

The world of twentieth-century French publishing analyzed in all its dimensions

Patricia Sorel

Senior lecturer in history

Université Paris-Ouest-Nanterre-La Défense, France

As we know, Jean-Yves Mollier devoted his earliest, foundational work to the nineteenth century. In 1978, he completed a thesis (3^e cycle) in French literature on the left-wing republican and parliamentarian Noël Parfait (1813-1896). Then, in 1986, he defended his doctoral thesis in history on *Histoire politique et culturelle au cœur du 19^e siècle* (Political and cultural history at the heart of the nineteenth century). Between these two dates, he produced his first work on publishing history, *Michel et Calmann Lévy ou la naissance de l'édition moderne (1836-1891)* (Michel and Calmann Lévy or the birth of modern publishing), which appeared in 1984.¹ Three years later in 1987, at the Université Paris-10 at Nanterre, he launched the first university course specifically dedicated to the history of publishing, the book, and reading in Europe from the eighteenth to the twentieth (later the twenty-first) centuries. Aiming for a global history, an objective which has remained constant, he was thus trying to renew the vast domain opened up by the *Histoire de l'édition française* (History of French publishing) edited by Henri-Jean Martin and Roger Chartier, whose third and fourth volumes had appeared in 1985 and 1986 respectively.² Jean-Yves Mollier located the birth of the publisher in the period 1770–1830, with the arrival on the scene of Charles-Joseph Panckoucke (1736–1798), publisher of the very substantial *Encyclopédie méthodique*, who was one of the first to prioritize the logic of offer over the imperative of demand. While continuing to

¹ Jean-Yves Mollier, *Michel et Calmann Lévy ou la naissance de l'édition moderne (1836-1891)* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1984).

² Henri-Jean Martin and Roger Chartier with Jean-Pierre Vivet, eds., *Histoire de l'édition française* (Paris: Promodis-Cercle de la Librairie, 4 vols., 1983–86).

explore the nineteenth century, Jean-Yves Mollier soon extended his research into the twentieth.

I searched the list of the many university theses he has supervised over the years for those relating specifically to the twentieth century. The first was submitted in Nanterre as early as 1992: it was a *mémoire de maîtrise* (master's dissertation) by Constance Didier on Albert Skira's art publishing. In the same year, he set up, with Pascal Ory, the CHCSC (Center for the Cultural History of Contemporary Societies) at the University of Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines (UVSQ), which became the base from which his influence on book history radiated throughout France and beyond. By the end of the 1990s, the number of scholarly theses he supervised on twentieth-century publishing started to multiply. Some covered recent events, such as Aurélie Barrière's master's dissertation on literary programs on French television from 1953 to 2000, or Julien Bachelier's 2002 Diploma thesis (DEA) on the publication of manga in France and Japan.

Since recent changes in the publishing world cannot be understood without a close knowledge of its long-term history and evolution, Jean-Yves Mollier has become one of the most eminent specialists in French publishing in the contemporary era. At the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, at a very uncertain moment for the future of publishing, he invited several specialists to answer the question *Où va le livre?* (Where is the book heading?).³ The aim was to take stock of the economy of the book, change and resistance in the publishing world, and the agents of the book. This proved to be a very useful exercise after three decades of profound transformation in the world of the book. The age of publishing houses had been followed by the age of publishing companies, then in the aftermath of the Second World War came the age of great mergers with the formation of two large corporations, Hachette and the Groupe de la Cité. The purpose of *Où va le livre?* was

³ Jean-Yves Mollier, ed., *Où va le livre?*, (Paris: La Dispute, 2000).

not so much to answer that extremely complex question, but to offer some thoughts and perspectives on it. That is what made the book so interesting, and caused it to be updated and reprinted in 2002 and 2007, while the importance of large international corporations in the publishing sector went on increasing. In his chapter on “L’évolution du système éditorial français depuis l’*Encyclopédie* de Diderot” (The development of the French publishing system since Diderot’s *Encyclopedia*), Jean-Yves Mollier demonstrated that a historical perspective is indispensable for understanding the present publishing landscape.⁴ He underlined the fundamental difference between the present and the history of industrial concentration in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The objective of the financial conglomerates which buy up publishing companies today is not to see them endure, but to sell them on as soon as they have provided the significant added value and “leverage” so prized by financial investors. In 2007, in another article published in the *Revue d’histoire littéraire de la France*,⁵ Jean-Yves Mollier stressed that the age of the publisher as both a businessman and an intellectual had run its course, and he expressed his concern for the future of a publishing market exclusively dominated by financial considerations.

