanish politics, in particular their policies towards the Rock. We harbour attitudes to what we euphemistically term "our neighbours to the north" that are often irrational but we also have totally

understandable responses to historical facts: the border was closed for over 13 years, Gibraltar suffered and successive governments have made life difficult for us.

And then there is our sense of Britishness. I'm going to dwell on this final aspect for a bit.

Our Britishness, as often portrayed by the UK press, is essentially a parody - a figment that only exists in an imperial past. It's fish and chips, cosy pubs and military parades. To look at these relics and think they represent what it means to be Gibraltarian in the 21st century is to fundamentally misunderstand who we are - but it also lacks a current model because not even present day Britain is like this portrayal of British Gibraltar. What we're saddled with, and often don't do enough to combat, is this ersatz version of Britishness; one perhaps still sought by visiting cruise ship passengers but alien to the Number 4 bus driver and certainly alien to me and my generation.

If we've overplayed this plastic Britishness, we've underplayed the Spanish influence - maybe that's why: to counter a threat, we've had to erect a shield, however artificial. Often it is this simplification that is our worst enemy.

This is not to say that there aren't lasting, authentic structures of Britishness in Gibraltarian life: education, the legal system, politics are all conducted in the British fashion but our physical and conceptual isolation from mainland UK has encouraged quirky local forms to emerge.

Mark Sanchez has made similar comments in his writings and last year's talk at this festival and my thoughts on the matter have been influenced by countless conversations with him.

Although neither of us is a political writer, I feel that the political, the personal and the cultural, blend constantly in Gibraltarian life. It bothers us that we are misrepresented, I suppose, because writers strive to represent truthfully - although our subjects and characters are often fictive, any attempt to portray Gibraltarian life will only succeed if it matches lived Gibraltarian experience - bilingual, earthy, raw, complex, hybrid - not the Gibraltarian as seen via some sneering colonial glance.

The same idea applies to the concept of emotion in poetry - the context of the emotion, its object, its cause, can be filled in imaginatively, but it

will only work if it is true to what it feels like to have that emotion. A good poem is not true in the sense that it is a record of what happened, it is true because it captures something about life without falsifying distortion. This is why writers must be alive to such distortions and aim to replace them with accounts that get to the kernel of things around them. In this sense, we're all political at some level.

One way I've tried to do this, to recreate the experience of living in Gibraltar, is to focus on liminal characters - people on the margins. As I mentioned earlier, regardless of perceived or imagined socioeconomic rank, we shared the same world back in my schooldays.

But the data drawn from my Castle Road days was unexpectedly bolstered when I also spent three years working as a prison officer. I saw some of my school friends, those boys who spent their school years floating from suspension to detention to after hours scuffles, locked up for various crimes.

In prison, I spoke to inmates about their lives and they revealed stories about drug runs, fights, unfaithful spouses, addiction, future criminal activity and failed promises to reform.

It was a raw catalogue of human experience and frailty from some of the most vulnerable people in our society. Linguistically it was very revealing - many convicts are charismatic, flamboyant characters, they're often good storytellers and use slang and insults with great flair. I encountered Llanito rap and examined first hand the notion of Gibraltarian maleness.

I think that if we ignore this material, if we dismiss it because it is unsavoury or uncomfortable, we miss out something about our identity. The language of the street often gives us direct access to the different influences that have shaped us and, freed from social constraints, some national character traits emerge in their most unpolished forms.

SLIDE

I paid tribute to a marginal character, a cross-dressing fairground entertainer who visited the Rock every summer, in my poem 'Ghost Train' in the final section of 'West.'

This is how it goes:

GHOST TRAIN

Leather-faced mini-man/woman
With your ballooning gut
Spindly legs swaying
In mock seduction to the pounding rumba
A cigarette paper could fit
Between your oily head
And the tunnel entrance
As you duck, your flowery
Skirt chucked up by candyfloss air
When you toss your tits
Up high our slack mouths
Point upwards till they land
Back in your pink bra

During breaks you draw deeply on a Ducados
And sip a warm beer behind the caravan
For a while you softly stroke your mongrel
With the same veiny hands
That beat children daily with a tiny broom

Did you dream of this?
The cross-dressing
Amid the travel and the dust
The remote towns and their
Powdered beauties oozing
Mid-summer carnality
The early deaths by maiming
The rootless sex and perverse romance
Of being a hybrid,

A macho-pansy never quite
At ease in this sterile land?
But perhaps it's a job like any other:
Make-up, stretching,
Yellow clips on
Like a city clerk cycling to work.

