Fire River Poets interview with John Greening, Guest Poet on Live Zoom Event 7.30pm 2021

Graeme Ryan (Fire River Poets): John, thank you very much for agreeing to this online interview in advance of your reading – it's much appreciated. When did you realise poetry was important to you - and the writing of it?

John Greening: It was early on, listening to nursery rhymes, or reading the couplets that were the alternative to prose narrative in those glorious Rupert stories. There was *Cautionary Tales* and *Verse and Worse*. There was Michael Flanders (and Swann). I wrote a lot of verses when I was still in single figures and short trousers, and my holiday diaries were usually composed in baggy rhyming couplets, with cartoon illustrations. Poetry began to get through at a deeper level when I was at secondary school – Louis MacNeice and early Ted Hughes initially, but I browsed all kinds of poets who were beyond me, from Wallace Stevens to Edith Sitwell. And then Milton loomed into view (in fact I reread *Paradise Lost* during the first lockdown). Although Eliot is often thought of as the polar opposite of Milton, Eliot it was who drew me next. Bizarrely, I learnt 'The Waste Land' off by heart chiefly to impress my girlfriend (reader, it worked, and we are still together). The years that followed were spent in trying to shed Eliot's influence.

GR: Wow, that's some achievement learning the whole of 'The Waste Land' – impressive! I'd like to return later to your comment about shedding poetic influences, which is a fascinating subject, but keeping to the thread we've started for the moment …What are your thoughts when you consider your first poem(s) - what impulses or experiences triggered them?

JG: The first poem that could be called one (rather than just doggerel) was about the Pyramids, funnily enough, although I have no idea what prompted it. This was years before we actually went to Egypt, where I would find something like a satisfactory poetic 'voice', stimulated by the place and the upheaval in our lives. I must have been sixteen or so, and it was a long-lined affair comparing the transience of butterflies to the immemorial stones of Giza. All very contrived. My first mature, publishable poem (there had been hundreds of immature ones) was written while standing in an orchard in the village of Brampford Speke, near Exeter, in March, 1977. The orchard was attached to the bungalow where I was living with two other postgrads. It was a beautiful spot, highly inconvenient for the university, but within reach of Dartmoor (once I had acquired a secondhand Honda 50) and wonderfully atmospheric. The village itself boasted a pub called *The Agricultural Inn*, which consisted of an elderly woman's front parlour. Our bungalow was a cheaply built 'tied cottage' perched on the banks of the Exe, which during the winter rose right up to just below the window ledge of the tiny bedroom I occupied on the far side. That was something to watch, undoubtedly, if only for the sake of self-preservation. But it was the orchard that I particularly loved. On the day I wrote the poem, I remember willing myself to look

attentively, not looking through, but at. I wanted to convey precisely what I was seeing, which in March cannot have been apples, yet for all its symbolism the poem does suggest scrutiny of the actual tree. I can still recall the feeling that at last I was in touch with the real source of poetry, that the more I looked the more I seemed to be watching something other than the tree come into bud. 'The Orchard' was published in the rather prestigious tabloid-style literary magazine, *Bananas,* edited by Emma Tennant, a fact which would impress Ted Hughes when we corresponded that year (I didn't know at the time he had been conducting an affair with her, as related in her memoir, *Burnt Diaries*).'The Orchard' was one of my first published poems, but I've never reprinted it, preferring to begin my 2009 'Collected', *Hunts,* with a later poem, 'Baby Arctic', which appeared alongside it in the same issue of *Bananas.* Perhaps I should have had more faith in my 23-year-old self

GR: That is such a fascinating answer John and a wonderful insight into how you received poetic inspiration: 'at last I was in touch with the real source… the more I looked the more I seemed to be watching something other than the tree come into bud'. Fascinating also to hear about your correspondence with Ted Hughes – a whole host of questions immediately springs to mind! I've read *Burnt Diaries* and was aware of *Bananas* magazine. I'd love to read 'The Orchard' one time.

JG: It ends with lines my wife still quotes at me whenever we mention eating apples:

> A blackbird
> deep in the tree's darkest fractions
> pecks all the eaters
> and sings.

GR: That's tantalising – maybe you might consider letting us hear the whole of it when you read for us on Feb 4th?