In the following year (2008), Jean-Yves Mollier published *Édition, presse et pouvoir en France au XX^e siècle* (Publishing, power and the press in twentieth-century France), which formed a sequel to his *L’Argent et les Lettres* (Money and Literature) which appeared twenty years earlier.⁶ He had access to unpublished sources, including the archives of the Hachette group at IMEC (Institut Mémoire de l’Édition Contemporaine), the archives of the Syndicat national de l’édition (National Publishing Union), and also those of Maurice Dumoncel, previously an administrator

⁴ Jean-Yves Mollier, “L’évolution du système éditorial français depuis l’*Encyclopédie* de Diderot,” in *Où va le livre?*, 23–39.

⁵ Jean-Yves Mollier, “Éditer au XIX^e siècle,” *Revue d’histoire littéraire de la France* 7.4 (2007): 771–90.

⁶ Jean-Yves Mollier, *Édition, presse et pouvoir en France au XX^e siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2008); and his *L’Argent et les Lettres: histoire du capitalisme d’édition, 1880-1920* (Paris: Fayard, 1988).

at Fayard, Grasset, Plon and Tallandier. This enabled him to shed new light notably on the period of the German Occupation, when French publishers participated in drawing up the notorious Otto lists.⁷ In this work, Jean-Yves Mollier exposed the close links that the publishing world enjoyed with political authorities. Thus he discovered that, in the mid-1960s, the Hachette group made monthly payments to influential political figures, François Mitterrand among them.

Jean-Yves Mollier also traced how the family-based and dynastic structures of publishing, which he had studied in *L'Argent et les Lettres*, were gradually absorbed into the Hachette group – taken over by Jean-Luc Lagardère in 1980 – and by the Groupe de la Cité. His research also offered valuable insight into the collapse of Vivendi Universal Publishing (i.e. the former Groupe de la Cité) in 2002, and into the machinations of the Lagardères senior and junior to gain control of their competitor, which eventually enabled Hachette to emerge unrivaled as France's foremost publishing group. In the end, as we know, the European Commission permitted Lagardère to keep only 40 per cent of the former Vivendi Universal Publishing company, while the remaining 60 per cent (Éditis) were resold to Baron Ernest-Antoine Seillière, president of MEDEF (the Association of French Enterprises). Jean-Yves Mollier was able to follow this tangled story down to its minutest details, thanks partly to a file sent to him by an anonymous French parliamentarian – a file which contained all the documents which Brussels had required the publishers to submit for the arbitration procedure. Significantly, the parliamentarian thought it best to entrust these confidential documents to a historian who specialized in publishing and who had a reputation for scholarly rigor.

⁷ The Otto records listed books which the German authorities ordered to be withdrawn from sale and pulped. Three lists, drawn up in 1940, 1942, and 1943, first targeted books by Jewish, communist and anti-Nazi authors, but later included books by British and American authors. The bans also applied in Vichy France. French publishers agreed to the “censorship pact” in order to be allowed to continue operating.

Following this broad panoramic view of twentieth-century French publishing, Jean-Yves Mollier published two monographs on great publishing houses, from their establishment up to the beginning of the twenty-first century: *La Librairie Tallandier* (2011, in collaboration with Matthieu Letourneux), and the *Histoire de la librairie Larousse* (2012, in collaboration with Bruno Dubot).⁸ Again using partly unpublished archives, Jean-Yves Mollier and Matthieu Letourneux analyzed the history of a company which made its name in popular publishing before becoming a publisher of history, albeit still oriented toward the general public. They analyzed the evolving identity of the company and the role of its managers. As for Larousse, the archives at IMEC once again gave Jean-Yves Mollier and Bruno Dubot access to important documentary sources, to which they added the company archives in the Rue Montparnasse. Their history of Larousse covered 160 years of a publishing house whose dictionary has become world-famous, using not only company records but also personal and family documents. This was the history of a firm, but it also incorporated the biography of an exceptional individual and freethinker – Pierre Larousse, already the subject of an article from 1995, which Jean-Yves Mollier entitled “The Sphinx of Burgundy.”⁹ These two monographs enriched the history of the publishing industry in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In another article which appeared in 1994, Jean-Yves Mollier emphasized how “such monographs are valuable and indeed indispensable because they bring into focus a man, a family, a milieu, a business, they throw light on networks, and help us understand how stables of authors are formed, and the transition of a publishing house into a great publishing concern.”¹⁰

⁸ Jean-Yves Mollier and Matthieu Letourneux, *La Librairie Tallandier: histoire d'une grande maison d'édition populaire (1870-2000)* (Paris: Nouveau Monde, 2011); Jean-Yves Mollier and Bruno Dubot, *Histoire de la librairie Larousse (1852-2010)* (Paris: Fayard, 2012).

⁹ Jean-Yves Mollier, “Un Sphinx bourguignon,” in Jean-Yves Mollier and Pascal Ory, eds., *Pierre Larousse et son temps* (Paris: Larousse, 1995), 9–27.

