Writers Aloud

Episode 452

RLF INTRODUCTION: Hello and welcome to *Writers Aloud,* the podcast about writing from the Royal Literary Fund.

This episode is devoted to an interview with award-winning poet John Greening. In addition to having been a Royal Literary Fund Fellow and carried out numerous interviews for this podcast over the years, Greening has edited various collections of other poets' verse and written studies of the work of many more, including several of the First World War poets and Ted Hughes.

He is also a long-standing poetry reviewer and critic for the *Times Literary Supplement*. In the following conversation with Caroline Sanderson, he started out by explaining how he discovered that poetry represented the heartland of his writing.

John Greening: Yes, it's curious, isn't it? It's a curious thing to have ended up doing, really; but at the same time, poetry is one of the first things we encounter when we're young, I think, those nursery rhymes and so on, and looking back, there were a lot of those. Mother played the piano, so there was a lot of singing around the piano, so I think some of the lyrics of those songs went in.

And I remember being fascinated by things like Belloc's *Cautionary Tales* and things like that. And I used to make up little rhymes when I was quite young, but where it all comes from who knows, people have written long worthy tomes on the subject of where the interest in poetry comes from, but it's connected with sound I think, and music.

I love music and even now I think I respond to the *sound* of a poem first and then what it means comes afterwards.

Caroline Sanderson: Mmmm. We think sometimes, perhaps those of us who don't write poetry think, *Oh that's a very particular thing to be*, but I heard you say in a piece you recorded that being a poet is rather like a traffic island, it's a sort of focal point where all kinds of genres converge, like you're an open sided vehicle?

John Greening: Yes, you have to be...a state of 'inspiration' is what the Romantics would have called it; you have to be in this kind of receptive state to write a poem. The poem has to come to you, really, and I think poems probably come to many people, perhaps to most people, but they just ignore what's there. It's a case of being ready for it and writing it down. So you are receiving…a piece of receiving equipment, maybe. So you have to have that constant state of awareness. Of course you can't always have that state of awareness because you have to live your life and you have to teach or whatever it is you do. But it is being attuned to the world, to the *coincidences* within the world very often, the way one thing connects with another in an interesting or exciting way; I love synchronicities, and I'm always on the lookout for them.

But sometimes there you don't know they're there and you never know what you're going to write about: we went to a Gilbert & Sullivan concert in a local church the other night, and I ended up writing a poem about that, though it wasn't really about that. I started writing about it because it clicked with something I remember from my childhood, it turned into something I hadn't expected at all. So you never know what's going to start the poem at all, but you've got to be ready for when it does come.

Caroline Sanderson: And then when you start the poem it can turn into something else entirely, I guess?

John Greening: It can, and you've got to judge that. It's so easy to say, 'No,

no, I want this to be a poem about the flowerbed'. But the poem says, 'No, it's going to be a poem about your great grandmother'. So you've got to...I suppose it's like riding a horse or something, you've got to give it a bit and pull it back.

The other thing is the form, you know, what form is it going to be? You say, 'No, I want to write a sonnet', but the poem may decide, 'No, this is going to be free verse'. So you've got to keep all those things under control, and that is why it is such *fun*, for the writer anyway, I don't know about the reader, I can't speak for the reader, but it's fun to write.

Caroline Sanderson: Well, there are so many forms available to poets, aren't there, there are all these sort of...even if you follow the verse structures, which of course you don't have to, but, you know, I guess those structures sort of corral, but they also challenge your word wrangling. Do you find as a poet that there are forms that particularly suit you?

I note from reading your work that it's hugely diverse in terms of the way that it arrives on the page?

John Greening: Yeah, I think many poets have a default form. Very often if I'm writing the ideas for a poem down to begin with, it'll be little three-line verses, what are called tercets. And...but it's easy to get stuck in that, similarly with a sonnet, the sonnet can be a rather tyrannical form, and it could take you over. So you...sometimes that's fine, you go with it, but you've got to be aware that you're not repeating yourself, you're not just doing the conventional thing.

So, as with all the other points I was making, you've got to keep that freedom, and not just repeat what you know you can do. Because you want to...it's a process of discovery. So you're discovering what the language can do, as well as whatever it is the poem is trying to tell you about yourself or about life.

