

The Influence of ‘The Belfast Group’ on the Emergence of Seamus Heaney’s Poetry

Juan José Cogolludo Díaz (jicogolludo@telefonica.net)

Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia

Abstract

This article will demonstrate how Philip Hobsbaum’s Belfast writing group, modelled on a similar group in the UK, defined Seamus Heaney as a poet. His review of ‘A Group Anthology’ in 1963 sparked in him an enthusiasm for a writers’ group which would provide encouragement and critical criticism from fellow writers. The young Seamus Heaney stood out among these aspiring writers in the Belfast Group; he had published a few poems in student magazines and local newspapers under the pseudonym Incertus. From the outset, his participation in the workshop sessions, along with Hobsbaum’s teachings and continuous encouragement, were enormously influential in his emergence as a poet. Heaney’s rural origins, his Catholic education and his belonging to a minority community which was being discriminated against, were factors that, together with the political and social context of Northern Ireland at that time, exercised a significant impact on his artistic creation.

Keywords: Seamus Heaney, Philip Hobsbaum, Belfast, poetry, *Death of a Naturalist*.

Resumen

Este artículo demostrará que el taller de escritura de Philip Hobsbaum, a modo y semejanza de un grupo similar en el Reino Unido, ensalzó a Seamus Heaney como poeta. Su reseña sobre ‘A Group Anthology’ despertó en él un interés por contar con un grupo de escritores que actuarían de estímulo y crítica constructiva. Entre estos aspirantes a escritores destacaba el joven Seamus Heaney, que había publicado algunos poemas en revistas universitarias y diarios locales bajo el seudónimo de Incertus. Desde el principio, él se unió al entorno del llamado ‘Belfast Group’, y su participación en las reuniones del taller, así como las enseñanzas y los continuos estímulos de Hobsbaum, tuvieron una enorme influencia en sus inicios como

poeta. El origen campesino de Heaney, su educación católica y su pertenencia a una comunidad minoritaria y discriminada, son factores que, unidos al contexto político y social en Irlanda del Norte en esa época, incidieron decisivamente en su creación artística.

Palabras clave: Seamus Heaney, Philip Hobsbaum, Belfast, poesía, *Death of a Naturalist*.

Seamus Heaney was born on the family farm of Mossbawn, near the village of Castledawson, in Co. Derry (Northern Ireland), the very same year that William Butler Yeats died.¹ The shoes of one great poet were to be filled by another, thus continuing the Irish literary tradition of outstanding writers. He was the eldest of nine siblings: seven boys and two girls. His father Patrick worked as a cattle dealer while running the family farm. A considerable amount of Heaney’s poetic creation is derived from his experience living on that farm and his childhood in the countryside. “Digging,” the inaugural poem of *Death of a Naturalist* (his first collection of poems), reflects both the enormous admiration he had for his father’s talent and ability to carry out his work on the farm coupled with the rural setting of his upbringing: “Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests. / I’ll dig with it” (1966: 2). The concept of “digging” with the pen represents Heaney’s literary style, and reflects his constant exploration of history, culture, literature and language.

Foster describes the significance of this poem: “In “Digging,” the first poem of his first volume, and one that functions as a crude but effective manifesto, the poet recalls his father, like *his* father before him, expertly cutting turf on Toner’s bog” (1995: 27). The young poet would, however, decline from following in the family tradition, “But I’ve no spade to follow men like them” (1966: 2). O’Brien summarises the contents of Heaney’s first book of poetry as follows: “*Death of a Naturalist* has as its major theme the poet’s escape through art from his native rural background, and poem after poem in that volume presents images of dehumanizing country labors and a sense of nature as something impersonal, cruel and frightening” (1995: 192). Having received a university education and feeling incapable of following in the footsteps of his predecessors, Heaney relinquishes manual labour

in favour of intellectual work, which, as the last three verses of “Digging” indicate, he decides to become a poet.

Between 1945 and 1951 Heaney attended Anahorish primary school, a mixed denominational school for Catholic and Protestant children located in the village of Bellaghy where he lived.² The opportunity to study in a Catholic-adverse environment implies both a personal and professional breach from the world he knows. Heaney benefitted from the 1947 Education Act and, on receiving a good secondary education, went on to study at Queen’s University Belfast. This new legislation ensued from the 1944 Education Act, known as the Butler Education Act, allowed many young people from either country villages or urban working-class families to receive a secondary education for the first time. The law established free compulsory education until 15 years of age throughout the United Kingdom.³ Moreover, as universities were granted greater financing, the children of families with economic difficulties could now access third level education by means of scholarships. This education act created a generation of well-educated and critically-minded individuals who, refusing to accept the *status quo* would question the model of society and go on to establish the human rights movement in Northern Ireland towards the end of the 1960s. However, the Unionist government of Northern Ireland implemented the act three years later as the Education Act (Northern Ireland) 1947.

