

Sima GODFREY  
**Concrete Poetry**

**Abstract**

The relationship between literature and architecture has been a competitive one since at least the time of Horace who declared his poetic monument “more lasting than bronze and more noble than the pyramids of kings...” In 1832, in his epic novel, *Notre Dame de Paris*, Victor Hugo expanded on this reflection with reference to the mediological impact of Gutenberg’s press. Henceforth, he wistfully noted, a printed bible would replace the magnificent stone bible that was the great Cathedral: “l’imprimerie tuera l’architecture.” Returning to the city where Gutenberg invented that press, this article looks at recent examples of public architecture in Strasbourg that seek to reconcile word and stone. At the very time when the written word has become increasingly dematerialized, these “architextual” monuments rematerialize the word in a postmodern exercise of “concrete poetry.”

**Résumé**

Depuis au moins Horace, qui déclara son monument poétique “plus durable que l’airain, plus haut que les royales pyramides”, le rapport entre la littérature et l’architecture est marquée par une certaine rivalité. En 1832, dans son épopée, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, Victor Hugo réfléchit sur cette concurrence en analysant l’impact médiologique de l’invention de l’imprimerie par Gutenberg. À partir de ce moment, affirme-t-il — non sans nostalgie — le livre de pierre que fut la cathédrale allait faire place au

livre de papier, « plus solide et plus durable encore » ; « l'imprimerie tuera l'architecture. » Dans cet article nous retournons à Strasbourg, la ville où Gutenberg perfectionna l'imprimerie typographique, pour considérer des exemples récents d'une architecture publique qui cherche à réconcilier parole et pierre. Au moment même où, pour revenir à l'exégèse de Hugo, la parole écrite devient de plus en plus "volatile, insaisissable", ces monuments "architexturaux" de la post-modernité produisent, au sens le plus littéral, de la "concrete poetry", de la poésie en béton.

### **Keywords**

« Ceci tuera cela », concrete poetry, printing, *poésie concrète*, Strasbourg,

### **Bio**

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THE RELATIONSHIP between literature and architecture has been a competitive one since at least the time of Horace who, reflecting on his first three books of poetry, declared:

*exegi monumentum aere perennius  
regalique situ pyramidum altius...*

“I have completed a monument more lasting than bronze  
and more noble than the pyramids of kings...” (*Odes*, Book 3: 30)

Nineteen centuries later, the English poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley, similarly contemplated the impermanence of those pyramids in his sonnet on the Egyptian king, Ozymandias:

« My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:  
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair! »  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.”  
(Shelley 1970: 550)<sup>1</sup>

Still echoing Horace, some fifty years after Shelley, Théophile Gautier, the Parnassian poet, declared poetry an art sculpted and chiseled from material more durable than marble, and more lasting than bronze:

Les dieux eux-mêmes meurent  
Mais les vers souverains  
Demeurent  
Plus forts que les airains.  
Sculpte, lime, cisèle — he declaims to poets —  
Que ton rêve flottant  
Se scelle  
Dans le bloc résistant! (Gautier 1981: 149-150)

Stone monuments of human pride quake before the power of the written word. The pen is mightier than the trowel.

The Book of Genesis had long before warned against the architectural hubris of monument builders. In the story of the Tower of Babel we are told: “And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there... And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven.” (Gen. 11: 1, 4). Whatever the technical prowess of its architects, we know what happened to the men who built that tower. God punished them with language. “Ceci tuera cela.”

The phrase is Victor Hugo’s and it is taken from the central chapter of his great historical novel of 1832, *Notre Dame de Paris*. Not surprisingly,

in a novel whose title and protagonist is a cathedral, Hugo pondered deeply the relation between stone monuments and literary ones. At a time when Gothic churches had fallen victim to revolutionary vandalism, aesthetic ridicule, and physical ruin, Hugo championed the grandeur and the meaning of medieval architecture; aside from the faith they proclaimed, before the invention of the printing press, these great stone monuments were, he insists, society's most precious books – accessible to the “illiterate” masses, and more durable than the fragile handwritten manuscripts reserved for precious few.

