**Carcanet Oral History Interview [04 August 2018]**

**Respondent: Anthony Rudolf (AR)**

**Interviewer 1: Lise Jaillant (LJ)**

**Interviewer 2: Bret Johnson (BJ)**

LJ: Thank you so much. Yes, it’s interesting that you started as a magazine, and Carcanet started as a magazine–

AR: So did Anvil, Peter Jay’s magazine, *New Measure*. And Richard Berengarten asked me to give you this pamphlet he wrote about me, it’s a bit embarrassing, this is when he was still Richard Burns, did you know he changed his name?

LJ: He told me, yes.

AR: I spent a few years being a political publisher. I think I exaggerated the extent to which I dropped everything else, I talked about it much later in terms of dropping everything for that, but I didn’t, it was an exaggeration. And here’s a couple of Menard books for you both.

LJ: Oh, thank you. It’s Christmas! Thank you so much.

AR: *Mother’s Milk*, Bill Shepherd’s great sequence about drinking. This other one, *Harvesting the Edge*, is a very strange and interesting work, a classic example of a small press book. Geoffrey Dutton was a significant poet, wrote very well-selling books on exercise, swimming and mountain-climbing etc, plus he was an internationally renowned academic immunologist, and he kept this garden in Scotland, which or was wild, huge, beautiful. And he worked on it himself, every day. I went to see him when I was at Hawthornden Castle, the writer’s retreat south of Edinburgh. I said to him that I knew he’d written about the garden before, for horticulturalists, I said ‘You should write a book, for me. You’re a poet and a gardener, so write’ and he did. That’s a classic example of a small press initiative. And it got very good reviews. A very significant book, it’s entirely illustrated, no photographs, by poems, by his own poems. It’s beautiful, it got a review – this year, it got a review, twenty-three years after it was published. I think that must be a record.

LJ: Well, sometimes you know, it’s very slow.

AR: As if it was a new book. I mean, I know the person who wrote the review, but he hadn’t told me, I didn’t ask him to do it. I think he looked at his shelf and thought, ‘Oh, I’ll review it.’ Anyway, do you want to ask me some questions?

LJ: Yes, I have a list of questions to ask you. I’d like to start at the beginning with your childhood in London. I read your memories –

AR: Which one? *The Arithmetic of Memory*?

LJ: Yes, this one, I was at the British Library this morning -

AR: Inspired by Georges Perec, who was in turn inspired by American poet Joe Brainard.

LJ: So, my question for you is, when did you start writing poetry, and becoming interested in poetry?

AR: I wrote about this in another book called *Silent Conversations*, published by Seagull Books. I went to Cambridge to study modern languages and then changed after one year to social anthropology. But I regretted changing subjects, so I kept my French and Russian going, perversely, and neglected my new studies. One day I was in Bowes and Bowes bookshop in Cambridge, and I picked up a book by Yves Bonnefoy. And I had a clear sensation that my life was changed forever. But I didn’t quite know in what way. I translated a few of the poems, and I wrote to him in complete innocence, he invited me to see him in Paris. The most important French poet of his time. A man always encouraging the youngsters.

LJ: I had a look at his archive at the IMEC [Institute for Contemporary Publishing Archive] in Caen in the west of France. They have all his papers.

AR: There’s probably a lot of letters from me, you know his collected correspondence is being published in many volumes? They’ve just done the first volume. He’s a prodigious figure, but then he was already famous from his first book *Douve* [*On the Motion and Immobility of Douve*] published in 1953, he was about forty. Anyway, he invited me to Paris, we became close friends, and this lasted for more than fifty years. And I’ve co-edited and part translated several books of his, most recently volume one of the two-volume anthology of his work. Early on, he said: ‘I would like to see your own poems,’ and I said, ‘I haven’t written any.’ He replied: ‘Maybe you should, if you’re translating these.’ He liked the translations. At that stage his English wasn’t so good, so belatedly I started writing. Michael Schmidt published my collected poems in 2017. The first poem in the book was written in 1964. By the way, I met Michael Schmidt about four years later. I gave a reading at Oxford, in ‘67 or ‘68, we can’t quite remember. And he was President of the Oxford Poetry Society, the student president. And I introduced him to Daniel Weissbort and Elaine Feinstein.

