**Carcanet Oral History Interview [17th June 2019]**

**Respondent: Nicolas Tredell (NT)**

**Interviewer: Victoria Stobo (VS)**

Preamble, NT introduces himself: I am a freelance writer and editor, I used to teach at Sussex University.

VS When did you start reading *PN Review* and what did you think of it?

NT I started reading it in 1978 to ‘79 when I was doing an MA at the University of Kent at Canterbury. One of my tutors, Stephen Bann, had contributed to the magazine and he referred us to an article there which I believe was about Adrian Stokes who was one of the authors we were studying to some extent on the MA course. So that’s how it began, that’s how I got to know about the magazine.

VS: So, what were your first impressions of the magazine as I understand from other contemporary accounts that it was considered to be controversial to a certain extent in the 70s and 80s?

NT: There was perhaps an element of controversy about it. What drew me to it was that to some extent it combined a traditional approach to literary criticism and an upholding of literary values with an openness to some of the new ideas that were coming across from France. Indeed, Stephen Bann was quite instrumental in introducing me to these ideas around structuralism and particularly post-structuralism, for example Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva. So, I was interested in that mix of tradition and innovation.

VS: So, what is your own background, you mentioned you were studying an MA course at that time?

NT: Yes, that’s right it was an MA in Modern Literature since 1850. I think at that time I was particularly interested in modernist literature in Joyce, Woolf, Eliot and how that had developed out of 19th-century literature, out of Flaubert for example, and how it was then being re-interpreted particularly at that time in France.

VS: Excellent, and when did you first meet Michael Schmidt?

NT: I think I met him sometime in the early 1980s. Our relationship began because I had come across a book in the London Library on the new accessions shelves by Geoffrey Hartman called *Criticism in the Wilderness* and I wrote a review of it simply on spec for *PN Review*. I sent it to Mr Schmidt, as I then called him. And he liked that, and then it was probably about a year and a half we spent in correspondence. I contributed more reviews, some articles, and we eventually met in the Savile Club after about a year and a half, face to face. But we’d had quite a considerable amount of correspondence, which I think must be in the Carcanet archives in fact, prior to that. It was in the old pre-email days of carbon copies and such-like.

VS: Absolutely and what was your first impression of Michael?

NT: I thought he was dynamic (laughs) and engaging.

VS: And how has your relationship with him evolved over time?

NT: I think in some ways we worked together very well. I think that on the one hand I did still have this idea that I wanted to uphold certain traditional I suppose, rather Leavisite values and therefore I also liked the association for example with Donald Davie and C. H. Sisson who were editors at that time and I felt at the same time that Michael was open to considering the new theoretical ideas that were emerging even if critically. I think I was perhaps able to contribute to that and, unlike Bob Dylan’s Mr Jones, I think something was happening and I knew to some extent what it was even if I didn’t approve of it all. And I suppose in so far as I was contributing anything to the general ethos of the magazine at that point I was interpreting this material, quite a lot of which at that time hadn’t been fully translated for an English, for an anglophone audience, who might not have been immediately sympathetic to such ideas in the way they were sometimes rather aggressively, militantly expressed by some of their English proponents.

VS: You wrote articles on a wide range of topics for *PN Review*, could you tell me more about these articles, maybe how your contributions to *PN Review* have developed and changed over time?

NT: I think it developed in that I became more wide-ranging in terms of my coverage. I think on the one hand I was still drawn to this idea that I wanted to defend the value of literature and in that sense, a traditional sense, of what literature could do for the individual and society. And I think I probably had some idea that I might be able to effect some kind of integration or rapprochement of *that* approach and those ideas coming from France in so far as they often tended to involve, particularly say with Barthes or Derrida to some extent, looking very closely at the words, the kind of language that was used in literary texts, which in a sense was an extension of close reading. And I think that’s why you’ve got people like, say, Stephen Heath, a young don at Cambridge, going across as it were to France and finding those ideas.

