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This transcript was made possible with the aid of funding from Arts Council England.

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Episode 75 - English PEN (June 2016)
Transcript by Christabel Smith

Producer: David Turner – **DT**

Host: Paul McMenemy – **PM**

Guests: Cat Lucas – **CL**
Robert Sharp – **RS**
Andrew McMillan – **AM**

Intro:

DT: Hello, I'm David Turner and this is the Lunar Poetry Podcast. In this episode, the editor of Lunar Poetry magazine, Paul McMenemy, is chatting to the good folk of English PEN about the work they do translating literature into English, particularly work by writers at risk. The episode opens with a reading of Ashraf Fayadh's poem, A Space in the Void.
I'll be back at the end with some information as to how you can find out more about English PEN and other topics covered in the chat. Enjoy.

Conversation:

CL: In November 2015, poet and curator Ashraf Fayadh was sentenced to death in Saudi Arabia for apostasy. The charges relate to his 2008 collection of poetry Instructions Within. The following poem, A Space in the Void, translated by Jonathan White is one of the poems which led to Ashraf's detention.

[We are unable to reproduce this reading at this time.]

PM: Thanks very much. Hello and welcome to the the Lunar Poetry Podcast. My name's Paul McMenemy and today I am joined by Cat Lucas, who you just heard reading a poem by Ashraf Fayadh, and Robert Sharp from English PEN. Thanks for joining me.

RS: Thanks for having us.

PM: I suppose the first thing to ask would be, what is English PEN?

RS: So, yes, English PEN is the founding centre of PEN International. I suppose we have to describe what PEN International is now. It's an international association, a fellowship of writers, and as I say, English PEN is the founding centre. The organisation was set up in London in 1921 by the novelist, Nobel literature laureate John Galsworthy and a friend of his called Amy Dawson-Scott, who was the networker of the day.

She was very well connected to all the writers in London and it began just as a forum, a club for writers to talk about literature, because writing is a very solitary profession, and they quickly realised that if they were interested in literature from around the world, literature across frontiers, they had to fight for literature across frontiers and to break down the barriers of literature across frontiers. It's that sensibility that's the underpinning value of the PEN network.

There are about 140 centres in 110 countries, there are electronic networks of writers who live in different countries, as well as country-based centres, and what all the centres have in common is this love of literature across frontiers. Today in London, in 2016, we still fight to break down those frontiers. So, we fight censorship and laws that are a barrier to speaking, to writing, but we break down the other barriers to literature as well.

Language is a huge barrier to literature. What if your favourite poem, or your favourite novelist is written in a language you don't understand? So, we have a major translation programme which is funded by Arts Council England to bring the very best world literature

into the English language. And we also run a number of literacy and outreach projects for people who might not have tried reading or tried writing, in the hope that they will increase their own freedom of expression either through reading the words of others or trying themselves, or a bit of both.

And we also run literary events so, there are no spacial barriers, there's no space between the very best writers from around the world and the audience who might want to interact with them and ask them questions about their work. So, although we run projects in many different areas, outreach in communities, translation of literature and also freedom of expression, they're all grounded by this idea of breaking down the barriers to literature, to reading and writing.

PM: So, we're mainly going to be talking today about writers at risk. We heard at the start the poem by Ashraf Fayadh, who as Cat said is currently imprisoned, so can you explain a little bit more about your campaigns for writers at risk, and what exactly you do?

CL: Yes, so writers at risk is obviously quite a broad term and has actually been made broader in recent years. The programme nominally started, or more officially started in the 1960s and was originally called writers in prison and was very much focused on writers who had been imprisoned for what they had written. As the decades have passed, we have seen more and more instances of people being threatened or forced into exile, so there are so many different ways in which a writer can be silenced.

So I think we have broadened it beyond this idea of writers being in prison. That's one extreme case, but there's a lot of other ways that writers can be silenced and when we talk about writers, we are not specifically talking about novelists or poets, we are talking about any literary professional. That might be a translator, it might be an editor, it could be a journalist, who are obviously very much in the firing line.

But in the last decade or so, as the internet has become more and more a part of our every-day lives, so our case list has expanded, and we now have bloggers. I've just been looking at a case today, Nabeel Rajab, who is in prison in Bahrain for tweeting. Writing has now become something that everyone can access more readily and that in turn has led to us having a lot more cases that we need to be campaigning on behalf of and working with.

