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## **From the Magico-Mythical to Reality-Congruence: Models and Anti-models in Pierre Bergounioux's *La Mort de Brune* — [Source link](#)**

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**From the Magico-Mythical to Reality-Congruence: Models and Anti-Models in  
Pierre Bergounioux's *La Mort de Brune***

Despite a writing career that has spanned three decades, that has produced over seventy-five volumes (including novels *récits*, *rêveries* and literary criticism<sup>1</sup>) and that has been punctuated by the award of several prizes,<sup>2</sup> until very recently Pierre Bergounioux figured on the French literary scene primarily as a writer's writer. While his novels and shorter texts have generally been reviewed favourably in France's "quality" press and although commanding the respect of contemporaries such as François Bon, Pierre Michon, and Jacques Réda,<sup>3</sup> his work has drawn rather less attention than that of most of the above and much less attention than that of more media-conscious writers such as Michel Houellebecq, Frédéric Beigbeder, Marie Darrieussecq, or Virginie Despentes. The Anglophone press seems to be unaware of his existence and, unlike the work of Bon, Michon, Jean Rouaud, Richard Millet and Pascal Quignard, to date none of his books have been translated into English. Academic critics both within and outside France were also slow to respond to his growing body of work: only a handful of full-length articles appeared before the publication in 2002 of Sylviane Coyault-Dublanchet's comparative study of Michon, Macé and Bergounioux,<sup>4</sup> most of them, like Coyault-Dublanchet's book, focusing on issues relating to filiation and to provinciality.

Given the thematic range and conceptual richness of Bergounioux's fiction and autofiction and the generic and formal issues raised by it, this relative neglect is difficult to fathom. One might cite as probable factors Bergounioux's dense writing style and complex syntax, the fact that his work is rooted to a very large extent in a particular region of France (and one that tends to be seen as a provincial backwater, i.e. the Corrèze), and the compulsive return across both his fiction and autofiction to the same characters and the intricate dynamics of their relationships, were it not the case that at least some of these comments might also be

made about Michon, Millet, Rouaud or Bon.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps, ultimately, it is a combination of these factors and the saturnine tone and apparent bleakness of many of his books that have daunted both general readers and critics. Whatever the reason(s), the general impression has been that Bergounioux is a writer who is admired but not widely read. Fortunately, there have been some fairly decisive signs in recent years that this rather half-hearted engagement with his work is giving way to much more sympathetic and nuanced readings. These include Marie-Thérèse Jacquet's *Fiction Bergounioux* (2006), Laurent Demanze's comparative study *Encres orphelines: Pierre Bergounioux, Gérard Macé, Pierre Michon* (2008) and a special issue of the journal *Littératures* (2009), as well as a number of articles and books chapters which discuss, among others, the following topics: kinship, ancestry and origins; generational conflict and failed communication; linguistic apprenticeship and dialect; knowledge and the drive to understand; the long-term psychological and familial impact of World War I; the attraction of "elsewhere"; temporality and narrative technique; repetition and seriality.

Given this recent increase in critical responsiveness to Bergounioux's work, it is all the more surprising that *La Mort de Brune* (1996), although in many respects one of his most accessible texts, has, to date, received relatively little critical attention. Jacquet and Demanze are both alert to many of the thematic patterns that recur across his œuvre and they propose perceptive readings of individual texts, but neither discusses *La Mort de Brune*, while Coyault-Dublanchet's treatment of the *récit* is restricted to passing comments and to a brief analysis of the references to art and "artists" and of the tension between the aesthetic aspirations of its characters and their awareness of their provinciality.<sup>6</sup> Of the articles that examine *La Mort de Brune*, three have focused primarily on the roles played by paintings and sculpture and/or fictional artists/authorial surrogates within the text, while Françoise Lioure (2004) discusses it as part of a more general comparative overview of the work of Bergounioux and that of Valéry Larbaud.<sup>7</sup>

In his own commentaries on *La Mort de Brune* in his published notebooks, Bergounioux has offered invaluable and more detailed than usual access to his reflections as he composed it, though these reflections do tend to give weight to the accusations of gloominess with which he has sometimes been taxed.<sup>8</sup> It is clear from the *Carnet* entries for 1994–1995 that he envisaged *La Mort de Brune* as a fictionalised account of his own childhood in Brive that would explore, above all, a thematic nexus relating to the cultural stagnation and isolation of post-war Corrèze, the lack of perspective and self-awareness of its inhabitants, and the inevitable disappointment awaiting those who tried to transcend these endemic limitations: “the backwardness that afflicted us, the impossibility of achieving a perspective on our situation, the disappointment to which were destined those who aspired to transcend the generic, provincial condition, its limitations.”<sup>9</sup> Again and again in the course of the notebooks, Bergounioux returns to the town’s and region’s backwardness, while his brief references to the characters he is working into the narrative concentrate on their thwarted aspirations, their vices, the ways in which their restricted opportunities have curbed their freedom to develop and, in some cases, deformed their personalities. Interwoven with these comments are others that testify to Bergounioux’s anxieties about the form of *La Mort de Brune*, though he offers no clear account of how the structural problems encountered are resolved.