The education act was responsible for the boom of several generations of writers since, without it, many would not have received a university education. The consequences, though indirect and slow in coming, contributed to restoring politics in Northern Ireland and providing equal access to secondary and university education for all sectors of society. Seamus Deane, a Northern-Irish Catholic poet belonging to Heaney’s generation explains it as follows: “It was education that delivered the first serious injury to the unionist’s blind bigotry: advancement was now to be achieved on the basis of merit, not on sectarian affiliation. As a consequence, school became vital for us. Learning had an extra dimension to it, an extra pleasure; it now carried a political implication, a sense of promise” (Clark 2006: 37). For Deane, however, not all the aspects of this act were favourable, especially with regard to religious and political matters; “[...] one of

the fatalities of the Education Act of 1947-48 was not only the Unionist one-party police state but also the impregnable position of the clerical RC state-within-a-state” (Brown 2002: 97).

The social context in which Heaney’s childhood unfolds was closed-minded and strictly Catholic; the Gaelic football team, the Church and the Catholic meeting hall in the village were the places where people in rural areas would convene. In 1951 Heaney was admitted as a boarder to St Columb’s Secondary School in Derry city, some forty miles from his hometown, and remained there until 1957 when he turned eighteen. The school, which opened its doors in 1879, was then as it still is today, a centre for Catholic boys, which served as a diocesan seminary and, to a great extent, asserted his religious and cultural upbringing.⁴ Heaney elaborates on the religious atmosphere which was generally pervasive throughout Catholic schools in Ireland, and his was no exception:

There was the sense of a common culture about the place; we were largely Catholic farmers’ sons being taught by farmers’ sons. The idea of a religious vocation was in the air all the time; not a coercion by any means, but you would have to be stupid or insensitive not to feel the invitation to ponder the priesthood as a destiny. However, in the first year, the way people separated themselves was that those who came with notions of the priesthood would choose Greek and the others chose French. So I chose French. (Corcoran 1998: 239)

Heaney, whose work is notably lyrical and ethically committed, has dedicated a significant part of his poetry to the condemnation of institutionalised sectarianism in Northern Ireland. The poems, in which important personal, political and historical echoes can be appreciated, are found essentially in the collections of *Wintering Out*, *North* and *Field Work*. Parker states that some of Heaney’s first poems, “Dock” among them, “sprang from wounded political and religious sensibilities, rather than rural nostalgia” (1993: 40). With regard to the subject matter of his first poems such as “Dock,” Heaney explains, “my first attempts to speak, to make verse, faced the Northern sectarian problem” (Deane 1982: 66).

Of Heaney's generation of writers, Michael Longley and Derek Mahon enjoy great distinction as poets. However, Heaney is the writer whose work has achieved the greatest recognition both in Ireland and around the world. The relationships of these writers with their community and the public in general have been complicated, largely as a consequence of the partition of Ireland: the division into two politically and religiously opposed communities. In spite of earlier differences, the poems from Irish poets (and more significantly from Northern Irish poets) flourished from the 1970s onwards against the terrible political and social agitation resulting from the 'Troubles'. Cleary outlines this as follows:

The decades of the Troubles in the North seem, to some degree, to have created the conditions for the emergence of the distinctive and inclusively Northern Irish literature that the period of Unionist political and cultural domination had never yielded. Since the late sixties, a new generation of writers – among whom poets and literary critics have been most distinguished – from both nationalist and Unionist backgrounds has emerged to international prominence. (2002: 75)

That same year 1961 Heaney graduated with a degree in English, and in 1962, completed his teacher training diploma at St Joseph's College of Education, and accepted a teaching post at St Thomas' School in Ballymurphy in Belfast. At the end of that same year he published his first poems under the pseudonym "Incertus," meaning "uncertain," which clearly illustrates how he felt as a poet in that period of his life. Heaney returned to St Joseph's in 1963, but this time to teach English. In that same year, he enrolled in a part-time postgraduate course at Queen's University and met Philip Hobsbaum. This encounter was to play a significant role in Heaney's emergence as one of Ireland's best-known poets. In an interview with Clark in October 2000, Hobsbaum recalls the exceptional teacher Heaney was: "The then Inspector of Schools for the province was a Protestant called John Ferguson, and he said to me, 'The news of this man's teaching went far and wide. I had to haul him out of the school and make him an extra at St Joseph's College to teach the other teachers to teach.' He's as good a teacher as he is a poet" (2006: 41).