In Hugo's novel, Claude Frollo, the dark archdeacon of Notre Dame, explains to a visitor the language in which those great Gothic monuments were written

« ... Je vous ferai lire les hiéroglyphes dont sont couverts les quatre gros chenets de fer du portail de l'hôpital Saint-Gervais et de la rue de la Ferronnerie. Nous épellerons encore ensemble les façades de Saint-Côme, de Sainte-Geneviève-des-Ardents, de Saint-Martin, de Saint-Jacques-de-la-Boucherie... »

— Pasquedieu ! qu'est-ce que c'est donc que vos livres ?

— En voici un, dit l'archidiacre.

Et ouvrant la fenêtre de la cellule, il désigna du doigt l'immense église de Notre-Dame... L'archidiacre considéra quelque temps en silence le gigantesque édifice, puis étendant avec un soupir sa main droite vers le livre imprimé qui était ouvert sur sa table et sa main gauche vers Notre-Dame, et promenant un triste regard du livre à l'église :

- Hélas ! dit-il, ceci tuera cela... le livre tuera l'édifice ! » (Hugo 1967: 196-197)

Responding to Frollo's sigh, Hugo steps in to offer a mediological exegesis : « *Ceci tuera cela*... le livre de pierre, si solide et si durable, allait faire place au livre de papier, plus solide et plus durable encore. Sous ce rapport, la vague formule de l'archidiacre avait un second sens ; elle signifiait qu'un art allait détrôner un autre art. Elle voulait dire : L'imprimerie tuera l'architecture.

« ... jusqu'à Gutenberg, l'architecture est l'écriture principale, l'écriture universelle. Ce livre granitique... le moyen-âge en a écrit la dernière page.

Au quinzième siècle tout change.

... L'architecture est détrônée. Aux lettres de pierre d'Orphée vont succéder les lettres de plomb de Gutenberg... Le grand poème, le grand édifice, le grand oeuvre de l'humanité ne se bâtira plus, il s'imprimera. » (Hugo 1967: 199-205)

To be sure, Hugo acknowledges – and celebrates – the triumph of print, a triumph that freed the expression of thought from stone and made it even more permanent with its weightless immateriality: « Sous la forme imprimerie, la pensée est plus impérissable que jamais; elle est volatile, insaisissable, indestructible. Elle se mêle à l'air. » Nevertheless, he cannot

help but look back with regret at the demise of the stone book: « ... Ainsi... le genre humain a deux livres, deux registres, deux testaments, la maçonnerie et l'imprimerie, la bible de pierre et la bible de papier. Sans doute, quand on contemple ces deux bibles si largement ouvertes dans les siècles, *il est permis de regretter la majesté visible de l'écriture de granit, ces gigantesques alphabets formulés en colonnades, en pylônes, en obélisques, ces espèces de montagnes humaines qui couvrent le monde et le passé depuis la pyramide jusqu'au clocher, de Chéops à Strasbourg.* » (Hugo 1967: 210. My emphasis)

In the epic contemplation of stone monuments from antiquity to the Middle Ages that closes this reflection, Hugo sweeps from the pyramids of Egypt to the bell tower of Notre Dame. Not Notre Dame de Paris, however, but, somewhat surprisingly, Notre Dame de Strasbourg.

The cathedral of Strasbourg, so different from Notre Dame de Paris, has long been considered one of the most beautiful Gothic cathedrals in Europe. It is also one of the tallest churches in the world. Like its sister cathedral in Paris, its portals and façades spell out hundreds of stories and teach countless lessons to its faithful readers. In Hugo's words, « toute la face de l'église est un poème savamment composé. » Stepping back to admire the church and the magnificent spire on its north tower, Hugo famously commented "C'est le prodige du gigantesque et du délicat. J'ai vu Chartres, j'ai vu Anvers, il me fallait Strasbourg." (Hugo, 1985; vol.2: 123)

Ironically, however, at the very time when that soaring north tower was being completed (1439), it was in the shadow of the cathedral of Strasbourg that Johannes Gutenberg was putting the final touches on the printing press that was destined, in Hugo's parable, to replace the great Bible in stone.<sup>2</sup>

The reference to Strasbourg in the passage from *Notre Dame de Paris* could not be more apt, therefore, for it is in that city that the symbolic face-off took place between "ceci" and "cela"—the printing press and the cathedral.