The two go hand in hand, so very often a new form, a discovery of a new form, will be because you're trying to say something new. But when you're in your late sixties, of course, that's more of a challenge. But I always remind myself that W. B. Yeats started doing extraordinary new things when he was in his late sixties.

Caroline Sanderson: So yes, your most recent collection, *The Silence,* which...*The Silence* refers to the composer Sibelius and the 'silence' in terms of his composing for I think the last thirty years of his life. So *The Silence* is a very long poem, I think it's twelve hundred lines, is that right?

John Greening: I think it started off that long and it may be less than that now, but at one point I realised it was too long; too long to publish. And there was one afternoon, having worried at this for weeks and weeks, suddenly there was a sort of a moment when I was able to just dispassionately look at what I'd written and go through with a pencil and cross out vast swathes of what I'd written, because I knew it had to happen. But again, the moment has got to arrive; it's got to be the right mood for you to be able to do that, and cutting stuff out is the most important thing for any writer, I think, being able to cut...it's a strange thing to say, but it's perhaps the most important element of creativity, I think.

Caroline Sanderson: Yeah, it's the editing process. I think we all emphasise that, as writers, don't we, that's where it really happens in the editing a lot of the time, but I think maybe I had a preconception that because poetry can and often is quite a précised form in itself, that the idea of cutting lots of lines hadn't sort of occurred to me, but clearly that's something that you've had to do?

John Greening: It is, and it's a very Sibelian thing actually, there are long poems about Sibelius and he himself was famous for his self-criticism and for...also for cutting, cutting, cutting and never being satisfied with what he'd written. So it seemed to be an appropriate aesthetic approach, really.

Caroline Sanderson: Yes, there's a line in the poem where you say, 'Self-criticism, that's what it comes down to: knowing where / to make the cut, having the courage to leave something out / and an instinct for the buried seed'.

John Greening: Mmm. Yeah. It's sort of, a compound character in the poem. It's partly about me, I suppose, but that poem is really about the creative process of any artist; the compound creative artist and the silence.

Caroline Sanderson: Well, so that's your most recent collection. I wanted to talk about a book of prose, *Threading a Dream: A Poet on the Nile*, which is a memoir interspersed with poetry. It's a memoir inspired by your time in Egypt, late seventies, early eighties, where you went with your wife as a VSO volunteer, to teach. And Egypt's such a recurring presence in your poetry, so I was really interested to talk to you about why going to Egypt was such a formative experience, I suppose it would be for anybody at that age, but it seems to be where your poetry started to happen?

John Greening: Yes, certainly it was. I mean, I'd been writing for years before we went in 1979, so I was in my mid-twenties. We went as a teaching couple, and I'd been writing about this, that, and the other, but I don't...I never quite found my voice. And, yes, as you say, somewhere like Egypt, you couldn't fail really to be moved to write about it.

But it did seem to me I had unearthed something; I found a way of writing that was satisfactory to me. Again, it's that doubleness that I keep coming back to, with my first collection, which was all about Egypt, it was the poems I wrote there.

Caroline Sanderson: That's *Westerners*.

John Greening: *Westerners*. And the title of that is because *we* were Westerners. But for the ancient Egyptians, the Westerners were the dead because they were buried on the West Bank of the Nile, so that kind of

doubleness which fascinated me and runs through the whole collection. And perhaps that's what it was that set me off, on the way forward as a writer. But yeah, I come back to Egypt again and again.

And *Threading a Dream* I wrote 2011, I think I started it. And it's a sort of a mixture of verse and prose, it was wonderful to return to it. We've never been back, actually, we never went back to Egypt at all, but I've been back in my head many times.

Caroline Sanderson: But maybe it's something...I know you'd had some correspondence with Ted Hughes, I think, before you went, and he'd said, you have to live, I think, 'a bit uncomfortably', as if there had to be that sort of spur.

John Greening: I think that's probably at the back of my mind. The rest of his advice I spectacularly ignored. He said 'Don't become a teacher in a closed situation'. But then you can't all be like Ted Hughes, it was a fairly sort of wild life he led, and very...hugely successful, of course. But yeah, it was a formative period.