LJ: Just to go back to your translation of Yves Bonnefoy, I mean, what I found at the British Library is that your selected poems of Bonnefoy were published by Jonathan Cape. So, quite a big publisher.

AR: I have since then published several more volumes, including many of those translations heavily revised. That book embarrasses me, that book I’ve almost disowned. I now think it shouldn’t have been published, but I couldn’t resist it, and people, significant people, liked it, including the director of Cape Editions, who was a poet called Nathaniel Tarn. He’s in his nineties now, he’s the last, practically the last survivor of that generation – there are three or four living survivors of the first Poetry International. Which was in 1967. That was a very extraordinary festival. Peter Jay and I, we were youngsters taking part, and Nathaniel Tarn and Al Alvarez are now both in their nineties . . . [Alvarez died in September 2019].

LJ: But what was your experience of publishing with Jonathan Cape in 1968, I mean that’s quite a big firm?

AR: Well, for me it was, it was… it felt like the big-time. It felt like, really, something significant.

LJ: You were twenty-six years old, right?

AR: Yes. The small format of Cape Editions was new in England. It was based on a German series called – I’ve forgotten the name of the publisher, perhaps Rowoldt – and was a new departure in high-brow paperback publishing. And it was the first and last time I was published by a big publisher. After that it was the small, the specialist publishers, such as Seagull Books, which brought out my memoir *Silent Conversations*.

LJ: Yes.

AR: Is that the kettle whistling?

[Short break for coffee]

LJ: Thank you so much. So, you were telling us about your magazine, that preceded Menard Press.

AR: *The Journals of Pierre Menard*, which was entirely devoted to translations. I was very into translation, I contributed to *Modern Poetry in Translation*.

AR: The founding editor, the late Daniel Weissbort was a close comrade, Michael published him. The Menard magazine was produced on a manual typewriter.

LJ: Yes, I’ve seen a copy at the British Library. They have one, but Bret hasn’t seen it, so if you have an issue. It’s very much a small magazine.

AR: A classic, small, little magazine. [Leaves to collect issue].

AR: The magazine was co-founded with a friend in Oxford called Peter Hoy. I can give you one each. That was the fourth issue. Ego was involved, a wish to be part of the scene, which is not a crime, or even a sin. It was an interesting time to be around. I write about it in the keepsake catalogue introduction.

LJ: Ok. Why do you think people were interested in poetry in translation at the time?

AR: There had been the opening up of central and eastern Europe, some of whom were published in Penguin Modern European Poets, edited by Alvarez, who was a key figure. So, Alvarez at Penguin, and Nathaniel Tarn at Cape, the two survivors, I think everybody else is dead, from the first Poetry International in 1967. Grand poets, Ted Hughes founded it, he’s the central figure in the whole renaissance. It really was a renaissance. But the magazine collapsed because my co-editor was too busy, or he was a procrastinator, and in the end, finally, I thought, I’ll go on – let’s keep the friendship and give up the collaboration.

LJ: Ok, so you gave up the magazine but you created this press?

AR: Yes, and it staggered along, with small grants from the Arts Council, and this and that and the other. And I can’t quite believe, I must – it was a lot of work, a lot of books came out in some years. And many of them, certainly a third of the books, perhaps half, were translations. And that way, one met one’s heroes and heroines. Yes, hero-worshipping and reflected glory were part of it, maybe a bit more for me than for Michael Schmidt, or Peter Jay. But I think they too had heroes. It was exciting, being around these fabulous, grand figures. Octavio Paz, Bonnefoy and others.

LJ: So, would you describe Yves Bonnefoy as a kind of mentor? He was older, right?