The present article has two main aims. First, continuing the intertextual/ intermedial lines of enquiry opened up in Lioure’s article and in my comparative analysis of *La Mort de Brune* and *Kpélié*, it argues that the structure that gradually evolved in the course of writing offers strong evidence of a – unacknowledged and perhaps not fully conscious — debt to two ostensibly quite different sources: the quest narrative and traditional early learning materials, in particular, the *abécédaire* (alphabet book) or *grand imagier* (picture book). It seeks to demonstrate that, in addition to the evident intertextual nod to Larbaud and the explicit

references to a series of real monuments, sculptural fragments and paintings, *La Mort de Brune*'s structure and secondary characterisation draw upon the actantial dynamics of the quest paradigm and the stock "characters" of pre-school and early classroom materials in order to suggest the intertwining of magical and veridical beliefs that characterise the child's interaction with his world and to explore a range of broader issues which are central to Bergounioux's work as a whole, notably the tension between involved and detached modes of being and between personal and group identity. Second, the article will qualify the fairly generalised critical perception of Bergounioux's work as essentially melancholic and even sombre and pessimistic in mood,<sup>10</sup> and will demonstrate that, notwithstanding the overwhelming negativity of Bergounioux's comments on 1950s Brive in the *Carnets de notes* and the numerous comparable narratorial observations that punctuate *La Mort de Brune*, the miserabilism of many of the descriptions of both his native town and his characters is contested within the text by more positive notations that expose well-camouflaged chinks in Brive's parochialism and unexpected pockets of kindness and fortitude among its population and that, by extension, offer both a more sympathetic reading of man's limitations and a more optimistic perspective on human potential.

*La Mort de Brune*'s debt to the quest narrative manifests itself primarily in the structure, which is based broadly upon the initiatory paradigm, in the conventional actantial patterns that characterise many of the protagonist's encounters and in the inclusion of a number of Arthurian echoes and chivalric topoi in the detail of the text. Here, childhood is presented as a series of ordeals, the negotiation of which brings the protagonist into contact with a number of adversaries and helpers, who in some instances appear to the child to have supernatural powers, who impede or assist him as he plots a course through the dangers and enigmas that confront him in almost every corner of the grim provincial town in which he is

condemned to live. The ordeals to which he must submit himself include various sorts of physical and psychological trials: the crossing of the dark and eerie courtyard of the Hôtel Labenche on his way to elementary school, the music school and the local dispensary, all of which are located in this Renaissance complex; the weekly music lessons that bring soul-destroying boredom or the terror of abject humiliation before his female fellow-pupils; the excruciating injections he must endure because of a longstanding medical problem; and, as he grows older, the often terrifying expeditions beyond the immediate environment of his home into the obscure streets of the old town, to the sinister slums of the outer edges and to the local poultry-butcher's slaughter-house and the suburban sheds in which the latter dries the skins of the animals he has killed.

Like the knight-errant, the narrator of *La Mort de Brune* is always on the move and here, as in Arthurian romance, the protagonist's adventures promote "the margins of fictional geography," turning the conventionally peripheral into the main sites of signification.<sup>11</sup> In contrast with most fictional accounts of childhood, home, parents and peers figure not as narrative pivots, but as rather sketchy presences: the house in which the child lives is essentially the place from which he ventures and to which he returns; his father intervenes to provide moral support in one of his adventures, but otherwise loiters rather lugubriously in the background of the story, while his mother is mentioned only in passing on a few occasions (13, 47, 66, 75, 103, 111) and his brother only once (72); except in the postscript to the text, the narrator's friends figure not as individuals, but as points of access to other parts of the city and to other social classes. By contrast, as we shall see later in this article, "characters" who might conventionally be considered as minor or tertiary or, in fact, who might figure as inanimate elements of the decor, loom large in the narrator's peregrinations and in the tests he must undergo. Moreover, here as in Chrétien de Troyes's romances or Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*, the space that the protagonist traverses is the site of multiple

narratives,<sup>12</sup> whether they be the life-stories of the shopkeepers and tradespeople whom he encounters or the inner lives of ostensibly inanimate elements of the décor which his vivid imagination brings to life. As will be shown, it is in large part in these encounters rather than in his interaction with his parents and his peers, that the narrator's search for identity, direction and meaning will be conducted.

Although the description of the topography of Brive is referentially accurate, the city is evoked in terms that associate it with magic and antagonistic supernatural powers. Brive is repeatedly designated as the domicile of “hostile forces” and “contrary spirits” (14) that thwart all human endeavour and aspiration. Danger lurks in every corner; “a ferocity that belonged to times gone by” seems to linger within the very stones of the buildings; “a latent – sometimes explicit – threat” is inextricably “associated with the most trivial activities” (21); and even crossing the Hôtel Labenche courtyard demands of this ill-prepared knight-errant that he avail himself of a makeshift “shield”: “I would take in my ration of darkness and smoke and launch myself, teeth clenched, into the gallery, my big school satchel held on my chest like a shield”(19). For the narrator, Brive is not simply a backward provincial city: as the narrative progresses and sinister detail is added on sinister detail, it takes on the status almost of a mythical blighted site. Indeed, as the object of a spell — a “*sortilège*” (81) or “*maléfice*” (106) — that has petrified it in time, it can be seen as a variation on the Waste Land found in so many of the Grail narratives.<sup>13</sup> In this instance, the momentous “dolorous blow” is not a lance-blow that wounds a king and turns him into a fisher;<sup>14</sup> rather, it is the shot that killed the Napoleonic General and Maréchal d’Empire who gives the *récit* its title — Guillaume Marie Anne Brune — and who was one of the few sons of Brive to have achieved some success in the world beyond the city walls, but whose dazzling career was halted when, during the White Terror, he was ambushed and murdered by Royalists in an Avignon hotel, his body then mutilated and thrown in the Rhône. In the rather idiosyncratic “history” of his



birthplace that the narrator offers, the ignominious death of Brune figures as a highly symbolic moment signalling the end of a period in which Brive had briefly taken its place on a larger national and international stage and had participated — through the agency of Brune — in the making of History. With his murder, time not only seems to have stalled, but to have gone into reverse, and Brive appears to have accepted its lot as a gloomy, parochial city cut off from the world beyond both by the surrounding “realm of heathland and peat bogs, of gorse bushes and broom” (63) and by a defeatism that kills initiative and hope before they are able to take root: “Time — having accelerated its pace, having opened before the child Brune who played in our alleyways the road to Paris and then the highways of the world, Le Helder, Hohenlinden, Montebello — seemingly reverses its course and freezes beneath the cold gaze of the counter-revolutionary” (85).

