Between Modernity and Tradition: The Central Library of the Budapest University of Technology (formerly Royal Joseph University) and the Mural of its Reading-room

The first separate library buildings in Hungary

By the mid-19th century with the appearance of the public libraries and the increasing rate of publishing, the library as an issue had transformed, as well. The requirement was to have one or more reading-rooms, some smaller research rooms and several big and possibly extensible storages (magazines) in the new type of library. Separate library buildings had appeared across Europe. The transformation of the libraries challenged the renewal of their decoration, as well as their relationship with the tradition. Before the First World War three separate library buildings were erected in the territory of Hungary (as part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire): two in Budapest, and one in Kolozsvár (today: Cluj-Napoca, Romania).[1]

The construction of the first separate library building in Hungary started in 1873, the year, when Budapest, a European metropolis came into existence upon the unification of three towns, Pest, Buda and Óbuda. The Central Library of the University of Budapest (today: Eötvös Loránd University) was built according to the plans of the architects Antal Szkalnitzky (1836–1878) and Henrik Koch (1837–1889), and its construction was finished in 1875.[2]

1. The Central Library of the University of Budapest. Photograph by György Klösz, c. 1880

2. The reading-room of the Central Library of the University of Budapest. Photograph by György Klösz, c. 1880

1. Lajos Németh (Ed.), *Magyar művészet 1890–1900*. Budapest 1981, p. 70. ■ 2. József Sisa, *Szkalnitzky Antal. Egy építész a kiegyezés korabeli Magyarországon*. Budapest 1994, pp. 130–142; József Sisa (Ed.), *Motherland and Progress. Hungarian Architecture and Design 1800–1900*. Basel 2016, pp. 486–488.

The innovation of architect Szkalnitzky was the roof-light of the great reading-room. (A similar roof-light was used in Hungary a few years earlier by Friedrich August Stüler [1800–1865], former teacher of Szkalnitzky, precisely in the great room of the picture gallery of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Szkalnitzky also took part in the competition for the construction of the palace of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and projected plans with a roof-light for the picture gallery rooms. He was the leader of the construction of the palace, as well.)[3] There had been a few roof-lit reading-rooms in Europe by that time (the most famous was designed by Henri Labrouste [1801–1875] for the Bibliothéque Nationale in Paris), but the models for Szkalnitzky were rather the picture galleries of his time.

Apart from that innovation, the reading-room follows the tradition of Baroque libraries with walls covered with book shelves and an upper circle. In the two-storeyed room, 25 000 volumes can be stored and there are 150 seats. Thus the magazine and the reading-room are not separated from each other, although the building has other reading-rooms and magazines, too.

The decoration of the room has not changed up to this day. The portrait of King Franz Joseph (1830–1916) hangs on the eastern wall, and under the ceiling twenty allegoric female figures of the arts and sciences are coming into sight (frescoes painted by Károly Lotz [1833–1904]). The frieze under the vault remained vacant due to financial reasons. However, four murals were planned to be painted there, which would have depicted four episodes of the Hungarian history.[4]

The next separate library building in Budapest, as well as in Hungary was built almost 30 years later: it was the Central Library of the Royal Joseph University. At the same time, between 1906 and 1909, the Library of the University of Kolozsvár was constructed according to the plans of architects Kálmán Giergl (1863–1954) and Flóris Korb (1860–1930).[5]