AR: Well, that’s a good question. At the time he was only forty, but then I was only twenty-two or something. The question is, it depends how one defines a mentor. In a way, he was a mentor. Later I met an American poet, George Oppen whom I, and many other young poets, elected as mentor. A genuine mentor never chooses a disciple. Gurus welcome disciples, and sometimes they dominate them, and sometimes they abuse them. Mentors never do that. Mentor is entirely benign. You choose a senior figure. Translation was my cover story; I had my private reasons for wanting to keep quiet that I was a writer. Partly because I didn’t entirely believe in what I was writing, and partly for other reasons. Translation was quite a good cover story. But I was hiding in plain sight, because translating poetry already sends a big signal that poetry is important to you, it’s hardly something you’re doing for money. I mean, there was the occasional gig – there was Radio 3, occasionally one got paid. But you weren’t doing it for money you would starve if you were.

LJ: But you mentioned Michael Schmidt, that you met in 1968 -

AR: And I was published by him in his early Carcanet series –

LJ: So, do you remember exactly when you met him, you mentioned –

AR: ‘67 or ‘68.

LJ: Ok. But in Oxford, right?

AR: Yes, it was when he was president of the Oxford Poetry Society, and I think it was around the time the Cape edition was published in ‘68. But I might have gone to Oxford before it was published, knowing it was going to be published. And we kept in touch, always, sometimes more, sometimes less. But in recent years there’s been a huge amount of contact, because of the books I’m doing for him. Last year, he published my Collected Poems, and he published a book called *Zigzag* two or three years earlier under a Carcanet imprint called Northern House, which is run by Jon Glover, who’s a central figure. Which reminds me, Jon Glover, I met him through the magazine *Stand*, edited by Jon Silkin whose own books were or would be published by Carcanet. Silkin was a role model, which is not quite the same as a mentor, but… you can have a role model you never meet, whereas a mentor, I guess, you know. But Silkin I knew, and I was his London editor for a while. On the scene too was an extraordinary character called Miron Grindea, who ran a small magazine of the utmost importance, called *Adam International Review*. But it was so personal to him, that when he died, there could be no successor. I think, if Michael retired from Carcanet, it might well have a future. Menard is too personal, it could never be taken over by anybody else, really.

LJ: You mentioned the Arts Council, obviously you had a difficult relationship with them in the 1970s, there was a controversy –

AR: Yes, it was a terrible, terrible business.

LJ: I wonder if you could tell me a little bit about it.

AR: Well, I could try and find you the open letter I wrote.

LJ: Yes, I found it in the archives, so I know a little bit about the context.

AR: I was at war with Charles Osborne, who was at war with me, and it was over grants. They tried to cut our grant off. And I mounted a campaign to have it restored – and he got very offensive, insulting. Then he was written to by one of Michael Schmidt’s mentors, C. H. Sisson, who had been a civil servant, who told Osborne it was not appropriate to write in that way – as a civil servant, he shouldn’t – he should watch his language, and ticked him off. I sent copies -- this was before the age of email -- to about 50 people, of every letter to Charles Osborne. So he fell into a trap.

LJ: Why did you fight with him?

AR: Because I wanted the money. [Laughter] It was as simple as that.

LJ: Ok. You didn’t think that he wanted to give you this money?

AR: He personalised everything. He was a hugely powerful, the most powerful arts bureaucrat in his day. I think he died recently, in his 90s. He later became a music critic, and he wasn’t a very likeable person. But it was a storm in a teacup, really. I managed to preserve the grant for one or two more years, and then I entered my political phase. I got big grants for that –

LJ: In the 1980s –

AR: In the early 80s. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation gave me a very large grant, after I published a pamphlet, *Towards the Nuclear Holocaust* by Sir Martin Ryle, which sold 15,000 copies, it may be one of the best-selling small press books ever.

LJ: So what happened, why did you want to change your focus, because obviously you specialised in poetry and then you –

AR: Because I thought we were all going to die, I thought we were going to die in a nuclear war. I took it very personally, I had young children, who grew up in this flat, partly. One’s duty as a parent was to protect. But how could you protect? What could you do? You could go on marches; you could go on a demo. And that’s good, but ideally you should use your professional skills, if they are appropriate. I’ll show you the pamphlet that sold, and it had two editions, three editions. I may not have a spare copy.

[Rudolf leaves to fetch book].

 I did about twenty pamphlets. It nearly killed me, I had no assistant. This one, I did so many – I had no assistant, I always did everything myself. Ryle was the Astronomer Royal and a Nobel Prize winner. And he offered me the pamphlet having read the one I had already published, by Lord Zuckerman, which caused quite a stir.