Let me go back to some of the themes explored in my poems.

Some of the questions that I've returned to numerous times are things like: What's it like to search for meaningful experiences in a world from which god has been deleted? Why do we still hang on to the trappings of religious belief and the ornaments of faith?

Many believers still go through the motions, but there's often a hollow core, and I'm reminded of Hardy's great poem 'God's Funeral' where the death of God is evoked in this way:

"Uncompromising rude reality
Mangled the Monarch of our fashioning,
Who quavered, sank; and now has ceased to be."

In my Spanish-themed poems, these feelings and questions become more pressing and they

reflect my complicated relationship towards religious belief which I'll explain in more detail now…

SLIDE

I'm an atheist at times, though also often an agnostic, who longs for the certainties, comforts and sheer metaphysical audacity of a faith I've never even had or lost and some of my poems attempt to see whether pleasure, travel, the joys of language, the experience of fatherhood and ritual, can fill a void left by God. Again, I stress, I've never been a believer - let's say I wallow in the romance of it all and draw upon it for the power of its imagery.

Perhaps one explanation for this lies, once again, in my upbringing. I was brought up in an atheist household but one where religious traditions were studied and discussed.

Also, and this might explain my fascination with religious imagery, the Durantes have a habit of visiting every cathedral, church or chapel they encounter on their travels.

Although I might have been unwilling to enter so many places of worship when I was younger,

they clearly left an enduring mark and I am pleased to say that, on a recent trip to Bristol and Bath, I dragged my own mini-family to numerous churches - so the tradition lives on.

So, together with what I might call an atheistic nostalgia for faith, another important influence is my background in philosophy.

I studied philosophy at university. The topics I have read and thought about for the last 18 years and the discursive, abstract approach to certain canonical questions have left their mark on my poems, some of which are more obviously philosophical than others.

For example, the poem “Meat” in my collection is about the afterlife and how unthinking rituals are not up to the task of marking someone’s death. Other poems reflect on ageing, the way we fit into our bodies, the role of memory in personal identity, the value of pleasure. These are, broadly speaking, philosophical topics.

Here is ‘Meat’ which I wrote after attending a funeral in St Theresa’s Church:

A lisping priest –
and a routine of stagnant traditions

we move on by default

whenever others make choices for us the silent

80 kilos of boxed meat and sinew
slowly going off

sprinkled over the polished coffin

are ineffectual drops of water
because preparing for nothingness is hard

the emaciated
onlooker up there dangling

such a pitiful, wasted figure for a god

life just gone cold
and
graveyard
sparrows and dead flowers
will mean more

why this same mould for millions

encasing spontaneous wonder
doubt and a dozen minor rebellions?

that a wanton weekend
the privacy of desire
and the very fullness of it all

might be cut down, packaged

§

Sparrows, scattering now
(their dusty, half-dead eyes
their nervous

animal innocence)

seem to know more about this

Although I didn't realize it at the time, birds figure in many of my poems - once again, the explanation lies in my past. I used to be a keen birdwatcher - I'd track the movements of migrating Black Kites and swifts on hot August afternoons and there's still something about the mystery of birds, whether they're bursting out in song, soaring or moving nervously from branch to branch, that draws me in.

SLIDE

I want to now briefly explore some less obvious connections between poetry and philosophy that can explain why I've drifted between these disciplines over the last few years.

One similarity is difficulty - a lot of philosophy is extremely difficult. Sometimes, this is unnecessary or wilful difficulty where the philosopher has failed to articulate things clearly or thinks that incomprehensible sentences are likely to be regarded as profound sentences.

Most of the time, however, the difficulty is inherent in the subject. When you're making fine metaphysical distinctions about the fundamental makeup of human experience, or thinking up elaborate counterexamples to already complex moral theories, the result will be hard to grasp on first acquaintance.

I'm hopelessly attracted to this difficulty - it's always worth the effort to work through a lengthy argument despite the often unattractive features of philosophical prose. What's more, I've found that the puzzlement I felt at the start of my degree has not diminished - the topic and the foundational questions it addresses, remain as hard as they were then when I first entered

university, hungover, grabbing a latte in a polystyrene cup during a 10am lecture on Spinoza.

I find a similar difficulty in poetry - both in reading poems and writing them. In fact, writing poems is, for me at least, terribly hard - a kind of torture, at times.

Most of the difficulty, in the poems that are worth reading repeatedly and with care, is due to the complexity and ambition of their aims.