Since the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Strasbourg has remained the contestational space *par excellence* for real and symbolic clashes. Most notably, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it became the decisive site for deep rooted confrontations between German and French nationalisms, languages and arms. In view of this history, it is in the very site where "ceci tua cela," that, in the aftermath of World War II, Strasbourg was reinvented as the symbolic space for the peaceable partnership of "this" and "that". In 1949 it was chosen as the headquarters of the Council of Europe, in 1979 it became the seat of the European Parliament and since 1994 it is home to the European Court of Human Rights.

Victor Hugo would be proud. The visionary author, had, after all, declared in 1849:

« Un jour viendra où les armes vous tomberont des mains, à vous aussi! ... Un jour viendra où vous France, vous Russie, vous Italie, vous Angleterre, vous Allemagne, vous toutes, nations du continent, sans perdre vos qualités distinctes et votre glorieuse individualité, vous vous fondrez étroitement dans une unité supérieure, et vous constituerez la fraternité européenne... » (Hugo 1849)

Accordingly, to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the creation of the Council of Europe, the French municipality of Strasbourg and the German municipality of Kehl, sitting on either side of the Rhine river which had once divided “ceci” from “cela,” undertook a cultural project to celebrate the peaceful bridging of historically opposed nations. Forty authors from forty European countries were invited to compose texts in their mother tongue on the theme of the “Pont de l’Europe.”

The metaphor of the bridge was, of course, an obvious choice to represent the surmounting of difference after 50 years of the construction of Europe. It was for this reason, in fact, that, in another context, the committee charged with defining the iconography for the new Euro in 1996 had settled on a series of imagined bridges. In this instance, however, behind the 40 poetic bridges in 29 languages—more specifically below them—lay a rather prosaic but very concrete bridge, the aesthetically nondescript “Pont de l’Europe” that literally links France and Germany, Strasbourg and Kehl, across the Rhine. <sup>3</sup> (Figure 1)

The literary texts created for the occasion thus turned the bridge into a concrete monument to be read anew, the words not quite inscribed in stone – as in the case of Restif de la Bretonne’s 18<sup>th</sup>-century erotic memos which



Figure 1.  
Pont de l’Europe. Andreas Brandolini Office for Design.

he scratched onto the bridges of the Ile Saint Louis<sup>4</sup> – but printed onto coloured Plexiglas, framed behind glass and mounted on aluminum lecterns.<sup>5</sup> The bridge signifies not only a reconciliation of languages and peoples, but also of concrete and print, with the architecture supporting – somewhat shakily, it turns out – the poetry. For, setting aside the poetic panels, the Pont de l’Europe is notorious not only for the ugliness of its original design, but also for the remarkable vibration as traffic drives over it. And although the idea of vibrating poetry may delight the literary imagination, when it is welded to concrete, the effect is not exactly lyrical: the rivets on the frames holding the poems are constantly jumping out and needing to be replaced, literally enacting what Georges Poulet (1980) called “la poésie éclatée” and the metal posts supporting those frames routinely detach from the sidewalk and have to be reinforced with heavy duty glue. To borrow Hugo’s expression, the printed bridge, when compared to the concrete bridge, is indeed “volatile, insaisissable... [Il] se mêle à l’air.” “Ceci remuera cela.”

Most recently, the bridge and its poems were the target of demonstrations against the NATO summit held in Strasbourg in spring 2009. On April 4<sup>th</sup>, hundreds of demonstrators from across France and Europe mobilized on the Pont de l’Europe to march in protest against NATO and the war in Afghanistan, hoping that as the volatile voices of “ceci” they might defeat, or at least defy, the monumental force of “cela.” In the course of the afternoon, there were violent attacks on the bridge and on the poetry alike, both of which were politically overdetermined. For the collusion of concrete and poetry on the Pont de l’Europe spoke, however imperfectly, to a vision of European harmony, strength and solidarity which the anti-NATO demonstrators actively sought to challenge. (Figure 2)



Figure 2.

Pont de l’Europe, damaged panel, May 2009. Photo Alexandre Kirstetter.