As the narrator explores this desolate townscape, he — like the traditional quest hero — encounters a range of opponents and helpers, many of whom figure as threshold guardians. Among the “opponents” he encounters one might include: the lugubrious concierge of the Hôtel Labenche who, with his “nasty demeanour” (19) and “suspicious look” (20), guards the courtyard the little boy must cross several times a day; the fearsome-looking *sommelier* who stands sentinel outside the wine-shop in a dark side-street of the old town, who is eventually revealed to be an advertising mannequin, but whose “fixed, mad laugh on his scarlet-daubed face” (49) terrorises the child; the old hag who suddenly appears — outlined like a cardboard cut-out — in the doorway of a slum-house and whom the narrator later sees roasting rats on an open fire; the irascible (and possibly mad) hatter who, almost as soon as the child goes out to play ball, emerges from his shop to berate him and to predict the disasters that the boy is bound to bring upon himself (64); the scoffing damsels who seem to greet him with titters and whispers when he arrives at his music lesson (41).<sup>15</sup> Fortunately, like the typical knight-errant or folk hero, the protagonist of *La Mort de Brune* also has his

helpers – characters, both real and imaginary — who offer protection, who aid him as he traverses his ordeals and who, now and again, open a breach into a more welcoming magical world that contrasts sharply with the drear reality of Brive. Such is the “stone woman” (21)/ “Renaissance lady” (31) (generally referred to as “the lady”) who stands, amongst other broken decorative fragments, in the entrance to the Hôtel Labenche, to whom the little boy attributes benevolent qualities and who acts as a protective threshold guardian. So too are: the inexplicably kind M. Adophe, the local tailor, who bestows on him gifts of sweets and toys (98–99); the elementary school teacher who, with a kind gesture or word, can in an instant assuage the child’s apprehension and dispel the adolescent’s melancholy (126–30), who introduced him as a timid little boy to the wondrous world of puppetry (128–29) and who had bought him a toy boat that he could sail on the sea when he would finally make it to the coast (128);<sup>16</sup> and the “stranger,” the fellow pupil who joins the narrator’s class during his final year at school and who, by his energy and force of personality, serves as the “herald” of a new age that will dawn with the arrival of the 1960s.<sup>17</sup>

The prominence in this list of opponents and helpers of various sorts of trades and professions – the concierge, the tailor, the hatter, the primary-teacher — is telling and points, I would argue, to another textual pattern that is founded on a second set of textual and visual sources which are far removed from the quest narrative model but which, as they are deployed in *La Mort de Brune*, nevertheless, complement rather than compete with it. Thus, each chapter is devoted to the narrator’s encounters with one or more members of a cast of secondary characters (animate or animated by him) that — with several admittedly unorthodox additions and, in some instances, rather scandalous attributes — might almost have stepped out of the pages of a traditional *grand imagier* or *abécédaire*, from a children’s card game, or from a school poster such as those produced by the Editions Rossignol in the 1940s and 1950s and showing a typical village street with typical traditional shops or a single

shop filled with the goods and tools typically associated with a given *commerce*.<sup>18</sup> Thus, to the list of tradespeople given above can be added a number of other shopkeepers and professionals including the “lady doctor” who administers the child’s weekly injections (chapter 1); the *concierge* and the bass player who attends the music-school and who subsequently becomes a professional musician (chapter 2), the music theory teacher (chapter 3), the *sommelier* and the war veterans (chapter 4), the hatter who berates the narrator when he is playing in the street and the poultry-butcher who is the father of one of the narrator’s school-friends and a friend of his own father (chapter 5), the photographer who lives in the house adjacent to that of the narrator’s family, the tailor who showers the puzzled child with sweets, and the soldier, in the form of Marshal Brune who is represented in stone and on canvas in different locations of the town (chapter 6), the grocer with her sad displays of colourless vegetables and salted cod, the music-shop owner who, by virtue of his courtesy and the quality of his wares, adds a touch of distinction to the town’s cohort of shopkeepers (chapter 7), the tax-man who spends much of his time in the local library, and the primary-school teacher who is both a family friend and the narrator’s mentor (chapter 8).<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, as in a somewhat unconventional game of happy families or in paired-associate games, a high proportion of these characters can be grouped generically according to the professional or amateur activities that s/he practices (with the difference that, here, a character may fit into more than one “family”) or they can be matched in ways that reflect their positive or, more usually, negative attributes or fates. And so, most of the secondary characters can be grouped according to the following categories: shopkeepers (the grocer, the hatter, the music shop owner, the photographer, the poultry-butcher), music and musicians (the music-shop owner, the bass player, the music theory teacher, the poultry-butcher/amateur opera singer), teachers and “scholars” (the elementary school teacher, the music theory teacher, the tax-man/amateur historian, Marshal Brune); and, finally, artists (the

photographer/painter, the poultry butcher/amateur opera singer, the bass player, and, even, Niki de Saint-Phalle who makes a brief appearance in a news reel where she is shown “shooting” a painting). Alternatively, many characters can also be seen as partners within a complementary or contrasting pairing: the photographer and the poultry-butcher are both, ultimately, failed artists but, whereas the one kills himself, the other accommodates the limitations of his situation, while pursuing his passion as far as he can as an amateur; the tax-man and the music-shop owner frequent “loose women” but, while the former rather sinister character talks openly about his predilection for prostitutes, the latter falls in love with one young woman and kills her out of jealousy; Brune is a soldier who comes to a bad end, while the elementary school teacher is an impassioned militant who fights for various causes throughout his life.

