

The combats of Jan Michalski

Frédéric Pajak

The illustrator and writer, Frédéric Pajak, pays tribute to his friend, Jan Michalski, the publisher, who died a few days ago at the age of 49.

Faced with the death of a friend, there can only be disbelief, pain, silence. And then come the words, stuttering, commonplace, as if this death which is unjustly inflicted upon us, required us to speak out. Jan Michalski was a publisher, or in other terms, a man who believed in words. He devoted the last 15 years of his life to them, with all the pride and attention to detail required by such a passion.

With his wife, Vera, initially publishing literature from the countries of the East, *Noir sur Blanc* was created in Suisse Romande in 1986, then in Paris in 1990 and Warsaw in 1991. For the past two years, they have both endeavoured to resuscitate a prestigious but neglected Parisian publisher *Buchet-Chastel*. I have seen Jan dream over the treasures of the past catalogue, and dream still more of what remained to be done, without restriction as to genre - fiction, history, philosophy, religion, environment, music, painting. He loved beautiful books, rare books, and was always ready to spend time in bookshops, less through a taste for dust than to imagine a future book or collection. Whatever he did, he took inspiration from the past. He was a "classical" man who loved to revolutionize, to show himself where he was least expected. His tastes were therefore always disconcerting, impossible to predict. He was both mischievous and serious, carefree and severe. He laughed with his right eye, while analysing with his left eye, just as his publications did.

It is no sinecure to be a publisher. It is necessary to love bringing others into the limelight, and to do so you have to be able to remain partly in the shade, without casting a shadow. You need to love the words of others, their excesses, tricks, approximations, and the unanswered riddles that they conceal. You need a great deal of patience, and even greater impatience. Jan was learning the trade every day - and he gave the impression of ceaselessly learning, of allowing himself to be convinced : but in reality, he had his own opinion and hardly ever let it slip.

We had known each other for over 15 years. I remember all our conversations. I remember our silences. I remember everything, and one of the first books that Jan and Vera published in 1987, *Proust contre la déchéance*, a short essay written by the painter Josef Czapski between 1940 and 1941, when he was a prisoner in the Soviet Union, with 4,000 Polish officers, in the camp of

Starobyelsk - only 69 of them survived. Certain prisoners had set themselves the task of giving talks to their comrades on military, historical, artistic or literary subjects, with a view to overcoming their dejection and anguish. Czapski was deported to the North of Russia, and in the former Convent of Griazowitz, he dictated to two friends, lieutenants, the notes from these talks on Proust in a "freezing and stinking dining room". This work, published with the *Reminiscences of Starobyelsk*, by the same author, is the work of a painter, a Polish painter, a prisoner, who remembers a French writer to overcome despair. I do not think that there can be a better way of beginning in publishing, even if these books did not receive the acclaim that they merited. They reveal Jan's enthusiasm for literature, art and, in particular, memory. They foreshadow the work to come.

For Jan continued with his work, which consisted in particular of sharing the culture of his country with the French-speaking public, so often overcome by the indifference of the media and the intelligentsia, so true is it that intellectual curiosity is not the same in blasé Paris as in Warsaw, which had suffered censorship for so long. Now, we only need to consult the catalogue of *Noir sur Blanc* to grasp the enormity of this passion : a hundred or so titles from the celebrated *Pan Tadeusz* by Mickiewicz, through the *Pensées échevelées* ("Tangled Thoughts") by Lec, illustrated by Topor, and including the stunning conversations with the father.

But Jan did better. With Vera, they published in Poland, with the same publisher, books by Western authors : Umberto Eco, Charles Bukowski, Henry Millar, Blaise Cendrars and many others. While in France, Polish or Russian books trod a difficult path to their public, in Poland Western works met with considerable success. Is that so surprising ?

At the beginning of the summer, we were walking through the streets of Paris. Jan was asking me questions about my Polish grandfather, who emigrated to France just after the First World War and who worked in the mines in the Pas de Calais, before studying the art of portrait painting in the capital. He confided in me that it was in memory of these émigrés that, with his wife and brother, he had breathed life once again into the famous *Librairie polonaise* in the Boulevard Saint Germain. I felt once again how much the past mattered to him, and how much he could read the present in it. Shortly before his disappearance, Jan offered me one of the greatest joys of my life when he invited me to his home in Warsaw, where I had never been before. We shared our delight at the original drawings of Bruno Schulz. He wanted to show me the best of his country, and it was unforgettable. Another emotion for me was to discover in the bookshops of Warsaw the works of Slawomir Mrozek alongside those of Nicolas Bouvier in *Noir sur Blanc* editions.

Jan was not easily given to confidences. As with so many Poles, his family had experienced Soviet persecution, the camps of Siberia. He did not indulge in self-pity. He was turning a new page, seeking to create or to strengthen links between Eastern Europe and the West. When the Communist bloc disappeared, when the Berlin Wall collapsed, Jan was ready, for he had long understood the true extent of the world. He spoke several languages, sometimes passing from one to another in a conversation to speak a language of his own. Petty discussions, passing fads, self-righteousness, and even the scandals of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, made little impression on him. He had a cosmopolitan vision of culture. His opinion was often provocative, whether on social relationships or politics. And even if his comments were made with a certain detachment, they were never unconsidered. He offered few keys to understanding him, doubtless because he

disliked inflicting his knowledge, tastes and intuition on others. He was a man of great reticence, caring for those close to him, attentive to others, as proud as a Pole and as secretive as a true traveller. He left us much too early, but I am confident that the vast work that he embarked upon, intellectual, artistic and ethical, will be understood in the years to come, because Europe will discover its dimension in the countries of the East, and in Poland, where French was spoken so as not to share the language of the occupier. I know that he will be understood, because he was a visionary: and what at first sight seemed gentle folly, will be perceived as a malicious form of wisdom.