PM: One of the writers you campaign for who has been getting a lot of attention in the press is Raif Badawi who's primarily known for his blog. Yes, I suppose that shows how these things have changed.

CL: Yes, that's absolutely right, and last year we were involved in something called Blog Action Day. I think the thing is we can publish things very, very rapidly. Robert and I have self-published some collections of writing by writers at risk, so the possibilities are there for so many more people. But that obviously means that so many more people are in danger.

RS: I think blogging is also the 21st century way of pamphleteering. A hundred years ago, or 200 years ago, the radicals who developed ideas of free speech were handing out, cranking out libels and bills from a home-printing press and handing them out on the street. Then a few years ago we had fanzines and underground photocopied literature.

In the 21st century, the way to do that is to have a blog, but it's still on the same spectrum. It's still the same underlying activity going on, which is speaking truth to power, saying things, writing things, that the king, in the case of Saudi Arabia, or the president, or the religious authorities or big business, anyone with power, and influence and money, might not want you to say. So Raif Badawi, although he is doing something very modern, is part of a long tradition that goes back centuries.

CL: And I think the irony of Raif's case in particular, but we see this a lot, is we would never have known about him, we would never have read his work, even though he was arrested more than four years ago now, it wasn't until he was publicly flogged outside the mosque that people started to sit up and pay attention.

His book has now been published in at least two or three European languages and has been widely read by people around the world and it seems almost funny, if it wasn't so depressing, that they've essentially given him this platform that he wouldn't have ever had. In the introduction to his collection of blogs, he does state that he never imagined it would be collected into an anthology, even in Arabic. But his words are all over the world, so I think despots would be better advised to let their bloggers speak and actually they would potentially have less impact.

RS: It's a paradox. It's confusing. But it's good that we have read his words, and as Cat said, it's an act of solidarity and it does give him a voice. It does alleviate to some small degree the inconvenience that he's going through. And then, in a sort of philosophical way, when you're reciting the words of another person, they are speaking and the same thoughts that were running through their head when they wrote down the words...

Maybe they've been translated before you read them out loud again or read them in a book again, but the same sentiments, the same values, the same thoughts crackling along your synapses were crackling along his or hers when they wrote it. So, in a very real way, the simple act of reading the poetry of these people is defying the censors and giving these people a voice once again.

On a more pragmatic level it does give them succour, it is an act of solidarity and comfort. We do know that Raif Badawi and Ashraf Fayadh and the others whose poetry we read at demos and protests, do get to hear about it. They might see a picture or watch a video on YouTube or something like that. So even though they are far away, the power of the internet means that very quickly word will get to them, that in London, or Berlin or New York or in Sydney, someone has given them a voice.

And time and time again, and this is what completely motivates me and I'm sure it's the same for you Cat, we hear them say how useful it was to them and comforting to them, so the first thing we can encourage your listeners to do is to check out these poets, read them in translation. If your listeners do speak another language, a wonderful act of solidarity would be to translate some more poems from these people into the English language.

It doesn't have to be from Arabic in Saudi Arabia – name your language and we will find you a poet who's in trouble, in that language, who needs a voice. And that act of writerly solidarity, one writer speaking to another, one writer interacting, doing something on behalf

of another writer, is something that we champion and encourage. We would love for your listeners to do some of that. It's a wonderful way to do some activism, but also be creative and perhaps also develop your own creative practice.

PM: I suppose one of the difficulties is finding these works in the first place, in a lot of cases. Whether you speak another language or not, simply trying to find things in the morass of the internet… I know that you have some links and so on, on your website, but I don't know if you have any other ways of...

CL: Wherever possible, we will try to either publish translations by the cases we are working on behalf of, or link to places where they are available, because I think for us, it's all well and good to relate the details of the case and the specifics of what they've been charged with, but actually the thing that gets people fired up and empathising with those individuals is reading their own work.

Often, actually seeing a photograph of them and perhaps with their family, I think it's creating this fuller character, I suppose. But you're right that in a lot of cases, it is very difficult to track down even original writings. English PEN's been involved with a couple of anthologies, so historically there's work from cases we've worked on over the last 50 years available.

But what we've done in the past, for example we had a case in Cameroon, a poet and historian who was in prison for several years, who had written an amazing collection of prison poetry which we were sent a couple of years ago now. We actually just put a call out on Twitter, asking people if they were French speakers and to get in touch if they were interested in perhaps translating one of his poems.

