

Critical voices, witch hunts and gatekeepers: Malta's literary scene in turmoil

Mark Vella spent two years as the book reviewer for *Illum*. Here he sits down with educator Daniel Xerri to discuss the latest controversy among Maltese authors and takes to task PEN Malta's request for the removal of an official from the Kunsill Nazzjonali tal-Ktieb.

First there was an anonymous blog that started uploading critical reviews and commentary on the Maltese literary scene. And after ruffling feathers, the blog was suddenly taken down only to be followed by a Facebook comment, now removed, by a manager at the Kunsill Nazzjonali tal-Ktieb who alleged Maltese authors prostitute themselves to advance in the literary scene.

And then, PEN Malta, the grouping that represents authors insisted that an official apology from the KNK was not enough and the manager, who is herself a budding writer, should be removed.

Daniel Xerri: What are your thoughts on the idea that contemporary Maltese literature seems to lack robust critical voices?

Mark Vella: It's never had robust critical voices. What do we mean by criticism? While there is a tradition of academic literary criticism in some form or other, with works gradually placed in a canon, we lack the same robust structure on the commercial review level, where books are taken to the public.

There used to be a kind of review tradition in newspapers and mainstream media until the late nineties and beginning of the noughties. Knowledgeable reviews by Paul Xuereb and Norbert Ellul Vincenti on *The Times*, and every newspaper, both in Maltese and English, had its literary page. The move to online and the attention to metrics spelt the dwindling of the review tradition nearly to zero. Now it's gaining a certain resurgence with the use of social media and dedicated websites.

However, we don't have a culture of seasoned reviewers producing critical reviews based on academic knowledge, knowledge of the literary tradition and the canon, and informed attitudes towards literature. We do not have those kinds of critique.

Why not?

The usual excuse is that Malta is too small. There might be some writers who will hate you for saying something critical about their work. This is what we're seeing in *The Malta Literary Review* (MLR) controversy. Even though I believe that reviewers should show their face, I was quite happy with what was coming out from the MLR.

Not everything about its anonymous reviews was accurate or sufficiently polished, but there was this refreshing style, there was a bit of savagery, something similar to what we sometimes read in certain international newspapers and literary journals. There was an amount of irony in these opinionated reviews that hadn't seemed possible in Malta for a long time.

Is it that we're not used to this kind of caustic criticism?

I think the issue is deeply connected to the Maltese psyche. Beyond partisan politics, we don't criticise one another publicly. Everyone's a friend of a friend, and everyone gets easily offended. In Malta there is a very strong link between business interests, political interests and personal interests. There are many seldom recounted anecdotes of how business interests intervene to take down or discount negative reviews when they view that this may affect their patronage: and it seems that this tactic is still ingrained, even lower down the food chain of interests. So, it takes a lot of courage to express what you want to say in the critical way you want to say it.

The irony is that it takes courage even to be anonymous, as we've seen with the MLR debate. I speak to many people who say that critical reviews are needed in literature, in the arts, in theatre. And I've met many people over the years who expressed an interest in setting up a publication or website for such reviews. The initial discussion is always about whether it should be done anonymously or not.

I prefer putting my name to my reviews, but I understand people who would like to do it anonymously. I understand them perfectly because of the vindictiveness we encounter in this country. Nevertheless, we need to move on. We're no longer in the 1980s when people used to write anonymous letters to the papers or use imaginative pseudonyms. Now it's far more difficult to remain anonymous.

What's strange about the controversy surrounding the MLR review 'scandal' is that there is, after all, a growing tendency in Malta to openly say what you want to say, even after certain landmark reforms concerning freedom of expression and the liberty allowed by the relatively unregulated online world. There are, for example, irreverent podcasts using foul language. There are many people who write what they feel on social media. The environment seems to be there nowadays.

Why do we need a critical review culture in the Maltese literary scene? Some people say that there is too much mediocrity locally.

Rather than saying that we're mediocre a priori, I believe that many things go unchecked in the Maltese literary scene. For example, in one of the MLR reviews, the reviewer claimed to have inside knowledge of mismanagement, favouritism, or an unequal application of the rules regarding public funding. There are two questions at play here, which might have been unjustly conflated by the reviewers, but which still merit close perusal: one concerns legitimate opinions about a work's quality, but the other question is whether the Kunsill Nazzjonali tal-Ktieb is actually applying universally fair methods of assessment when assigning grants or other aid.

An absence of checks and balances happens partly because there isn't an ecosystem of critical reviewing. There aren't different critical voices. If there were such voices, we would have someone who's appreciative of a piece of work and someone who's not, as well as someone who's got an alternative take.

Instead, what we have in some review outlets is akin to a pageant show. These reviews are written by people who do not know the first thing about how to produce a good critical review. They just give a summary of the book and use the same hackneyed phrases to say something about it. I'm not saying you need to be Harold Bloom to know how to write a solid review, but these people don't even have a grasp of the basics of reviewing. So, we remain where we are.

What I've seen in my time as a reviewer is that a lot of hype surrounds the same established authors. As an ex-publisher, I understand that this is part of the marketing reality, but a critic should

also be able to know the industry and see beyond the fluff. There is also a fair amount of literary realities that are underrated or not rated at all, sometimes even due to the publisher's actual interest or lack of marketing power. Some of these works harbour more surprises and interest for an attentive reviewer than some of the run-of-the-mill authors that are published with regularity and with all the pomp.

