In memoriam

Homage to Professor Jean-Michel Thomine

Professor Jean-Michel Thomine has just left us, surrounded by his loved ones at the Portes on the Isle of Ré, a few days after his eightieth birthday, following a harrowing chronic disease that he faced with courage.

Jean-Michel Thomine arrived in the city of Rouen in September 1970 after earning accreditation as an associate senior lecturer. His particularly brilliant career led to a request that he participated actively in developing the nascent School of Medicine in Rouen. He became a resident of the Paris University Hospitals (interne des hôpitaux de Paris-Concours 1957) then, after serving in Algeria and defending his medical doctoral thesis, he became a clinical fellow (chef de clinique-assistant) in 1964, at the Orthopaedic and Reconstructive Surgery department of the Cochin University Hospital in Paris. He was thus one of the last surgeons to study under Robert Merle d’Aubigné and, without doubt, the very last to have access, in 1967, to the much sought after position of ‘assistant-attaché’, which he fulfilled until he took up his post in Rouen. As ‘assistant-attaché’, he accompanied Professor Merle d’Aubigné in all his professional duties including outpatient visits, technical choices, operating room activities, and research... One could hardly imagine a better teaching method than this direct ‘compagnonnage’, in situ, of the student by the teacher, particularly when the background of the student is impressive and the teacher is Merle d’Aubigné.

As soon as he arrived in Rouen, Jean-Michel Thomine dedicated himself entirely to his mission. He initially had a tiny 15-bed unit confined within a general surgery department. Within 2 years, he had transformed it into an orthopaedics and trauma department with two clinical fellows. In 1976, he was promoted to the position of university professor and head of the Orthopaedic and Trauma Surgery Department, a 96-bed unit with an associate senior lecturer, four clinical fellows, and a visiting fellow. In 1997, the unit expanded into a vast 150-bed department combining two specialties, orthopaedic and trauma surgery and plastic surgery. Jean-Michel Thomine headed this department until he retired in September 1999.

He founded the Orthopaedic Surgery School of Rouen, which rapidly acquired a reputation of excellence. During the tenure of Jean-Michel Thomine, the school trained about 40 orthopaedic surgeons, as well as ten or so visiting fellows who went on to work in their own countries, Algeria and Belgium. He was deeply dedicated to his role as a teacher. The acquisition of technical skills was of course the basis of his teaching, but he focused his efforts on building sound minds and imparting proficiency in medical decision-making. I remember how, when I was a young resident, he steeped me in the foundations of orthopaedic surgery and, even more importantly, in the fundamentals, which he felt were essential to high-quality care. His remarkable analytical capabilities and his affinity for the ‘mot juste’ fascinated me. A few constitutive precepts guided his actions. The training potential of traumatology — regarding both the acquisition of technical skills and the establishment of a surgical strategy — prompted him to organise a staff meeting about emergency patients, every morning, including on Saturdays, which he led until he retired. During the weekly staff meeting on patients undergoing scheduled surgery, he demanded concise presentations and the identification of strong clinic-pathologic correlations, which he felt was mandatory to ensure optimal patient care. He insisted on two other messages, which he believed had considerable teaching value: any suggested treatment required evaluation in terms of its risk/benefit ratio and, when discussing treatment options, healthcare cost considerations should be taken into account, at least from a theoretical perspective. He often pointed out the mismatch between the unlimited nature of healthcare needs and the obviously limited availability of healthcare resources. This attention to the community, interpreted at the time as marginal and utopic, proved visionary... 

In addition to his dedication to teaching, he strove to create a strong unit of basic and applied research. As a corollary to clinical research, he formed the project of providing the orthopaedic and trauma surgery department with a research unit dedicated to gait...
analysis. He deeply admired the creative ingenuity of Etienne-Jules Marret, who developed chronophotography techniques for the scientific study of human walking, in the late nineteenth century. He strongly believed that modern computer-based systems would optimise the performance of the ‘clinical eye’ — which was outstanding in his case — that he used to analyse limbs. He was helped in this project by Franck Dujardin, whose scientific training and research studies were a perfect foundation for the development of this unit, which was named the Groupe de recherche de l'appareil locomoteur (GRHAL). After being assigned premises adjoining the clinical units, he obtained sufficient funding to purchase a motion-capture optoelectronic device (Vicon™), to which he subsequently added high-performance force platforms. These efforts allowed the characterisation of normal and abnormal gait and the establishment of a database for studies of the aetiopathogenesis of hip osteo-arthritis and of the wear of prosthetic acetabular cups.