Extraordinary, extraordinarily happy time, too. And, you couldn't stop the poems coming, really; I just wrote them wherever we were. Didn't have a camera, and I sort of took what I think Edwin Morgan called 'instamatic poems', just snapshots; very, very free verse. I was reading a lot of the American imagists, not only Americans, but people like William Carlos Williams, and that, I think, influenced the way I was writing, lots of short lines, which I tend not to do these days at all.

Caroline Sanderson: Yeah, I don't know much of that poetry apart from, I remember at school doing 'The Red Wheelbarrow' by William Carlos Williams.

John Greening: Yeah, indeed, that's it.

Caroline Sanderson: Yeah, so that gives me the little feel of what that means.

John Greening: Yeah, he looks at an object and writes about it, which is what I was doing in Egypt really. You know, look at a shaduf or these sort of, these wonderful things along the Nile and you write about it as it is.

Caroline Sanderson: So we've talked about Egypt a little bit; and a sense of place and of surroundings also feels important to your work and not least the Huntingdonshire countryside where you live. I think that sense of place inspires so many poets, doesn't it? I wonder if it's something to do... because certainly when you're writing about Egypt there's all these layers of history and they're obviously literally being excavated by archaeologists.

But it feels that when you write about the countryside that you're now and have been for a few decades living in, that it's about layers of history there as well?

John Greening: Yes, yes, it is. And I think that's one of the reasons why I like it here and why we've stayed here because it's a very unspectacular place to live, Cambridgeshire or Huntingdonshire, as I like to think of it. But yeah, the layers are there, extraordinary numbers of things have happened around here from the Civil War period, for example, a lot of famous poets have lived around here. John Donne passed through; Dryden was up the road, Cowper just in Huntington, so lots of literary associations as well. And a place of 'significant soil' as Eliot called it.

I mean, Little Gidding is just...I cycle to Little Gidding every now and then. So a place where significant things have happened, so you feel that there's something going on, but also not many people have actually written about *it*. So whereas if you're in the Lake District or something I mean, how do you write about that because it's all been done before?

So it suited me and I've written about it a lot. I think I am a poet of place,

I'd like to write about people more and better, but I'm a poet of place essentially and this is one of the places that I've ended up writing about a lot.

Caroline Sanderson: And your Collected Poems: *Hunts,* it's called *Hunts: Poems 1979–2009*. And 'Hunts' having that sort of double meaning, being short for Huntingdonshire...

John Greening: ...but there's also lots of...

Caroline Sanderson: other hunts!

John Greening: Other hunts going on in the book as well, there's a hunt for a penguin's egg, Captain Scott's expedition, and hunting for this, that and the other. Yes, so again, the double meanings.

Caroline Sanderson: Music is also a thread that runs through your work. We've talked about your most recent collection, *The Silence,* its title poem is a meditation on Sibelius, and the thirty years he spent grappling with his Eighth Symphony. But there's also mentions of Holst and Schubert and many other composers. So I'm assuming that music is very important to you. And it makes me think about the relationship between music and poetry.

The music that you write about doesn't seem to be that with song in it, so it's not a question of song and lyric, but more to do with the sounds, I guess?

John Greening: It's a tricky relationship, isn't it, between the two art forms? And poets are not necessarily musical. I mean, Yeats, for example, was completely tone deaf, but they meet at some...they meet somewhere, I think, music and poetry.

I do write about music a lot, and I think my love of music does inform

my appreciation of poetry, but quite how that works, I don't know. I also edited an anthology of other people's poems about music, because I think poets have written a lot about music. In the old days it used to be the composers were inspired by great poems like Byron's and so on, but these days it's the other way around, I think.

Caroline Sanderson: And who are the fellow poets whose work you're most drawn to and why? We're sitting in your wonderful writing cabin and the walls are lined with alphabetical volumes of poetry. So, it looks as if your, you know, your inspiration, certainly your reading, is wide and vast.

John Greening: It's terrifying, isn't it? Just because I have the books there doesn't mean I've read them, though I have, in fact, read most of them. Some are review copies. You mean living poets, poets who I'm influenced by? Oh, it changes every day, almost. There are certain poets I return to in terms of reading, poets like Charles Tomlinson, Anne Stevenson, Louise Glück, I'm very fond of; very, very pleased when she won the Nobel Prize, all that was well deserved.