We had an amazing response. Within a few months, we were able to collate these translations, some of which had been done by professional translators, some which had been done by aspiring translators so again, it was encouraging them to do this sort of work as well. We were able to publish a little collection of them and the money raised from that we were able to send that back to support him.

So if stuff isn't available then, as Rob said, get involved in translating it, this is the best way of spreading the word about these cases and getting people talking about them and writing about them. This is something we are going to be doing at Ledbury Festival, where we've paired, I think, over 25 poets performing at Ledbury with five of our cases, current cases of concern, including Ashraf Fayadh.

There'll quite simply be reading either a short poem or an extract of longer poems during our events at Ledbury, a very short biography, there's no further action. Lots of the writers are already writing to the poets they've been paired with, but it is that moment where people have come to an event to see, perhaps, Ruby Robinson reading and there will just be a moment where she has given a voice to someone who has been silenced for five or six years because they've been under house arrest. I think that's extraordinarily powerful.

RS: I think we might go on to talk about this in a moment, but another thing we do is, if not enough poems are available, another way of showing solidarity is to write a poem about that person. We did a wonderful event and I can say it was an absolutely brilliant and

wonderful event because I was not responsible for programming it, but Cat, sitting next to me, was, with Steven Fowler, the avant garde poet and his Enemies project.

Steven brought together dozens of poets to write in response to the plight of people like Ashraf Fayadh, Raif Badawi and as I say, dozens of others. What I love about that project is again this fact, that although it's solidarity and campaigning and raising awareness, we are also putting more literature, new literature, into the world.

The experiences of these people from Saudi Arabia, from Azerbaijan, from Burma are informing, and enhancing our literary culture here in the United Kingdom. There is a real sense of dialogue with that project in particular that Steven was able to foster between the poem, the embattled poets, the persecuted, prosecuted poets around the world and the maybe slightly more comfortable poets, certainly politically and security-wise here in the UK.

So watching that event unfold and watching back all the poems being performed on YouTube made me immensely proud to be a part of PEN. And Cat, I hope we do more of that.

CL: We've already got a date in the diary for next year. The thing that really struck me was the responses from the British writers or the writers based in the UK who pretty much unanimously said it was the hardest thing they'd ever had to write, and the pieces were incredible. I think the first piece, I was rolling about on the floor laughing, and then for most of the rest of the day I was in floods of tears. It was incredibly powerful. I just wanted to read a quote quickly from Chris Redmond of Tongue Fu who's performing at Ledbury next week.

Chris is going to be reading a poem by Amanuel Asrat, who is an Eritrean writer who was arrested 15 years ago and has yet to be charged. There is very little information about where he is or what his situation is and Chris says, "I feel humbled and privileged to be reading a poem by Amanuel Asrat as part of Poetry as Protest at Ledbury Poetry Festival. To share my writing is a freedom I enjoy and take for granted. To read somebody else's work out loud who has had that freedom taken away from them feels both simple and terribly important. We can be voices for each other."

PM: We can now hear one of those performances from the Modern Literature Festival. We heard Ashraf Fayadh at the start of the podcast and this is Andrew McMillan's response to Ashraf Fayadh.

AM: I found this incredibly difficult and I think a lot of the other writers did too. Just confronted by my own privilege, I guess, and how easy I have it to write the sort of stuff that I do. In contrast, Ashraf Fayadh was sentenced to death for some of the stuff he wrote that got reported in Saudi Arabia. That death sentence was later commuted to eight years in prison and 800 lashes, which are to be given in 16 separate punishment sessions.

So I took that number 50 from one of those sessions and considered everything I have done or taken for granted just this week that would otherwise have got me in trouble in another country. And I took the structure of 10 sections from Ashraf's great disputed poems, the poems that got him into trouble. Ashraf's work is incredibly funny, incredibly moving, and very politically charged as well in some cases, but oftentimes, just about love as well.

This is what I attempted to write in response to that situation, just trying to say, well, this is what I did this week and I'm still here, and I'm still all right and it's the not the same elsewhere in the world. And all I think we can do for writers like Ashraf, all the writers that we are hearing about today, is just keep saying their names out loud. That means they won't be forgotten, and that means we might remember them and keep supporting them. This is called Week of Living Blasphemously and it opens with a quote from one of Ashraf's disputed poems.

[We are unable to reproduce this reading at this time.]

PM: You can hear, well you can see, all the poems performed at the Modern Literature Festival if you go to YouTube.com/FowlerPoetry. It's well worth checking out as there are lots of really good poems. I think the one you were talking about which had you rolling on the floor was Harry Mann's wasn't it? It really needs to be seen to be experienced so I won't talk about it here. But yes, it's quite something.