LJ: But just to go back to the 1970s, you mentioned Richard Burns, when did you –

AR: Richard and I were at Cambridge together. But we only met on the very last day we were undergraduates. Thus, we almost didn’t become friends. We knew friends in common. He dropped in to see me, I don’t know why - he came to see me, I was living next door to a friend of his in a student room. And we immediately liked each other. But then he went off to Italy, as you may know, or Greece? Italy, I think?

LJ: Greece first, and then Italy.

AR: Greece first, then Italy, where he met Ezra Pound. Then we became very close friends. I published one book by him. He founded the Cambridge Poetry Festival in ‘75. I was on the original committee, and there was a quarrel, not with him, and I left the committee, because I quarrelled with someone else on the committee. I don’t quarrel with everybody, the only two quarrels I can remember were with that person and the one I mentioned just now, with Charles Osborne. Small press publishing is interesting and friendly and exciting work but also dull at times. The chores are the price one pays for the interesting editorial stuff, with the occasional glamorous moments.

LJ: So, how do you explain that some presses survive, whereas others disappear?

AR: You’re entering into the domain of individual psychology. You have to be very tough, and very organised, and very ambitious, to do it on a large scale. And Michael is all three. He’s tougher than me, he’s got all three – I’m a very mild version of him. Neil Astley is like him. You know, Bloodaxe. They are very extraordinary people, they really are – and they have to fight. If you’re going to survive, you’ve got to get your hands dirty, you’ve got to do the boring work. And in the early days you wrap the parcels yourself, you do everything (and if you’re a one-man band like Menard, you do it all the time) and some kind of vision sustains it. It’s an extraordinary achievement, Carcanet. I’ve been very lucky that Michael believes in my work. I don’t know if anyone else would have published my Collected Poems.

LJ: He told me that his main strength is networking. You know, he’s very good at networking, meeting with people –

AR: He is brilliant at networking, yes. I used to be good at networking on a smaller scale, in the old days, and I’m good at emails now, but I have never mastered social media. I don’t want to, I don’t need to, because Menard ended really. Although it still exists, in the sense that there is a backlist which it would be nice to shift. It’s not going to do any more books. It had its moment. Forty solid years, about a hundred and sixty-five books.

LJ: And how do you feel about that, the fact that it’s not going to do any more books.

AR: Not a problem for me. I sometimes think, if I hadn’t done Menard I could have concentrated more on writing and translating. But then I wouldn’t have been me. Being a publisher appealed to a side of my personality, and it appeals to a side of Michael’s. Michael, after all, is a prodigious worker, being a publisher, writing books, teaching. The sheer quantity of work prodigious, possibly unique. Never mind the quality, feel the width.

LJ: Yes, it’s a mix of skills, and obviously you need to like to be alone, you need to like socialising with other people as well.

AR: Yes, it’s a mix of skills. I’ve occasionally had a part-time assistant, for maybe one or two afternoons a week, but I’ve always done Menard on my own. I’m more of a loner than Michael, you see. So, individual psychology enters into it. But at the end of the day, you know, the small presses, our survival, the personal life of the individual running it, might be of interest to some people, but it’s the work that counts. Michael wouldn’t say that all Carcanet’s books are equally good. He’s there to publish good writers, ideally the best writers. The popular ones find big, commercial publishers, but he’s there as a safety net, for people who would otherwise not be published.

LJ: Tell me a bit about Peter Jay, when did you meet him –

AR: Well, I knew Peter Jay from the first Poetry International in 1967. Something was in the air in the late 1960s. *MPT* [*Modern Poetry in Translation*] was founded in ’65. Poetry International was ’67. *Penguin Modern European Poets*, I can’t remember which year, it might have been started a bit earlier. There was a huge amount of energy. It was post-The Movement, remember the so-called Movement? Although one of the key figures in the Movement was a singular individual, one of Michael Schmidt’s two mentors, Donald Davie, and Sisson being his other one. Davie was a very important figure, and actually had one foot in the avant-garde, which Sisson didn’t. Sisson was a kind of reactionary, but I think he was pretending to be more reactionary than he was.