His initiation as a poet coincides with Hobsbaum’s creation of an informal seminar which brought together a group of people who shared a common interest: literature. These writers, or would-be writers, became known as “The Belfast Group” or simply “The Group.” The meetings began as a creative writing workshop where their endeavours developed in a political and social context, amidst the tensions of Northern Ireland.

Philip Hobsbaum, a critic, poet and professor of English, had moved to Belfast in July 1962 to teach English literature at Queen’s University Belfast.⁵ He succeeded Laurence Lerner, who was a lecturer and poet in the English Department at the time when Heaney was a student in the late fifties. “[Lerner] quickened my love of poetry and, for better or worse, helped to start me writing about it” (Heaney 1980: 12). Hobsbaum established the workshop and organised and directed the sessions. The first seminar was held in October 1963, a few months after Hobsbaum and Heaney had met. Initially the meetings were held on Tuesdays (then later, on Mondays) at Hobsbaum’s apartment, and he would decide who participated based on the individual potential of each member as a writer. Seamus Heaney attended the meetings from the very beginning of the workshop. Ennis states that “[...] the 24-year-old Heaney was appreciative of a writers’ group. He noted the way the poems were copied and shared among the participants, thus encouraging an informed response to the work” (2017: 195).

It is possible to define two different periods of literary activity in the poetry workshop; the first took place between October 1963 and March 1966. “Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, and James Simmons attended regularly during the first three years; Derek Mahon came once. At the time of the first workshop, none of these men had yet published a book. By the end of the decade, they were among the foremost Irish poets of their generation” (Clark 2006: 1). This period of intense poetic creativity in Belfast, from Philip Hobsbaum’s arrival in 1962 to Heaney’s departure ten years later, has received several names, principally *Ulster Renaissance* or *Northern Ireland Literary Revival*.

Shortly after his arrival in Belfast, Hobsbaum became conscious of the political tension and social unrest which would soon manifest

itself as violence on the streets; “Philip Hobsbaum had felt that Northern Ireland would explode sooner or later, for ‘there was a rumble in the air’” (Parker 1993: 59). Unaware of the unwritten social norms and religious sectarianism, which for political or spiritual reasons constrained interpersonal relationships in Belfast, Hobsbaum gathered people of different devotional affiliation in his house; “I was told by more than one person that Catholics and Protestants would never meet under one roof –for any purpose. The Belfast Group, among its other achievements, proved these ill-wishers wrong” (Hobsbaum 1997: 173).

Against the background of a sparse literary culture in Northern Ireland in the mid 1960s, Heaney described Hobsbaum as “one of the strongest agents of change”: “When Hobsbaum arrived in Belfast, he moved disparate elements into a single action. [...] He was impatient, dogmatic, relentlessly literary: yet he was patient with those he trusted, unpredictably susceptible to a wide variety of poems and personalities, and urgent that the social and political exacerbations of our place should disrupt the decorums of literature” (Heaney 1980: 28-29).

Hobsbaum’s apartment, which served as a poetry workshop one day a week, became the meeting place where Catholic and Protestant writers could discuss cultural and social issues without fearing the consequences. Clark points out that “Hobsbaum’s Group was one of the few places in Belfast – perhaps the only place – where these writers felt free to voice social grievances and to explore the complexities of cultural identities” (2006: 61). In fact, it was at one of the workshops where Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley met. “It was here that he [Longley] met the Heaneys, his first close Catholic friends (the Longleys were, likewise, the Heaneys’ first Protestant friends), and realized the extent to which he had missed out on the riches of Irish culture” (2006: 56). Even though institutionalized discrimination against Catholics gave rise to the explosion of the violence which unfolded in Northern Ireland since 1969, the root of the confrontation was not religious affiliation but the political wishes and aspirations harboured by each community. The Unionists, who were chiefly Protestant, wanted Northern Ireland to remain as part of the United Kingdom while the nationalist republicans, who were

predominantly Catholic, defended the unification of the island of Ireland. Fortunately, there was no room for sectarian tensions during the meetings of “The Group”; as Clark outlines, “[i]t was also one of the few Belfast forums that discriminated not on the basis of religion but on the basis of aesthetics” (2006: 2).