CL: Also, in very good news, the case that he was paired with has subsequently been released and actually, we did see that over the course of from when we first assigned cases to the writers here in the UK, there was actually quite a lot of development in some of those cases. A case we have in Cuba has finally been, he was offered a scholarship at Harvard University several years ago, and now due to the opening up of relations between the US and Cuba, I think it's seven years ago he was offered it, and he's finally able to take it up. Another case of ours, a Qatari poet who was in prison, originally sentenced to death or life imprisonment, was released shortly before the festival.

RS: I think it really does work because we know that the authorities observe these protests. The reason we know that, especially in the case of Mohammed al-Ajamy in Qatar, was because they were photographing us from the Embassy while we were lurking outside it. A poet, Tim Kiely, was reading Mohammed al-Ajamy's blistering poem against the Qatari regime right opposite the embassy in Mayfair, and then a few days later al-Ajamy was released.

Now it's not just that one act. We work with Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International in the case of Mohammed al-Ajamy, on those kind of demos, Index on Censorship, Article 19, Reporters Without Borders, Committee to Protect Journalists. It's all these groups, with perhaps a slightly different focus, I don't think any organisation has the literary focus than PEN does, but we're all hammering on that door metaphorically, not actually bashing down the doorway of any embassy.

We're all keeping these people in the public eye and signalling to the embassy and to the governments of these regimes that these people are remembered, that we are going to hold them to any domestic laws and due process and also at any opportunity, we're going to link these human rights abuses to trade, to culture. In Azerbaijan for example, we've been working with activists who are trying to raise awareness around various sporting events and that sort of thing.

So yes, we keep at it and we keep being noisy, and we keep reading those poems and those passages from novels where we can, signalling to the government that we know what they

are doing. Very often, it's just easier for them to release the poet or the journalist, or the dissident in question, rather than have to answer awkward questions.

The number of times a release happens soon after some kind of demonstration or protest makes me think that there is a correlation and it's certainly worth people becoming involved, becoming activists and showing solidarity with these people. On many, many levels it works.

CL: Yeah, and I think even in cases where you don't see an obvious impact, we're very clear that this kind of support, for example the vigils we hold for Ashraf Fayadh and Raif Badawai outside the Saudi Embassy every single month, they mean a huge amount to them and their families who...

At this stage Raif's been in for more than four years, they've tried so many different avenues, his wife Ensaf Haidar who is completely remarkable, has spoken to politicians at every level in every country, she's still working her socks off, but there are so few ways of knowing what to do at this stage. I think this kind of support is really crucial for them, just to keep them going.

So whether or not the government is paying any attention, the Saudi Embassy has referred to us as meddling foreign entities, but other than that hasn't bothered to reply to any letters, which is not unusual. The key thing is that every time we are there, we're taking photographs, we're tweeting them, we're tagging Ensaf and Raif, they're seeing it and I think that's so important. I'd encourage everyone to come to those vigils as well, they're usually on the final Friday of the month, but the details are always up on our website.

PM: Are there any other things you would recommend our listeners do if they want to get involved?

RS: I would certainly recommend that they join English PEN. The price per year is £50, which works out as the cost of, I was going to say a couple of beers or couple of glasses of wine, but with inflation and in the big cities like London, it's only a glass of wine every month. So, yeah, you can join as a member for £50.

If you are under 26, it is only £10, and we do need that support. It's very useful to have that membership base, of people subscribing every year, supporting our work. A very good way to show solidarity with writers is to become a member of English PEN. There are other ways to engage with us of course, we have Facebook groups for our translation project, for our outreach projects and our public events and our writers at risk work that Cat runs. Following us on Twitter as well, retweeting our stuff, spreading the word, all of that is very helpful and I would certainly recommend going to have a look at our website.

There's always an opportunity to sign a petition or to write an angry letter or if you are a poet, you could write an angry Haiku or something to the Saudi Embassy or a government that is abusing free speech. Also, activity is aimed at our own government as well. A big part of English PEN's work is keeping free speech strong here in the UK, so that we are not accused of being hypocrites when we campaign abroad.

It's very important that we hold ourselves to exactly the same standards as we would any other country, which means defending free speech, even for unpleasant people who might

say offensive things. It's also important to defend the free speech of journalists who might be writing in the public interest, and being threatened with libel or privacy injunctions and some journalists even get spied upon by the security services.

