

The public intellectual

Germaine Greer's most famous intellectual sparring partner visited Belfast recently to add his weight to Belfast's contender bid as European City of Culture. Cian O'Neill met Tom Paulin

Down he came, walking like a housecat on frost. Gängerly. We sit down in the restaurant and over a full regional breakfast and yard of coffee the Late Review seeming curmudgeon talks about his life as a public intellectual, his poetry, and why he is here.

That latter answer being the Imagine Belfast 2008 project, a sort of cause demi-célebre which he weighed in to support in Belfast Castle the previous night. His talk, about the vernacular city, was well received by the 18 wheel 'midgets with cocaine platters juggernaut' that is Belfast literary *société*. His view that Belfast has been a hotbed of culture depended on the language invention of the locals, their spirit of critical candour.

Particularly the candour of those who worked on the bolts, the shipyard workers. And, this being Belfast, he got drunk. "I started pouring whiskey down myself." That vernacular again.

He has a new book coming out (about "the Great Patriotic War"), to be featured in the Between the Lines Literary festival on March 14th. He is somewhat superstitious about its determinacy and leaves it open to further work. He is also conscious of the gravity of the subject, "and fearful of parachuting in."

Though Paulin is an interesting public thinker because he does parachute in, and not infrequently. A theme in the new work of poetry is "fascism" in the English establishment. He speaks of the Duke of Windsor as "a nazi" and TS Eliot and Henry Williamson as "fascists". In a recent *Guardian* review of a new Eliot biography he was vituperative on the topic of his misogyny. Yet he says that his view of the poetry is unaffected by this. He speaks of Frost as "a very complex monster, though a marvellous poet... marvellous poet." It seems part of the Paulin schtick, the bone-bleaching assessment, the Northern put-down, which nevertheless bespeaks a tough tenderness.

"I find that in England, you know, poets are regarded in a sort of sentimental way. You criticise them you're then accused of not being able to appreciate their poetry. Whereas over here you can say what you want about Yeats and Shaw. Certainly there is a no holds barred attitude here, which is healthier. There is a more democratic attitude to writers."

This is the candour which Paulin celebrates, what he calls an "eighteenth century virtue." That referring to Francis Hutcheson and Thomas Hazlitt, perhaps his most significant influences. The significance is unmistakable. The Scottish Enlightenment put the public intellectual right there in what Milton called the heart of culture. And that Enlightenment fed into Unitarian Ulster Scots Protestantism. And perhaps had greater influence.

"I'm trying to argue that there is a possible case that that idea which is central to the Scottish Enlightenment and to English Literary Criticism actually came from here. That's the notion. I mean it did, but it might seem a long way off." This is, it seems to

me, Paulin's Big Theme. He spoke in his Vernacular City lecture of Irish historians having an axe to grind. He seems arguably to be exercising his leverage as a recognized public thinker to influence the perception of Ulster Protestant culture.

Before becoming the *eminent cherisher* (Oxford, he taught in Nottingham for "22 unhappy years as a junior lecturer in that wretched department. And after 15 years I tried to get them to make me redundant." He explained why. "This sounds like boasting, but I was the only person there anyone had heard of. Working with second rate academics is hell on earth—inadequate, dismal, dingy people." He continued, "It's a terrible world, the academic world badly paid, demoralized, awful." When I referred him to Stanley Fish's axiom that "academics are happy to eat shit and care not, at a push, what kind of shit it is", he was aglow with admiration. "That's probably the most interesting thing he has said." It rather makes one wonder why he himself has been an academic: "I thought of myself as kind of slow to do things. If you get an academic job you have a lot of free time, and that's what writers need. Time." But if he had to decide anew would he enter academia? "Oh yeah, I love teaching, you get all kinds of ideas from your students." Indeed, as he admits, "My students do a lot of my research for me." This extended to an article on DeLoe recently for which his students checked dates and details.