Heaney began to explore his cultural identity in the workshop sessions and read several poems which at the time challenged the Unionist hegemony, such as “For the Commander of the Eliza”, “Requiem for the Irish Rebels, Wexford, 1798” and “Orange Drums, Tyrone 1966,” which are among his most political works of poetry.⁶ “These poems suggest that the public forum of the Group workshop encouraged Heaney to subvert the Ulster code of silence through his poetry – a daring feat, when one remembers his image of Northern Ireland’s citizens ‘whispering morse’” (Clark 2006: 62). These two words are taken from the poem “Whatever You Say Say Nothing” (*North*); Heaney resorts to the historical epic of the Trojan horse to describe his land as a territory “Where tongues lie coiled, as under flames lie wicks”, and he compares the Catholics from Northern Ireland with the Greeks in the Trojan horse, “Where half of us, as in a wooden horse / Were cabin’d and confined like wily Greeks,” who find themselves, “Besieged within the siege, whispering morse.” (Heaney 1975: 54). The Catholic nationalists, who seek the unification of all Ireland, are trapped in the north of Ireland by the Protestant Unionists who defend that part of the island and want to remain as British citizens within the United Kingdom. Unfortunately, people can learn to live with the attacks, bombs and the internment camps in order to survive, “[w]here to be saved you only must save face / And whatever you say, you say nothing” (1975: 53).

Between 1955 and 1962 Hobsbaum had organised a similar workshop, also called ‘The Group,’ first in Cambridge and later in London. The Belfast Group adopted the same work paradigm. They began meeting at the Hobsbaum’s home near the university every Tuesday night at 8 pm. At the start of these sessions, a writer would present Hobsbaum with a selection of new written work and he would then make a further selection for presentation at the Group meetings. Later on, Hobsbaum would give either the secretary of the English Department, Cilla Craig, or his wife Hannah, a series of poems, short

stories or other pieces of work to be typed up and copied. The 'Group Sheets', as they came to be known, were handed out to the members the following Tuesday when the group met to hear the writer read his or her own work. While poetry took precedence, short stories and prose were also presented. Arthur Terry, Professor of Spanish at Queen's, presented verse translations from Catalan.

Hobsbaum described "The London Group," which served as a precursor for "The Belfast Group," in the following terms:

The Group was collection of writers, based in London, and predominantly poets, who met each week between 1955 and 1965 to discuss one another's work. For the first four years I acted as chairman, selecting participants and making sure that they received in advance of each meeting a copy of the texts to be discussed. There was no membership fee and no automatic right of admission. There were no passengers, either: it was understood that, sooner or later, every participant in discussion would contribute work that, in its turn, would be discussed (1987: 75).

With regard to the precise format of the work sessions, Hobsbaum always maintained that the first part of the proceedings would be devoted to the work of one writer only, and all the other members present would comment on it immediately after it had been read. Experience proves that meticulous peer evaluation, if done with personal and professional respect, may be an effective means of learning. Hobsbaum established a specific and restrictive method that consisted in reading only what had been written and in the way it had been written. Several participants found this practice somewhat disquieting. According to Jack Pakenham, a school teacher at that time who attended the second period of the Group meetings, "[w]oe to any unsuspecting poet who could not stand over every single word written" (Dugdale et al. 1976: 58). The mere fact that a piece of work was scrutinised by every member of the workshop, and that all of them could criticise it, was at times disconcerting. For his part, Michael Longley has written that, despite the discussions within the Group, he never changed a comma.⁷

As with other circles where people of different aesthetics, professional aspirations, and personal ambitions gather, Hobsbaum's poetry workshop was not without personal tensions. Besides the differing individual circumstances of its members, jealousy and complexes propagated disagreements among the Belfast poetry coterie. About the Group activity, Simmons wrote: "In those old gatherings under the auspices of Philip Hobsbaum in Belfast it was obvious that Seamus was being groomed for stardom. His recognition by the English critics came quickly and he has never looked back". Moreover, he goes on to harshly criticise Heaney's early poems by saying that, although relishing the vivid descriptions of nature, he "was impatient of [Heaney's] commonplace ideas, timid moral postures and shallow metaphysics" (1992: 39).