LJ: My question was about Peter Jay.

AR: Peter Jay was running his very distinguished press Anvil, similar profile to Menard’s, a lot of the books were translations. And we knew the same people, and we went to the same readings, we co-published a couple of books, and I co-published a couple of books with Schmidt. So there was an overlap. He was a junior organiser at the first Poetry International. I actually participated, that might have been my first reading. It depends whether it was before or after the reading in Oxford. So it was quite something, to give your first reading at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, on the same platform as Auden and Ungaretti. Great poets, I was surrounded by these grand figures. I took it in my stride; today I’d be much more nervous.

LJ: And obviously Anvil Press was based in London as well -

AR: Yes, South London. One of the books I co-published with Peter was *Collected Poems* by F. T. Prince, who was later published by Michael Schmidt. A major figure, whose first book was published by Eliot at Faber in 1938.

LJ: My question is really, why were so many people interested in poetry in translation at that time, because obviously there were many British poets –

AR: It was the opening up of eastern and central Europe. It was possible for poets to come from Russia and so on, to visit and to give readings. I might be exaggerating, but it felt like a golden age. I suppose it serves my purposes to feel I was part of a golden age. Partly too, as always, it was partly an accident of personalities, who created the zeitgeist: Ted Hughes, Alvarez, Tarn were of an age when they could make their mark as editors and translators. By the way, when I read my translations with Yves Bonnefoy at Poetry International in 1967, it was almost unheard of, it may have been one of the very first times a translator read with his poet. In the past, it would have been an actor or a famous figure like Ted Hughes who in fact was slated or slated himself to read my translations, and then dropped out because he had a bad back.

LJ: Yes, did you meet Ted Hughes?

AR: I knew him, he was a friend of mine. My father was his accountant, his financial adviser for a while and helped sort out the Sylvia Plath estate. That was quite a drama. He was a heroic and extraordinary figure.

LJ: Do you have a few questions, Bret, to ask?

BJ: Yes, I was interested in your saying it was the golden age of independent publishing, because –

AR: It was the beginning of a golden age. Yes it was, yes it was a kind of golden age moment.

BJ: Based on my research, a lot of people speak about this age as a difficult age, because –

AR: You mean the sixties?

BJ: The sixties –

AR: Difficult, because?

BJ: Because of the eventual mergers and conglomerate purchases.

AR: Well, that didn’t happen until a bit later, did it? Margaret Thatcher became prime minister in ’79, that’s when things started going wrong, in a way, even if she was a symptom as well as a cause of the new society, in which the state became less important. In terms of subsidy and so on.

LJ: So, in the US it started in the 1960s. So, you’re kind of confusing your dates here, Bret.

BJ: There was a two-wave period, so things like Jonathan Cape and The Bodley Head, they started to merge.

AR: Yes, but wasn’t it a bit later, the mergers?

BJ: The eighties was much more prominent.

AR: Yes, it’s no accident it was the eighties because Thatcher became prime minister in ’79. It coincided for me, though, with the beginning of my political involvement. But that was not entirely coincidental because of cruise missiles, and the whole military posture.

LJ: Actually, it reminds me, I forgot to ask you something about *PN Review*. I mean, how did you feel about *PN Review*, because it’s often described as right-wing –

AR: I don’t think it’s right-wing now. I think it was more right-wing than me at that time, but it wasn’t fascist, it wasn’t extremely reactionary. It was conservative. But Michael has moved, become more progressive. In those days he was under the influence of Sisson and Davie and C. B. Cox. Of course, the whole spectrum has moved to the right. So it may be that Michael’s just stayed where he was - but his editorials are more progressive than they were, I would say, than they were in the early days.

LJ: Ok, so in the early days, how did you feel?

AR: Well, it was conservative. It was conservative, maybe with a small c, not Conservative Party, but still too conservative for me. Ironically enough the progressive position has become to conserve what we have. The right wing is now radical. Look at Brexit.

LJ: In the 1970s, many people were quite angry at *PN Review* . . .