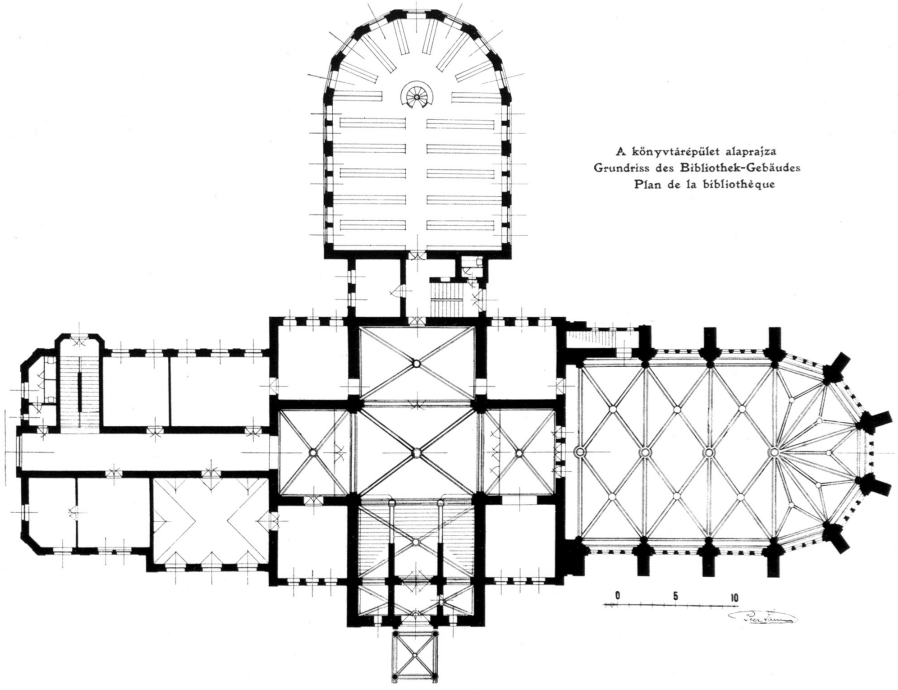
3. The Library of the University of Kolozsvár on a postcard. First half of the 20th century

■ 3. Mária Kemény, *A Magyar Tudományos Akadémia palotája*. Budapest 2015, pp. 84–93, 109–123, 143–161; about the palace of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences: József Sisa (Ed.), *Motherland and Progress. Hungarian Architecture and Design 1800–1900*. Basel 2016, pp. 307–314. ■ 4. Ervin Ybl, *Lotz Károly élete és művészete*. Budapest 1938, pp. 153–157. ■ 5. János Gerle, *Korb Flóris, Giergl Kálmán*. Budapest 2010, pp. 145–149. ■ 6. The predecessor of the Royal Joseph Polytechnic, the Institutum Geometricum was established by Joseph II, King of Hungary and Holy Roman Emperor in 1782. On the history of the institution: Kornél Zelovich, *A M. Kir. József Műegyetem és a hazai technikai felső oktatás története*. Budapest 1922. ■ 7. Alajos Hauszmann: *A Magyar Királyi József Műegyetem új épületei. Die Neubauten des Königlich Ungarischen Josef-Polytechnikums. Les nouveaux batiments de l'Université Joseph Roy. Hongr. des Sciences Techniques*. Budapest, s. a. [1910], pp. 13–17. ■ 8. Ibid., p. 20.

The new campus of the Royal Joseph University and its new library building

The Royal Joseph Polytechnic became a university in 1871.[6] The institution bought a building site in 1898 at Lágymányos (South-Buda) next to the western bank of the Danube, where its new campus was later erected. The construction started in 1903. The first buildings were housing the Institute of Chemistry and Physics (both were planned by Győző Cziegler [1850–1905], 1903–1904 and 1906). Then, the main building (planned by Alajos Hauszmann [1847–1926], 1906–1909) and the library were built. The education started in the new buildings in 1909.[7] At the time of the site's purchase, the university management planned to place the library in the main building, but later, due to fire protection and the fast growth of the holdings, the construction of a separate library building became necessary.[8]

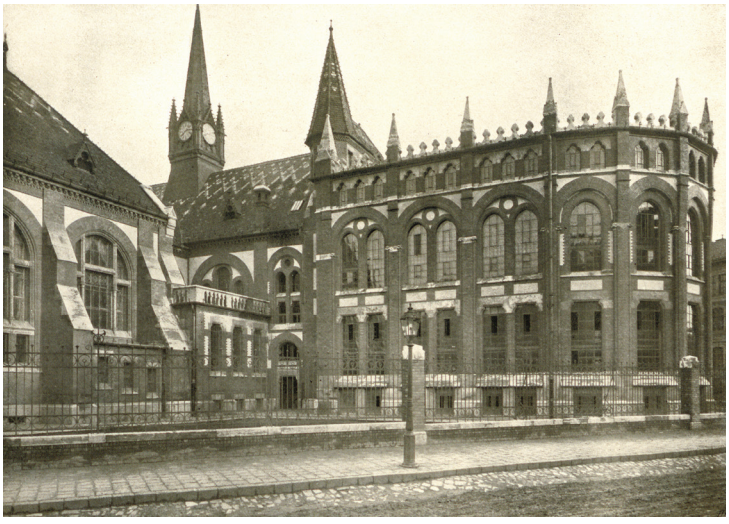
4. The Central Library and the Main Building of the Royal Joseph University. Unknown Photographer, 1909