I rather thought he would be happy beneath the spires of Oxford. Not completely. "The university is a badly run series of folk museums. It's not a real university, in that there is no one who finally takes responsibility for anything. It's run by ex-public school boys as far as I can tell, and has a lot of the faults that come with that. But I like the English Faculty very much."

He then made an interesting admission, of bourgeois or academic poet guilt, for not living the life of the penniless Wordsworth. "I feel I should have. I didn't take myself seriously enough" (as a writer). The solution which he has reached is to see his real job as public intellectual engaged in public communication.

"Teaching, writing, broadcasting, that's my way round it. But there are purer writers. I am very fascinated by journalism. I see journalists as the pillars of civic society and literary journalism as the central energy of literary criticism. Reviews are addressed to a general audience. It's the idea that out there, there are a whole lot of people who don't go anywhere near universities but who are interested in the arts and ideas. To communicate to those people is a responsibility I think."

Paulin is famously unafraid of the critical grand tour, the money shot. "Most contemporary novels fall apart after page 61. It's an infallible rule." Or: "Almost every big movie falls apart in the last third." This tendency was memorably instanced in a January 2002 Late Review wherein he lambasted the Paras for murder on Bloody Sunday. One wonders if he sees

himself as a fierce critic.

"It's not proceeding from a recipe. I lack the ability to construct a balanced point of view. I take the view that positions need to be staked out. It is not a matter of right and wrong. Criticism is an argument in which different positions collide, and truth is in the dust, hovering somewhere above the battlefield. It's an unstable, ungraspable substance, I think."

Late Review made him famous, made him that public intellectual. "You have to talk quite a bit on a popular culture brief, in which I have no interest whatsoever. Except for big Hollywood movies, which seem to be written by 1930's left-wing writers." He actually recanted on glowing approbation which he meted out on the programme to Carpenter's *Escape from L.A.* "Oh, it was a terrible film." But you said it was wonderful?! "Oh aye... Actually I suppose it was a shite film. It was just as well I said that because everyone else said it was rubbish." Was he playing, or does he play, the contrary critic? "I always believe what I'm saying. Possibly intuitively you pick it up that everyone else is going to go down this road. Criticism and theatre are not unadjacent."

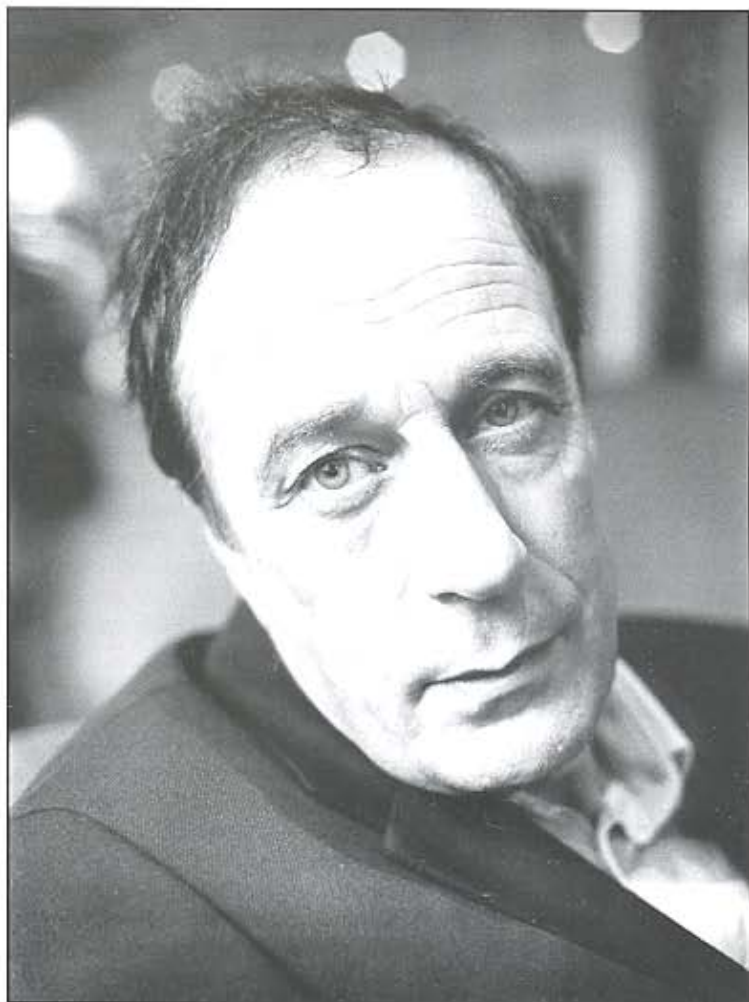
One might wonder then whether he can maintain his credibility as a public thinker and poet by playing the critic. The example of Clive James comes up. "He was a good TV critic. But he went into TV, and that was the end of him. That's the way, you know. Can you take yourself seriously, can you be taken seriously as a writer in television. The genre itself poses problems for a writer, which not all meet. For every Benjamin there is a Larkin. It is a kind of soundbite culture, but I don't see anything wrong with that. In that, it is your duty to communicate with as many people as possible."