JG: I'm not sure it's quite good enough for that, though I have a mind to include it in a memoir I'm writing.

GR: In the meantime: Can you trace the wellspring of your original poetic impulse in any of what you are writing now (eg in *The Silence*?) Does it come essentially from the same place, however evolved and well-travelled it's now become?

JG: 'Place' is indeed the key, and I think you will find that a lot of my poems respond to 'significant soil'. Sometimes that's the place where I grew up, Hounslow, which was the focus of an entire book: *Heath* (Nine Arches,2016), in collaboration with Penelope Shuttle, and some of which is reprinted in *The Silence.* Another little collaborative book (which is at this moment being printed) is a generally upbeat series of holiday postcard sonnets exchanged with my friend Stuart Henson, *a Post Card to* (Red Squirrel Press, 2021): again, these are places that have nudged the Muse awake, that seem to know where poetry is hidden. I'm currently working on some tiny poems

about famous alchemists, who are invariably associated with a particular city – such as Robert of Chester – and if you read *Agenda* magazine, you may have seen a recent long sequence of mine, 'Circles', which features different parts of the UK and their associations with friends and family. This summer I have a new pamphlet coming out which has as its focus the area around Little Gidding – Eliot's 'History is now and England' has always had resonance for me. *The Giddings* is essentially a series of tree poems, so there is a link with those original Exeter lines too. A love of nature is obviously a thread that takes me right back to my earliest days, to a kind of Eden and indeed to the Royal Botanical Gardens, since the first months of my life were in Kew, by the Thames (there's a poem about that in *The Silence*). Then there has been Finland (though I wrote the long Sibelius poem 'The Silence' before actually visiting his house, Ainola), and Iceland, New Jersey, Achill Island, endless walks through Huntingdonshire (my Wessex), and Egypt, Egypt, Egypt.

GR: That leads well into your most recent collection *The Silence* (Carcanet 2019) which I have greatly enjoyed. The breadth and variety of it (and mastery of many forms, not least the long line in certain key poems) are very impressive. You create whole imaginative worlds there, one theme being the way the past co-exists with the present which you evoke in striking, compelling ways.

JG: I'm glad you enjoyed it.

GR: Egypt has been mentioned a few times already and, for me, a signature poem-sequence in the collection is 'Nebamun's Tomb' (originally published as a pamphlet by Rack Press). In the note you say this refers to the remarkable paintings of from the tomb of an accountant in around 1350 BC and 'appropriated for the nation' by the British consul-general in Egypt. Would you mind if I quote a few lines from the final poem in the sequence?

> XI
>
> There is a garden in the next world
> where all the birds and fish and plants
> that we have exterminated are being kept –
>
> I think it is this seedbank that I visit
> occasionally when I am sleeping and wake
> to feel as if some part of me has gone out
>
> and spent the night travelling, as Egyptians
> used to believe and so would leave a false
> door out of their tombs. Within that garden
>
> which I imagine to be like the one at Kew
> where my parents lived and where I was born…

The way in which you weave childhood and imagination here is thrilling and moving '… the light/is the light that was in Egypt when we were there'

For me the light is more than just biographical experience – you keep open the possibility that it pre-existed in you and, by implication, all of us: a portal to an imaginative kingdom co-existing with and underpinning this one, an access point to the meaning of personal history that also goes beyond that. How would you respond to this observation?

JG: Thank you for all these kind words. I think you have tuned in to what was going on in 'Nebamun's Tomb', although it was written very quickly – as often happens. It's curious how time behaves when one is composing. I look back at some long sequences that my notebooks tell me were written in a matter of hours. Yet whole months pass without anything being written. And that is perhaps connected with some of the more mystical tendencies in my poetry, and living in Egypt certainly liberated that fascination with the occult. The Ancient Egyptians knew a thing or two about the afterlife, and it seems to me that this crucial area is the one that the modern Church (not to mention modern poetry) has rather overlooked. Yet poets who have dabbled in spiritualism tend to be ignored – as John Gurney's epic masterpiece, *War*, has been, or Andrew Young's *Out of the World and Back* – or they are mocked for it, as Yeats was. In fact, Yeats's poetry is inseparable from his belief in magic. Do I believe in magic? I used to be a (very bad) children's magician, so I understand entirely why Harry Houdini spent his life trying to debunk it; but I have also had personal experiences which can only be called truly magical. I'm a Jungian at heart, so I always try and remain alert to such things – especially to coincidence, to what Les Murray called that essential 'doubleness'. One of the reasons I gave my 2008 collection, *Iceland Spar* that title is because it's a mineral that makes everything appear double, and even the Sibelius of *The Silence* is partly a mask for JG.