VS: Absolutely, I can see that in a lot of Michael Schmidt’s preoccupations as well, a lot of the authors he was corresponding with in the 80s, like Laura Riding springs to mind.

NT: Yes, that’s right, yes.

VS: So, I noticed that you wrote a lot of reviews on American poetry for example. Did you suggest articles to Michael Schmidt, or did he contact you, or was it a combination of both?

NT: I think really it was a combination of both. I was certainly very interested in American poetry and in American literature more generally, but poetry was the major focus of *PN Review*, and I was interested in it there. And of course, what you were getting to some extent with French theory is that it impacted more in a way upon university academics in America, at Yale, say, than it did in England. There wasn’t the same level of hostility and some of those academics who were assimilating that theory were also very good, very close readers of American poetry, let’s say of a poet like Hart Crane or Lowell, or the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, as they were called. So I think there was a kind of interfusion of the kind of literature that had been produced or was being produced in American poetry and the kind of theory that was coming in; it offered ways of reading that poetry that hadn’t been so easily available previously. But I was also interested, of course, in tracing it back, let’s say to Hart Crane, to Walt Whitman, that kind of historical perspective as well.

VS: Absolutely, and were you in touch with readers of *PN Review* after the publication of these articles? Did you get a sense of how it was received?

NT: Yes, to some extent, sometimes Michael would tell me, sometimes people would write letters, sometimes I would hear things directly myself, so that I did get a sense of how what I was doing was being received, yes.

VS: I also have a question about networking and how that facilitated through Carcanet and through *PN Review*. Did you meet other *PN Review* writers in the 1980s?

 To some extent yes, I wouldn’t say that that happened widely. In so far as we did network in those days it was by formal correspondence in the traditional form by a handwritten or typed letter. I did have a sense of a kind of network of readers who were interested in the kind of areas that I was interested in, if coming at it from different angles. So, I was conscious of a kind of audience that I was writing for.

VS: Would you say that the people who wrote for *PN Review* shared particular characteristics?

Nt: That’s difficult, I think, to reply to. I think they probably all shared an interest in poetry and a belief in the value of literature. I think some were more sceptical about or more hostile to literary theory than I was but were nonetheless interested to read about it, provided a certain critical perspective was also taken, provided it wasn’t accepted without some form of interrogation or questioning as to its value. I think there was always the sense that literature should be superior to criticism, in contrast to an idea that grew up in the 1980s and 1990s, I think, that criticism was equal or even superior to literature, in so far as one can make those divisions. So, yes there was that kind of commonality, I think, around the value of literature and particularly the value of poetry as a unique form of verbal and literary expression.

 In terms of what you were saying about readers and audiences. Were you ever aware when you were writing for PN Review of a debate or a review of some kind that sparked lots of discussion? I’m thinking of a recent one that I’m aware of in *PN Review* i.e. that of Hollie McNish’s work last year?

NT: Yes, I think there was often that sense when I was writing that it was exciting and stimulating to cause controversy. And I think perhaps some of the attacks I made on certain British post-structuralist critics did cause that kind of controversy. That was, shall we say, interesting. It seems slightly youthful when I look back on it now, razor-slashing as it were, but I did enjoy it at the time, I think it fostered quite a useful debate about the purpose and value of criticism and the purpose and value of literature. So, I think that sense of PNR, going back to one of your original questions, as being controversial was there.

VS: Yes, so moving on. I have a question about Brian Cox. Obviously, he’s very important to Michael Schmidt and the establishment of Carcanet Press, particularly the relationship with Manchester. So, could you tell me a bit about your relationship with Brian Cox? For example, when did you first meet him?

NT: I don’t think in fact I actually met him until I interviewed him in the early 1990s for that series of interviews in PNR that became *Conversations with Critics*. I was of course aware of his work and his interventions in debates about education through the Black Papers and his subsequent work. But I didn’t in fact meet him face to face until I had that opportunity to interview him. And then also I interviewed him later on, after he had retired.

VS: What did you think of his reputation as a right-wing writer?