The incidents of April 4<sup>th</sup>, even as they exposed its material fragility, reinforced the material significance of poetry in a politically charged public space. Elsewhere in Strasbourg, the conjugation of stone and poem, concrete and printed word, has been firmer and more playful. In 1994, commissioned by the city of Strasbourg, members of the literary group Oulipo—the Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle – combined forces with the architect Jean-Marie Wilmotte to create the columns that would punctuate the path of a new tramway system. The project that emerged, “Troll de tram,” transformed 32 otherwise mundane tram stops into monuments of poetry even as it transformed travelers into readers. The poets’ direct engagement with urban materiality was entirely in keeping with the experimental nature of Oulipo, for the act of writing, like the act of read-



Figure 3.  
Colonne Wilmotte, Station Les Halles. Photo Alexandre Kirstetter.

ing for the Ouvroir, « ne se divise pas et ne s’est jamais limité à la forme traditionnelle du livre. Non seulement tout, pour le groupe, peut être sujet de littérature, mais tout peut être support de littérature : les murs, les colonnes, les trottoirs, les fenêtres, et bien sûr les bancs publics. » (Le Tellier) <sup>6</sup> (Figure 3)

The Oulipien texts that crowned the new tram stops derived, as always, from a set of specific constraints. In the first place, they had to be brief enough to fit comfortably on the columns and remain legible. They were subdivided into four distinct groups: homophonic and toponymic variations, the “story of Anna” and “le langage cuit.” These typically playful Oulipien “genres,” supported by the concrete material of each column, drew on the potentialities contained in the verbal material provided by the Strasbourg Tramway.<sup>7</sup>

For the homophonic variations, the poets exploited the possibilities offered by the 6-syllable sequence, “*le tramway de Strasbourg*.” They produced 32 phonetically related sequences that function as the punchline for 32 brief stories. Here, for instance, is the homophonic variation on the column at the Langstross-Grand rue station: « Le délicat compositeur du *Beau Danube bleu* possédait plusieurs oiseaux marins. Un jour, il laissa la porte de la volière ouverte. Les oiseaux se consultèrent démocratiquement pour savoir s'ils s'échapperaient. Il n'y en eut qu'un petit nombre à voter oui.

Les trois mouettes de Strauss : pour. » (Figure 4)

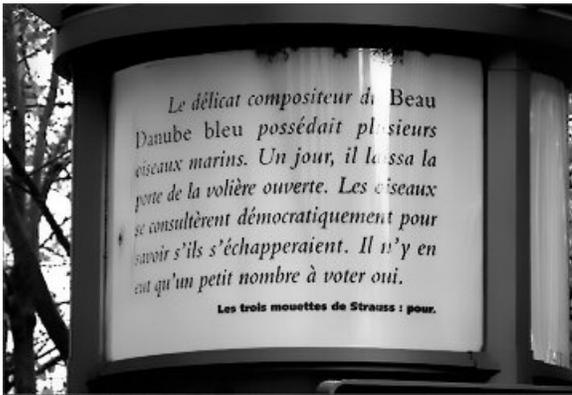


Figure 4.

Homophonic variation: “Les trois mouettes de Strauss: pour” Station Langstross – Grand Rue. Photo Alexandre Kirstetter.

The toponymic notices next to them, erudite in form but utterly fanciful in content, are meant to inform the traveler about the supposed origins of the station’s name. (More than one traveler has been fooled by these encyclopedia-like entries.) Here is the notice for that same tram station: **Langstross (Berthe)**. Artiste de cirque (1907 – 1960). Amie de

Grock, elle se spécialisa dans des numéros spectaculaires: manger intégralement une bicyclette en deux jours, un wagon de tram en cinq. Elle mourut en tentant de dévorer la *Grosse Bertha*. Quatre qualificatifs la désignaient: lente, grosse, grande, drue. (Figure 5)

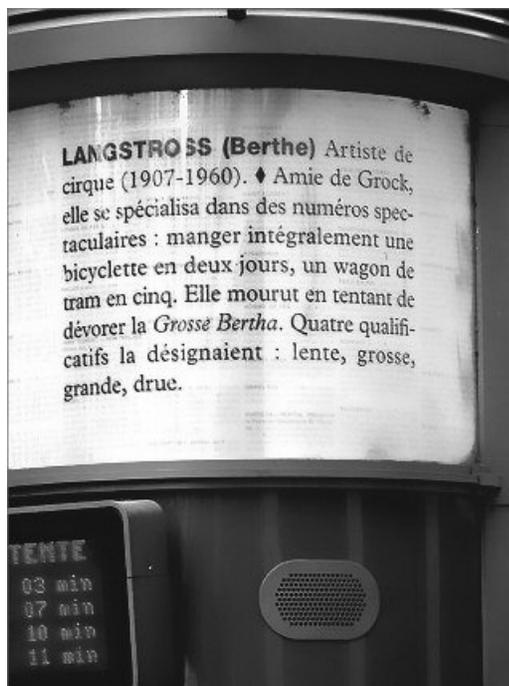


Figure 5.