5. Ground plan of the Central Library of the University of Budapest

The concept of the library's formation–which was elaborated by Gusztáv Rados (1862–1942), director of the library, teacher at the university and by the architect, Samu Pecz (1854–1922)[9]–was entirely different from the case of the library of the University of Budapest. Here, the reading-, and study-rooms are unequivocally separated from the magazine. In the middle of the building, there is a cross-shaped hall with a staircase. From here open the three functionally separated wings of the building: northwards the reading-room, westwards the magazine, between these two the reference library where 30 000 volumes can be stored, southwards the study-rooms (first of all) for teachers and the direction's bureaus. There is a covered passage-way to the main building on the eastern side of the building.[10]

6. Passageway between the Central Library and the Main Building of the Royal Joseph University. Unknown Photographer, 1909



7. Magazine of the Central Library of the Budapest University of Technology. Unknown Photographer, 1909

The six-storey magazine has a capacity for 200 000 items, and can be extended with another six floors. The expansion, however, has never been made. Therefore, a plain roof has still been covering this wing. The floors of the magazine have low headrooms (only 2, 5 metres), every two floor is separated by fire retardant coping. The magazine, as the whole construction, was made of fire-proof materials: reinforced concrete, brick, and glass. The magazine and the reading-room have polygonal endings which was necessary because of the closeness of the street.

The floor space of the reading-room is 400 square metres. The hall is 16, 5 metres wide and 26 metres long. It has 230 seats. The room has a rib vaulted ceiling and large windows.[11]

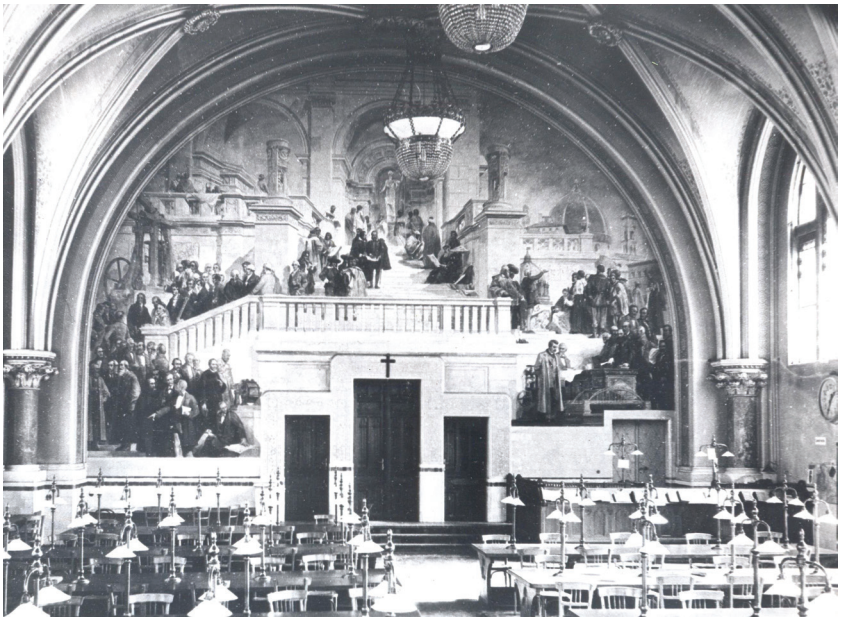
Samu Pecz, the architect was repeatedly criticized because of the style and the church-like, anachronistic appearance of the building. Nevertheless, Neo-Gothic library buildings and reading-rooms were in fashion in the beginning of the 20th century–first of all in the

■ 9. László Móra, *A Műegyetemi Könyvtár története 1848–1948*. Budapest 1971, p. 79. ■ 10. The plans of the building: Budapest Főváros Levéltára (Budapest City Archives), XV.17.d.329 - 5534, 1–11., 26. f.; The building contractor of the library was Lipót Havel (1847–1933). ■ 11. János Végh: Pecz Samu önéletírása. In: István Bardoly–Csaba László (Eds.): Koppány Tibor 70. születésnapjára. Tanulmányok. Budapest 1998, pp. 522–523. ■ 12. The bequest of Pecz's plans is found in the Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára (The National Archives of Hungary), T 6.

USA. The models for American libraries were the university libraries of Great Britain which moved in the churches after the secularization of the universities.