Heaney claims that the rivalry in The Group was not the main issue: "It was more that the consequences of The Group ratings had to be lived with outside it. After a while, a *placement* of sorts was established and it persisted in an in-house kind of way" (O'Driscoll 2008: 76). So, even the negative side effects of the readings and evaluations of the poems, and ensuing comments, had a positive rendering for Heaney, who modestly said about his work, "[...] I suppose I had a top-of-the class rating". On the other hand, Michael Longley, "was marked down because of his stylishness. Aesthetically too 'paleface' for Philip" (2008: 76).

Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley, more than the other members of the Group, profited enormously from the spirit of rivalry and cooperation. "Hobsbaum's criticisms may have confirmed Longley's belief in his poetic voice as much as praise had confirmed Heaney's, since the Group aesthetic gave Longley something to work against—an example of how *not* to write. [...] This double-edged spirit of cooperation and competition was, in part, what drove the Group's momentum" (Clark 2006: 68). Russell adds that "[t]hey are the two best poets who emerged from Philip Hobsbaum's Belfast Group, both because of the quality of their literature and because of their commitment to their craft" (2010: 3).

To Heaney, more than any other member of the Group, Hobsbaum was the mentor from whom the young writer was able to extract the

greatest advantage of the methodology applied in the workshop; he viewed it as being a ‘class’, and took the advice offered by Hobsbaum as if he were a ‘tutor.’ Many years after, Heaney recalls the significance and importance of those sessions as part of “an education,” where “You’d hear people reading and talking about what meant most to them.” He also emphasized the long-term effects of those reunions among peers as very productive for all of them: “The Group gave the people who attended an audience and a motive for their own writing, but this other, more general toning up of the poetry muscles was equally important, maybe in the long run more important” (O’Driscoll 2008: 75).

In an interview given to Frank Kinahan, Heaney himself commented on the reaction to Hobsbaum’s system by explaining: “A lot of people hated it; I mean, there were always quarrels about it. But Hobsbaum was, among other things, a great publicist. He spoke more forcefully to the public than the writers themselves would have spoken. He was a teacher” (1982: 408). Heaney recognized the fact that his emergence as a writer was thanks to Hobsbaum, “Phillip Hobsbaum was really the one who gave me the trust in what I was doing and he urged me to send poems out – and it’s easy to forget how callow and unknowing you are about these things in the beginning” (Clark 2006: 66-67). Undoubtedly, the importance of the Group resided in that, for Heaney, it endorsed the idea of writing. Brearton also considered Heaney to be the favoured disciple in Hobsbaum’s workshop, “For Hobsbaum, Heaney was the undoubted star of the Group, whose densely textured, empirical mode of writing validated Hobsbaum’s own critical principles” (2003: 209).

Besides providing Michael Longley with a forum for his poetic production, the Belfast Group also served as a platform for the early works of James Simmons, Paul Muldoon and Ciaran Carson. For some it was the very first time their work was presented publicly; that is to say, the members of the Group were their first audience. Heaney explains that, “[w]hat happened Monday night after Monday night in the Hobsbaum’s flat in Fitzwilliam Street somehow ratified the activity of writing for all of us who shared it. Perhaps not everybody needed it ratified –Michael Longley and James Simmons, for example, had been in the swim before they landed– but all of us were

part of it in the end” (1980: 29). Although not all the participants were in the same circumstances, their common interests and activities helped to galvanize the Group’s writing skills. Heaney concludes by praising his mentor saying that, “[w]hat Hobsbaum achieved, whether people liked it or not, was to give a generation a sense of themselves, in two ways: it allowed us to get to grips with one another within the group, to move from critical comment to creative friendship at our own pace, and it allowed a small public to think of us as The Group, a single, even singular phenomenon” (1980: 29).

Although Paul Muldoon joined the Belfast Group in its final stage at a time of increasing violence in Northern Ireland, his participation in the seminar was enormously advantageous for him: “It was very important for me, since a writer must be a good critic of his work. There was no sloppiness in the group, everyone was quite outspoken” (Haffenden 1981: 132-133). With regard to the other writers of that time, Muldoon stated that, “[o]ne way or another, it does seem that Irish writers again and again find themselves challenged by the violent juxtaposition of the concepts of ‘Ireland’ and ‘I’”. Muldoon also added that the Irish writers have a tendency to anchor themselves between these concepts, “[...] as if they feel obliged to extend the notion of being a ‘medium’ to becoming a ‘mediator’” (2000: 35).