NT: I think it was somewhat simplified, let me put it that way. I think there is no doubt that the way that the Black Papers came across was as a very right-wing reactionary kind of document and intervention that did have some effects that might be questioned upon educational policy. But I think he was always, and this is something he said himself in interviews, I think he was always fundamentally a kind of Leavisite liberal. He wasn’t as consistently right-wing as perhaps the Black Papers gave the impression of him being and certainly he shifted, he moved away from the more extreme right-wing identifications that developed, I think, in the Thatcher years. Of course, he fell out with Mrs Thatcher over the Cox Report, which was considered to be too weak and wet, but the Cox Report was a consistent development of his previous attitudes. I think he was one of those figures that was somewhat shocked and thrown by some of the developments in the late 1960s, some of the more radical and anarchic kinds of developments, and I think he reacted against that more strongly than he might have done in other circumstances, let’s say.

VS: Do you [think/feel?] that image has influenced his legacy?

NT: I think maybe that he is still seen as someone primarily associated with the Black Papers because they had such an impact. And I think he was aware of, in what he said to me, the more unfortunate elements of that, of how easy it was to start a kind of pressure group through the media of the time, perhaps even more so today. It would have this enormous impact that would distort some of the original ideas and impulses. But if one thinks of the Brian Cox or C. B. Cox who co-edited “Critical Quarterly” in the 1960s, you would see in many ways how open that journal was, for example to American poetry and to all those new ideas and impulses that were coming in at that time before literary theory really impacted upon England. So, I think you would have to take that into account. And I recall once writing a review of one of Brian Cox’s books and it was actually difficult to find the real Brian Cox. He even changed his name, he was Brian Cox, he was C. B. Cox, he was C. Brian Cox. He had several different names, as Bernard Bergonzi pointed out to me, across his career. So, I think if anybody wrote a full assessment or a biography of him, a much more complex figure would emerge. And that might happen, I think, in time as people look back on those debates.

VS: One of the themes that I’ve seen coming out of some of the interviews with Michael Schmidt is that he talks generally about the critical culture in the UK and that it is not as it was. I think he’s probably talking more about broad-sheet newspapers and things like that. What do you think is the secret of *PN Review*’s and Carcanet Press’s success? How have they continued to develop and thrive for such a long period of time?

NT: I think because of its openness and not a completely anarchic or uncritical openness but because of the range of poets that it has published. It is very internationally oriented. And I think also because in the early days it built up a steady base of readers and gradually enhanced its reputation. I remember, for example, having some correspondence with the late American poet, Adrienne Rich, by that time of course very much a radical poet, very forward in her attitudes. And I remember her saying the Carcanet list was a distinguished list, as she put it. And there was that sense that it has indeed, particularly in the case of poets, built up a very distinguished list that hasn’t discriminated on ideological grounds but has been chosen in terms of quality, and Michael, I think, has quite an instinctive eye for good or very good poetry. He can recognise that, wherever the particular poet has come from. I think that has helped a great deal, his own personal knack as it were in that respect.

VS: So, I was going to go on and talk about archives in general next. I know most of your personal papers are held at the John Rylands library.

NT: Most of them, yes

VS: Why do you think it is important to preserve and protect archives? I was interested in perhaps the process that you went through when you decided to deposit your personal papers with the Rylands?

NT: I thought that they would make an important historical record by which people could look back and could reconstruct, recreate and perhaps critically reinterpret the kinds of debate that were taking place. Particularly, let’s say, in the controversial days when I was writing *à chaud* as the French say, ‘in the heat’. I wouldn’t have a perspective on that. Maybe I would if I looked back on these documents, but I haven’t really done that. But someone else coming later, coming from outside, knowing what happened later, knowing what happened afterwards, knowing what happened in the future would have that kind of perspective so I think archives can lend a fuller and richer understanding of what happened in the past, what these debates were about, what was going on, what was actually going on, which might not have been what the people at the time who were involved at the time thought was going on. So, they have that fascinating cultural and indeed human interest because of the various personalities that are always involved in these kinds of disputes. There is a double level in a way, the individual personalities and their trajectories and then you have this body of ideas into which they are feeding and which they are developing. And archival material is essential for that.