If Bergounioux’s fictionalised evocation of his childhood has been informed both by the quest narrative and by *grands imagiers des métiers* and related early learning materials,<sup>20</sup> it is, of course, in part because he is evoking a journey of initiation in which the child strives to make sense of his world and of his own place in it. Central to that initiation are the balance, in his approach to the world, between cognitive strategies based on magical thinking and those based on rationality and the processes by which he learns to *read* his environment, an environment that appears to be dauntingly complex and frequently alarming. Thus, the traditional quest structure in which the hero sets out into the unknown in order to find an unidentified valuable object, to make good some kind of lacking or to resolve a problem offers a fitting framework for the exploration of the child’s attempts to discover the “hidden nature of things” (106), to find some kind of essential sense in the world around him, in “what passed for reality” (41), to bridge the yawning gap between “words” and “things” (61); moreover, by its mixture of naturalism and magic, the quest narrative also provides a structure that readily accommodates the evocation of the co-existence within the child’s mind

between various sorts of magical thinking and his sharpening awareness of the principles of physical causality and logical deduction. And, indeed, as we have noted, the narrative of *La Mort de Brune* interweaves meticulous descriptions of 1950s Brive with passages that express a belief in otherworldly forces and in magic causality. Thus, the autonomy and intention that the protagonist attributes to the “lady” and to the *sommelier* are both examples of animism or animation magic which, as child development psychologists have demonstrated, persists well into childhood alongside more rational cognitive operations.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the mysterious ears that the little boy finds in the school playground – and which are, in fact, fallen magnolia petals – are the product of animistic reasoning; although his disclosure to others of the treasure he has found fails to elicit the expected wonder and admiration, the “ears” have – momentarily at least – served an auto-therapeutic function by the promise that they seem to offer that his longing for a confidant and for someone or something who/ which will give him some answers might be fulfilled: “I can still recall unkindly comments made the day I brought home in a cardboard box lined with cotton wool a splendid ear that I fully intended to protect, nourish and keep until it would be fit, eventually, to receive my confidences and, who knows, to reply” (44–45).<sup>22</sup> The “lady” is also implicated in an episode involving mind-over-matter magic.<sup>23</sup> As the narrator makes his way home from his music lesson, he comes upon a fight between two of the “chipies” (“little vixens”) whose mockery during the music-lesson had tortured him; in the course of the fight, the violin of one girl is shattered. To the narrator, this incident is much more than a banal adolescent skirmish; it represents the magical fulfilment of a wish, the infliction of the “vengeful calamity” that he had “called down on them” (41). Though there is no direct reference to the “lady” in this passage, the tussle occurs at the entrance over which she watches, and her implied role in the granting of his wish is unmistakable. Finally, elsewhere in the text, the narrator admits to a belief in non-permanence magic, the belief that objects can arbitrarily turn into other objects or disappear:

“the question [...] of the persistence of objects [...] preoccupied me to the extent that I would sometimes turn around very suddenly in order to check that they were not taking advantage of my inattention to fade away, to disappear” (58).<sup>24</sup>

Interwoven with the elements drawn from the quest narrative, those borrowed from the *grand imagier* format complement the fantasy features of the child’s initiation by their rootedness in the everyday. Even as he resorts to magical interpretations of particular features of the surrounding world and of particular events, the child simultaneously conducts an unflagging investigation of his immediate concrete environment and a searching scrutiny of its inhabitants. Here, the shopkeepers and professionals – who, as in the *grand imagier des métiers*, are introduced sequentially and systematically across the book – play a central role in the narrator’s attempt to “read” his life-world. In the early stages of a child’s development, the *grand imagier* serves a number of pedagogic functions: it seeks not only to help the child to catalogue the people around him, but also to develop step by step his/her vocabulary, to refine his/her ability to classify, to differentiate and to associate, to improve conceptualisation and, ultimately, through the combination and recombination of characters, to promote story-telling and creativity. In *La Mort de Brune* the development of these skills is charted in large part through the narrator’s exploration of his everyday world and, in particular, through his encounters with the secondary characters. As the narrative charts the slow but steady expansion of the boundaries of the protagonist’s world, as the narrator learns first to negotiate the multi-purpose Hôtel Labenche with its many spaces, functions and inscriptions, then moves on to explore – by constantly increasing the radius of his journeys from home – the narrow streets of old Brive, the market-place, the decaying houses at the edge of town and the exotic Spanish quarter, he learns to decipher it: to understand the elaborate and obscure signage of the Hôtel Labenche (each acronym is an enigma in itself), to identify the trades and businesses of nearby streets, to differentiate between different social

classes, to track the traces of history in the walls and buildings of the town and of prehistory in the surrounding landscape. In short, the narrative plots the development of the child's linguistic, social, cultural, topographical and historical literacy skills, while at the same time outlining the process by which people, places and the various stories (eye-witness observations, hearsay, speculation, gossip, historical accounts, painted narrative) associated with them are stored in the child's memory, ready to figure and be reconfigured in future narratives, including the one that we are reading.

However, there is another reason why Bergounioux should have been drawn to these particular literary and visual sources. There is compelling evidence in both his non-fiction<sup>25</sup> and in several novels (notably *La Maison rose*, *La Toussaint*, *L'Orphelin* and *Miette*) that his understanding of the relationship between environment (social, historical and geographical) and personal development is strongly inflected by his reading of Norbert Elias and, in particular, by the latter's thinking on the relationship between involvement and detachment and between "we-identity" and "I-identity." It is to an exploration of the usefulness of these paired concepts in interpreting *La Mort de Brune* and Bergounioux's choice of cultural models in the development of his narrative and characters that the remainder of this article will be devoted.