When that happens, we oppose that. We are even involved in the campaign against the new Snooper's Charter which does threaten free speech by threatening people's privacy. If people are looking over your shoulder, that does affect freedom of expression or your freedom to write if you know you're being watched. So, yes, there are lots of UK campaigns to get involved in as well.

You can come and see us at any one of our events, like Ledbury for example. Then the stuff we are really excited about is this creative, literary engagement. You don't need to come to our offices in London for that. You can work it into your creative practice wherever you happen to be.

CL: We also have a network of student PEN centres at universities across the UK. So as well as joining PEN for the bargain price of £10 if you're under 26, you can check out our website to find out if there is already one at your university, that's whether you are a student, a lecturer or professor, and if not, get in touch and we would be very happy to work with you in setting one up.

PM: Great. Just one thing I was going to ask. As you mentioned, English PEN do a lot of work within England and there are branches in other countries, but you're probably best known for your international work. Do you find it a hard sell, or a harder sell than perhaps it has been in the past, considering that Britain has had a fairly difficult relation with translated texts, with writers from abroad? If recent events are anything to go by, we are possibly going to become more insular. Has that been a problem?

RS: Everyone for many years has talked about the apocryphal 3% of literature published in English is literature in translation. I say apocryphal, I think it is a very bold statistic and I don't think it has been updated. But, we talk to publishers and booksellers who do say that actually the public has quite an appetite for translated fiction and of course some of the most popular work in recent years, thinking of something like Stieg Larsson and his books, are works in translation.

What we've learnt, and our team running the writers in translation programme have researched this and looked into this quite extensively, what they've found is that readers really don't care what language the book was written in so long as it's a good book when they pick it up. I think people like reading about 'exotic' books from far away and finding something in common with those authors who might be living on the other side of the world.

So, yeah, I think there was perhaps a sense among publishers a few years ago, an assumption that translations in some way are too hard and readers didn't want it or would be turned off by it. But our experience of the past 10 or 11 years of running our translation programme is that, that really isn't the case. And all you need to do is present good literature to the readers and they will respond.

Very recently with the Man Booker International prize, two English PEN supported titles, Tram 83, and A General Theory of Oblivion, were on the long list. And A General Theory of Oblivion was on the short list as well. So, these are books that might not even have found their way into the English language, these translation costs have been supported by PEN. We are particularly pleased with that, of course.

Yeah, the publishing industry itself is always, I don't want to say it's embattled, but there are pressures on the publishing industry and like any business, publishers will go with what works and what makes them the most money. So, you might find that the well-known celebrated authors, their next book will always sell. They'll always get commissioned to write another one because publishers know that they can sell it. They can sell these superstars. And the concern is that if there is a recession, if there is a downturn and if publishers are squeezed by changes in the business or economic environment, and there's less money available for publishing, then the things that will get spiked first of all might be the radical new voice or the diverse voices from overseas.

So, part of our job is lobbying the publishers and reminding them just how good international literature is. And trying to frame it and present it to them in a way that says 'hey, this is a way you can make more money. Look at this slightly, perhaps, untapped pool of talent that exists all around the world. Why not dip your toe in that ocean?'

Obviously there are some fantastic publishers who only do translated fiction. Bigger publishers have had imprints that just do that, but yeah, I think that over the last decade, our colleagues on the translation programme have seen literary translation become more popular. Which is all to the good. Long may it continue.

PM: Thank you. Well, one thing that we can all do as well as looking to get involved with the various things that English PEN are doing is to try and read these works where we can and where we come across them. So with that in mind I'm going to read a final poem by the Chinese poet Liu Xia, she's currently under house arrest in China and this poem was written for her husband Liu Xiaobo, a Nobel Peace Prize winner, and is currently serving an 11-year sentence in China on a charge of subversion.

This poem's called June 2nd 1989, and was translated by Ming Di and Jennifer Stern and you can find it on the website of American PEN.

[We are unable to reproduce this reading at this time.]

Outro:

DT: Thanks for listening. If you want to find out more go along to englishpen.org or worldbookshelf.englishpen.org. Links to both those websites and the translated works of both Ashraf Fayadh and Liu Xia can be found in the description section below, wherever you're listening to this, as usual.

And also don’t forget you can get updates and info about the podcast via our Facebook page which is Lunar Poetry Podcasts on Facebook or on our Twitter account which is @Silent_Tongue. Thanks for listening.

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