Les Murray, who visited us here, in fact, because he read at the Castle, so that was quite a thrill. So different poets, different days, and I have catholic taste, and I'm aware also that you shouldn't just read the work from your own time. So every now and then I'll dip into Elizabethans or even earlier, or look at some Jonathan Swift or read some Matthew Arnold, and I read criticism as well. And there's all those novels and plays one is supposed to read as well. Not to mention all the other languages. I've been translating some Goethe; I've got a little volume of some Goethe translations coming out later in the year. So, try and do something new, try and keep it on the move.

Caroline Sanderson: Yes, we should have mentioned your translations as well, because that's another string to your bow, isn't it?

John Greening: Well, yes, as long as nobody makes me speak German, it's fine!

Caroline Sanderson: But I suppose going back to poets, reading contemporary poets, it all informs the present, doesn't it? It's a never-ending cycle. I learnt the acronym the other day: *Bable* — book acquisition beyond life expectancy.

John Greening: Well, that's me.

Caroline Sanderson: I think we all suffer from that! When you're reviewing poetry, what are you 'judging', in inverted commas? To what extent is it a personal response and to what extent can we judge that something is successful, because I know you're a judge for the Gregory Awards?

John Greening: Yeah, well, I was for many years. Yeah, one would like to say it's an objective thing, but, and there's some...some of it is objective. You can say, well, can this person actually write a coherent sentence, have they noticed that the line break is an important element in the poem, for example? Have they thought about the way that word sounds with that word?

So those are things, which you can all agree on. But in the end, I think, and this is probably a terribly arrogant thing to say, but it's basically because I've read a lot of poetry in my life, so I'll have a sense of what it should be like, which is very hard to define. You get an instinct for it in the end.

We all advise writers, would-be writers, to read a lot. So that's the way you come to understand it. So there are things, yeah, you can say, 'Well, if you're trying to write a sonnet, then why is it you've not got the balance between the, the eight and the six quite correct?'; and I think there's that; there are objective aspects to it, but, it's a mystery in the end. I would make a lot of money if I knew what it was that made a great poem.

Caroline Sanderson: Of course, and a lot of the writing business is a bit of a mystery, isn't it? Which is why it's so hard sometimes to advise other people or even to teach it. But then you *have* taught and I wondered if, as a writer – I've written a lot, but I've never written poetry – are there starting points?

John Greening: Once the process starts, and I think this is probably true for beginners as for experienced poets, once the process starts it carries you with it. You've got to be a bit of an obsessive to be a poet, you've got to say, 'I want to get that absolutely right'.

And you may not know quite what it is you want to get right. So you've got to put the hours in. You've got to enjoy tinkering around with the words on the page. And not be too dogged about saying 'This is what this poem is going to be about', as I said earlier. If you want to start writing poetry, start with something simple, just look hard at something near you, something unfamiliar or something familiar. Just go and stare at a milestone or go and look at a...you know, a rose in the garden. Just look at it very hard and words should start to come to you. And then you play around with the words and see where it's going to take you. And as I always say, it won't necessarily be what you thought it was going to be about.

But yeah, you've got to read lots of other people as well. And you'll end up sounding...you'll start off sounding like another poet probably, that doesn't matter. You work your way through that, you shouldn't be too hung up on being a plagiarist or whatever, it's not plagiarism to be influenced by another writer.

And that has happened through the ages that artists have acknowledged and used earlier material. So we draw on each other's work; it's a conversation down through the ages really, poetry.

Caroline Sanderson: I was going to say that, actually, in relation to your work, it often does feel like that because you do reference other poets quite often in your work, as if there is a conversation going on.

John Greening: Yes, and, in a way that I'm sure Philip Larkin would have hated because he always got very impatient with people who name-dropped other poets. But it's that sense of conversing with others. One of my...the book before *The Silence* was called *To the War Poets*, and it was a series of verse letters to the poets of the First World War.