GR: The next poem from the collection, 'Kew', continues in this vein, with a moving fleeting wish to see your father again, at the window of a train that is passing along an embankment above you, (earlier there is a beautifully apt image of the stag-beetle you see on the pavement 'struggling/ like a memory, the feelers at full stretch').

JG: Yes, that short poem has its own Egyptian connections as the stag beetle is a sort of English equivalent to the scarab. 'Kew' also came very quickly indeed, standing where I used to wait as a small boy and wave to my Dad as he came home on the Tube. The concluding title poem of *The Silence* was not one that came easily at all, however. In fact, it was originally 1200 lines, and one afternoon I cut it all savagely. I think it works now. The final shape of the whole book only became clear when I realised that 'Nebamun's Tomb' would work as part of it.

GR: That's a fascinating observation. Almost as if the latter poem were a Rosetta Stone for the collection, if that doesn't sound too fanciful. Is there another poem or sequence that is a signature for you in this collection?

JG: A lovely idea about the Rosetta Stone. As for other signature poems ... There are some I clung to through all the different versions of the collection. I was pleased to have managed some versions of Hölderlin (one of them was accepted for *Poetry Ireland Review* by Eavan Boland shortly before she died – she was one of my favourite poets, so that meant a lot) but I'm also proud of 'Airmail for Chief Seattle' because it's in a metre I don't often use – four-beat short lines, rhyming *aaabbb* – and it confronts some of the big issues (courtesy of Chief Seattle) that contemporary British poetry prefers to avoid, the very things we were just discussing. Americans are much more ambitious in this respect, and I greatly admire poets unafraid of such scope. James Merrill, for instance.

GR: The very next poem 'Evensong' takes us into related chambers of meditation where you take a deep look at life's meaning in the presence of death and the possibility of an afterlife in some unknown form [see remarks above]. The poem is dedicated to the memory of Dennis O'Driscoll. Would you mind sharing some of your thoughts about him and the sort of exploration he inspired in you to write this poem?

JG: Dennis was a remarkable man, a superb critic and poet, and a good friend. His parents died when he was very young and he suddenly found himself responsible for his five siblings. Unsurprisingly, the experience meant that he was for the rest of his life preoccupied with death. He even worked in the Death Duties department of the Irish Civil Service. But he had such a wry manner in his writing that there is never anything mawkish about his poems: they are often hilarious. He was one of those poets who actually had a 9-5 job, and we used to meet for lunch in Dublin whenever I was over there, but he was always having to rush back to the office and I wish I had spent more time with him. Dennis was always well known in Ireland, but the world took notice when Faber brought out his book of interviews with Seamus Heaney – *Stepping Stones*. He had dropped a private hint to me (during one of those snatched lunches) that this was appearing. And it's a wonderful book. I suspect that Dennis was largely responsible for my Cholmondeley Award, as he seemed to know and like my work. Alas, he died on Christmas Eve 2012 – that New Year's Day would have been his 59th birthday. My poem for Dennis nods once or twice towards some of his own interests and preoccupations. He is a very quotable poet, and edited an excellent book of poetry quotations himself.

GR: He sounds a wonderful person - and friend - and you've certainly inspired me to explore his work. Thank you for introducing me to him.

To continue, I think you show complete mastery of the long line (iambic pentameter in this case?) in the poem you've dedicated to him:

Evensong

How strange to have lost those close to us. It's not possible
that so much can be extinguished. I think of the daguerreotypes
Victorians had taken with their dead propped next to them
in an armchair or stretched on a couch. That's how it feels. [...]

You create a powerful meditative space in this poem – the lines really encourage extended thought and re-reading about what death and life might mean - and the abiding quality of friendship. Are there any other comments you'd like to make at this point?