VS: And why did you choose the John Rylands?

NT: I think because of my long association with *PN Review* and Carcanet. I liked the idea of it being both geographically near and also in a library which I knew to have a fine reputation. It was a kind of a good way, I felt, to conserve them in that particular way. But by that time, they had become quite voluminous and were getting quite fragile in some ways as paper archives do, so that I was glad to be able to store them at that particular point.

VS: And what sort of selection process did you go through with the archives before they were deposited?

NT: I think I tried to include everything that I had. What I included was all my correspondence, all my postal correspondence, snail mail correspondence in those days, with Michael. So, for quite a long time we called each other Dear Mr Tredell, Dear Mr Schmidt, and I know Michael adopted this with some other figures as well. And then we moved onto a more informal level. So, there was all that kind of correspondence. There was also correspondence relating to Mike Freeman’s co-editorship and the kind of issues that arose there. And there was also the material relating to the interviews that I did for *Conversations with Critics* that first appeared in the magazine and then in the volume. So, there I had the tapes and the edited versions and lots of related correspondence. So, I tried to put everything in, I think, without censoring anything. I’m not suggesting that there was any absolutely sensitive material but I’m sure anyone who read through it would have some interesting revelations from time to time of what might have been going on.

Vs: Actually, that raises an interesting point there. I interviewed Mike Freeman probably last month now. So, did you work with Mike while he was an editor at Carcanet?

NT: Yes, I did. I worked mainly with him in relation to *PN Review*. There were areas where we did cooperate in a sense. For example, we were both interested in the work of Christine Brooke-Rose who, as you know, published some experimental novels in the 60s and 70s but then really dropped out of sight. And then she suddenly approached Carcanet and Mike Freeman was very excited and indeed so was I. And Michael Schmidt was encouraging that and indeed the first person I ever interviewed for *PN Review* was Christine, so in a sense the interviews that I did were sparked off by that coalescence around the figure of Christine.

VS: Did you find that your working relationship across Carcanet, and *PN Review*, with Michael, with Mike Freeman. Were those working relationships, did they function well?

NT: I think so; there was some divergence at some point. I’m not sure how much you know about this or how much Mike mentioned or what his take on it would be, but I think there were two main things that happened. One is that I think that Mike politically was rather more left-wing, and he was inclined to open the magazine more to writers with whom Michael and perhaps also, say, C. H. Sisson were uneasy. The other element is that there was at one point a scheme to expand the magazine so it that it would incorporate fiction, particularly experimental fiction in line with Carcanet’s own publishing policy for people like Christine Brooke-Rose. So, there was that idea. And to some extent I supported those particular lines of development. I thought in a way it was probably time to move on to that more expansive mode. And I think in the end Michael Schmidt didn’t really like that, in fact, he didn’t like the direction the magazine was taking. I certainly remember C. H. Sisson saying that he thought the magazine had lost its identity, it had become too amorphous, which I could understand, that kind of objection. So, there was a certain kind of parting of the ways of Mike Freeman and Michael Schmidt at that particular point.

VS: Mike Freeman did talk about that in his interview, I think that’s only natural after such a period of running a publication. There’s always going to be changes,

NT Of course, yes. I think there was a sense of some need for change, I think Schmidt himself felt that and initially he worked very well with Mike Freeman, indeed I recall him saying that Michael Freeman was the nicest person he’d ever worked with. But as I say, in the end Michael Schmidt was not quite happy with the direction in which the magazine was going, perhaps because it was to some extent losing a distinctive identity. It needed to develop, but he wasn’t particularly happy with that. I myself didn’t particularly object to it at that stage but I could see where the objection was coming from.

VS: And you mentioned there *Conversations with Critics* and how that interview series was turned into a publication. Could you tell me about the publication process with Carcanet?