In drawing upon the structural features and archetypal characters of the quest narrative, Bergounioux brings into play narrative elements that – in Eliasian terms – allow him to chart the shifting balance in the child's thinking and beliefs between magico-mythical involvement in his world and a more analytical detachment that enables him to reflect upon that world as object and to operate as an always *relatively* free, self-conscious subject. In his work on the sociology of knowledge, Elias examined the roles played by involvement and detachment in the development and civilising of humanity, arguing that one can identify a gradual shift from involved, magico-mythical approaches to the world, that entail a high

degree of affective engagement and a low level of reality-congruence, to approaches founded on much greater (though never absolute) detachment from emotional and instinctive drives that are characterised by a higher level of reality-congruence.<sup>26</sup> Thus, involvement manifests itself in reactions that are based on sentiment, instinct and impulse, that may imply recourse to received knowledge or to fantastic, animistic, or religious explanations for phenomena, that are characterised by lack of self-awareness and that tend to be associated with lack of control over one's life-world; by contrast, detachment entails perspectival distance, conceptualisation, self-awareness, the exercise of foresight and detour behaviour, and greater control over phenomena. However, involvement and detachment are not to be seen as mutually exclusive opposites; their relationship is that of poles in a continuum, with all human activity entailing a mixture of involved and detached modes of reacting: "As far as one can see, the very existence of ordered group life depends on the interplay in people's thoughts and actions of impulses, in both directions, those that involve and those that detach keeping each other in check. They may clash and struggle for dominance, or compromise and form alloys of many different shades and kinds – however varied, it is the relation between the two which sets people's courses."<sup>27</sup> While in *Involvement and Detachment* (1987) and *What is Sociology?* (1978), the main thrust of Elias's discussion pertains to the civilising process, to the production of knowledge and to the work of the sociologist, he nevertheless sees this tension between involvement and detachment as an intrinsic feature of man's relationship to his natural and social world and, consequently his schema is equally applicable to the situation of the individual and to that of the fictional character. Indeed, in *Involvement and Detachment* Elias draws quite extensively on Edgar Allan Poe's story "A Descent into the Maelstrom" to illustrate his explanation of this dynamic, while his reading of *Las Meninas* highlights the ambiguity of Velázquez's situation in the painting, both involved



in the social group that he paints and in the act of painting and detached from them, self-aware as a painter and attentive to his status in relation to that group.<sup>28</sup>

In *La Cécité d'Homère*, where he offers his fullest gloss on Elias, Bergounioux summarises in his own terms the former's conception of the involvement-detachment dynamic, highlighting in particular the role played by affectivity and magico-mythical belief in situations where the human being is unable to distinguish clearly between "what is us and what is not us" and underlining the close association that Elias makes between, on the one hand, perceived danger and lack of control over threatening forces and, on the other, emotionally involved and "fantasy-laden" reactions and modes of knowledge:

The old curse, according to Elias, is the confusion between what is us and what is not us, the mind and the world, dreams and reality, the planes and the divisions that the rational point of view, the idea of the real requires require us to distinguish from each other. So long as the immanent order of events remains hidden, we tend instinctively to populate it with entities that are more or less animate and that we try to combat or win over by magical means. Along with the latter's relative ineffectiveness come uncertainties and anxieties, a high level of emotionalism that precludes a realistic assessment of the phenomena in question as well as effective action. Man is then clad, says Elias, in a "shining armour of fantasies," to protect himself against the ills that assail him. He can only correct the image he forms of the world to the extent that he revises the image he has of himself. (13)<sup>29</sup>

However, in Bergounioux as in Elias, there is no suggestion that intellectual development results in the permanent abandonment of involved responses or, indeed, in the complete eradication of magic-mythical beliefs/ "knowledge." As human beings, Bergounioux notes in *La Cécité d'Homère*, we cannot but be involved, and affective – and, indeed, magico-mythical — responses are not simply jettisoned with the development of reason and

detachment.<sup>30</sup> Rather, it is a matter of achieving a balance between involved and detached approaches to reality:

It is impossible for us to increase our understanding and our control over events so long as we fail to overcome our emotional involvement in them.

But since control over them is partial, it is impossible for us to examine them as detached observers, or consequently, to master them. Elias describes this interdependence as ontological. (9)

Thus, his fictional, autofictional and autobiographical writing not only returns again and again to the attraction that is exerted by unreflecting involvement in *les choses* but also testifies to the vestiges of magico-mythical thinking that inform his narrator's/ his own perception of the world.

The pertinence of the twin concepts of involvement and detachment to the case of the protagonist of *La Mort de Brune* is readily demonstrable. Thus, in the first four chapters of the *récit*, the child protagonist intermittently resorts to animistic or quasi-magico-mythical approaches — i.e. to affectively involved responses — in order to accommodate features of his environment that frighten him (the eeriness and darkness of the courtyard and of the rue Basse), that threaten his sensibilities and self-perception (the lowering looks and suspicious mien of the concierge)<sup>31</sup> or that make him socially uncomfortable and painfully aware of class differences (the poverty and senility of the old woman in the lower town). However, as the text advances, the narrator gradually acquires the powers of reasoning that enable him to find other explanations for most of the phenomena he encounters and to understand rather better the deterministic factors that have produced certain sorts of behaviours in the characters he encounters. With the aid of his father, he is able to confront the dreaded *sommelier* who haunts his dreams, and finally realises or acknowledges not only that this figure is an inanimate advertising mannequin, but more generally that “there is nothing that,

