

Please cite the Published Version

McMillan, A (2018) I know that men can mistake: Andrew McMillan on Tom Paulin's Love's Bonfire, the dash and poetic authority. *The Poetry Review*, 108 (1). ISSN 0032-2156

Publisher: The Poetry Society

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Essay: I know that men can mistake

Andrew McMillan on Tom Paulin's *Love's Bonfire*, the dash and poetic authority

One of the things I've always been interested in, in relation to poetry, is the idea of working towards the truth. I don't mean telling the "what-actually-happened truth", as the great Irish poet Rita Ann Higgins has called it, but rather the creation of art that moves towards the 'poetic truth', that which gets to the root of a particular feeling, incident, or moment in time, in ways that might be almost entirely fabricated. Truth, then, as a synonym for honesty: how we honestly live in the world, even if we have to make things up to show that.

Poets will often find themselves in rooms with people who want to write; who are oftentimes wondering how they might make their work more 'truthful'. After talking of sincerity, or plainness in a poem, my own workshops will tend to move on to an idea of indecision in the voice of the poem's persona (which Jack Underwood's essay in the previous issue of this magazine distinguished from a "philosophical, empathetic" state of being uncertain). I've found myself, over the years, constantly returning to the poems in Tom Paulin's *Love's Bonfire* (2012). The collection features several poems which are expert in destabilising the authority of the poem's voice; rather than being told what something is in a sure declarative, the reader is given a set of potential options, or is given something with one hand only to have it taken away by self-correction with the other. Paulin uses the dash, that grammatical shorthand for something perhaps slightly less formal, to achieve this effect.

Take the opening of 'A Spruce New Colour' for example:

It all depends on your point of view
but from mine – and I know that men
can mistake colours and shades
– from mine the new suspen-
sion bridge at Toome is puce
– puce or maybe lavender –

All twenty-six lines of the poem carry on like this, oscillating between different points of view and different opinions. The only sure moment or definite image the poem is able to offer up is "the police station / built like a barracks behind high walls" – we'll come back to that line later. In workshops this is a great poem for discussing that idea of 'poetic truth' – because what is the human condition if it's never to be certain, to always second guess and to always reconsider what it is we've just said? The fact that Paulin can achieve this with just a little punctuation has always fascinated me.

How should we term these self-intrusions into the poetic line? I was not, for the longest time, sure; I abandoned the fixed position and certain voice of the 'critic'. I quite liked 'in-step', with its suggestion of coming out of the line and stepping into a new tangent of thought, but I've ultimately settled on the more mundane and literal 'dash'. Its evocation of striking or flinging something with great force also seems appropriate. Particularly in his later poems, it feels as though this is what Paulin is doing: quickly shifting the focus of a line or flinging the idea back to the reader – giving them the authoritative position, and asking them to make up their own mind.

This dash isn't something one sees much of in Paulin's very early work. In his debut collection *A State of Justice* (1977), the alternating indented line is favoured as way of bringing the undulating rhythm of the landscape into the poems. In 'Under a Roof', from this first collection, the dash towards the end of the second stanza simply adds further detail to the description, albeit with slightly more force than previous lines, rather than redirecting or subverting the authority of the image which has already been posited:

In a house where no one knows each other's name,
A zone where gardens overgrow and privet rankles –
It stinks in summer and it blinds the panes.

There is a similar use in 'Ballywaire', with the lines "Through gunfire, night arrests and searches – / The crossroads loony smashed to bits –"; again these dashes allow the voice in the poem to become more severe or subjective, and thus they are already performing a function of allowing Paulin to switch the tone of a poem; though still acting to double-down on rather than open up the lyric line. In Paulin's second collection, *The Strange Museum* (1980), the dash continues to serve the purpose of allowing for a change in register. In 'In the Lost Province', Paulin moves from an external narrative to an internal one through deployment of the dash: "As it comes back, brick by smoky brick, / I say to myself – strange I lived there". By the 1983 collection *Liberty Tree*, this same use of the dash is still in place and yet Paulin also seems to be using it as a way of altering a poem's point of view as well. So in 'Desertmartin', we're in the head of the 'I' of the poem for the line "I drive across it with a powerless knowledge –" and then the focus seems to shift, almost to a wide-angled shot, when we get to "The owl of Minerva in a hired car". In 'Manichean Geography II', the reader is told of "The slack wind – warm, trammelled –": here, again, there is a shift in focus – from external observation of the wind to feeling like one is inside it – yet the dash still works to reinforce rather than develop the image.