¹⁰ Jean-Yves Mollier, “L’histoire du livre et de l’édition dans l’espace français,” *Bulletin de la Société d’histoire moderne et contemporaine* 3–4 (1994): 35–49; and “L’histoire de l’édition, du livre et de la lecture en France aux XIXe et XXe siècles [Approche bibliographique],” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 126–27 (March 1999): 39–59.

Censorship is an integral part of book history, and Jean-Yves Mollier has consistently explored its purpose and function. In 1992, he co-organized an international conference at UVSQ (together with Pierre Hébert, Pascal Durand, and François Vallotton) on *Censure et imprimé: Belgique, France, Québec, Suisse, XIX^e-XX^e siècles* (Print and censorship: Belgium, France, Quebec, Switzerland, nineteenth-twentieth centuries). In 1997, he published a chapter on “La survie de la censure d’État (1881-1949)” (The survival of government censorship) in *La Censure en France à l’ère démocratique* (Censorship in France in the democratic age).¹¹ He returned to the topic in *Où va le livre?*, in a contribution on “the temptations of censorship.”¹² Here he showed that, since 1789, censorship has assumed many different guises and he expressed some anxiety about its recent manifestations.

He drew on the case of the Abbé Bethléem, the intransigent cleric who made it his life’s mission to “struggle against the invasion of impious and dissolute literature.” A few years later in 2014, he wrote a book on this neglected figure of the first half of the twentieth century: *La Mise au pas des écrivains: L’impossible mission de l’abbé Bethléem au XX^e siècle* (Bringing authors into line: The Abbé Bethléem’s “Mission Impossible” in the twentieth century).¹³ He showed that Bethléem’s crusade against dangerous books grew so influential that, when in 1934 Hachette launched the French version of *Mickey Mouse* (*Journal de Mickey*), it chose to hide behind the pseudonym Paul Winkler. After Bethléem’s death, his legacy inspired the law of July 16th 1949 on publications for the young – a law which authorized the Ministry of the Interior to ban the sale and exhibition to minors of “publications of any kind representing a danger to youth because of their licentious or pornographic character, or because of the role accorded to crime, violence, racial hatred or discrimination, and incitement to

¹¹ Jean-Yves Mollier, “La survie de la censure d’État (1881-1949),” in Pascal Ory, ed., *La Censure en France à l’ère démocratique* (Brussels: Complexe, 1997), 77–87.

¹² Jean-Yves Mollier, “Les tentations de la censure d’hier à aujourd’hui,” in *Où va le livre?* (2007), 197–212.

¹³ Jean-Yves Mollier, *La Mise au pas des écrivains: L’impossible mission de l’abbé Bethléem au XX^e siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2014).

the use and possession of or traffic in drugs.” The main victims were the publishers Maurice Girodias, Jean-Jacques Pauvert, Éric Losfeld, Claude Tchou, and Régine Deforges.

Behind the biography of this truculent character Bethléem, Jean-Yves Mollier painted a backdrop of censorship over the last century, describing it as a phoenix constantly reborn from its own ashes. As the epilogue reminds us, “Censorship never dies.” If “Bringing authors into line” enjoyed a relative decline after 1968, “Anastasia has not said her final word,”¹⁴ even today in the West where freedom of expression has never been so open. As a vigilant citizen paying attention to recent events, Jean-Yves Mollier has always denounced censorship in all its forms. In an article published in 2006 in *Ethnologie française*, he warned readers that their freedom was at stake “when society, in order to defend itself or to protect any one of its constituent groups, erects barriers to channel, legitimize or encourage fear.”¹⁵ On December 31st 2014, he published a tragically prophetic article in *Le Monde* entitled “Fascism and its contemporary revivals,” just one week before the murder of members of the *Charlie Hebdo* production team.

In many articles and in the course of his research seminar, Jean-Yves Mollier has remained faithful to his global history agenda. He has analyzed the history of publishing in every dimension – economic, political, social and cultural – up to the present day. The conclusion of his *Une autre histoire de l'édition française* (An alternative history of French publishing) is entitled “Challenges for contemporary publishing.”¹⁶ In it he asks whether the profession of publisher itself is disappearing. Now that publishing has passed into the control of investors, he suggests, it risks losing its very identity. Just like his late friend André Schiffrin (d. December 2013),

¹⁴ Translator's note: Anastasia, a cartoon character armed with scissors, is a common French nickname and symbol of the Censor.

¹⁵ Jean-Yves Mollier, “La censure et l’histoire,” *Ethnologie française* 36:1 (2006): 126.

¹⁶ Jean-Yves Mollier, *Une autre histoire de l'édition française* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2015).