JG: It's often the metre that shapes a poem, and for the O'Driscoll elegy I chose a long line – usually longer than pentameter – with roughly seven beats to a line, and a varying number of syllables. What Hopkins called 'sprung rhythm', I suppose. This is only very loosely adhered to and it's rather subjective, but it helped me to escape the Victorian parlour which strict blank verse can sometimes evoke. Pound's idea about breaking the pentameter was shrewd; but it's still possible to write lively verse in the traditional forms, and there is traditional pentameter in, say, 'Middlesex' or 'Odyssey' from my *To the War Poets*.

GR: Your control of the long line is a feature of several poems in *The Silence,* not least the title poem which explores the final thirty years of the composer Sibelius's life when he wrote no more music and lived in artistic exile in rural Finland. Something here comes to mind about the pithy and effective poem 'Two Roads' where you contrast 'the fast people', multi-tasking and adept in the Twittersphere, with another breed who catch 'what the others/were moving so quickly they missed:/the prize deep-feeders.'

JG: There's a wittier, more sardonic manner that I allow my Muse to surrender to occasionally, and it helps give a collection a certain balance – I'm probably affected by so many years of listening to sonata form and symphonies where you have the scherzo and the adagio contrasting with each other. I always felt if I could have been a composer, that would have suited me well.

GR: In your book you definitely show us the value of going for the 'prize deep-feed', to ponder life and death in a way that does not go for easy answers. I'd like to turn now to the poem 'Airmail for Chief Seattle' which you mentioned earlier. It's such a wide-ranging and thought-provoking poem which mixes childhood memory, ancestry, Native American tribal wisdom, fatherhood and much more in a metre (and rhyme scheme) I must confess I don't know. It's a tour de force.

Let me quote a bit (verses 8 and 9)

Splitter-in-Chief, forgive me prying,

but you do not remember saying
that when our children's children are playing
and think themselves alone, the shadow
spirits will come to them, that the dead are…
What precisely was your credo?

A child of Hounslow Heath, I conjured
paleface friends to get an injun
scalping in our garden, urged on
by Pan Am drumrolls, feathers, war paint,
'let's pretend' [...]

So many of the book's themes emerge and speak to each compellingly in this poem. I love the way your childhood in Hounslow Heath merges with your trip to America to find connection with Chief Seattle. Tell us about the poem's genesis – and how would you characterise its 'big themes' which you referred to earlier? Also, what is SEALTH you refer to towards the end?

JG: 'Sealth' is just the official Native American name of Chief Seattle, which appears on his grave on Bainbridge Island. I rather like its proximity to the word 'stealth'. How did the poem emerge? From anxiety probably, which is how quite a few of my poems begin. We were anticipating this long flight to visit my wife's sister in the Pacific North-west, and the poem was a way of distracting and preparing myself. Originally I had the idea of starting it during the flight (as happened with my recent 'Europa's Flight' sequence) but I became so involved that it was complete by the time we left. The journey is therefore imagined rather than recalled. Again, the form drove the poem: those *aaa* rhymes and half-rhymes. I am drawn more and more to rhyme as I get older. It acts like a barbed-wire fence, ensuring that there is some wit and scepticism at regular points in the lines, keeping woollier ideas in their place. As for those 'big themes' you mention, they are the ones I have already discussed, but there's a certain amount of taking stock, glancing back over my life. At the poem's heart is a famous quotation from Chief Seattle about there being 'no death, only a change of worlds'. I am fond of the poem, but it's an awkward length to read aloud, so it rather gets overlooked at readings.

GR: I have just read 'From The Peak' and have really 'got' it this time - in terms of the mood and the setting and the edge in your preoccupations at the time. I particularly felt I stepped right in to the 'Lud's Church' section.

JG: That Peak District sequence is another that I cut down drastically. It got shorter and shorter. Like Sibelius, I value self-criticism, though I draw the line at putting entire works on the fire.