NT: The interviews began really in rather a casual kind of way. It was actually after Mike Freeman had left so it was in a sense part of that search for a new direction for the magazine. And Michael came up with the idea that I might do some interviews and at that point it wasn’t any more than that. There wasn’t the idea of doing a book. So, I interviewed, as I say, Christine Brooke-Rose, I interviewed Frank Kermode, I interviewed George Steiner. I was pretty much interviewing anyone, frankly, I wanted to interview, anyone I wanted to meet. And at a certain point it became evident that this would be sufficiently substantial to be turned into a book. So that when I had done, I think twenty interviews in all, by which time maybe I think Michael was thinking it was getting a bit long in fact for a book, and after I had done Lisa Jardine, then at that point I think it was decided it would be turned into a book. And that involved not a huge amount of changes but there were some points where material I had excised from the interviews because I had constraints of space to some extent or relevance – there was no other particular reason – got put back in. I remember the A. S. Byatt interview when she was talking about men. I put some things back into that that had not been in the original one published in PNR, so there was some expansion, some alteration in that kind of way. So, the interviews are not all quite the same in the book as they were in the magazine, but they are using material that was recorded and transcribed in the original interviews for the magazine, so it took a different shape in that way.

VS: And how did you find the editing process in terms of putting the final manuscript together so the sort of support that you received from or the comments that you received from Carcanet?

NT: It was fine, I was working very much with Robyn Marsack at that time, so that she was the editor of the books I was doing at Carcanet as well as editor of the reviews and articles I submitted to *PN Review*. And Robyn was thoroughly professional and pleasant. We both enjoyed scrutinising proofs to see if we could find typos and we tried to eliminate those as far as possible. And it wasn’t a situation where there was a lot of editorial intervention. It wasn’t a situation where the editor at Carcanet was saying to me ‘Could you put this in’ or ‘Could you change that’, or such like. So, in some sense it was a, relaxed is not quite the right word, but it wasn’t anything other than a smooth process.

VS: My last question is less to do with the archive itself than, it is related to the project we are engaged in at the moment. So, as part of the project of Lise Jaillant we would like to make part of the email archive available online for the first time. And as a third party whose correspondence is preserved in the archive, I would be very interested in hearing your views in making such material available. It would be made available subject to permission of course but how would you feel about email correspondence being made available online?

NT: For myself I would be quite happy with that. Going back to your earlier question about the value of archives, clearly the situation has changed with electronic media, with emails, which don’t have that durable form that typed or handwritten material does. So, I think it’s very important to archiving today that emails are preserved in some way and also made available in some way. There are obviously some differences in the way that one writes emails and the mistakes that one might make or the things that one might say, but I think it’s very important that they are conserved or made available because they are part of the archive, though it’s a different kind of archive. And the kind of really quite extensive letters that Michael and I used to send to each other in the 1980s and really up into the 1990s – and Mike Freeman and I also corresponded in that kind of way – are given a rather different form because one is using email. But I still think there is obvious continuity with the earlier kind of media, of documentation. And I would be absolutely happy with it and indeed I would say if it’s going to be a fruitful and accurate archive as far as possible then there has to be some way of preserving and making accessible the email material that is building up.

VS: I think it would be interesting to do a study of the email as a correspondence form so see how it is changing and how the way we are communicating with each other is changing in response to that technology. Does the fact that your papers are already available in the library influence the way that you feel about archives. From what you’ve just said I think there is an element of that at play, I guess?

NT: Yes, I think that the sense of some kind of continuity between the email archive and the typed or handwritten archives that are already available is quite significant. One wouldn’t want as it were the story just to stop at the point at which email starts being used. It would be further episodes of the narrative, further episodes of the story but also with the added factor that with email it takes a somewhat different form.

VS: VS talks about the selection of emails for archiving and how it is still being worked on.

Is there anything else you would like to say or ask about the questions?

NT: No (mentions that he has enjoyed reflecting on his experiences).