By the time one arrives at *Fivemiletown* (1987), Paulin's use of the dash, and what it is allowing the poems to do, is starting to expand. In 'The Bungalow on the Unapproved Road', the dash allows the poem to switch from third-person observation to first-person opinion ("The headboard was padded / with black vinyl – / just the ugliest thing / I'd seen in a long time"); though there is still that expected surety, particularly in comparison to a similar poem in *Love's Bonfire*, 'A Day with Two Anniversaries', in which the authority of the voice is constantly shifting and questioning itself. In another *Fivemiletown* poem, 'Peacetime', we encounter the word "no" after a dash: "of the heavy trousers – / no wallet"; this feels like an important usage as it lays the groundwork for future instances in which the dash subverts or questions the lyric line, though in this case it is still serving the traditional purpose of adding a coda to the description. In 'Matins' from *Walking a Line* (1994), the gradual shift continues, with the phrase "you could hardly call them fields" following a dash; this is a softer version of the technique which appears in *Love's Bonfire* when, in 'A Spruce New Colour', Paulin writes:

to the young man
– a Presbyterian –
who – I don't want to say hangs –
who walks in the song

In this poem, alongside a deepening of description, the dash also enables Paulin to give an aside to the reader, framed as a negative ("I don't want to say..."). This allows the idea to be planted in the

reader's mind without it having to be directly said within the poem itself. A similar technique is deployed in 'Air Plane', also from *Walking a Line*, in which Paulin writes "in its box of / – I should say sky – / in its box of air". The technique has not yet reached the point of outright contradiction, but it is here allowing Paulin to pose an alternative while still then carrying on with the original intention of the line. The dash, as has been consistent throughout the body of Paulin's work, is used as a 'but' rather than a way of layering: a slight diversion, a suggestion of something else creeping in.

It is through the voice of Churchill in the poem that bears his name, from *The Invasion Handbook* (2002), that we see the dash emerging as something which can facilitate the pulling-back from authorial impregnability of tone:

I found Halifax had preceded me
like a secondguesser
or an ample
familiar ghost
robed in ermine
– or was it Chamberlain's ghost
his ghost to be

Here the dash becomes a hinge on which the second-guessing, unsure tone can swing in and out of the voice of any given poem.

If a dash were appropriate to begin a sentence in an essay, I'd deploy one here because I want to change tack – and ask, what's the point? Why get so exercised about a dash? First of all, there's no one who uses it like Paulin does, so subtly but with such resounding effects. Secondly, that shift from an image being compounded and confirmed, dug deeper into but ultimately validated, towards images that never seem sure, which always shift, is something that I believe is vital for poets to learn from and take into their own poetry.

In a 2002 article in *Literature and Theology*, discussing, among other things, Paulin's relationship to Hazlitt, Patricia Horton comments that:

in attempting to step outside the subjectivism, irrationality and excess which the imagination represents, Paulin leaves himself trapped in a materialistic world which excludes any possibility of the mystical, the spiritual, the transcendent. His work can be read as an on-going struggle to resolve such tensions, a striving towards that seemingly paradoxical entity, the republican imagination.

Earlier she speaks of Paulin's "anxieties about the aesthetic". Horton's concerns are specifically religious and political, yet they can also help to shed light on the craft of Paulin's work. What others have called an "ambivalence", Horton would characterise as a "struggle", yet both words suggest an oscillation between differing perspectives, in Horton's view in service of moving towards this "paradoxical entity, the republican imagination"; perhaps the poems in *Love's Bonfire* have grown more comfortable sitting in this imaginative paradox.

Horton's later notion that "Paulin's representations undermine the notion that history has any one direction or singular narrative structure" are important to consider. So too her assertion that, in an interview with Eamonn Hughes, Paulin is "charting his own move away from empiricism with its

emphasis on experience, observation and practice”. Horton sees this enacted in *Fivemiletown*, but seemingly more in terms of what the poems are saying rather than how they are saying them. The “relativistic tone” she finds Hughes ascribing to *Fivemiletown* is still played out structurally with dashes which compound and add depth to images or thoughts, rather than contradicting them. The subjects might have shifted to a place of greater ambivalence, or struggle (depending on which critic you ask), but the poems, for all their candour of tone and startling clarity, are still clinging to their empiricism in terms of craft. It isn’t until *Love’s Bonfire*, after fleeting test-runs in earlier poems, that Paulin feels able to call into question not the surety of history or the empiricism of truth, but the authorial voice in the poem.

Elmer Kennedy-Andrews gives us a brilliant turn of phrase when discussing Paulin’s work in her book *Writing Home: Poetry and Place in Northern Ireland, 1968–2008*, commenting that: His own poetic practice, full of glitches and skelfs, is such a writing against the grain. Constantly, he is engaged in a deliberate effort to estrange and disrupt, to turn the poem into a vehicle of defamiliarisation, scandal and permanent critique.