GR: I referred a while back to the tryptich 'Visionary'. Despite your focus on the rational, quotidian exploration of your dream and experiences, and the deliberately

deflating conclusion – the 'gap in the hedge' being just an unmystical space cut to allow delivery of a sofa to watch TV (love the bathos there!) – I can equally feel its converse, via Samuel Palmer and Blake. The pun on 'holy palmers kiss' works very well too. You keep both elements, the brain's left and right hemispheres, in play here but in seeming to hand the laurels to the left hemisphere I actually think we see how much more pe-eminent the right is for you - and this in step with all you have said earlier. I'm reminded of a Heaney poem about Ted Hughes (it may be in *The Haw Lantern*, I must look it up), where Heaney contrasts the expansive side of Hughes with a far more cautious side, even mistrustful (of inspiration).

I also really like the sequence *Heath*, dedicated to poet Penelope Shuttle, with its evocation of the Roman past, the highwaymen-ghosts of the heath. The free verse and expansive form suit the subject matter well. Could you tell us a little bit about your collaboration with Penny, what the heath means to you both, and also: do you instinctively know which poetic form to use or do you often tend to experiment during the drafting process till you find the right one?

JG: I find the best outcome is if the form presents itself at the same time as the poem, which is how it was with our collaboration, *Heath*. I instinctively began the sequence with a six-beat long line, perhaps conscious that Penny prefers shorter more imagistic lines, but also because it gave scope for various shapes and patterns. I wanted to evoke the long straight horizon of this very flat terrain too. But metre should, I feel, well up from the unconscious. It's a kind of ancient preservative (something Joseph Brodsky says), and it does, as you suggest, have to be dug for. There can be many drafts in that process – it's not unusual for me to have twenty or thirty, at least, as the form gradually emerges. Metre keeps you in touch with all your predecessors, and even so-called free verse is usually following some sort of pattern, be it repetition or juxtaposition. Naturally, if you write a sonnet then you are pretty much stuck with fourteen lines and pentameter; and there are occasions when I've felt I must write, say, a sestina (e.g. for the six wives of Henry VIII!) but I much prefer poems where I've surprised myself with the metre. As for how *Heath* all began: that dates back to an occasion in Falmouth in February 2014, when I read aloud an earlier poem about the old village below Heathrow Airport ('Heath Row', from my first Carcanet book, *To the War Poets*). After the reading, Penny and I were reminiscing about our childhoods on opposite sides of the old Hounslow Heath, which barely exists any more, but was once considered the most dangerous few square miles in England, and which evidently still had a powerful hold on both our imaginations. I laughingly said we should write something about it together... then I returned to Cambridgeshire and thought no more of it. But I did write the three poems which appear in *The Silence*, imagining two characters crossing the Heath like Macbeth and Banquo, out of time, or into a timeless zone. I emailed these to Penny in Cornwall, and she quickly replied with poems of her own. So it began, back and forth with our poems. Mine had roman numerals, hers had titles. Mine were, as I say, generally long-lined, hers shorter. As it went on, the collaboration became more and more 'inward', yet there was always the

sense of responsibility to the other writer. There was no agreed 'plot', we never discussed the how, why or where. It was all done by email too. We quickly began responding to formal elements, echoing and alluding to each other. One or two poems were actually co-written. I had not done anything like this before, but of course Penny often worked collaboratively with Peter Redgrove. We occasionally stumbled on similar subjects perhaps because we explored the same sources – both ending up with a Harlington Yew poem, for instance. What might have been a pamphlet grew over a period of weeks into something much larger – the original version of *Heath* is even longer than the book's eventual 180 pages – and its structure was the result of two or three meetings and floors covered with print-outs. The very last editing session was under a tree in Osterley Park, appropriately, with the planes passing over on their way to the airport. Those planes are an *idée fixe* – 'Flight Path' in *The Silence* is another out-take from the sequence – as they were in my childhood, when I could see them approaching my bedroom every minute or so. They seemed to scrape our chimney (and the roof was torn off the house some years after we moved – as mentioned in my shape poem, 'Hounslow' in *To the War Poets*). I have no relatives in Hounslow any more, though Penny's family home is in Staines. But one day during the writing we did allow ourselves a drink at the Bell Inn, where the Staines and Bath roads divide. Here it was that travellers used to strengthen their nerves before setting forth. The gibbets next to the inn would creak with corpses in the days of footpads, as an admonition and warning. Penny and I then went for a walk on what remains of the heathland, a smallish nature reserve, squeezed between high-rise flats and the Post Office depot: you do get some sense of what the old terrain must have been like. You certainly find yourself looking from any westward train from Paddington with a new understanding of what those flat, built-over reaches must have meant once, and how they might have been used for the first Ordnance Survey (as they were). But I don't think I ever actually went to the heathy bits of the Heath when I was growing up – it was a bit dodgy, and 'my parents kept me from children who were rough' as Spender said – it's really as much an imaginary place as the 'Huntingdonshire' I now live in, which also preoccupies me ... maybe like Hardy's Wessex.