Toponymic notice. “Langstross – Grand Rue. Photo Alexandre Kirstetter.

Over the course of the 32 stations, the « histoire d’Anna », in turn, tells the story, one chapter at a time, of the beautiful Anna, Léo the policeman and Otto the rat. For each chapter only the letters contained in the name of the station are used. The chapter at Langstross – Grand rue reads as follows: “Anna, en détresse, s’attarde sous la lune et les astres, tangué sous l’anneau de Saturne. Otto, le rongeur, entonne du Strauss et la regarde danser. Elle se dénude, naturelle. Léo le sage se dégèle, tend une rose rouge: « Ô ange... »”

Finally, in “le langage cuit,” variations on proverbs and expressions, the oulipiens substitute the words “tram” and “tramway” for key words in the original sayings that the traveler-reader is invariably enticed to recover.

Here again is the text from Wilmotte column for Langstross-Grand rue. (I have provided the substituted words in parenthesis):

L'exactitude est la politesse des *trams*. (des rois)  
 Un *tramway* n'est jamais perdu. (un bienfait)  
 Qui veut voyager loin ménage son *tramway*. (sa monture)  
 Quand le *tram* n'est pas là, les souris dansent. (le chat)  
 Jamais deux sans *tram*. (trois)  
 Le *tram*, ou c'que t'erras. (les trois mousquetaires)  
 La chair est triste, hélas, et j'ai pris tous les *trams*. (lu tous les livres)

« La chair est triste, hélas, » the urban traveler might well muse. « car j'ai lu tous les trams. » Unlike the precariously fixed poems that are attached to the Pont de l'Europe, the oulipien texts crown their respective concrete columns securely and fill the time—and the space—between tram arrivals with poetry. The printed word conjugated with concrete here occupies both a spatial and a temporal dimension. Nevertheless, while it derives its purpose from, and gives meaning to, the concrete column below, perched above street maps and isolated behind glass, the printed text remains – like the poems on the Pont de l'Europe – an object on display, more like the dot on an “i” than a statement in stone. “Ceci coiffera cela.” By comparison, the poetic capitals that crown the columns of Notre Dame, for instance, seem to emerge organically from the stone.

One of the features Hugo most appreciated in the Gothic cathedral, was the way it successfully integrated and harmonised different kinds of artistic expression. Before Gutenberg, architecture was the sovereign art, the pre-text for all art forms. It provided shelter, purpose and meaning for the people and media that informed it.

“Tous les autres arts obéissaient et se mettaient en discipline sous l'architecture. C'étaient les ouvriers du grand oeuvre. L'architecte, le poète, le maître totalisait en sa personne la sculpture qui lui ciselait ses façades, la peinture qui lui enluminaient ses vitraux, la musique qui mettait sa cloche en branle et soufflait dans ses orgues. Il n'y avait pas jusqu'à la pauvre poésie proprement dite, celle qui s'obstinait à végéter dans les manuscrits, qui ne fût obligée pour être quelque chose de venir s'encadrer dans l'édifice sous la forme d'hymne ou de prose.” (Hugo, 1967: 203)

In the pre-Gutenberg days, people walked around and through “the grand oeuvre” of the cathedral reading and learning from its walls, its sculptures, its paintings, its stained glass, the call of its bells, the refrains of its hymns.

Post-Gutenberg readers of a post-modern age, we have much to share with the polymorphously literate public of Hugo's 14<sup>th</sup> century. Raised as we may have been on the printed word, the information we absorb on



Figure 6.  
Médiathèque André Malraux – Strasbourg – Architectes: Ibos & Vitart.  
Intégral Ruedi Baur Paris.