‘Skelf’, a great colloquial synonym for ‘splinter’, gives us a wonderful way of thinking about what this article has thus far been calling the dash – indeed the marks Paulin makes by way of interjection or to transform his poems have the visual quality of a small splinter, lodged into the lyric line. Since Kennedy-Andrews’ commentary on Paulin, it would seem that Paulin has turned this “effort to estrange and disrupt” onto the poet himself, attempting to estrange, disrupt and defamiliarise the authority of the poet-voice who is speaking.

The opening poem of *Love’s Bonfire*, ‘A Day with Two Anniversaries’, starts the collection as it means to go on: “Our aim – no mine –”. Whereas earlier Paulin might have used the dash to look deeper into the “aim”, this poem offers one declarative up to the reader and then immediately undercuts it, calling into question the veracity of the coming narrative, indeed of the rest of the poems to come in the book; it reins in the poet’s initial impulse to speak for more than just himself: the voice quickly recedes, coming back to just speaking for the self, rather than any grander purpose. So too a few lines later when, after the speaker has hit a badger, we are given “(couldn’t – didn’t – stop)”; here we get the dash but also the parenthesis, a doubling of the undercutting of the line which once more calls into question the narrative: is it that the speaker couldn’t stop in time, or simply that he didn’t?

The third poem in the collection, and one we have already encountered, ‘A Spruce New Colour’, begins with a line that seems to speak to that idea: “It all depends on your point of view / but from mine –”. Straight away Paulin is giving up the authoritative voice of the poet that might seek to speak for all people, or certain socio-geographical groupings of people, and places the coming statements squarely in the realms of his own personal opinion. Even this personal opinion is not, however, to be trusted:

[...] – and I know that men
can mistake colours and shades
– from mine the new suspen-
sion bridge at Toome is puce
– puce or maybe lavender –

The bridge is a definite article, but its colour cannot be categorically stated, nor its shape, which could be “curved” or “semi-circular”; later a previous bridge is even reconsidered as “the bridge that stood in for the older one”. Again the dash sparks these changes of direction. The only definite thing that Paulin doesn’t question his own view of is the “police station / built like a barracks behind high walls and screens”; the physical remnants of a violent history are definite; but any other attempts to describe the landscape and its architecture can only be personal conjecture; history has its definite undeniable buildings, and actions, but the truth of them is malleable, and claimable by either side.

‘A Spruce New Colour’ is perhaps the poem busiest with these self-corrections, but there are others in the collection as well. In ‘Kissing Ms Khosa’, Paulin corrects himself: “Tip is touch / – as in tiptoe / or – better – on tiptoe”; again, where the dash might previously have been used to compound or solidify an image, it is here suggesting that language itself is a malleable, perhaps even contested space. ‘The Thin Hem’ presents more of a traditional use of the dash for Paulin – like those in his most recent books before *Love’s Bonfire* – with its opening remark, “Maybe she’s intending to pray”, undercut and countered with “– no I can’t – can’t pray – it’s such a drag”. Here the dash is used as a hinge to swing another voice into the poem, adding depth to the perspective rather than contradicting it entirely. In ‘Donegal Naif’ it seems as though Paulin is already so settled into his use of the dash as a contradictory force that he begins to have fun with it, almost mocking his own, more serious uses of it earlier in the collection:

Some hairs off a donkey
– or some hairs off of a donkey
– its tail not its hide

This is a self-correction that seems to pre-empt the words of a critic or pedantic reader, and is a lighter use of the technique than one sees elsewhere in the collection.

In *The Secret Life of Poems*, published in 2008, a year before *Love’s Bonfire*, Paulin opens: Poetry begins in speech [...] it moves from there into the imagination and life of common people – into rhymes, riddles, traditional songs – and is then sometimes collected so that it moves from oral tradition, communal memory, into print.

The shift from speech and oral tradition, where many versions of the same thing exist, into communal memory which, by its very nature, will never be uniform, and then into print, fits with the notion that there can never really be one poetic definite which any given poem must follow on its way to the ‘poetic truth’; people will have spoken of an event, a place, a time differently, they will each have differing memories of a particular moment.

Love’s Bonfire sees Paulin move beyond the dash as a way of layering or deepening an image, and into a space where it can undercut the authority of any given lyric line; such is the confidence with which Paulin is deploying this new approach, that he is beginning to subvert it, to satirise it within the later poems in the collection. It is a technique that allows for the abandonment of authorial certainty and moves away from the poet as a teller of only one truth, which paradoxically moves a poem closer to the ‘poetic truth’ that Higgins mentions, because it feels much more honest. In a country that is facing renewed questions over its future in the wake of the referendum, it is a technique that offers great scope for the representation of “communal memory”, however fallible and unsure that may well be.

Tom Paulin, New Selected Poems, Faber, £12.99, ISBN 9780571307999
Tom Paulin, Love's Bonfire, Faber, £12.99, ISBN 9780571271535