AR: Yes, they were. *Stand* was progressive, was more left-wing, and has always been. And… well, *London Magazine* was non-political, and *Agenda* was non-political, although the editors shared some of Ezra Pound’s less acceptable views. The really important magazines were these three, and *The Review*. *The Review*, edited by Ian Hamilton, preceded his *New Review*, not to be confused with *Poetry Nation Review*. *The Review* was edited by Ian Hamilton, do you know *The Review*? I’ve got a complete set, which is lovely. It was a very important magazine, it was crucial. To me, it was so exciting, I was living in America in ’66, and the magazines would arrive in the post, either I had given them my address, or my parents forwarded them. I was young. The people who were young then are now, like me, in their 70s, and one or two, like Tarn and Alvarez, are in their 90s. Most have gone. Not only the conglomerates and the reduction in state funding, but the digital revolution has changed everything. There was something about the print magazines which was so special. Whereas now, the digital ones, even the best ones, they encourage people to write at greater length. I mean, I have got a patron at *The Fortnightly Review*. You can write in any length you like for it, which no print magazine would ever permit. I occasionally publish something in *PNR*. Michael will allow, say, a thousand words, and a longer version of it can go online. If you’re old enough, like me, you feel that a print book is more real than a digital book.

BJ: You could say that the, because of the cost involved, people have to be more selective and therefore it creates a better aura around the printed book.

AR: Without a doubt. But digital publication is a good thing, at least where there is editorial control, as on *Fortnightly Review*, and *Jacket*, and one or two others, very good magazines. Far more people read me on the *Fortnightly Review* than in *PNR*, however I must not forget that *PNR* is published both in print and online.

BJ: It’s quite funny because a lot of contemporary, independent publishers now like Galley Beggar Press, they call this the silver age of publishing.

AR: But what do they say was the golden age, that mythological projection backwards or forwards?

BJ: I think they’re saying it’s the silver age in publishing, in anticipation to what could happen in the next few years.

AR: So, forwards.

BJ: Yes.

AR: Well, ask them.

BJ: I mean, that would be a good point. They do --

AR: Ask them, say you’ve spoken to a publisher who started in the late ‘60s and who feels that it was a golden age. It was a privilege to have made a small contribution.

BJ: I think they certainly have a nostalgic view of what publishing used to be.

AR: Because of what, there were grants and things? Because we –

BJ: Because people were a bit more adventurous, before things like PRH, just so overwhelmingly omnipresent –

LJ: Yes, that’s true, Mathew Sperling told me -

AR: What’s PRH?

BJ: Penguin Random House.

AR: Oh right, Yes, yes, before – there were many, there was, for example, Cape Goliard, which was beautifully printed, excellent –

LJ: Actually I’ve just commissioned an essay on Goliard on exactly the same expression, golden age of publishing –

AR: Who commissioned it?

LJ: Matthew Sperling, he works at UCL, he’s a lecturer at UCL.

AR: Oh yes, I’ve read things by Matthew Sperling. But I can’t remember – wasn’t he at Oxford?

LJ: He’s a poet and he’s also a scholar, he used to be at Oxford. He’s in London now at UCL.

AR: Oh, he’s at UCL? Along with Eric Langley and…

LJ: Yes, I mean, he got his position two years ago, so, but before that he was at Reading, and before that at Oxford. So anyway, he’s written this chapter on Cape Goliard, and I remember this expression, golden age. So, there’s definitely something going on here.

AR: That reminds me, I published about a hundred, or nearly two hundred postcards. They were mostly not for sale. Poems on postcards. If anyone had a complete set, it’s probably worth a lot of money. I got the best and/or most famous poets to contribute and I thus claimed them as a Menard author: Ted Hughes, Seamus Heaney, all kinds of people over the years, would send me a translation.

LJ: And tell me a little bit about distribution, I mean, how did you make sure those books were available?

AR: Well, for some years, Menard has been part of, recent years, Inpress. Do you know Inpress? And before Inpress, Menard had other distributors. In America I’ve been distributed by SPD [Small Press Distribution] in California for about forty years. But at the beginning, I took the books round the bookshops myself, there were ten or twelve bookshops. I tried to sell them the books, and if they wouldn’t take them, they might take them on what was called sale or return, consignment. You used to queue up with proper reps at Foyles.