GR: What a vivid evocation of a place very unfamiliar to me. You describe it so memorably! You said earlier with respect to Yeats and Jung that you have had 'magical experiences'. Would you be willing to share one of them with us?

JG: Oh, don't get me started. But it's probably best to read this article I wrote for the RLF: 'Only Connect' - The Royal Literary Fund (rlf.org.uk).You'll find there are a good number of short talks I gave about writing on the RLF Vox site too.

GR: Yes, you talk about magical conjunctions in your RLF article - well, last night I got out the Christopher Reid selection of Ted Hughes' *Letters* and tried to find the letter he wrote you. I couldn't find your name in the index so I flicked through trying to guess what year the letter may have been written. Inevitably I got side-tracked by other letters, read a few, then some more, jumped a whole section and then the book

fell open on his letter to you, with a wild service tree leaf pressed there. I remembered placing it there years ago because I wanted to remember what he'd said in the letter, something very pertinent to my job as then which was a drama teacher in a secondary school. Hughes's letter spoke of the need for something new, some action, to occur on every page when writing drama. I used this as a touchstone because I've written a number of full-length plays for young people and, on Hughes's recommendation, I always made it a rule to have some new action every page - advice which I found simple and extremely effective. So there you go, his letter to you marked by a pressed leaf because it was important to me, even though I didn't know who you were. Mysterious. I'd like to read some of your verse drama sometime.

JG: There's a lovely synchronicity in that story about the leaf in the Hughes *Letters* - and it's interesting to hear about your plays. I have written many, but I suspect some vital element (talent, most likely) was missing, though the ones I have produced myself with students seemed to work, and the Lindbergh kidnap one staged in Asheville, USA was a quiet hit. People kept coming up to me and revealing that they had known characters from the play: there was even one of the witnesses from the trial. I wrote that play when we were living a few miles from Flemington Courthouse, where it all happened. The Trial of the Century - until O.J.Simpson came along.

GR: I feel a real temptation to deleve deeper into your plays here – I did a quick google on the Lindbergh kidnap and what a story it is! I'd like to see your play one day. But, returning to the main highway, what fascination does Sibelius hold for you? To me *The Silence*, the final piece in the collection, reads like a poem-novel in the way you imagine your way into the composer's life and mind-set. Did it involve much research and sifting – you mentioned how you cut it drastically at one point?

JG: It didn't feel like research, but I re-read Eric Tawaststjerna's three-volume biography in parallel with the writing, so there was originally a chronological backbone. That all rather disintegrated and in the end it's really the old man reflecting on his life in a more random way, though the progression through the seven symphonies remains. And the over-arching preoccupation is the eighth symphony, which he probably completed and then burnt. I've written about all this in these two online articles: Entering the Silence: John Greening on Sibelius | The Carcanet Blog and Making the Cut: John Greening on editing poems - Wild Court. I have only ever once tried producing a novel, which nobody is going to see. The process taught me that I will never be a novelist (though my elder daughter, Katie, has that gift) but I do like narrative poems, and am interested in biography. Behind *The Silence*, though, more than the life (though I include biographical detail), is Sibelius's music and his approach to structure. He spoke somewhere of the 'severe internal logic' in a symphony, and the finest symphonic music seems to draw the listener towards profound truths.

GR: 'Sibelius', the first poem in the collection, is a prelude to the title poem *The Silence*. Could you say a little about these lines:

> '... the sun holds up
> its lollipop as if a young hero might
> cross, find an egg, tie a knot in it.'

The egg and the knot are echoed in the title poem too.