The poet John Fuller has written that an intrinsic part of the pleasure of poetry is to be able to unravel difficulties and solve puzzles - and a related pleasure is moving from one state of understanding to another. The same is true of philosophy; the pleasure lies in the intellectual challenge, in digging deep and moving from perplexity to something approaching understanding.

In poetry, the difficulties of interpretation are often even greater than in philosophy because the poet will employ all sorts of tricks to get you to see something that isn't immediately obvious whereas you'd normally trust a philosopher to steer clear of extended metaphors, conceits,

obscure literary allusions and the rest. The poet, to borrow Emily Dickinson's words, might aim to tell the truth, but she tells it slant, from a particular and often obscure or unexpected angle.

So that's one connection - my perhaps perverse worship of difficulty.

Another connection is broad and difficult to pin down: poetry and philosophy are both attempts to make sense of the human condition. I don't think that's controversial but it's something that both projects share with other disciplines and so isn't something I'll dwell on.

So all these connections go some way towards explaining why someone who is interested in philosophy might become passionate about reading and writing poetry. However, the affinities between poetry and philosophy have, historically, not always been that obvious. Since Plato condemned poetry for its ability to deceive and for its appeal to rhetoric and the emotions, some philosophers have regarded the disciplines as engaged in an irresolvable feud. Philosophy is cold reason, poetry is hot-headed emotion and feeling and they forever pull in different directions.

But this line of thought misdescribes philosophy, poetry and the structure of human thinking.

There is no successful reduction of the practice of philosophy - many things come under that banner. However, it's not an activity that can only be conducted by cutting ourselves off from our nature as social, living and feeling beings.

Poetry, too, is mischaracterised - it is not just a flow of feeling. Feelings are expressed and aroused by poets and poems but there is also argument, description, imagery and a focus on the limits and possibilities of language.

So, philosophy is not just cold reflection and poetry is not all about gushing emotion - it is only if we think about them in these terms that we are likely to perceive the conflict that Plato saw.

Most crucially, however, the supposed antagonism relies on a false picture of human thinking which tries to force a clear division between reason and emotion.

The philosopher Martha Nussbaum has done important work in this area - in one representative passage, she writes that: “Emotions are not just the fuel that powers the psychological mechanism of a reasoning creature, they are parts, highly complex and messy parts, of this creature’s reasoning itself.”

One final and significant link for me is that philosophy and poetry provide the perfect vehicles for exploring ideas with complete freedom.

You can encounter a philosophical proposal which can be charitably explored and analysed for pure intellectual pleasure without having to believe in the proposal or act according to its practical consequences.

This makes it possible for me to spend my life studying arguments for the existence of god, for example, without ever having to decide the matter myself. In fact, I might hold that the matter is, by its nature, the sort of thing which cannot be decided, but there is still immense value in considering the theoretical options.

It’s because of this that many people, in a culture where every activity must justify itself

economically, are apt to dismiss a lot of philosophy as “useless” or “pointless” - revealingly, poetry is subject to the same type of narrow rejection and both endeavours have felt the need to justify their continued relevance.

In poetry, I feel a similar freedom. A poem is an invitation to explore a possibility: what might the world look like to a Martian? What would it be like to fall in love in this city? What does it feel like to inhabit the mind of a misanthrope? What if I compare my love to a vegetable? And, here’s the key point, you can use the vehicle of the poem to do all these things without risk - it’s the ultimate untethered “What if?” that poems make possible.

In poetry, we’re able to make a distinction between the voice of the poem and the voice of a poet - things said in one voice are not necessarily endorsed by the other.

Some think this independence can be abused because we can use the artistic freedom of the poem to express repulsive ideas while retreating to the distinction between author and work to avoid responsibility. It also works the other way by blocking criticism of an author’s

character from carrying over into a criticism of his work.

But I'm a firm believer that a poem ought to be judged on its artistic merits, and not on the moral standing of its author.

Ezra Pound was, by any account, a repugnant individual but a fine poet - an unwillingness to embrace this often unsettling complexity betrays a lack of imagination and an inability to see that poetry operates in a space often sealed off from real life in the ways that I've been describing above. But, despite this, we must still be alert to whether objectionable views have leaked from the life onto the page.

And the same holds when we trace the opposite path, from supposedly morally dubious artwork to creator - to accuse the author of Lolita of hebephilia is to misunderstand how art, representation and imagination function.

Great art often operates at the level of the subjunctive: consider this possibility, it says, but don't endorse it. In fact, I think we often do a disservice to a work of art by wholly endorsing its message, we "miss the point" by engaging with it in the wrong way - if we're to keep our

minds open and receptive, it's best to entertain ideas provisionally, for the sake of argument, and then move on, like we do in philosophy.

