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by Ricki Hollander

Tom Paulin's Poetic Incitement

Tom (Thomas Neilson) Paulin's academic credentials and literary accomplishments are impressive. According to his curriculum vitae, the British-Irish poet and critic has written prize winning collections of poetry and critically acclaimed books of literary criticism. Born in Leeds, England in 1949 and raised in Belfast, Northern Ireland, Paulin was educated at Hull University and Lincoln College, Oxford. He lectured at the University of Nottingham until 1989, was Reader in Poetry until 1994, served as director of a theatre company in Derry, Northern Ireland and was fellow in Creative Writing at the University of Reading. He is now GM Young lecturer of nineteenth and twentieth century English Literature at Hertford College, Oxford and a regular panel member on BBC 2's *Newsnight Review*.

However, Paulin's international fame, or rather notoriety, has little to do with his career accomplishments and much to do with his history of extremism, hate speech and incitement.

In his television appearances, Paulin has distinguished himself with acerbic comments and nasty arguments with co-panelists. He also published hate-filled, anti-Israel rhetoric in the form of a poem entitled "Killed in the Crossfire" that went so far as to borrow from Adolph Hitler's autobiographical *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle). On Feb. 18, 2001, the London *Observer* published the poem.

The poet introduced his piece with a fiercely anti-Zionist quote by Victor Klemperer (1881-1960), who had converted from Judaism to Christianity in his youth. Klemperer's abhorrence for the Nazis who viewed him as a Jew despite his best efforts to distance himself from his roots, was matched by his loathing for Zionists whom he viewed as "repugnant" and whose movement he compared to "pure Nazism." The quote chosen by Paulin was as much anti-Semitic as it was anti-Zionist:

To me the Zionists, who want to go back to the Jewish state of 70 AD (destruction of Jerusalem by Titus), are just as offensive as the Nazis. With their nosing after blood, their ancient 'cultural roots', their partly canting, partly obtuse winding back of the world, they are altogether a match for the National Socialists. (June 13, 1934)

Paulin's poem followed:

Killed in the Crossfire

*We're fed this inert
this lying phrase
like comfort food
as another little Palestinian boy
in trainers jeans and a white teeshirt
is gunned down by the Zionist SS
whose initials we should
- but we don't - dumb goys -
clock in that weasel word crossfire*

While he condemns Zionists as Nazi murderers, his usage of the term “dumb goys” echoes Hitler’s similar use of it in *Mein Kampf*:

For while the Zionists try to make the rest of the world believe that the national consciousness of the Jew finds its satisfaction in the creation of a Palestinian state, the Jews again slyly dupe the dumb *Goyim*. (Adolf Hitler in *Mein Kampf*, Volume I: Chapter 11)

Unsurprisingly, Paulin’s poem was greeted with heavy criticism. A letter by a member of the Board of Deputies of British Jews suggested that Paulin “examine his own attitudes towards the Jewish people and the state of Israel.” Paulin, in turn, responded furiously “repudiating” the letter “with contempt.” Following a clichéd attempt to distinguish between criticism of Israel and anti-Semitism, Paulin insisted he was a “philo-semite,” His proof? He had published a review drawing attention to T.S. Eliot’s anti-Semitism.

Paulin’s acrimony toward those suggesting he harbors anti-Jewish feelings was repeated in an interview he gave to *Al-Ahram Weekly* the following year. The poet attacked his critics as “Hampstead liberal Zionists” for whom he has “utter contempt.” “They use this card of anti-Semitism,” he continued. “They fill newspapers with hate letters. They are useless people.”

But while Paulin was railing against his detractors, his actions continued to give more cause for criticism. Paulin jumped into the fray championing the claims of an Indian Muslim student who had brought racism charges against his course tutor, Dr. Fritz Zimmermann, for failing him in Arabic language and calling him dyslexic. The poet busied himself with making hundreds of calls, some threatening, on the student’s behalf, although he did not approach Zimmermann himself. Paulin’s allegation that the professor was “banged off to Israel to get out of the way” were false, but implied that the poet believed Zimmermann to be Jewish and/or Israeli. In fact, Zimmerman is neither; he is a German Gentile. The judge, who ruled that there was no evidence of unfair discrimination against the student, found Paulin to have been “mischievous” in his unfounded claims of racism and suggested that he was “excitable and may have had his own axe to grind regarding Dr Zimmermann.”

What raised the biggest uproar, however, was Paulin’s interview with Omayma

Abdel-Latif of *Al Ahram Weekly* (Issue 580, 4 -10 April 2002) in which he expressed his opposition to the existence of a Jewish state, his support for Palestinian violence against Israel, and what can be construed as incitement to kill certain Jews. What exactly were the views that Paulin so injudiciously expressed?

On the validity and existence of the Jewish state:

"An historical obscenity."

"I never believed that Israel had the right to exist at all."