Many fruitful partnerships arose from these capabilities. Among them, several deserve special mention, such as those involving the Anatomy Laboratory of the School of Medicine under the direction of Fabrice Duparc, the Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery Department with Pierre-Yves Milliez and Isabelle Auquit-Auckbur, and other university departments and engineering schools.

On the national scene, the work of Jean-Michel Thomine made a strong mark. His dedication led him to preside over many scientific societies.

A well-earned acknowledgement of the quality of his descriptive anatomy and functional studies that resulted in the publication, in 1998, with R. Tubiana and E. Macklin, of a reference manual entitled ‘Examination of the hand and wrist’. He also worked on Dupuytren’s contracture and on a functional treatment device for fractures of the proximal phalanx of the fingers, known as the Thomine device.

President of the Société d’orthopédie de l’Ouest (SoO) in 1986–1987, with the successfully achieved goal of creating a theme issue of the Revue de chirurgie orthopédique reporting the best symposia and communications at the annual meeting.

President of the Collège français des chirurgiens orthopédistes et traumatologues, with the goal of bringing together all existing capabilities and teaching resources, whether academic or non-academic, in both the public and the private sectors, to create a mixed- and equal-representation structure that is now universally recognised.

And, as the culmination of this long and exemplary career, president of the SoFCOT in 1997. During his time as president and as board member, he contributed actively to efforts aimed at defining the role of each component of the SoFCOT. He drew attention to the importance of the image of the SoFCOT as the factor that governed its institutional value and its position as an interface of choice between the authorities and the orthopaedic community.

This position had direct concrete effects during the work done to revise the French nomenclature of medical procedures. At the SoFCOT meeting held in November 1997, for which he gave me the role of associate meeting president, his much-noted opening address clarified a number of his favourite ideas on personal and professional ethics, which he adhered to faithfully.

His work as a member of the editorial board of the Revue de chirurgie orthopédique led him to become Editor-in-Chief in 1995. Philippe Beaufils, his successor, will describe it better than I can.

Jean-Michel Thomine was a friend of the arts. He said little about this area. I remember, however, the emotion with which he spoke of the frescoes by Masaccio and of the Brancacci Chapel at his return from a trip to Florence. He enjoyed French chamber music from the ‘grand période’ — from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century — and, in paintings, colour, under all its forms. But poetry was the recipient of his secret garden. As long as he was active professionally, he rarely discussed this passion, which inclined towards René Char and Saint-John Perse. In a very different category, the ‘Atelier Oulipien de Queneau’, or workshop of potential literature, known as Oulipô, drew his attention as a means of crafting words and producing a distorted vision of reality. However, he was opposed to the use of theoretical constraints that confines the Oulipô technique. His shift from ‘Oulipô’ to ‘OuPoPo’ reflects this position. Not to mention the mischievous twinkling of the eye (and I am firmly convinced it is there) triggered by the playful self-criticism that the shift inevitably suggests. His 200 or so poems, classified by his daughter Alice, illustrated and prefaced by his two daughters-in-law Anna and Marie-Claire, and published by Pamyennes in the 2000s as two booklets entitled ‘Oupopo or a doubt’, say everything about him.

Béchamel
L’air éclairé sous la lune comme chapeau
Se laisse regarder un merle noir et rond
Qui promène sur mon gazon
Un air arrogant de voyou
Tenant sa merlette par le cou
Fier, il déambule devant nous
Lui disant : vois comme les hommes sont bêtes
Et comme il est facile de leur tenir tête

Jean-Michel Thomine has been laid to rest in the small cemetery of the Saint-Calixte church in the village of Mailly-Champagne, in the family vault, in the midst of magnificent vineyards that hold the ‘Grand Cru de Champagne’ appellation. Could we have imagined, for him and his legacy, a last resting place more radiant with beauty and serenity?

In the name of the 45 orthopaedic surgeons he trained directly, and also of all those who worked with him to any degree, dear Ms Thomine, dear friend, dear Jean-Baptiste and Sébastien, dear Alice, please accept, along with our fond affection, our deepest condolences.

N. Biga, on behalf of Franck Dujardin, Fabrice Duparc, Pierre-Yves Milliez, Isabelle Auquit-Auckbur who continue his work
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1 Oulipô or ‘Olivroir de Littérature Potentielle’ is a literary movement from the middle of the twentieth century founded by François Le Lionnais and Raymond Queneau and based on the crafting of words and the definition of rules for writing.
2 OuPoPo or ‘Ouvrir du Possible Poétique’, is the variant imagined by JM Thomine, who did not accept the writing constraints imposed by the Oulipô technique. OuPoPo has both similarities and differences with Oulipô.

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