I see a link here with what I said about my attitude to religious ritual - I'll happily jump temporarily into the shoes of a believer and try to imaginatively recreate the sense of faith and wonder of those attending an Easter procession but I'll retreat when a fuller, deeper commitment is called for. To identify entirely with a political movement, a philosophical theory, a nation, even a football team, strikes me as intellectually arrogant and suffocating. We should, like the novelist Howard Jacobson wrote, 'bow down" to no-one.

I extend Jacobson's injunction to ideas - this is the distance, the very freedom that poetry and philosophy make possible - they are the vehicles in which we can hold things up for inspection, criticize common sense, mock popular opinion, without having to identify with a movement and without becoming subservient to a cause. There'll be no bowing down to ideas, only a healthy skepticism.

In all honesty, there is possibly an element of cowardice in this and, in my case, I have no

further argument in favour of this particular practice - it's just part of my temperament. I remember a tutor of mine at university always used to tell us: "Never be a joiner" - and I think he was right.

I labour these points because it's increasingly clear that, in public debate, online, in the media, we're losing the ability to separate the argument from the person making the argument. Perhaps more awareness of how literature works and the notions of narrator, character and author and even the philosophical ideal of disinterested but charitable reflection could help us avoid these errors.

So, to summarise this rather dense section: poetry and philosophy allow us to play a rich and fulfilling game where we test out ideas. Most importantly, they allow us to explore the viability of ideas or ways of life without deeper commitment, a commitment which, I argue, is often suffocating and debasing. I hope that makes sense.

THE POEM I'LL NEVER WRITE

Despite the breadth of some of these influences, there is a poem I'll never write - but I can tell you how the idea of this poem was born.

There have been some academic attempts to try and grasp Gibraltarian identity. The German anthropologist Dieter Haller argued that Gibraltarians value the image of the smuggler and the image of the beauty queen and that these images were forms of resistance to Spanish pressure at the border.

Haller argued that Gibraltarian males see the figure of the smuggler - described by him as wearing "sunglasses, muscle shirts, lots of golden chains and rings, earrings, tattoos, slicked-back hair" - as an "important social image". He also argued that the prominence and number of beauty pageants on the Rock could be explained by seeing them as a means to present Gibraltar as a "'national' entity on the world stage" at a time when this was being blocked in other areas by Spain.

Although we've moved on from these crude types, something remains of Haller's insights. However, I think that if he were to look at Gibraltar today, he would notice another potent image: that of the lawyer. Lawyers dominate

public life on the Rock and the top three law firms act as finishing schools for the political class.

So taking these ideas and mixing them up, I came up with a plan for an epic Llanito poem. It would follow the life of a 'Vratha' - that is, a type of local hoodlum or wide boy, a more evolved version of Haller's smuggler - who works his way up from a life of petty crime and jail and eventually becomes a lawyer who marries a Miss Gibraltar. It would be a mock-heroic work that would mirror the pattern that Gibraltarian society has followed in its recent development. I'd bring in my experience of working in prison and of covering court proceedings and my reporting on beauty pageants - it would sum up the Gibraltarian experience in all its glamour and absurdity.

Why can't I write it? It's a problem of tone. To be true to the experience of the Vratha, I feel that I'd need to express his thoughts in Llanito and I just can't get it right. I think that Llanito is too close to one's natural expression that an attempt - or at least my attempt - to write it down convincingly will come across as pastiche. It has rules, like any dialect or natural language, but I can't seem to work poetry with them. Also, I

prefer a slightly elevated register in my work while Llanito is the firmly grounded language of the street - I'm just not the right sort of poet to do this, however much I'm tempted by the prospect.

The Panorama, a daily paper published here, has a regular columns called Calentita which is written in what purports to be Llanito. However, the sentence structure gets it all wrong with English definite articles where demotic Llanito would favour Spanish and a random placement of Spanish words which no Llanito speaker would accept.

It reads like a computer's attempt to write Llanito if its instructions were merely to mix English and Spanish elements and is far from idiomatic. Crucially, there is too much English too.

It seems that the conscious production of Llanito in journalism, or for me, in poetry, is a bit like writing out the instructions for riding a bicycle - no list of constituent steps will get you close to actually being able to ride the bicycle.

So that's the poem I'll never write - but in speaking about what might be, maybe I've shed

some light on the texture of Gibraltarian life as it strikes me.