Fig. 7.  
Médiathèque André Malraux – Strasbourg – Architectes: Ibos & Vitart.  
Photo Alexandre Kirstetter.

a daily basis comes to us increasingly in visual forms that the Parisian populace of *Notre Dame de Paris* could not have imagined but may well have understood. Like them we read and learn from multiple media that far exceed – and threaten – the hegemony of the printed book. *Their* monumental books in stone were supplanted by the printed book; the books *we* now read have lost even the materiality of paper and ink. They have become increasingly virtual, webified in Googledom: in Hugo's words, « volatile [s], insaisissable [s]... [La pensée] se mêle à l'air. »

It is in this context, at a time when books and libraries are dematerializing and becoming accessible to atomized individuals in private space, that the city where Hugo's "ceci" and "cela" first confronted each other continues to interrogate the collaboration between print and stone for the larger community. Just as the sacred cathedral, whose surface imparted knowledge, gave way to the printing press and the library which dispensed knowledge through the books, in Strasbourg, the *bibliothèque* has evolved into a monumental *médiathèque* whose walls, floors *and* books all demand to be read. A monument to both "ceci" and "cela" that has rematerialized the printed word.

Commissioned by the Communauté urbaine de Strasbourg in 2002, the Médiathèque André Malraux, located on a former industrial site on the Bassin d'Austerlitz, opened its doors to the public on September 19, 2008. The architects, Jean Marc Ibos and Myrto Vitart, conceived of the building as a gigantic bookcase, that, when lit up at night, would appear readable.<sup>8</sup> Little did they imagine just how readable their building would be. When the well-known graphic designer, Ruedi Baur, was hired to handle the signage for the médiathèque, he chose not to have any supports for signs but to inscribe texts directly into the architecture. In his words: « L'architecture elle-même se présente comme espace inscrit. » Just as the medieval public learned their catechism and read their (sacred) history on the façade of the medieval Cathedral, the history and lessons of the Médiathèque are literally spelled out on its walls, the reader turning corners just as he would turn a page. The identity of this cultural centre is established through the printed words that merge with the architecture. (Figure 6, 7, 8)

Inside and out, writing punctuates the space, revealing the materials that constitute the building. Meanwhile the architecture exalts the printed word, and specifically literary texts.<sup>9</sup> The Médiathèque includes a centre for the study of illustration, a department of *bandes dessinées*, CD listening areas, television programmes relating to different departments, and 145 internet stations; but it is conventional books that constitute 80 % of its holdings. The entire building is a hymn to the printed word.

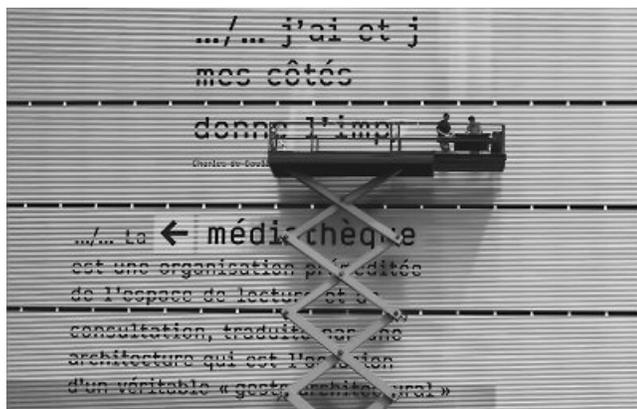


Figure 8.  
Médiathèque André Malraux – Strasbourg – Architectes: Ibos & Vitart.  
Intégral Ruedi Baur Paris.



Figure 9.  
Médiathèque André Malraux – Strasbourg – Architectes: Ibos & Vitart.  
Close-up of text. Photo Alexandre Kirstetter.



Figure 10.  
Médiathèque André Malraux – Strasbourg – Architectes: Ibos & Vitart.  
Floor. Intégral Ruedi Baur Paris.



Figure 11.  
Médiathèque André Malraux – Strasbourg – Architectes: Ibos & Vitart.  
Reading room. Intégral Ruedi Baur Paris.

