JAMES McGONIGAL

Coming Out Teaching: Philip Hobsbaum in the 1960s

PHILIP HOBSBAUM WAS ABOUT THE MOST provocative teacher you could ever encounter. I say 'encounter', and not 'meet', or 'have', since his favourite method was to counter, contradict or parry. It was exhilarating and unnerving. I remember him in 1967 leaping down from a dais, where he was lecturing on Wordsworth's earliest texts, to confront some students in the front row who, unwisely enough, had been swapping ribald remarks on a topic that Philip was engaged upon with passionate commitment — until that sudden leap from the dais, the heavy landing and the articulation into startled faces: 'I have taught some of the roughest kids in some of the toughest schools in the East End of London, and never had to put up with such a combination of insolence and stupidity.' Or words to that effect.

And what an effect. They were delivered in a tone that weirdly mixed patrician and pugnacious. Burly, bearded and (as I recall) often in those days wearing a dark sweater, he looked like a grizzled Jewish boxing coach but talked like a toff. Most Glasgow students couldn't make him out. Was it an act? The tones were RADA but the aggression and unpredictability seemed real and familiar in this city. Shocked silence. Then everyone got back to Wordsworth in a more receptive frame of mind.

I had been fortunate enough to be assigned to Philip Hobsbaum's tutorial group in 1966 when I changed course from Modern Languages to English after a year at Glasgow University. My wife reminds me as I write that I did not always consider myself so lucky then, and remembers me 'reeling' from tutorials after a particularly forthright display of his expected standards, by which we supposed that he meant our inadequacy. He often despaired loudly of Glasgow, its climate, its literary life (lack of) and its students. It is true that Glasgow in the mid sixties was still black and bleak. But his approach seemed to cut him off from the subtlety and saving humour it did possess.

He had recently arrived from Queen's University in Belfast, where he had helped generate or orchestrate a remarkable burst of new confidence in Northern Irish writing: Seamus Heaney, Bernard MacLaverty, Paul Muldoon and others had benefited from critical workshop-seminars which he had held regularly in his home there. This had derived in its turn from the practice of the Group, which Philip had begun in Cambridge and continued in London with Edward Lucie-Smith, Peter Redgrove, Peter Porter, George MacBeth and others. And this, further back, had its origin in the practical criticism developed

in Cambridge by I. A. Richards and F. R.Leavis.

Any sense of deference towards such names was quickly knocked aside by the urge to practical demonstration and justification of rhythmical and lexical effects, and by energetic professional engagement in the new texts that poets put forward for interrogation by their peers. There was great attention to accuracy, to reducing redundancy in phrasing, to identifying the emotional impact a poem possessed. Philip's role in all this varied: referee, roustabout, coach, promoter, but also member of the audience and generous host. At least, this was true of my experience of his practice in Glasgow then.

Because I had taken my courage and early poems in both hands and asked him, as my tutor, for some comment, he invited me to join the group workshop held regularly at his flat on a Sunday evening. There I met Tom Leonard, Stephen Mulrine, Robin Hamilton and other student poets, mostly slightly older than I was. Later, after I had left university and (I think) the format had somewhat changed, there would be Liz Lochhead, James Kelman and Alasdair Gray. Philip clearly enjoyed his role as a Zvengali figure, magicking poetry out of thin cultural air. He inspired confidence because he took the work seriously enough to be critical about its detail, and seemed to be able to help new writers to find the stylistic stance that suited them best.

This was accompanied by a breadth of reading and an excellent memory that was impressive to witness, if difficult to argue against. (But he would always listen to your argument: he was one of the most acute listeners I've ever met.) Such confidence and definiteness may have come from his own deliberate apprenticeship as a student to those he considered the greatest living literary critics in England: F. R. Leavis, William Empson and G. Wilson Knight. From the first of these, in particular, he seemed to have learned a combative approach to slack readings and unexamined or second hand opinions. Or else, he identified in the older man a compatible sense of being an outsider, a nonconformist. Philip's Jewishness and partial blindness at this time increased that sense of being open to persecution. The titles of his own poetry collections were beleaguered enough: *The Place's Fault, In Retreat, Coming Out Fighting.*

From Leavis, too, he had learned to be unafraid to throw away much, even most, of a writer's work in order to rescue 'the essential'. I saw him do this with Wordsworth and Browning — and he'd do it for literary history too, championing Edward Thomas and the Powys brothers to cut alternative pathways through the received canon of English Literature.

For a variety of reasons, after a year or two I stopped going to Philip's workshops, or they stopped happening. I was as modest as my creative gifts were, and often felt (as the poet Basil Bunting said of himself with regard to his early mentor, Ezra Pound) a slow-wit at his brilliant table talk. And Philip also

seemed at one stage to be nonplussed by Glasgow's inability to handle him, or he Glasgow. There was an impasse, and an audible paradox. At the same time as he was recognising and vigorously supporting the resurgence of Glasgow dialect writing, his voice training as an actor, that had replaced broad Yorkshire childhood speech by clipped RP tones, remained firmly in place. Typically, he side-stepped the impasse by more formal evening classes in creative writing, and later by innovative degree courses for beginning writers, which yielded impressive results.

Philip was my tutor again for an Honours course on literary theory and again shaped my future studies by refusing to find much good in the Canadian archetypal critic, Northrop Frye, whom I admired for his style and vision. It took me years of part-time doctoral research to prove Philip wrong to my satisfaction, and (I'm happy to say) to his when he was, along with the poet and critic G. S. Fraser, an external reader of my thesis on Basil Bunting and mythopoeic form in English modernism. Edwin Morgan was my doctoral supervisor, a quieter but no less formidable critic than Philip, and in some ways much more radical. He was, in my time at Glasgow, exemplifying an internationalist outlook through his teaching, translations and writing: sound and concrete poetry, Eastern European authors, gay writing. I was, you may say, fortunate in my teachers.

One of the aims of a teacher is to provoke thought in the learner. Whether this thinking leads to assent or dissent from the teacher's view is often less important than the shaping that takes place in the process. Sparring is a good analogy: serious play-fighting, with the intention of learning to survive longer, or better. In this, the teacher's voice is a key element, allied to physical presence. I still remember vividly Philip reading texts in tutorial, keeping the rhythm (enacting it) with a sharpened pencil swung loosely between finger and thumb. He was eager, restless, and absolutely committed as a teacher. Something of that is recognisable in my own teaching style now, too. Not that I'd argue for any direct connection.

Yet whenever I try to teach my students to write better, I find myself using the same words and techniques that he taught in that first tutorial encounter — assert; quote or exemplify; explain. In that order, building up a paragraph. Then another — assert; quote or exemplify; explain. And so the work of explication builds with clarity and sense. You can see this technique employed time and again in his excellent book, *Metre, Rhythm and Verse Form* (Routledge: 1996).

Making complex things come clear, yet without loss of their loved complexity, is another gift in a teacher, of course. We can marvel at our luck in finding and being offered it. Young and self-centred, caught up in the turmoil

of 'making our way', we often neglect to tell even our best teachers that this was so.

JAMES McGONIGAL

from: ***The Beds of Ulster***

March

for Philip Hobsbaum

o it is life-giving to walk again
by coastlands where a poet was raised,
to see the granddaughters and sons of gulls
she watched with a blue gaze

from rocks hereabouts little altered
for all that turmoil of tides,
the sleet occasional, days lengthening
from morning to starlight

a child, she learned her secret
by the Sound of Moyle,
each ear must bend to catch the whisper
of its own queer shell