LJ: Foyle’s in London?

AR: Yes, and the Foyles buyer would look at it and would say no, or maybe take three copies, and I would proceed to the ICA bookshop, and Compendium in Camden Town, which was definitely a golden age bookshop. Many of these bookshops closed down, with the onset of online.

LJ: Ok, so perhaps that’s part of the nostalgia, because obviously there were physical bookshops and people could just look at the books and buy them.

AR: Yes. About ten or twelve bookshops, plus six or seven outside London which would stock the books. And people would pay, and the money would come in, but there were never enough sales to cover costs, hence the necessity of subvention.

LJ: Do you remember the names of the bookshops outside London?

AR: There was Days of Hope in Edinburgh, or was it Nottingham, which was known as Haze of Dope, because everyone was, you know. I’m trying to remember the other bookshops…

LJ: In Oxford?

AR: Well, Blackwells in Oxford would take the books, and some other big bookshops would, and there were specialised, literary bookshops, small ones, which would stock them. Otherwise it was a question of having a mailing list. I’ll give you an example of what can happen, I published a book by Max Jacob. The first and only translation of *Advice to a Young Poet*. It didn’t get a single review, and the 500 copies sold out within a year. Word of mouth, word got around, of people who admired Jacob -- there were enough people who couldn’t read French but who knew about Max Jacob, who wanted to read it. It’s never been reprinted. By the way, some of the Menard Books have been reprinted by Shearsman. Do you know Tony Frazer, who runs it? Bloodaxe came along in the seventies, and Frazer came along perhaps in the late seventies or early eighties as well. Bloodaxe is a bigger operation than Carcanet, probably. And their covers are aimed at big bookshops. I don’t like their covers, but the press is commercially oriented, and no doubt it has to be.

LJ: Any other questions Bret?

AR: We can carry on as long as you like.

BJ: I don’t know, if we direct it towards prizes?

AR: Yes sure, Menard got a couple of prizes.

BJ: What were the prizes?

AR: Once or twice books were selected for the translation award of the Poetry Book Society. The John Florio Prize for best Italian translation went to a Menard book, the first edition of the poems of Primo Levi. Menard got a lot of attention in later years when it was realised that I was the first person to publish Levi’s poems in translation.

LJ: You wrote a book about him.

AR: Yes, it was the first book on him, but it’s now out of date – I wish I could have time to revise it, it could be expanded, I could do a much better one.

LJ: It’s very interesting, very key –

AR: Well, I could do a better one. But his poems in translation, that was the book that won a prize, in ’76.

LJ: How many languages do you speak, French, Russian?

AR: I didn’t do the translation of Levi, someone else did. I know French, Russian, Hebrew, one or two other languages, to read but not to speak. French to speak. Russian to speak.

LJ: And you knew those languages as a child, or?

AR: Hebrew as a child, being Jewish. There was the Sunday School, it was like Roman Catholics learning Latin. You had to know the language if you were to say your prayers. I’ve got a good reading knowledge of it. And because I know French so well, I know various other romance languages. My lady-friend is Portuguese, so I’ve learnt a bit of that difficult language. She’s a painter, Paula Rego, do you know her work? Michael’s used covers by her. All the pictures in this room are hers.

LJ: Wonderful, wonderful.

AR: That’s me, as a painter’s model. I’m playing the part of a corrupt priest, but I am the model. And that’s me behind you as Kafka’s vermin in his story *Metamorphosis*. So, one picks up odds and ends of languages.

BJ: How important were prizes?

AR: A prize was always promotion, because it drew attention to the Press. The American co-translators of Levi, Ruth Feldman and Brian Swann, didn’t come over for the ceremony. It was in the papers, so there was free publicity. Of course, you have to be alert and remember to enter the books for prizes etc.

LJ So, you have to be proactive.

AR: Yes.

LJ: And did it make a difference to know people, perhaps?

AR: You mean was there, kind of, corruption?