JG: It's curious you should ask about the first poem in *The Silence* (here we go again, C.G. Jung!) since only today Carol Rumens posted it as her *Guardian* choice, with an exploratory essay: Poem of the week: Sibelius by John Greening | Books | The Guardian She gets most of it absolutely right though she too is a bit puzzled about the egg with a knot in it. This alludes to the story told in Sibelius's tone poem *Pohjola's Daughter* - a glorious work. The impossible task was one of several given to a hero from the Finnish epic, *The Kalevala*. And also, though Carol Rumens didn't pick up on it, the old man at the end - who is Sibelius and also me - is in fact W.B.Yeats more than anyone, counting his swans (and his years) at Coole. He was born in 1865, like Sibelius. Yeats is as important to me as Sibelius and has certain qualities in common.

GR: *The Silence* seems to a compelling summation of all you have written about earlier in the collection - and your very wide-ranging and stimulating remarks in the interview: your modus operandi, your way of seeing as a poet. It's an epic work which absolutely takes you into Sibelius's world, and much more besides, as you've just elucidated. A mountain-peak exemplar to any poet writing now. I'd like to quote a few lines in due course but first. How much of a challenge did you find it to write? Are there any sections or particular lines which surprised you – particularly pleased you - took you to new places as a poet?

JG: I rather agree with Keats about the long poem being the polar star of poetry. I enjoyed writing *The Silence*, but I didn't know quite how it would pan out and it was the work of several months. As I've already said, it was eventually cut down from 1200 lines. Having chosen that particular form of long-lined quatrains with half-rhymes (a cross between *terza rima* and the 'In Memoriam' stanza), I found it did indeed lead me into surprising areas, and I let it to a certain extent. It even got into my dreams, or rather came *out* of them. One night I woke up with a phrase in my head: 'the forest believes in you'. I rashly incorporated it into the poem, and although I assumed it would be cut out during the afternoon of the long knives, it is still there. I have plenty of offcuts from 'The Silence', and one actually found its way into my classical music pamphlet, *Moments Musicaux* last year. I was pleased, incidentally, the way *The Tempest* took hold of my final pages. Incidental music for Shakespeare's play was Sibelius's last substantial work before 'the silence', so it felt right, but it's a play that I love, especially its masque-like elements.

GR: Having read your poem aloud this morning to get the taste of it (to do it justice a every poem must be read aloud) I've found so much to admire, to be absorbed by, to return to. The biographical details are brilliant but there is so much more – that wonderful recurring image of the beating swans, the solitary struggle he faced each day at his desk for thirty years, the forest, the life he imposed on his family, 'noises off' forces of 20th Century history, the straitjacket of fame, the absolute need to keep tuning in to the source and yet the rigidity of silence – Yeats and you and Eliot and hosts of others are there: it is any artist's struggle to keep creating in the face of inspiration's death. You render it marvellously.

> He hums, he mutters, he grasps at old fungus and moss and kex
> and catches the gist of a point the black woodpecker made as it passed.
> This is where it will be found, the substance that has no taste
> but once touched will never go away. This is what takes
>
> him out: this breath of an ember of a final chance of making a start.
> The trees let down their guard, become like spokes on ancient wheel,
> though a wheel that's going nowhere. Stuck. Imagining himself on a real
> wagonful of timber, he lights up and believes in the art
>
> of getting something somewhere […]
>
> To be both the man on the cart and the horse, to be the one who'll make
> a desk from the wood, and the one who'll sit at it confronting chaos.

I hesitate to quote from the ending – which stirred and moved me greatly - because I think it would be a bit like Classic FM playing the last forty bars of his Second Symphony without the rest of the movement, never mind the whole work!
I urge you to buy the book, reader!

I think it is a stupendous achievement to have written *The Silence* and I feel as if I have actually been there in that room in Ainola, Järvenpää, and sat for a while beside the great man. Thank you – that poem will be with me always at some level now.

JG: Thank you so much.

GR: To finish -anti-climatically perhaps - and to pick up on some loose ends, here are three more questions if you can bear it.

- Which poets speak most deeply to you nowadays?
- In what ways do you compose?
- What was Hughes like as a correspondent? And where do you place him in the pantheon at this distance of time? Did you ever know Heaney also?