Even Derek Mahon, who assumed a scornful attitude towards the Group, – despite attending only one meeting – was impressed by Hobsbaum’s network of contacts and influence: “[h]ere was this man from London, people thought, whose name and whose friends’ names appeared in the leading journals, and he’s actually taking us seriously” (Mahon 1970: 91). The contacts Mahon refers to when speaking about Hobsbaum provided a crucial link between some of the writers who attended the creative writing workshop and the prestigious publishing companies in London, which, later on, would launch their careers and establish their reputations as important writers. Hobsbaum sent Edward Lucie-Smith (a poet and critic who directed the London Group after Hobsbaum left for Belfast) copies of some versions of the poems that had been discussed in the workshop. Lucie-Smith forwarded them to a number of literary editors. Karl Miller, literary editor of the *New Statesman* magazine, accepted three of Heaney’s poems, “Digging,” “Storm on the Island” and “Scaffolding,” which

were published on 4th December 1964 (Corcoran 1998: 245). In January 1965, having sent some poems to the Dublin publisher The Dolmen Press, Heaney received a letter requesting examples of more poems from Charles Monteith, the prestigious editor of Faber and Faber in London:

Then inside six weeks or so I had a letter from Fabers. I just couldn't believe it, it was like getting a letter from God the Father. I had a collection of poems at that time with Dolmen Press in Dublin. I left it with them for about a month after I got the Faber letter and wrote and asked them had they taken any decision. I didn't say anything about Fabers, I felt that I could play *some* cards. Liam Miller sent the manuscript back to me and said they weren't quite sure. So I felt I acted honourably enough at Dolmen. If they'd said they were going to accept it, I might have been in a different position (Corcoran 1998: 246).

Corcoran, however, points out that that particular manuscript did not become *Death of a Naturalist*. Heaney explains the finer details of Faber's acceptance of another of his manuscripts:

Charles Monteith of Fabers asked me in January [1965] did I have a manuscript. I sent them what I had and they didn't think there was a book there but they would like first refusal if ever I thought there was a book. So in about four months I wrote a hell of a lot, and I think I sent them another thing in about May or June. I got married in August and we went to London for our honeymoon, and by then they said they were going to take it. So it all happened very quickly (Corcoran 1998: 246).

The manuscript, which was published in book format in 1966, was his first full-length poetry collection, and forged the beginning of a long partnership between Heaney and the Faber publishing company, which, with the exception of North America, has been responsible for publishing the poet's extensive life's work.

Heaney obtained a post as lecturer in modern English literature at Queen's University following Hobsbaum's departure to Glasgow in 1966. Heaney explains that a whole combination of factors were working in his favour; his first book of poetry, *Death of a Naturalist*, had been accepted by Faber, which, "in those days, that almost constituted an official seal of approval" (O'Driscoll 2008: 102). The publication of that collection of poems shortly after, and the positive reviews that followed undoubtedly played to Heaney's advantage, both in his new post as lecturer and as a promising young poet. The comments and opinions of the literary critics, which boosted Heaney's confidence, provided his emerging career with encouragement and motivation. In his role as lecturer, Heaney had the opportunity of meeting Paul Muldoon, Medbh McGuckian, Ciaran Carson and Frank Ormsby –students and young poets who were to become well-known writers and make a name for themselves in the world of literature. Muldoon was still in grammar school when he met Heaney in 1968, "I asked Seamus if he'd look at my poems if I sent them to him. He subsequently published a couple of them in a magazine he was then editing" (Haffenden 1981: 132). Later on, Heaney became Muldoon's tutor at Queen's University.

The second period of the creative poetry workshop started when Heaney took over the chairmanship of The Group. Along with the critic Michael Allen and Arthur Terry, both lecturers at Queen's University, Heaney assumed the responsibility of organising the Group's sessions. The meetings took place sometimes at his family home on Ashley Avenue and other times at a pub on Lisburn Street called The Four in Hand until Heaney moved to the United States in 1970 with his family to work as a visiting lecturer at the University of California, Berkeley. The reunions of the Group were suspended between 1967-1968. This was followed by another year of inactivity (1970-1971) in Heaney's absence. The Group finally stopped meeting in 1971-1972.

Unlike the London Group, despite its close ties to several literary reviews of the time in Belfast, the Belfast Group published neither a magazine nor an anthology of poetry. Between 1965 and 1969, Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley edited the *Northern Review*, a regional literary magazine, which thankfully put them in good stand to request

new pieces of writing from the other Group members. The first issue of Harry Chambers's *Phoenix* – a literary and later exclusively poetry journal – contained poems from three members of the Group: Heaney, Longley and Iris Bull. Chambers, despite moving to Manchester with the magazine, continued to publish a considerable amount of new poems written by members of the Group.