given time, one cannot confront” (48). Similarly, where the child saw a terrifying silhouette etched in tar, ready to jump out at him, an apparition who transfixed him and who seemed in that moment to immobilise time, the adult narrator (whose commentary is constantly intervening to interpret the original perceptions of the child) sees an impoverished and demented old woman (53). Most tellingly, as his understanding refines, as he looks to the books in the library for knowledge and explanations<sup>32</sup> and to other — human — threshold guardians (for example, the elementary school teacher) for guidance, he has less and less need of the protection of the “lady” and she gradually fades from his awareness, to the point that he actually forgets all about her.<sup>33</sup> In fact, it is only many years later that he notices that she and the other fragments of architectural decoration have disappeared from the courtyard, though it is worth noting that his reaction, even at this point, betrays a trace of the magical thinking that, according to both Elias and, indeed, to much recent research on the imagination, persists into adult response patterns: “I had stopped thinking about her so that she would think about me and so she had disappeared” (31).<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the insights that detachment affords, although they liberate him from the terrors of his childhood, also bring disenchantment, the obligation to face facts (including unpalatable ones), and loss, including the loss of the hope, engendered by even the most unlikely and unappealing presences, that perfect happiness is ultimately attainable through effort: “What there was in the beginning is no doubt the last thing we can understand. In order to grasp it, we have to lose it, as well as the unadulterated, marvellous trust that we are born with. [...] If it has taken me a long time to recognise for what they were the poverty and the ills, the tragedies that they bore, it is because knowledge, one also realises in an obscure sort of way, is a source of sorrow, a loss, a great wrench. Never again will a stranger come looking for me in the falling light to bestow on me without explanation, without either compensation or reason, the delights of the earth. And even the dreadful figures lurking in the shadow and in the alleyways, the earliest

fears, the old foes, even they were not devoid of kindness. They left me the hope that, with effort and daring, I would get through it, that it is possible to dispel the great prowling shadows, that one is making one's way towards a complete and untroubled happiness" (101).

Central also to Bergounioux's fiction is the question of the social processes of identity formation, or to put it in Eliasian terms, the dynamic between "we-identity" and "I-identity." As we shall see, it is this preoccupation that explains, in large part, his recourse in *La Mort de Brune* to the character types and pair-associate patterns of pre-school and elementary learning materials and his elaboration across the text of a series of encounters between the protagonist and an indicative range of models and anti-models, each of whose lives offers a different variation on the tension between personal aspirations and the environmental factors that curb those aspirations, each of whose stories illustrates the ways in which historical, geographical, social and cultural context determines the opportunities for personal fulfilment.

For Elias and for Bergounioux, identity-formation in the individual is inextricably associated with his/her interactions with the social group to which s/he belongs. The human being becomes an individual in and through his relations with others, and the personal decisions and choices that s/he makes occur within a set of pre-determined constraints. Personal agency operates within circumstances and situations that are not of the individual's creation, but that are the product of social and cultural processes and of particular historical, geographical and economic conjunctures: "By his birth [the individual] is inserted into a functional complex with a quite definite structure: he must conform to it, shape himself in accordance with it and perhaps develop further on its basis. Even his freedom to choose among the pre-existing functions is fairly limited."<sup>35</sup> Even those features of his/her identity that he considers to be most particular, distinguishing and essential to him/her have, according to both Elias and Bergounioux, been formed in part through the individual's

relations and interactions and through his/her unavoidable engagement with the networks of interdependency that underpin society:

[I]deas, convictions, affects, needs and character traits are produced in the individual through intercourse with others, things which make up his most personal “self” and in which is expressed, for this very reason, the network of relations from which he has emerged and into which he passes. And in this way this self, this personal “essence,” is formed in a continuous interweaving of needs, a constant desire and fulfilment, an alternating taking and giving. It is the order of this incessant interweaving without a beginning that determines the nature and form of the individual human being.<sup>36</sup>

In short, Elias and Bergounioux reject the essentialist, *homo clausus* conception of the human being<sup>37</sup> in favour of a “figurational” conception in which identity formation is inextricably bound up with socialisation.

A high proportion of Bergounioux’s fiction might be regarded as offering a sustained reflection on the relationship between the historical, geographical, social and genetic factors that dictate the parameters within which the human being can develop as an (always *relatively*) autonomous individual and within which s/he is able to exercise choice. Viewed as part of a broader fictional project (and all his novels and *récits* of the 1980s and 1990s are interlinked), each new text can be seen to offer a different variation on this central tension, exploring it and its ramifications within and through different combinations of characters and character groups that recur across his work. Thus, the intense and highly intimate *L’Orphelin* evokes the narrator’s struggle – a struggle that spanned his adolescence and continued well into adulthood — to disentangle himself from the intergenerationally transmitted psychological baggage that blocks communication with his morose father and to establish a stable sense of identity, while *Miette* examines the interrelated destinies of a mother and her four children, inhabitants of a remote Limousin hamlet at the beginning of the twentieth-

century, and explores the pressures of kin, community and custom and the impact of history, geography and gender on the opportunities afforded to each member of that family group.<sup>38</sup> In *La Mort de Brune* Bergounioux places his child protagonist within a provincial urban community and confronts him with a succession of characters who all, in one way or another, embody the conflict between personal aspirations and *les choses*, the contingent factors that limit and thwart the pursuit of those aspirations. Moreover, as we shall see, each of these characters might readily be positioned along a continuum between two poles, with, at the negative extreme, characters who figure as anti-models or foils against whom the child seeks to define himself (e.g. the grocer and the tax-man) and, at the other extreme, characters who, by their determination, energy and unwillingness to allow themselves to be overwhelmed by *les choses*, serve as approximative or heuristic models and offer the child hope that he might one day find his place as an individual in the world and a role that he can embrace; and between these poles are found other characters who, although in many respects “failures”, testify to a common desire to reach beyond the confined circumstances in which, by accident of birth, they find themselves.