CLICHÉ

I spoke earlier of leading two lives - in my other life, I'm a journalist but please don't form an image in your minds of an intrepid seeker of truth and justice. This is low-resource local journalism - press releases, beauty pageants and charity presentations.

Journalists, and the politicians they report on, trade in clichés. This happens for different reasons - there is a set of clichés which are specific to journalism and tabloid journalism in particular. A flavour of these is provided by the title of Robert Hutton's book "Romps, Tots and Boffins: The Strange Language of News."

SLIDE

Journalists are also fond of clichés because they form part of a commonly understood tone, they simplify, they summarise. Why risk time and sense searching for an original metaphor when the well-worn phrase will do?

But, these practical and traditional considerations aside, in Gibraltar we all tend to borrow and adopt clichés uttered by politicians and establishment figures. For example, the UK's support for Gibraltar is frequently said to be "solid", or the cringe worthy "Rock-solid". We're told that we often "punch above our weight" and certain achievements "put Gibraltar on the map."

Another favourite of mine is the euphemistic cliché - when you want to refer to Spain but want to avoid doing so directly, we say "our neighbours to the north" as if this made the recent history of cross border tension less distasteful. We hardly, however, refer to Morocco as "our neighbours to the south."

Weather forecasts used to speak about rain in the "nearby hills." And the list goes on. In fact, the language of press releases and their reliance on a quasi-colonial and highly legalistic English and the way these expressions and stylistic infelicities creep into everyday talk would merit a whole separate lecture.

Closely linked to this trend is our love of hyperbole. A football victory was recently described by many Gibraltarians as "historic."

Days later, another victory, also billed as “historic.” History was being made several times a week.

But surely we must preserve this word for events that are truly historic - these are powerful words, to be used sparingly.

Another favourite is “tradition” or “traditional” - everything falls into this category for the journalist regardless of how long the practice in question has been running. It’s a word to fluff up sentences.

So I work in, and we’re all swamped by, a world of cliché. One of the problems is that cliché, by solidifying the use of a phrase, is the enemy of original thinking. If we talk and write in clichés, we will soon think in them - and to think in clichés is to uncritically accept someone else’s thoughts; it is to limit one’s view of the world to a view that has already been developed. To echo the words of a politician is to refuse to create sufficient critical distance.

In this environment, it can seem surprising that poetry still retains the power to ward off any temptation we have to rely on cliché and other imprecisions - for poetry, when it succeeds, is

the opposite of cliché. Great poetry dares to express things, common, everyday things even, in fresh, untested ways. What is striking and memorable is not when the evening is spreading its golden rays in the sky but how T.S Eliot saw it: "spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherized upon a table"

The poet David Constantine makes a similar point in terms of the idea of 'exactness', but his point is wider and applies to what he calls 'bad linguistic usage' of which cliché can be just one example.

He writes:

"Exactness, saying as truly as you can what you mean and demanding to be read with matching exactness, is a necessary virtue in poetry. And because poems are made of words and words are everybody's to use as they like, the exact use of them in poems becomes intrinsically a counter-attack against bad linguistic usage wherever it occurs. All the arts are an intrinsic answering back; but in the case of poetry, made of words and operating in the context of much public bad language (mendacious, evasive, slovenly, bureaucratic, ugly), the opposition is very obvious. Poetry is not a school of language;

it is not poetry's job to purify the language of the tribe; but by being itself, doing what it does, it must often excite in us the wish not just to be more serious but also to be more exact."

By avoiding cliché, we submit to the responsibility of thinking for ourselves - of looking for and expressing nuance, the distinctive character of events, we celebrate life in all its variety and are not content with a one size fits all description.

SLIDE

I argue that the effects go beyond what's on the page. Our whole experience is enriched because in reading poems, in noticing the things that ought to be celebrated in poems, in writing poems and revising them, we follow poetry's specific demands which encourage us to pay close attention to the language we use. And by close attention, I don't mean the pedantry of using apostrophes and semicolons in the right places, I mean a deeper commitment to thinking for oneself.

In a medium where every word counts, we cannot risk the stock phrase, we cannot be lazy in thought and talk if we want to authentically

tackle some of the biggest themes: living, loving, dying, ageing, faith, doubt, childhood, nostalgia.

But poetry in this sense is more worldly than philosophy because these grand-sounding themes can be explored tangentially and via the an individual, unremarkable object and so we have William Carlos Williams writing, rather mysteriously:

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

To do this in a sustained fashion is the challenge and the wonder of poetry.

Thank you - please buy a book!