The longest-standing Northern Irish literary magazine, the *Honest Ulsterman*, was set up by James Simmons in 1968, and it turned to the members of The Group to provide material for publication. Despite the lack of any formal link between the Group and the publishing companies, there was a feeling that a sufficient amount of literary activity existed in Northern Ireland to justify the efforts of these companies.

The importance of the Group's meetings and the role they played in the emergence of a new generation of Northern Irish poets has been called into question. Longley provides us with his position and perception of the meetings: "I didn't much care for the Group aesthetic or, to be honest, the average poem which won approval. I believed then that poetry should be polished, metrical and rhymed; oblique rather than head-on; imagistic and symbolic rather than rawly factual; rhetorical rather than documentary. I felt like a Paleface among a tribe of Redskins" (Clark 2006: 67). Likewise, Brearton criticized Hobsbaum for ignoring Longley's first poems: "In November 1964 Longley brought a selection of poems to the Belfast Group which included "The Hebrides," "No Continuing City," and three short (uncollected) love poems. While the poems met with admiration from Heaney, they also met with some hostility and incomprehension, notably from the Group's dominating spirit, Philip Hobsbaum" (2003: 203). It was Hobsbaum, nevertheless, who persuaded the Macmillan publishing company to publish *No Continuing City*, which launched Longley's career (Clark 2006: 68).

The fact that a significant number of the Group's members became talented writers achieving notoriety in literary circles as well as with the general public is unquestionable. The Belfast Group was in existence during the intense political upheaval in Northern Ireland until 1972 during which time many of its members published their

first collections and began their promising literary careers. Heaney was, unequivocally, the writer whose extensive and prolific career advanced the furthest, although Michael Longley, Seamus Deane and Paul Muldoon also became excellent writers and poets. During Hobsbaum's time as director, many writers were invited to the work sessions while others were 'invited' to leave.

Of the 'Group Sheets' read by Heaney and commented upon by the seminar participants, seven appeared in *Eleven Poems*, his first slim collection which was comprised of those written on the occasion of the 1965 Belfast Festival. The following year he published his first full-length poetry collection, *Death of a Naturalist*, for which he received several awards. These two important volumes established Heaney's reputation as a poet.

By the time Heaney started to write and publish, Longley and Mahon, who had studied together at Trinity College, had already established themselves as poets. Likewise, when Hobsbaum arrived in Belfast to take up a teaching post at university, he already had experience in the London workshop, which he then continued in Belfast as explained previously. Nevertheless, Heaney conceded they formed a school by virtue of the fact that they were emerging as professional Belfast writers, bringing with them their disparate backgrounds and personal techniques: "We're a school insofar as that original grouping was the first literary place; but I think that Mahon's procedures, Longley's procedures, my procedures, Simmons' procedures are very different. I suppose we shared traditional beliefs about whatever good writing is –it wasn't the let-it-all-hang-out school, it was the well-made school" (Kinahan 1982: 408).

With regard to the influence of Hobsbaum's poetry workshop, Johnston commented: "It may be that without Hobsbaum's Monday evenings, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) would not have appeared so early or so impressively as it did. Yet, who can believe that Heaney would have remained a mute, inglorious Milton without the Group's supporting criticism?" (1997: 52). Of course, this consideration is nothing more than a supposition for which we will never know the answer. Even so, it is imperative to highlight that Heaney's emergence as a writer coincided with Hobsbaum's arrival in Belfast and the creation of the

poetry workshop. Heaney described himself as a callow poet who was unsure of his creative ability: “I had absolutely no confidence as a writer qua writer”, and modestly points out his willingness to learn: “I was hopeful, tentative, and –you know– wide-eyed with expectation” (Kinahan 1982: 407). In fact, he views himself as inferior to the two greatest rivals of his generation: “Longley and Mahon had come from Trinity. They already were poets, in a way; they had elegance, they had a self-confidence, they had met Louis MacNeice and W. R. Rodgers, they read contemporary poetry, they had collected slim volumes. I didn’t have any of that at all” (Kinahan 407-08).