The choice of style can be explained easily if someone investigates the studies, the career, and the affinity of the architect. As an entrant, Pecz participated in the Neo-Gothic reconstruction of the Matthias Church in Budapest (led by Frigyes Schulek [1841–1919]). Later, he worked by the side of Imre Steindl (1839–1902), the standard-bearer of the Neo-Gothic architecture of Hungary. Furthermore, Pecz taught the history of medieval architecture at the Budapest University of Technology, where he became a lecturer in 1887. Most of his buildings evoke the architectural styles of the Middle Ages: the Reformed Church on the Szilágyi Dezső Square, the Great Market Hall, the National Archives and the so called "Gólyavár", the Great Lecture Hall of the University of Budapest.[12]

8. Reading-room of the Central Library of the Budapest University of Technology.
Unknown Photographer, 1909



9. The mural on the southern wall of the reading-room.
Unknown Photographer, 1920–30's

The mural of the library's reading-room

On the southern wall of the reading-room a 12 metres wide and 8 metres high mural (a secco) was painted by Dezső Rakssányi (1879–1950), teacher at the Royal Art Academy and by his pupils between 1910 and 1912. The former rector of the university, Alajos Hauszmann proposed earlier that the great wall of the reading-room could be covered by a mural.[13] In 1910, the rector of the university, Vince Wartha (1844–1914) and the head of the library, Gusztáv Rados as inventors of the program chose the personalities to be portrayed on the painting.[14] 83 portraits of scientists can be identified on the mural–primarly with the help of a print made after the photo of the Viennese atelier Blechinger & Leykauf–but almost 100 figures occur on it. The mural got severely damaged during the Second World War. Later, these damages were not fixed but the whole mural was overpainted.

10. The mural of the reading-room. Print by Blechinger & Leykauf, 1909

The composition of the mural–or rather the central part of it–evokes Raphael's (1483–1520) fresco, The School of Athens (1509–1511) painted in the Stanza della Segnatura in the Vatican Palace. Dezső Rakssányi placed the figures of great men in front of a classical building, as well.

In the centre of the composition, in front of the sculpture of Athena (Parthenos) stands Plato (428/427 or 424/423–348/347 BC) and his student, Aristotle (384–322 BC). Although they are not having a conversation with each other like on the Vatican fresco, the reference between the two paintings is unmistakeable.

In the upper zone appear two mathematician–astronomer–polymath from the Hellenistic period: Archimedes (c. 287–c. 212 BC) and Apollonius of Perga (late 3rd–early 2nd centuries BC). The Roman period, the Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages were excluded from the mural's program. Two figures in Middle Eastern (Arabic) costumes (perhaps the Persian Avicenna [c. 980–1037] and the Andalusian Averroes [1126–1198]) show the old conception that only the Islamic World preserved and later retransmitted the knowledge of the classical Greek science to Europe.

The selection of the personages from the Renaissance and Baroque period does not show any coherence. Johannes Gutenberg (c. 1400–1468), the inventor (or introducer) of printing in Europe; Christopher Columbus (c. 1451–1506), the user of geographic achievements; astronomers (Nicolaus Copernicus [1473–1543], Galileo Galilei [1564–1642], Johannes Kepler [1571–1630]); polymaths (Leonardo da Vinci [1452–1519], Giordano Bruno [1548–1600], Christiaan Huygens [1629–1695], Isaac Newton [1643–1727]); and philosophers (Francis Bacon [1561–1626], René Descartes [1596–1650]) are portrayed in this section of the painting.

Antoine Lavoisier (1743–1797) guides the eye of the spectator to another group: mathematicians, physicists, chemists, engineers and natural philosophers of the 18th and 19th centuries. This group of European (predominantly German, French, British and Scandinavian) scientists occupies the left side of the mural.[15] James Watt (1736–1819) introduces his steam engine to Robert Fulton (1765–1815) and George Stephenson (1781–1848). Below Ernst Werner von Siemens (1816–1892) stands next to his dynamo. On his right side stands Ányos Jedlik (1800–1895), who in fact invented the dynamo a few years earlier than Siemens, but his invention did not raise to notice at that time. Some of the here portrayed scientists were still alive when the painting was made. A few Hungarian persons are depicted on the painting. Farkas Bolyai (1775–1856) was regarded as the father of mathematics in Hungary. Ányos Jedlik had a respect as the father of the physics in the country. Károly Than (1834–1908) reformed the education of chemistry in Hungary, and he was a teacher of the Royal Joseph Polytechnic, the predecessor institution of the university. Hence, he had an important role in the university's collective memory, as well. So had József Stoczek (1819–1890) and Gyula Kőnig (1849–1913) who were former rectors of the university.