And I was chatting to them, perhaps rather presumptuously, but I was chatting to them as one might chat to a fellow poet on Facebook. It was sort of like poems addressed to them. So, in that sense, it was a real conversation, you chat about the art, you chat about your preoccupations.

Caroline Sanderson: Yeah, poetry's connection. Yes, all interesting things to think about if you're just starting to write poetry. And of course, that's what happened to you in Egypt by the sound of it, you were looking at objects hard because everything was new and strange.

John Greening: Yes, yes.

Caroline Sanderson: And that's what made it happen.

John Greening: And all you can do is just look with awe and try and take it in, so my way of taking something in...you can see the pyramids, we've all seen the pyramids, pictures of the pyramids so many times, when you're actually standing before the pyramids, you can barely cope with it. Well, my way of coping with it is to write a poem about it and then it sort of somehow makes it a process of digesting what you're seeing, I suppose.

Caroline Sanderson: There's a wonderful quote in the introduction to *Threading a Dream*, which is your memoir of Egypt, *A Poet on the Nile*, it's really struck me because you were, you and your wife were in Upper Egypt in Aswan, which is famous for the dam, of course. And you write, 'I believe there are deep turbines whose extraordinary output we may never even notice, but poetry is capable of driving them'. And I thought, *Wow!* So, I want to ask you about that quote, and also what can poetry do uniquely?

I think for me, and I don't read enough poetry, but I know what poetry does do for me: I'm a very fast reader, I have to read a lot very quickly, but poetry won't let you do that, you have to slow down. And I think in the lives that we all live in the 21st century, that slowing down…so poetry is, for me, partly about slow reading because it forces that, but what about these 'deep turbines'?

John Greening: Well, you're absolutely right about the slowing down. And you're slowing yourself down so much you're seeing into the depths of the words of the poem. The turbines are to do with that mystery, and something spiritual, actually. I mean, prayer and poetry are, you know, are quite closely allied. I'm not a sort of conventionally religious person, but I'm a spiritual person and I understand what prayer is about I think, and poetry touches on some of the same zones, I think.

So those 'deep turbines' I mentioned, yeah, it's the power, something generating power, whatever it is that Wordsworth felt when he was walking in the Lake District, I suppose. And I sometimes feel when I'm walking amongst the empty fields of Cambridgeshire. So that was a handy metaphor, the High Dam in...in Aswan.

And metaphor is what it all comes down to. And it drives me mad to hear politicians abusing metaphors every day of our lives; not really listening to the words they're saying, the images they're making — never trust a man who misuses a metaphor.

Caroline Sanderson: I interviewed Ali Smith recently and she talks about this, she talks about words: if you really, really look at them, words tell you everything you need to know.

John Greening: That's brilliant. Yes, yes. She should know, my word, what a writer!

Caroline Sanderson: Yes, absolutely. So what, John, do you think are the

preoccupations that will – always have and always will – run through your work?

John Greening: I'm not the person to ask really, but if you ask those few people who read me, the preoccupations…well, yes, place, it comes back to, and looking for meaning in life. Also, death, actually, and what comes after. Like poets since John Donne, I'm a bit preoccupied with death, and fascinated by it, and the possibilities of, you know, afterlife or whatever; I'm a bit of a New Ager in that respect. And, I'm quite drawn to history, and the way history repeats itself.

So, as we talk now, there's a war going on in Ukraine and I find myself writing about that but can't help thinking about earlier conflicts in writing about Ukraine. So history, particularly, does preoccupy me, and myth.

Caroline Sanderson: And myth. Well, one thinks of the Egyptian roots of your writing, and there's perhaps no civilization more preoccupied with the afterlife than the Egyptians.

John Greening: Which is probably one of the reasons why it appealed to me. Makes me sound a very gloomy soul, but I think it's one of the...I mean, Yeats said – I keep coming back to Yeats, don't I! – Yeats said that 'The only two subjects for poetry are sex and the dead'. And he had something when he said that; I write more about the dead than the other.

RLF outro: That was John Greening in conversation with Caroline Sanderson. You can find out more about his work on the Royal Literary Fund website. This episode was recorded by Caroline Sanderson and produced by Ann Morgan. Coming up next time, Royal Literary Fund writers explore the link between writing and the world beyond the desk.

We hope you'll join us.