If, in *La Mort de Brune*, the narrative is punctuated by the appearance/ interventions of one or more members of a cast of secondary characters who, as in a traditional *grand imagier des métiers* or a child’s card game, are all designated by their occupation or who might be rather grim reworkings of stock figures of the “affiche Rossignol,” it is because of the emphasis that such learning materials accord to the development of classification and taxonomical skills and because, like Elias, Bergounioux recognises the inescapability of social conditioning.<sup>39</sup> And, indeed, the fates of many of the secondary characters of *La Mort de Brune* testify to the apparent impossibility of escaping the environment into which they were born. The most extreme examples of the potentially spirit-crushing determinism of environment are to be found in the dreary grocer and the equally drab customers to whom she

serves her unappetising goods and who, the narrator muses as he stands waiting impatiently for the drone of their conversation to cease, must once have been ebullient and rebellious little girls, but who had ultimately turned into the “bonnes femmes” (“matronly types”) that their mothers had been (103–107). The sad and sometimes squalid lives of the photographer, the music-shop owner and the tax-man provide further illustrations of the same theme. In each case, the character has sought to transcend the limits of his life: the photographer through his painting of the Corrèze landscape, the music-shop owner through his transgressive and sublimatory relationship with a prostitute, the tax-inspector through his escapist historical research and his own unashamed frequentation of “women of ill-repute.” In each case, their attempts fail miserably. The photographer opts for suicide when he realises that his “art” is a hundred and fifty years behind the times; the music-shop owner murders the object of his passion; the tax-inspector eventually descends into madness, leaving unfinished the tome on which he had worked for many years (126). By virtue of their exceptional talents, Marshal Brune and the young bass player succeed in escaping provincial confinement, but their forays into the outside world bring them both to sorry ends, trajectories that seem to the narrator to confirm the failure that inevitably awaits any *brivois* who would dare to try to make his way in and his mark on the wider world. Each of these characters appears to the protagonist to confirm the “spell” that seems to hang over the community, “that turns a no into a yes, turns what one wanted into its opposite” (116). Each serves as a cautionary example, an anti-model in contradistinction to which he must strive to define himself if he is to achieve a sense of personal identity. However, as is acknowledged both in the text and in Bergounioux’s notebooks, these characters, for all their dullness, their weaknesses and their tragedies, have served a constructive function in the narrator’s development: in embodying what he did not want to become, they played their part in liberating him from that spell. In short, though to the child they seemed to all intents and

purposes to be *opposants*, in the final analysis and seen from the vantage point and the more sympathetic and analytical perspective of adulthood, it would appear that they were, in fact, quite unknowingly, *adjuvants* who steered him away from the “generic identity” that he could so easily have assumed by default.<sup>40</sup>

Alongside these accounts of failed aspiration are interwoven a number of stories of resistance and perseverance in which the protagonists have been able to achieve some kind of balance between the deterministic forces of historical circumstance and personal autonomy and fulfilment. Thus, M. Adolphe is revealed to be a German Jew who cheated death three times, surviving to build a new life in a foreign country and to bring unexpected kindness into the life of a little boy. As has been shown, he is the positive element in the hatter/tailor pair, the hatter delivering arbitrary, damning judgements of the boy’s character and apocalyptic predictions about his future, the tailor bringing unexpected and apparently unwarranted delights and a touch of enchantment into his life. Moreover, his presence in Brive not only sheds a different, heroic light on the protagonist’s rather dour and brooding father (the latter had obtained false papers for the tailor), but also reveals Brive to be a more welcoming and open place than the narrator has depicted it. The poultry-butcher is a man of two sharply contrasting sides: his “day-job” makes of him a fearsome killer of innocent animals, but he has a passion for opera that compels him to spend his hard-earned savings on trips to the Paris opera house and a voice that transfigures him before the narrator’s very eyes. The school teacher is a rebel who has consistently refused to give in to the supremacy of things (“l’empire des choses”): the son of an agricultural worker who fell at the Marne, he himself was a recidivist escapee of German POW camps, a lifelong campaigner for the downtrodden and – when his former comrades had thrown in their lot with Marxist-Leninism — a passionate Maoist. If there is a rather negative parallel between the teacher and Brune insofar as, in both instances, the revolutions that they espoused led ultimately to unpalatable



violence, it is, nevertheless, the case that the irrepressible energy of the teacher, his willingness to fight the odds, the passion and the colour that he brings into the boy's world, and his small but significant acts of kindness make of him a decisive influence in the narrator's life: "He could not imagine as he pressed on with his pipe dreams, beneath his banner, and in the knowledge that it was futile, he could not know that the shadows and the spectres of reality had retreated in disorder before him [...]" (131).

The pattern of pairing that we have noted extends to some of Brive's other famous sons: the references to the infamous Cardinal Dubois who, according to Saint-Simon, "was the greatest knave and the most utter scoundrel that there was in the world" (30), are counterbalanced by other references to one of Bergounioux's personal heroes, the zoologist Pierre André Latreille, who is often considered to be the father of modern entomology and who was born in Brive in 1762. Like Dubois, he was trained as a Catholic priest but, instead of pursuing a career of political intrigue, he devoted his life to the pursuit of knowledge. Moreover, his life story offers a counter to that of Brune and a parallel with those of M. Adolphe and the teacher. Whereas Brune renounced his scholarly ambitions to pursue a military career that, although meteoric, ended in an ignominious death, Latreille's story shows that even a *brivois* can beat the odds: orphaned and destitute, he was adopted by the celebrated mineralogist Abbé Haüy; arrested during the Revolution and sentenced to transportation, he was released following the discovery of a rare beetle, *Necrobia ruficollis* and the intervention of the naturalist Bory Saint-Vincent and, in 1829, was appointed professor of entomology at the Museum of Natural History (Dupuis, "Pierre André Latreille").<sup>41</sup> Finally, the "stranger" or "maniac" ("énergumène") who bursts into the narrator's world just as the 1960s dawn, who – though a mere *lycéen* – combines political activism with the writing of poetry, announces the dawn of a new era in which, contrary to

the rigid classifications mapped out by the *grand imagier* of childhood, the individual will have the opportunity to “be” several things at once.