When one belongs to a group, the principles of that group invariably exercise a degree of influence on the others. This is the case of the Belfast Group. The material Heaney presented was subjected to critical discussion and consequently, as a result of the group influence, successfully revised. As Bloom explains:

Poetic Influence – when it involves two strong, authentic poets – always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation. The history of fruitful poetic influence, which is to say the main traditions of Western poetry since the Renaissance, is a history of anxiety and self-saving caricature of distortion, of perverse, willful revisionism without which modern poetry as such could not exist. (1997: 30)

It can be argued in the light of Bloom’s analysis that Heaney, despite the pressure of influence, lost his early self-consciousness to become the ‘strong poet’.

The ‘Group’, which commenced its activity in 1963, coincided with the increasing political and social instability and impending violence in Northern Ireland which eventually exploded some years later, in 1969. Philip Hobsbaum created and directed the “Group” until his departure in 1966, unaware that “[b]y then the curtain was about to rise on the larger drama of our politics and the writers were to find themselves in a play within the play” (Heaney 1980: 30). Notwithstanding criticism of Hobsbaum’s manner or methods, his

considerable contribution to the development of poetry in Northern Ireland is undeniable; he recognised the potential of many aspiring writers by providing them with the opportunity to develop and take their first steps as poets: “Philip Hobsbaum is rightly credited with having single-handedly galvanised Ulster poetry into its present vibrant state” (Foster 1995: 37).

Thanks to Hobsbaum’s methodology, discipline and motivation, the participants learned from each other, which in turn, helped create some truly outstanding writers; Heaney, whose capacity and genius excelled the others, was the one who most benefitted from Hobsbaum’s teaching. There is no doubt that the Belfast Group provided Heaney with the necessary artistic self-confidence he was lacking. Most of the poems from his first collection, *Death of a Naturalist*, published by Faber and Faber (May 1966), were read aloud during The Group meetings. He was awarded three important prizes for this first collection of poems –the ‘Gregory Award for Young Writers’, the ‘Somerset Maugham Award’ and the ‘Geoffrey Faber Prize’, “setting the pattern of prizewinning which was maintained by all his poetry volumes” (O’Donoghue 2009: xiv). From these three awards, he went on to obtain others culminating in the Nobel Prize for Literature which was bestowed on him in 1995 at the early age of 56.

In June 1969, during the second period of the creative writing workshop of the Belfast Group, Heaney’s second collection of poems, *Door into the Dark*, was published. He also began working on his first poems of *Wintering Out*, his third book of poetry, which saw the light in November 1972. All this poetic production and the favourable reviews on both sides of the Atlantic confirmed Heaney as a prominent poet, whose renowned international prestige was inexorably to come.

NOTES

¹The population of Castledawson was 2,253 inhabitants, of whom 48.32% belonged to or were brought up in the Catholic religion (Census 2011). The British, along with the Northern Irish Protestants, refer to both the city and the county as Londonderry. The historic city of Derry, the second largest in Northern Ireland, and the only

one to preserve the ancient city walls intact, dates from AD 546, when Saint Columba founded a monastery on the banks of the river Foyle.

² The population of Bellaghy was 1,121 inhabitants, of whom 87.24% belonged to or were brought up in the Catholic religion (Census 2011).

³ The 1944 Education Act affected England, Wales and Northern Ireland, while Scotland was (as it is today) responsible for matters in the area of education.

⁴ The school currently has 1,500 pupils and can boast to having had two Nobel Prize winners among its students: John Hume and Seamus Heaney. Hume (along with David Trimble) was awarded the 1998 Nobel Peace Prize for his contribution to the peace process following the ‘Belfast Agreement’ known as the ‘Good Friday Agreement’. Hume was the leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party, and Trimble led the Ulster Unionist Party.

⁵ Although born in London (1932), Philip Hobsbaum was educated in the north of England and in West Yorkshire to where his family was evacuated at the beginning of the war. For a time, he wanted to be an actor and participated in a discussion and debating circle of the Jewish society. He was professor of English Literature at Glasgow University; Hobsbaum wrote more than 2,000 poems and several plays as well as short stories. He died in 2005.

⁶ “For the Commander of the Eliza” was published in *Death of a Naturalist* (1966); “Requiem of the Irish Rebels, Wexford, 1798” was included in *Door into the Dark* (1969), under the title of “Requiem for the Croppies”; and “Orange Drums, Tyrone” appeared in *North* (1975), his fourth collection. Widely regarded as his finest and most original book of poetry, *North* is also the one most thoroughly permeated with political and social content about Northern Ireland.

⁷ Longley’s Group Sheets prove he revised a series of poems, namely “Christopher at Birth”, “Elegy for Fats Waller” and “Gathering Mushrooms,” which he presented several times. (Clark 2006: 68).

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