

Il-Mina / The Gate

Godfrey Baldacchino

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Dahla / Prologue

At the west entrance to the Maltese town of Żabbar stands *Il-Mina ta' Hompesch*, a commemorative stone archway, built in neoclassical style. It was constructed in 1801 to commemorate the locality's status as a city, which had been granted by the Grand Master destined to be the last of the Hospitaller Order of the Knights of St John in Malta, the German Ferdinand von Hompesch, in 1797. (The Knights were evicted from Malta by Napoleon in 1798.) The location of Hompesch Gate, as it is known, over two centuries has not changed; but its functions and immediate environs have. In its current, latest reincarnation, the Arch is a traffic island and roundabout for a very busy and noisy intersection; it stands alongside the perch of a mobile street-hawker selling vegetables and fruit off his van (possibly without a proper permit); and its archway supports the banner commemorating the 400th year anniversary of the founding of the Parish of Zabbar, dedicated to our Lady of Graces. It is now festooned with electric lights, and comes with a pair of small cannons on one side, purportedly to defend the Arch but actually meant to embellish it: along the cannons are rows of flowerbeds which sport seasonal colours. *Il-Mina* is a Grade 1 National Monument that has found itself in the service of multiple users with fairly banal and pragmatic interests in mind.

Minqux fil-Ġebel / Cast in Stone

The Maltese Islands are a coralline limestone archipelago smug in the centre of the Mediterranean sea. Their stubbornly enduring legacy of stone means that some of the world's oldest, free standing buildings – possibly temples – are to be found there. One other (this time natural) local arch, the Azure Window, has gained notorious fame of late as the evocative backdrop to a gripping scene in the blockbuster series *Game of Thrones*. Thus must lasting materials bend under and bear the weight of the different interpretations that get invariably layered on spaces, places and things with the pursuit of time. Enduring stone constructions must thus suffer reinterpretation, sometimes of the intrusive material kind; and often in more subtle, less demonstrative ways.

Identity is similarly pliable, similarly constant. We journey through life with an understanding that some things don't change, or don't change easily – they might as well be cast in stone: our beliefs, our nationality, our value system ... And yet, even what might appear impervious to tinkering can and does change: fishing and bathing spots have been converted to pleasure boat marinas; a poor net labour exporting society has become an affluent net labour importing

economy; sleepy rural paths have become frenzied traffic arteries; and appeals to a European distinctiveness have ebbed and flowed.

A small island must always suffer the intrusion of the sea. Sea salt spray infuses the air, accelerating rust and decay. The shifting liquid medium continues to serve as prime witness to the drama of this island history: Phoenician traders and Roman soldiers; St Paul shipwrecked in 60 AD; the haughty Knights of St John arriving with what they could salvage from Rhodes in 1530; marauding pirates and pillaging corsairs over various raids; Napoleon and the French Fleet en route to Egypt in 1798; the crews of the Royal Navy and then the American Sixth Fleet with shore leave spent in the bars and beds of 'The Gut', in Strait Street, Valletta; boatloads of undocumented migrants from Africa, saved from drowning on their desperate journey of freedom and the search for a better and safer life; expectant tourists ferried off their cruise ship for a 9-hour visit to Malta.

Min Ahna, Min Ahna? / Who We Are, Who Are We?

The Maltese are a basket case of cultural hybridity: their surnames betray a diverse provenance, yet they are melded somehow as an island race with a fortress mentality and raw sense of exceptionalism. Their identity amalgam is however more complex than the beguiling duality of local yet global, Mediterranean yet European; insular yet cosmopolitan; speaking English and Maltese. Like Hompesch Arch, the Maltese are rooted yet routed; theirs is a rhizomatic engagement with the world, albeit from a small island perch. A sense of nationhood is embryonic at best, more willed and bullied into existence by the rhetoric, ritual and select representations of the past of and by post-independence historians and politicians, enamoured of nation building. A significant Maltese diaspora settled first in Ajaccio (Corsica), Alexandria (Egypt), Gibraltar and Tunis in the nineteenth century; then Adelaide, Chicago, London, Melbourne, New York and Toronto in the twentieth. Brain and brawn rotation, rather than drain/gain is now more in vogue, with 'fly in, fly out' Maltese communities in Brussels, London and Luxembourg. Catholicism provides a bulwark of mythic togetherness; a rallying call that contrasts with Islam: easily peddled for an island that was the seat of government of The Knights of St John – an aristocratic theocracy pledged to fight the Infidel – for 262 years (1530-1798). And appeals to a white-skinned Europeanness may come across as even comic: one can hardly call a Maltese 'white', tempered as s/he may be by an unforgiving sun; but, again, for a population that had been lumped with the non-European riff-raff for the purpose of securing migration by a supremacist 'White Australia' policy and thus savagely discriminated against, claims to a 'purer race' strike a raw nerve. At the end of the day, it would be hard to tell the physiognomic difference between a Sicilian, an Egyptian and a Maltese – but: what exactly do those terms mean?

The question is moot: with some 30,000 foreigners now working in Malta – that's a staggering 15% of the labour force – many accompanied by family members, we now reap the consequences of our economic success. Our property market, for sale and rent, is hot and getting hotter. We struggle with the implications of offering 'authentic' tourism experiences when

foreigners visiting the Islands may be greeted by a Kosovar waitress at a restaurant; an Italian driver on a public bus; or a Filipino nurse in a hospital ward. The Gate unforgivingly provides both exit and entry points, and to both locals and aliens. Diversity is upon us and smack in our face, reminding us daily of a plural reality – but not as something new, unknown and foreboding. It is rather a return to the Malta of old, the Malta as entrepôt for (then, sea borne) trade and commerce, when the very notions of statehood and borders – with their concomitant technologies of control and surveillance – had not yet been invented.

Xtut u Stati / States and Shores

With its girth of ocean, Malta is much like *Il-Mina ta' Hompesch*, unable to stem the traffic into Żabbar, but doing its best to at least manage the flow. As a sovereign state, Malta also stands tall and firm to project statehood and territoriality, with a resident population subject to its legal purview; as it must. Yet it is open, vulnerable and ultimately quite defenceless in stemming tides of human and cultural invasion and intervention, a consequence of the liminality of shorelines.

Tmiem / Epilogue

Those very successive waves of visiting humanity have crafted Malta into what it is today, and will continue invariably to shape its cacophonous miscellany in the years to come. This destiny should not be so hard to accept, when one remembers that – like other Semitic tongues – the Maltese language lacks the verb ‘to be’.