JG: I have catholic tastes, and my work as a reviewer means that I am prepared to read all kinds of verse. Only occasionally do I request a book by a particular poet. I

like serendipity in my reading. But there are those I keep returning to – Louise Glück is one, and I was delighted that she won the Nobel, and Eavan Boland is another, as I mentioned. I'm inclined to believe that it is women who have been doing the most interesting things recently, and who have the best ear for language. Think of Denise Levertov, Gwen Harwood, Judith Wright, Anne Stevenson, Carol Rumens, Rosanna Warren.. But Charles Tomlinson, C.H.Sisson, A.R.Ammons, Les Murray are still important to me too. Hughes is harder to read these days, and I suspect he will continue to date, perhaps becoming a sort of grotesque outsider like Thomas Lovell Beddoes in a hundred years. You asked earlier about poetic influences, and there may be some Hughes in my early work, but he is a risky ingredient. You can end up with too many screams and gobbets of darkness, too many similes and relentless anaphora. Those letters he wrote me were wonderful and a huge fillip for me, though. Heaney I love deeply and, although he was working within a fairly traditional mode, his work remains fresh and will survive alongside Yeats, Kavanagh, Montague, Boland. I met him twice, most memorably at Little Gidding, when our conversation was almost entirely about Dennis O'Driscoll. I acknowledge his influence, for example in my Fen poem 'Causeway' (*To the War Poets*) but somehow it feels less intrusive than Hughes. You ask how I compose? Probably much as other poets do, wondering how to get myself started, and then wondering how I can stop. Walking helps. But so do books – picking up some unexpected volume. Very often it's a sudden coincidence, a coming together of two things to make a spark. I write most days, but not always poetry; yet I'm always grumpy unless I have a poem on the go. I produce a lot and discard a great deal. In then end, we know that we'll be lucky if anything at all survives. I'd be happy to be a Chidiock Tichbourne, remembered for just a single poem.

GR: And one final one (I promise). Where do you see poetry in the UK at the moment - you talked earlier about American poets not being afraid to tackle the big themes - do you feel we are somewhat constrained in this country poetically - too materialist maybe?

JG: I was 'twelve years a judge' – for the Eric Gregory Awards, and each year I would receive up to a hundred collections of poetry by poets under thirty. I feel I acquired a pretty clear sense of the Zeitgeist. On the face of it, British poetry is more diverse than ever, yet in some ways it's very limited, and poets are constrained by what is considered acceptable. The controversy surrounding Toby Martinez de la Rivas's *Black Sun* is indicative of that. He's a terrific poet, I think, who taps into something vital. But there are many more taboos than we generally admit – not least, some of the spiritual material that interests me. Yes, you could be right about the materialism, but it's more a lack of alertness to wider possibilities (one of the reasons I like science fiction, but that's another story) and a British reserve. Even lesser American poets can write with emotional intensity which somehow avoids being sentimental. We don't have equivalents for popular figures like Wendell Berry, Robert Bly or Mary Oliver over here (although I am really not convinced much by

Oliver's heart-on-sleeve verses) and there are few heirs to Hughes's nature writing among young British poets, for all their green ambitions. There is also a currently fashionable 'Parnassian' style of witty non sequiturs, where nothing connects with nothing, the poet wandering aimlessly around interiors where no natural light has ever shone. I fear the pandemic may lead to even more such work. What gets lost, I'm afraid, is the sound of the words. Iain Crichton Smith, whom I have been editing, remarked shortly before he died that what was needed in contemporary poetry was a new music. I think he's right. There are poets who make all the right gestures – but having caught an image, found an imaginative connection, simply haven't mastered how to make one word answer another, making everything sing: that 'complete consort' of T.S. Eliot's. It was above all Eliot's music that made me want to learn him.

GR: John, it has been a pleasure and a privilege to conduct this interview. I am immensely grateful for the wealth of all your responses, for exciting introductions to many new things, for the depth of experience you have been so keen to share with us all and for the sheer generosity of spirit you have offered us. You have gone above and beyond. Thank you doesn't even come close.

It goes without saying we are thrilled to have you to read for us on February 4th. Anyone with an interest in hearing and seeing such a distinguished poet - look out for the link in due course!

More details and and interviews – plus our programme for the year - can be found on fireriver poets.org.uk

JG: Thank you for asking such interesting questions, Graeme. I look forward to the 4th.