■ 13. Alajos Hauszmann, *A Magyar Királyi József Műegyetem új épületei. Die Neubauten des Königlich Ungarischen Josef-Polytechnikums. Les nouveaux batiments de l'Université Joseph Roy. Hongr. des Sciences Techniques*. Budapest, s. a. [1910], p. 29. ■ 14. Kornél Zelovich, *A M. Kir. József Műegyetem és a hazai technikai felső oktatás története*. Budapest 1922, p. 235. ■ 15. On the picture occur: Gaspard Monge (1746–1818), Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), Pierre-Simon Laplace (1749–1827), Leonhard Euler (1707–1783), James Watt, Robert Fulton, George Stephenson, Joseph Marie Jacquard (1752–1834), Edmund Cartwright (1743–1823), Carl Linnaeus, Luigi Galvani (1737–1798), Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790), Alessandro Volta (1745–1827), François Arago (1786–1853), Augustin-Jean Fresnel (1788–1827), Friedrich Wilhelm Bessel (1784–1846), Carl Friedrich Gauss (1777–1855), Georg Friedrich Bernhard Riemann (1826–1866), Farkas Bolyai, Niels Henrik Abel (1802–1829), Hans Christian Ørsted (1777–1851), André-Marie Ampère (1775–1836), Michael Faraday (1791–1867), Giovanni Schiaparelli (1835–1910), Joseph von Fraunhofer (1787–1826), Robert Wilhelm Bunsen (1811–1899), Gustav Robert Kirchhoff (1824–1887), Alexander von Humboldt, Charles Darwin, Emil du Bois-Reymond (1818–1896), Charles Lyell (1797–1875), William Thomson, Baron of Kelvin (1824–1907), Heinrich Hertz (1857–1894), James Clerk Maxwell (1831–1879), József Stoczek, Marcellin Berthelot (1827–1907), Justus von Liebig (1803–1873), Károly Than, Ányos Jedlik, Ernst Werner von Siemens, Nikolaus August Otto (1832–1891), Gyula Kőnig, James Prescott Joule (1818–1889), Hermann Ludwig Ferdinand von Helmholtz (1821–1894), Julius Robert Mayer (1814–1878), Otto Lilienthal (1848–1896).

11. Detail of the mural of the reading-room. Print by Blechinger & Leykauf, 1909

The right side of the mural can be divided into three sections. On the right side of the stairway the great architects of the Italian Quattrocento and Cinquecento and two great patrons of art appear. On the far right, Cosimo de' Medici (1389–1464), the "pater patriae" of the Republic of Florence stands facing Filippo Brunelleschi (1377–1446) and Michelozzo (1396–1472), two architects who he supported. In the background their works emerge: the enormous dome of the Florence Cathedral engineered by Brunelleschi, and the Palazzo Medici (today: Palazzo Medici Riccardi) designed by Michelozzo. Then, the figures of Bramante (1444–1514) and Raphael lead the eye to the 16th century. The model of the cupola of the Saint Peter's Basilica is introduced to Pope Paul III (Alessandro Farnese [1468–1549]) by Michelangelo (1475–1564). The pope appointed the elderly Michelangelo to take over the supervision of the construction of Saint Peter's. On the left, Michele Sanmicheli (1484–1559) and Andrea Palladio (1508–1580), two architects from Northern Italy come into view.

The double portrait of a Hungarian aristocrat supporter, István Széchenyi (1791–1860) and a hydraulic engineer, Pál Vásárhelyi (1795–1846) links the upper section with the lower. They "are discussing" the regulation of the Danube. Sándor Lipthay (1847–1905), István Kruspér (1818–1905) and Imre Steindl were great teachers of the university: an engineer, a physicist, and an architect. Behind them stand Friedrich von Schmidt (1825–1891), the teacher of Steindl, and Kornél Fabriczy (also known as Cornel[ius] von Fabriczy [1839–1910]). Fabriczy was an engineer and art historian, who had lived abroad for decades. He never studied at the Royal Joseph Polytechnic and he gave up his engineer career to become an art historian. He was well known in his time for his monograph on Filippo Brunelleschi (*Filippo Brunelleschi. Sein Leben und seine Werke*) which was first published in 1892 (Stuttgart) and had a great success across Europe. On this mural, he is portrayed by holding a sheet with the drawing of the dome of the Florence Cathedral in his hands. Károly Hieronymi (1836–1911), engineer and former student of the Polytechnic stands on the right. He was the minister of trade when the mural was painted. Therefore, he (and his ministry) might be considered as the financial supporter of the making of the painting. Finally, two structural engineers, Carl Culmann (1821–1881) and his student Ludwig von Tetmajer (1850–1905) can be seen with a model of a railroad bridge.