It is not only for the camera that Paulin vents the spleen. His poetry is frequently subacid (see *State of Justice*). The key is the language, replete with his beloved fricative. Vernacular, biting language. Yet when asked why his language is so, and it is so angry, he has no clear response. "I don't know... I never really thought about it." He did speak in Belfast Castle of the clattering tenderness of the song *My Aunt Jane*. Further to which, he argued for the foundation of a "consensual, public, civil language" for Ulster.

The inference seems to be that Ulster must create a means of dialogising without fricative, a less candid language which cannot offend so easily. He finds the English, politically, very very adept. "One is endlessly fazed by that, because the brutal bluntness doesn't work. It causes me misery." Does that explain Nottingham? "Oh Christ!" then admits "but to have a civil society you've got to have that language."

His writing points to this conflict, candid and consequence. Paulin describes his work, technically, as primitivism. "Of course, all my stuff about vernacular authenticity is sentimental and immature. It's nothing adult." He takes glee in the disturbing image. "It's a kind of childish anarchism. It's probably some kind of embarrassment with being too neat and tidy. I'm worried about looking too printed as it were. I don't know why."

Paulin actually seems rather embarrassed talking about his inner workings. He reins himself in from revealing too much, after the event. As with his



Frankie Quinn

writing, he couches unexpected strong terms in otherwise restrained language. 'A gritty sort of prod baroque. I must return to like my own boke.'

Only certain kinds of prod baroque perhaps. Paulin, like prior Scottish Unitarian public intellectuals like Hazlitt, is a (smaller) republican. Does the Northern dilemma feature too much in the poetry of Paulin and his peers? "No". Will he be celebrating the Jubilee? "Certainly not."

"I'm very interested in politics. But it's so anodyne and empty in political life in Britain at the moment that I get portrayed as left wing." He had a recent spat with David Aaronovitch of the *Independent* over his criticism of Israel. "I got into a lot of bother for that." But he remains resolute: "Israel is a product of Western Anti-Semitism. There's a distinction between being Jewish and Israeli, but if you criticise Israel you are Anti Semite. They tried to do that with me on that *Observer* thing and I just have contempt for that. I am a pro-Semite, but I am anti-Israel. The British Labour Party is a Zionist party, the Americans have a colony called Israel, and we are in the Third World War which began on September 11, and we will be in it for the rest of our lives. And the Israelis will cause a nuclear war. That's it. That will happen. They will do that!"

Ginsberg wrote, "Surely I'll live to take tea in a backyard in Kyoto and be calm!" One can be unsure of Paulin settling into senescence so quietly. Whatever else he says, it should be interesting to overhear. ♦

Tom Paulin—pro-Semite but anti-Israel