As a reviewer, I had the privilege of receiving and reviewing books that I would not have bought otherwise. It might have been because of an unfounded prejudice against an author or publishing house whose name I didn't know. By reading these books I would sometimes realise that there's a reality which we don't know about in the Maltese market. A reality clouded by the excessive attention to the same names. If you don't have an ecosystem to talk about these kinds of books, everything goes unchecked, and no wonder some works fall by the wayside and gain nary a mention, just to remain languishing on the bookshelves.

Another problem is that there is sometimes an incestuous relationship amongst the established authors. They promote one another and publicly claim that other people's books are masterpieces. It ironically becomes necessary since there are few reviewers. This leads to the incestuous relationships frequently bandied about. Obviously, this is something that remains in a circle, especially if there isn't an external reviewer who can give an alternative opinion or at least confirm the authors' impression.

It pains me to rehash the *Castillo* controversy. When Clare Azzopardi's much-touted novel didn't win the National Book Council prize for best novel as expected, and the prize was not even awarded, there was a huge controversy. The decision was surely debatable – David Hudson was in the jury, so there might be some sort of pattern – but it sort of burst the bubble. The reactions were, however, short of a public lynching of the jurors, rather than questioning how the decision might have reflected on the state of Maltese literature, or whether, after all, the jurors made a gross mistake of judgment. For many months, it had been a foregone conclusion that *Castillo* would win, an instant classic even before being nominated for the prize, and this was compounded by the lack of actual competition in that year's shortlist. Nevertheless, an actual independent review by **The Maltese Reader**, though not dumping the novel, had a more nuanced approach than the usual celebratory puff piece.

On the contrary, Lorraine Vella's *Marta Marta* didn't get the attention it deserved before it won the prize. Despite it being a very good book, probably even on an international level, the fact that it was published by someone who opted for a micropublishing house meant that it was largely ignored before being given the prize. This goes to show that there are several power structures at work.

Given its value, what would help to develop a critical review culture within the local literary scene?

One could say it requires courage and less fear. But what is there to be afraid of? What retribution could possibly be meted out? You'd become a pariah. Maybe someone younger is afraid of being a pariah. I'm nearly 50 years old. I don't really care.

When I reviewed books, I wasn't out to destroy anyone. I felt that it would have been unfair of me to destroy a fairly unknown author who writes, let's say, popular novels. I didn't see it as important to diss someone who is unknown or who writes for a certain audience. That would have been dissing someone just for the sake of it.

On the other hand, I wrote highly critical reviews of certain established authors. I feel established authors should be able to take the flak. I reviewed books by Paul B. Borg and Alfred Sant quite negatively, for example. These are people who are in the public eye as far as literature is concerned. They're in the kitchen, so they've got to take the heat. It was my policy to gauge my criticism according to the book or the author that I was writing about.

Or else, I would criticise a book that was marketed in a certain way but fell short of its marketing. This is because even marketing and the publishers are essential actors. They create expectations in the reader. They help to widen or narrow the horizon of expectation. So, the critical reviewer needs to assess that.

What the MLR controversy showed is that a critical review culture is required. There's an appetite for more of that kind of criticism. Certain newspapers might have decided not to carry reviews anymore because according to their data no one reads reviews. However, I think it works the other way. A newspaper should give a service that although not widely read, will be read by the people who care.

If a newspaper were to review every book that comes out, every theatre production and art exhibition, this would attract a certain audience. They would see that newspaper as the go-to-place for quality reviews. So, media houses need to show some courage too. They should realise that there is a need, even a bit of hunger, for well-written reviews aimed at generating debate about the things that matter.

What needs to be eliminated though are those reviews in which everyone says the same pleasant things. There's no value in that apart from helping to scratch one another's back.

What are the implications of a critical voice like the MLR being taken down?

In the case of the MLR, despite the possibility that there may have been some personal grudges that motivated some of the reviews, the writers behind the project appeared relatively well-prepared for the job. They had an awareness of tradition, of the structures of the book industry or the book world in Malta, and knowledge of different genres, ranging from comics to poetry. They seemed to have the prerequisites for being good reviewers and for operating a good literary review journal.

The silencing of these reviewers, whether self-imposed or provoked by the witch hunt conducted by those who sought to reveal their identity, is quite worrying. Despite being somewhat misguided, they still had the tools necessary for being critical reviewers. This wasn't a gratuitous blog vomiting over everyone.

After what happened to the MLR, how likely is it that others will find the courage to express their critical views given their awareness that they can ultimately be silenced?

Highly unlikely, especially after Immanuel Mifsud's statement on the young poet Jasmine Bajada. I was very surprised to see him demanding that she be fired from her job at the National Book Council just because she expressed a controversial opinion about Maltese writers. It's as if Mifsud and the other writers backing him were offended at being compared to whores. Now they are demanding their pound of flesh.

It seems that the writers who were once revolutionary have now become conservative. In the past, our generation was proud to criticise older writers for being gatekeepers. Now it seems that contemporary established writers risk becoming the new gatekeepers.

For me, it is an aspect of cancel culture. People who dare criticise Maltese writers are being cancelled. Bajada and the writer David Hudson are being cancelled for expressing critical views on social media. They're being made pariahs, they're being ostracised.

It's ironic that this is happening with the blessing of PEN Malta, the organisation that should preserve and defend free speech. It is very worrying that two young writers are being made to bear the brunt for their frank views on Maltese literature.

What's happening online is that authors from certain coteries are ganging up on Bajada and Hudson, promoting a perception of cliques and the politics behind it all, gatekeepers who want to manage the canon.

The above is the full interview conducted with Mark Vella. A **shorter version** was published by *MaltaToday* on Sunday, 3 December 2023.