12. Detail of the mural of the reading-room.
Print by
Blechinger & Leykauf,
1909

The mural visualises the idea of the universality of sciences. In the reading-room of the Central Library of the Budapest University this conception was expressed through allegoric figures, here through famous representatives of natural sciences and technology.

Most of the Hungarian representatives are linked with the university or its predecessor, the Royal Joseph Polytechnic. It was important for the composer of the mural's program to show the great personalities of the institute to the students sitting in the library's reading-room. Indeed, the Institutum Geometricum which was established in 1782 and even more its later successors, the Royal Joseph Polytechnic and the University meant the cradle of Hungarian engineering. The great generation of Hungarian engineers was just born at the turn of the century.

The painting visualises what the management of the university was thinking about the history of sciences and engineering, and tells a lot about the university education of the era. At the beginning of the 20th century the curriculum started with two years of general studies in natural science. That is the reason why figures of Carl Linnaeus (1707–1778), Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859) or Charles Darwin (1809–1882) appear on the painting. After these two years, the students could specialize as engineers, mechanical-engineers, chemists or architects. These four sections of specialization are represented on the mural by famous scientists "coming down" the stairs.

Furthermore, it should be noted that only male scientists appear on the painting. Although women were not entirely excluded from natural science and engineering, at the Royal Joseph Univeristy no women could study at that time. In fact, the first women could matriculate to the university in 1925.

Not only women but also scientists from outside Europe were excluded from the program of the painting. Only Benjamin Franklin and Robert Fulton were born in North-America, but as sons of British and Irish settlers. The painting shows the dominant European canon which characterized the history of sciences–and still does to these days.

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sous la direction de
Frédéric Barbier, István Monok
& Andrea De Pasquale

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En hommage aux Parlements

En avril il peut faire frais
au fond du cloître Saint-Martin.
Dans le palais épiscopal
à Tours on ne sent pas le froid
sauf en se levant le matin.
Tout finit par un abandon
au temps des révolutions.
Mais c'est compter sans les savants
protecteurs du temps et des livres
attentifs aux biens artistiques
comme aux enjeux de la physique.
Sur une grande table oblique
au milieu d'une salle d'armes
chez lui, Alexis Tocqueville
dont le papa était préfet,
bien des lecteurs versent des larmes
en regrettant le temps des livres.
« On aime les bibliothèques »,
me confiait un père jésuite
un jour dans une rue d'Angers
à moins que ce fut Alençon.
Je me souviens des beaux caissons
percés dans de très hauts plafonds
où se nichaient quelques peintures
présentant la mythologie
d'un monde aujourd'hui disparu.

« Fureur de Minerve ! »
hurlait un scientifique en toge
une sorte de Zénon fou
qui s'échinait à protéger
l'essence de tous les savoirs

autrement dit la connaissance
par les gouffres d'Henri Michaux…
Biais du décor ! Biais du poème !
Il est absurde d'évoquer
dans un seul élan poétique
Henri Michaux et Tocqueville
à moins de rechercher l'absurde
cadavre exquis à la Breton
ce qui peut se défendre au fond.
Après tout, les Turcs et les Kurdes
en Anatolie cohabitent
(sûrement pas en Sybarites !)
Donc je défends le droit de faire
vieillir ensemble en rayonnage
de bibliothèques privées
des vers, des encyclopédies,
des catalogues de musée
des monographies, des romans
et naturellement ceci :
tout ce fatras d'octosyllabes
que je dédie aux Parlements
où se discutent tant de lois
que nos vies en sont chamboulées.

Voici que le matin s'achève
au fond du cloître Saint-Martin.

Éric Fournier

Ce poème a été prononcé par Monsieur Éric Fournier, ambassadeur de France en Hongrie, le vendredi 7 avril 2017 dans la Salle Béla Varga du Parlement, à l'occasion de la conférence Construction, décor et iconographie des bibliothèques du XIX^{ème} siècle

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