The marriage of stone and print is most remarkable inside the walls of the Médiathèque. The rough surfaces of the interior have been transformed into concrete pages on which literary quotations are inscribed, with specific words enlarged and highlighted to orient and guide visitors. Just as the building itself, whose title page is printed on the outside, approximates a hefty tome, each visitor who enters the médiathèque becomes a reader. The visitor/reader walks through pages of a book that is simultaneously written in print and stone. (Figure 9, 10, 11)

In keeping with the building's commitment to print literacy, each of the signs that orient the visitor/reader is embedded in literary quotations selected by Thibault Fourrier, a member of the Baur team, in consultation with staff at the médiathèque. Printed words are everywhere, not just between covers on a bookshelf. They flow up from the floor; they climb columns, they cross walls, cover ceilings and even furniture. Some are in foreign languages. And some are by foreign authors, pointing the way to the bathroom. (Figure 12)

It was, in fact, a quotation on a bathroom door that generated the most heated polemic about the building upon its opening in September 2008. Thibault Fourrier and his colleagues had selected a quotation by Louis-Ferdinand Céline from his posthumously published novel, *Rigodon*, to direct gentlemen to the “petit coin” reserved for “Messieurs.”

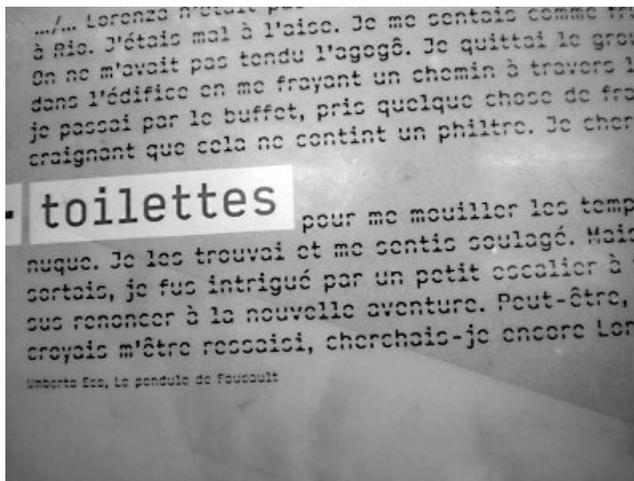


Figure 12.

Médiathèque André Malraux – Strasbourg – Architectes: Ibos & Vitart.  
Quotation from Umberto Eco, *La Pendule de Foucault*. Photo Alexandre Kirstetter

« Je vous laisse en plan et mes comics... Vite, mes oignons, que je vous retrouve!  
Par ici, Mesdames et MESSIEURS... Encore deux mille pages au moins! »

When an eminent Strasbourg sociologist objected to the use of a quotation by Céline because of that author's anti-Semitic views, the mayor of Strasbourg, Roland Ries, had the quotation erased claiming: « *Ce n'est pas le moment de réveiller de vieux démons.* »<sup>10</sup> The gesture provoked widespread and passionate debate about the choice of literary quotations in the Médiathèque<sup>11</sup>. Once again poetry became the pretext for political debate and reflection on the wider use of literature in the public sphere.

Baur, predictably, took the defense of literature “contre les attaques dangereuses dont elle peut faire l'objet.” That is precisely why the project of inscribing quotations directly on the floors and walls of the médiathèque must continue, he insisted. He hoped that the Médiathèque Malraux would continue to accumulate other texts that constitute our cultural treasure, even when those texts are works of people as abject as Louis-Ferdinand Céline.<sup>12</sup> The building was designed, that is, not only to illustrate cultural statements, but to make them. As one journalist had noted, before the opening of the Médiathèque, “la philosophie est celle du béton brut. Mais la littérature vient inscrire son clin d'œil, son désordre.”<sup>13</sup>

How fitting it is then that in the city where “ceci” – the printing press – first confronted “cela” – the stone cathedral—a new kind of *grand oeuvre*, a concrete *architexte*, should come into being to reclaim its sovereignty, supporting and preserving the materiality of the printed word. Responding to Victor Hugo's assertion a century and a half earlier, the Strasbourg Médiathèque proclaims: “Ceci restituera cela. Cela perpétuera ceci.” But as Horace and company so wisely knew, only time will tell.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I am deeply indebted to Alexandre Kirstetter, director of communication and public relations for the museums of the city of Strasbourg, and Christophe Haraux, manager of public art commissions for the city of Strasbourg for their hospitality and generous assistance with my research on public art in Strasbourg.