LJ: No, no, not corruption –

AR: It was such a small world, everybody knew everybody. To some extent. However, Michael Schmidt once said to me that he loved me, but if I sent him a manuscript that he didn’t like, he wouldn’t publish it. When you run a small press, the most embarrassing thing is when somebody you know sends you a book that you think is bad, and –

LJ: So, what do you do in this situation?

AR: You find an excuse. I’m not sure if I – hmm, did I ever publish any book that I didn’t believe in? There were one or two were not as good as I hoped. I don’t think I ever knowingly published a bad book. I may have knowingly published one or two that were disappointing, but I thought, ‘Ok, we’ll do it.’

LJ: Yes, Michael Schmidt told me it’s difficult to say no to somebody you’ve been publishing for many, many years.

AR: It’s very, very difficult. There are excuses you can invent – such as I’ve taken on too many books, and now I’m not publishing anymore. I did make an exception for the son of a close friend, for various reasons, which he’s quite open about on the internet. I published his comic book this year. He’s a schizophrenic and it’s a kind of account of what it’s been like, in that world. So, I did two hundred copies. No more Menard Press. I’ve got enough books I want to finish writing, one of them is an account of being a painter’s model. That’s hardly ever been written about most models, historically, if you think about Degas and his models, and the poor, exploited, young women who were in the chorus or corps de ballet of the Paris Opera, they’re not going to write books. They needed money. In recent years I’ve got more interested in painting, because being a painter is a different way of being in the world than being a writer. You know, with literary criticism, writing about writing, I sometimes think, ‘Oh god, there’s a million words about words.’ Painting is so much more unmediated, so much more direct.

LJ: This painting is wonderful, striking, yes.

AR: Yes, it’s pastel, it’s not oils, it’s pastel crayon. She’s a great painter. But writing about painting uses a different part of the brain than when you write about writing. You’re more aware of the outside world.

LJ: So, that’s your current project.

AR: Yes, it’s a long and difficult thing. It’s taken me eighteen months to finish the pre-first draft, putting all the material I’ve got in diaries and catalogues, into a computer file, to work on that. So, the second draft will be the real first draft. It’ll take another year.

LJ: Ok. And looking back to the 1970s, 1980s, what are you proud of? I mean, there were many very good moments, so --

AR: It was quite a time, because my children were born in 1974 and ‘76, and in those years, and especially from ’81, when my marriage broke up. My wife and I moved to two flats, and the children lived with me half the week and with her half the week. So I was running the press, looking after kids, trying to write, doing translations, had a day job, different day jobs, including the BBC World Service where the work was clerical, semi-editorial, a mixture of odds and ends, and in the end I was a lexicographer on the BBC dictionary. That was the best bit. But it was the shift system I liked. It enabled you to have weekdays off, you worked five days on three days off.

LJ: You’re proud of having been able to manage those activities?

AR: I juggled, although I’m chaotic and disorganised compared to Michael and others. I can’t juggle anymore. I think that’s a function of age. I can work, maybe even better than I did then, if I concentrate on it. But if I try to juggle several things in one day, I lose it. I lose the thread, memory goes. I can’t do all those things anymore. If I hadn’t done the publishing, I might have written better books, but I might have written no books. My kind of publishing was very personal.

LJ: Which makes legacy quite complicated, because obviously it’s not like selling a business, you need to find somebody who can understand the vision –

AR: To take it over? Nobody could take over. But Shearsman is reprinting some of the books they can sell. Tony Frazer at Shearsman does his own setting, and then he does print-on-demand. And it’s cheap. It’s cheaper than it used to be, and there’s less risk. In the old days, you printed five hundred or a thousand copies and only sold three hundred, and you’re left with the remainder. I’ll show you the attic later! I’ll show you some of the other rooms in the flat. I’ve got an assistant who comes in occasionally. She’s pre-sorting for me. There are some things I cannot complete until I’ve found the documents. But when you see the next room, you’ll see. This room is fine, really, it’s no problem, but the next room is chaos.

LJ: Bret, do you have a final question, perhaps?

AR: I don’t know how long you’ve got, I’m happy to, I can carry on.

LJ: We have a meeting – perhaps we can do a follow-up interview in a few months? Thank you so much for your time.

AR: I enjoyed it, my pleasure.

[Pleasantries, interview ends]