Jean-Yves Mollier attacks the current preoccupation with maximum profitability in publishing and calls on publishers to return to the fundamental principles of their profession. “It’s for publishers to prove that they are indispensable, which means they must stop promoting books as if they were washing powder; it must be remembered that publishers have something to offer the market and they are not just people following demand. The publisher anticipates the needs and desires of the public, he is prepared to put his faith in writers who are disturbing, who make people uncomfortable,” he declared in an interview with *ActuaLitté* on November 5th 2015.¹⁷

The economic future of publishing and distribution is now being played out on a global scale. As Jean-Yves Mollier already grasped in the 2007 edition of *Où va le livre?* “this fierce determination to have an international platform and to be visible in the most profitable linguistic arenas (which means in English and Spanish rather than French and German) constitutes a major break with the past and with the necessity for great international publishers to be autonomous agents and not the passive subjects of globalization.”¹⁸ His most recent work, *Hachette, le géant aux ailes brisées* (Hachette, the giant with broken wings), is a history of the greatest French publishing group from its creation by Louis Hachette in 1826 up to the present day.¹⁹ In it Jean-Yves Mollier describes the present age as one of “the deregulation of the book market.” He sees the defeat of Hachette in its struggle with Amazon over book prices as symptomatic of the end of an era, in which the major French publishers have now been destabilized by GAFA (Google, Apple, Facebook, and Amazon). Jean-Yves Mollier thus arrives at a fundamental question – that of the future of the Hachette-Livre group and with it, the future of publishing itself, undermined as it is both by digital publishing and self-publishing on the Internet.

¹⁷ <https://www.actualitte.com/article/interviews/aux-editeurs-de-prouver-qu-ils-sont-irremplacables-jean-yves-mollier/61932> (consulted 27 April 2017).

¹⁸ Mollier, “L’évolution du système éditorial français depuis l’*Encyclopédie* de Diderot,” in his *Où va le livre?* (Paris: La Dispute, 2007), 37.

¹⁹ Jean-Yves Mollier, *Hachette, le géant aux ailes brisées* (Paris: L’Atelier, 2015).

Jean-Yves Mollier's global-historical approach has profoundly renewed the history of French publishing. In an article published in 1996 he recalled that "economics never operates in a closed circuit, any more than does politics, society, or culture." "The history of publishing," he added, "lies at an interdisciplinary crossroads. It cannot avoid a global perspective, hence both its importance and its great difficulty."²⁰ This globalizing approach was already heralded in his bibliographical article of 1994 in the *Bulletin de la Société d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, updated in 1997, already cited. This bibliography listed the main scholarly works and university theses on the history of the book in the French-speaking world from 1789 to the present. Since then, Jean-Yves Mollier has provided an annual update for his master's students, and posted it online for the benefits of researchers all over the world. It illustrates the many different dimensions adopted by the history of publishing since its origins, because it is organized into no fewer than twenty different categories (the twentieth and final category is made up of works on the electronic book, a heading which did not even exist in 1999). The world of publishing is present here in its global dimension with, among others, one category devoted to periodicals, another to reading and a third to retail bookselling. In fact Jean-Yves Mollier has never neglected bookselling. One has only to remember the conference he organized at UVSQ in 1996 on *Le Commerce de la librairie en France au XIX^e siècle (1789-1914)* (French bookselling in the nineteenth century), and the proceedings published in the following year, and his important contributions to the *Histoire de la librairie française* (History of French bookselling) published in 2008.²¹

²⁰ Jean-Yves Mollier, "L'histoire de l'édition, une histoire à vocation globalisante," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 43:2 (April–June 1996): 329–48.

²¹ Jean-Yves Mollier, "La police de la librairie (1810-1881)," "La librairie de Minuit," "La librairie juridique," "Les cabinets de lecture," "Les dépôts de livres dans divers magasins et bazars," "Les prémices d'une nouvelle organisation des métiers du livre," in Patricia Sorel and Frédérique Leblanc, eds., *Histoire de la librairie française* (Paris: Cercle de la Librairie, 2008), 16–26, 70, 126, 149–55, 170–75, 176–82.

I conclude with a citation that, it seems to me, sums up Jean-Yves Mollier's thinking and his contribution to the history of publishing: "Whether economic, social and cultural, religious or educational, scientific or literary, and even artistic, publishing can never be reduced to any single dimension. It is bound to bring useful material to its sister disciplines, it lies at an intersection where the scholarly disciplines converge, where complementary approaches come together, which fully justifies its claim to be the fruit of all these meetings, a site of constant exchanges which reminds us that the book has always led us to this end-point."²²

Jean-Yves Mollier brings his own vision to a publishing world in the throes of transformation. His gaze is razor-sharp and uncompromising, but his view of the future never lapses into pessimism.

Translated by Martyn Lyons

²² Mollier, "L'histoire de l'édition, du livre et de la lecture en France aux XIXe et XXe siècles," 49.