Shelley evidently wrote this sonnet, first published on January 11, 1818 in *The Examiner* (London), p. 24. in friendly competition with Horace Smith, whose own sonnet of the same name was published Feb. 1, 1818, also in *The Examiner*, p. 73:

In Egypt's sandy silence, all alone,  
Stands a gigantic Leg, which far off throws  
The only shadow that the Desert knows:—  
« I am great OZYMANDIAS, » saith the stone,  
« The King of Kings; this mighty City shows  
« The wonders of my hand. »—The City's gone,—  
Nought but the Leg remaining to disclose  
The site of this forgotten Babylon...

<sup>2</sup> Gutenberg was born in Mainz around 1398. Legal documents indicate that he was living in Strasbourg in 1434 and at least until 1444. It was in Strasbourg in 1440 that Gutenberg perfected and unveiled the secret of printing based on his research, mysteriously entitled *Kunst und Aventure* (art and enterprise).

<sup>3</sup> The project was conceived by Michel Krieger, then municipal and community counselor for the city of Strasbourg.

<sup>4</sup> In 1776, after he moved to Paris from Auxerre where he had worked as a printer, Restif started using a wrought iron tool to engrave the record of his erotic dalliances on the garden walls and parapets of Paris. He commemorated his trysts by inscribing "Memoranda" with the date and name of his lover (s), the start and finish of love affairs, and significant visits. When his son-in-law took it upon himself to erase the inscriptions, Restif decided in 1785 to transcribe them onto paper. See Restif de la Bretonne, *Mes inscriptions, journal intime, 1780-1847*. Paris: Plon, 1889.

<sup>5</sup> Andreas Brandolini, the project's designer, intended the colour-backed poems, when illuminated at night, to form a literary rainbow visible both from the water and the road. See "Respecter la banalité du site, affirmer la présence de l'Europe; Interview de Andreas Brandolini, designer," in Kwiatkowski et al.: 11-12.

<sup>6</sup> Catherine Trautmann, then mayor of Strasbourg and subsequently French Minister of Culture, presided over a wide range of public art projects linked to that city's new transportation system. Among the many art installations associated with the tramway, one notes in the Gare de Strasbourg, the concrete inscription on the floors, staircases, platforms etc. of large printed slogans and commonplaces by the American artist, Barbara Kruger. Aphorisms like: » L'Empathie peut changer le monde », « Savoir, c'est pouvoir », « Voir, c'est croire » are designed to expose viewers to the prepackaged banality of feelings and expression in a postmodern consumer society.

<sup>7</sup> See Strasbourg Tram, le site non-officiel du Tramway de Strasbourg. [http://membres.lycos.fr/dmasson/tramway-strasbourg/f\\_tramway-strasbourg.htm](http://membres.lycos.fr/dmasson/tramway-strasbourg/f_tramway-strasbourg.htm)

<sup>8</sup> Olivier Namias, "Strasbourg: La Médiathèque André-Malraux," » *Archiscopie*, décembre 2008: 2.

<sup>9</sup> The "salle du patrimoine," in particular, a room whose two-story ceiling and gold-bespeckled floor recall a medieval illumination, is home to a major collection of documents relating to the 15th century: the century, that is, when both the cathedral and the printing press were constructed in the heart of Strasbourg.

<sup>10</sup> "Bibliothèque André Malraux: Louis-Ferdinand Céline puni de petit coin" 29/09/08. In *Actualitte.com, les univers du livre*. <http://www.actualitte.com/actualite/4896-Mediatheque-Andre-Malraux-Celine-toilettes.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> The polemic can be traced in the archives of the daily *Dernières Nouvelles d'Alsace*, September-October 2008. The debates were further fueled by the revelation that, while the quotation by Céline had been initially approved, a quotation by Brecht, from "The Resistable Rise of Arturo Ui," was not. The Brecht quotation which had been selected for the enormous mirror spanning the space of a staircase from the ground floor to the 6th floor, was replaced with a Dadaist text by Tristan Tzara. Denis Tricard, *Dernières nouvelles d'Alsace*, 26 octobre 2008.

<sup>12</sup> « Savoir accueillir et défendre les textes qui constituent [un] trésor, y compris lorsque ces textes sont l'oeuvre de personnages aussi abjects que Louis-Ferdinand Céline ». Denis Tricard, *Dernières nouvelles d'Alsace*, 29 octobre 2008.

<sup>13</sup> MSK, "La philosophie est celle du béton brut," » *Dernières nouvelles d'Alsace*, 28 juin 2008.