"Israel is an anhistoric state. It is a state created by the powerful nations somewhere else. It is an artificial state."

"In my view the European culture carries a very heavy responsibility for the creation of Israel..."

On Palestinian violence:

"The Palestinians need good anti-tank weapons. They have got to meet force with force. They have to be cunning and forceful."

On suicide bombers:

"I can understand how suicide bombers feel. It is an expression of deep injustice and tragedy. I think -- though -- that it is better to resort to conventional guerrilla warfare. I think attacks on civilians in fact boost morale. Hitler bombed London into submission but in fact it created a sense of national solidarity."

On killing certain Jews:

"[Brooklyn-born Jewish settlers] should be shot dead. I think they are Nazis, racists, I feel nothing but hatred for them."

At Oxford, Paulin's remarks were received with relative equanimity. Most felt that Paulin's vociferous opinions, however objectionable, were his own business. According to an Oxford fellow quoted in the London *Telegraph* (April 27, 2002):

There is a considerable group of people who find Paulin's words deplorable, particularly on Jewish settlers. A second camp defends his right to free speech, however loathsome the sentiments expressed; and a third just dismisses it as 'Tom being Tom' - a loose cannon whose thinking is so erratic it is not worth dignifying with a response.

And while the British Board of Jewish Deputies looked into bringing charges against Paulin under Britain's Terrorism Act 2000, Section 59 which discusses incitement to murder outside the UK, the chairman of the English department insisted that Paulin's comments were "not an academic issue, and therefore not a matter which the faculty

would take a position on,” adding that Paulin “has a right to speak his mind and it would be wrong if this right was curtailed because of his institutional responsibilities and affiliations.”

Shortly afterward in the fall of 2002, Paulin took a semester-long Visiting Professorship at Columbia University; his inflammatory remarks had barely caused a stir there. It was not until Harvard University’s English Department invited the poet to deliver the prestigious Morris Gray reading in November that a public outcry over Paulin’s call to murder was heard in the U.S.

After Harvard Professor Rita Goldberg charged that Paulin’s comments constituted incitement to violence, a debate ensued, and the poet’s invitation to Harvard was rescinded. In the wake of Harvard’s decision, a scheduled reading by Paulin at Burlington College in Vermont was reportedly cancelled as well. Several days later, however, Harvard’s English Department reinstated its invitation to Paulin out of widespread concern and regret for the fact that the decision not to hold the event could easily be seen... as an unjustified breach of the principle of free speech within the academy.

Meanwhile at Columbia, calls to dismiss Paulin were rebuffed. Provost and Dean of Faculties Jonathan Cole responded publicly in a December 9, 2002 article claiming that Columbia was facing McCarthy-like “pressures to silence or influence speech by those who are offended or frightened by its content.” He argued that “universities are unique institutions at which unfettered speech is not only tolerated but also encouraged” and that “current Supreme Court doctrine protects the speech and writings of Professor Paulin...” Maintaining that “one of the functions of a university is to teach its students the value of tolerating sharply divergent points of view,” he concluded that “Columbia's history of steadfast defense of thought and speech is a source of pride.” Columbia English Professor James Shapiro was even stronger in his defense of his colleague, stating that Paulin “did not step over the line” with his comments to *Al-Ahram*.

As for Tom Paulin himself, he pleaded innocence and turned the tables on his accusers by portraying himself as their victim. He wrote a letter to the London *Telegraph* (April 21, 2002) insisting that his views had been “distorted,” that he does not “support attacks on Israeli civilians,” that he supports “efforts to achieve a two state solution to the conflict,” and that he is “a life-long opponent of anti-Semitism,” but presented no evidence to bolster these claims. Furthermore, he refused to state how his quotes in *Al Ahram* were “distorted” or explain why the views he presented there completely contradict the views he now claimed to hold.

He then penned a 133-line poem entitled “On Being Dealt the Anti-Semitic Card” in which he declared his opposition to historical anti-Semitic acts which victimized Jews, talked of Palestinian victimhood, and then presented himself as a victim as well, lashing out at those who dare to accuse him of being anti-Semitic. Painting himself as a legitimate critic of Israel, he attacks his detractors and their motives, “saying Israel's critics are tout court anti-semitic is designed daily by some schmuck to make you shut

the f*ck up.”

Meanwhile, Paulin busies himself with supporting calls for academic, cultural, and economic boycott of Israel; he was the keynote speaker at a December 5, 2004 anti-Israel conference hosted by the London University School of Oriental and African Studies where a fresh crusade was launched to boycott Israel’s academicians.

Paulin and his supporters fail to see the irony of his ways – he condemns Israelis as Nazis but borrows the words of the Nazi meister; he attacks his critics as sending “hate letters” but engages in the most extreme hate rhetoric. And while his supporters defend his right to voice his sentiments of hatred as “academic freedom,” he is keynote speaker at a conference calling for boycott of academics.