In the end and perhaps despite himself and despite the judgements voiced in Bergounioux’s notebooks, the narrator creates an image of his childhood environment that, though predominantly gloomy, is relieved by the child’s discovery of hidden qualities and unsung acts of generosity and hospitality. The welcome extended to M. Adolphe, the German Jewish tailor, is not an isolated instance: the town also has a Spanish quarter which is populated with exiles who were driven out of Spain by Franco and Fascism. Despite their poverty and “atrabilious” Castilian pride, these people have introduced a colourfulness that contrasts with the dominant drabness of the rest of the town; they have brought unfamiliar sounds and smells; above all, they have turned the quarter into a positive variation on the slums of the rue Basse and have demonstrated that poverty, if counterbalanced by closeness of community and a shared purpose (in this instance, the struggle against fascist oppression), does not automatically lead to the marginalisation and loneliness that was the fate of the rat-burning old hag. Moreover, even that mad old woman, who appears to have been abandoned amidst the dereliction of the city’s slums, has an exotic counterpart in another part of town, which is characterised by various features that give the area an exotic cachet in the boy’s eyes. These features include the banana trees that an adventurous gardener has planted in front of the courthouse, the ornamental gazelle in the garden of his French teacher, the orange trees in boxes cultivated by a friend’s parents and – the old woman’s “pair” or counterpart — a “dame d’un certain âge” whose son had gone to Guyana to find his fortune and had brought back a shrunken head. To the adult reader, the shrunken head may be as gruesome and as distasteful as the incinerated rats, but for the child it belongs to a world “beyond” that has fired his imagination and that has stimulated his creativity: “an elderly lady whose son had set off to find his fortune in Guyana had in her house shrunken heads with sewn-up mouths

which I drew in my music theory book, along with blowpipes, quivers full of poisoned arrows, a club made of hornbeam, morphos whose wings were an incredible electric blue, Cayenne stubfoot harlequins with huge feet, gold-armoured beetles, the colour of fire” (95). Lastly, in a lyrical coda to chapter VII, the narrator acknowledges that, in summertime, the drabest shops of Brive and the most disagreeable and lacklustre shopkeepers succeeded – when they emerged from their “cubby holes,” opened their doors and set up their displays — to bring into the street the myriad smells of their wares, smells which, to the narrator, were sensory metonyms for life itself: “Every shop had put on display outside its door the impalpable, imponderable essence of life, the smell of leather and of bread, of coal and of metals, of printer’s ink and of wine, the modern smell of plastic which was appearing everywhere and — sweeter, more wonderful, more boundless than any other — the smell of creation given off by the crates overflowing with summer fruits” (114–15).

In the unnumbered final section of *La Mort de Brune*, the narrator provides a postscript, which does not, as one might expect, bridge the interval between the child and the adult he became. In that sense, the text remains open-ended. However, this postscript does offer a positive, provisional conclusion. The substance of the section is, superficially at least, banal — the provincial youth takes a ride in a friend’s car, and is initiated to the 1960s discotheque – but his reaction is intense and, as a little later, he and his friend hurtle over the hills, he experiences an elation that transforms both him *and* the world around him: “As if already the backdrop of shadows and suffering, the past, the smoke were not simply abolished” but were forgotten and had given way to “new sounds, the wind of speed” (136). On one level, this euphoria might simply be seen as a spontaneous response to the arrival in Brive of the 1960s with their bright colours, sharp modern lines, neon lights, and youth culture. On another level, however, it might be seen as an earned reward, for this rather unlikely knight-errant has played his own part in the transformation of Brive from waste land

to a place that, though not exactly a *locus amoenus*, nevertheless has its brighter and more hospitable corners where exotic plants and small boys can grow and even, if they are hardy enough, thrive. In short, the protagonist has learned to see Brive through different eyes and has in his own way helped to lift a blighting spell.

In *La Mort de Brune*, Bergounioux turns away temporarily from the exploration of the emotional dynamics and psychological intricacies of family life that dominates so much of his other fiction and refocuses his narrative lens on the relationships between the developing child and the townscape and broader community that lie outside the family home. Like his other fiction and autofiction, this text is rooted in reality: the physical environment that he evokes is referentially accurate and, in many instances, still verifiable today; the monuments and artworks that figure so prominently are part of Brive's cultural history and, where they have not survived, are all well-documented; the narrator is attentive both to the sights, sounds, textures and smells of the child's experience and to historical, topographical, and geological fact, and the narration tends to alternate between quasi-phenomenological evocations of the child's perceptions and passages that locate his story within a broader description of context. Yet, despite the referential accuracy of much of the detail, *La Mort de Brune* is also a highly stylised work that draws upon the archetypal structures and the character types of the quest narrative and of early learning materials in order to explore complex issues relating to involvement and detachment, determinism and freedom, social identity and personal sovereignty. In *La Mort de Brune*, Bergounioux examines the experience of socialisation and individuation and tracks the progress of his child protagonist as he ventures beyond the safety of home, learning slowly and often painfully to revise the magico-mythical explanations of early childhood and to reduce his "involvement" in favour of reason and more detached approaches to his world, struggling to deal with *les choses*, and

striving to achieve some kind of balance between the influence of community and the demands of the developing self. The process by which he attains that distance and achieves that balance is mapped through the changes in the opponents and helpers whom he encounters along the way: from the inanimate figures of the *sommelier* and the “Renaissance lady” in the first chapters to the “scholars” and radicals of the final chapters and epilogue, via an ostensibly rather motley, but in fact carefully selected range of the town’s *commerçants* in the intervening chapters, each of whom figures as model, as anti-model or as both model and anti-model, each of whose stories by its compromises points to what-might-have-beens, to that “arsenal of un-lived things” to which Elias, after Rilke, refers in *The Society of Individuals* (127-28). The reader does not learn what becomes of the child in adult life, but it is clear that, through the ordeals that he has endured and his encounters with a range of diverse adversaries and helpers, models and anti-models, he has undergone an initiation that has equipped him with the distance and understanding that he will need not only to know what he does *not* want to become, but also to avoid becoming it and, modest although that achievement may seem, it is the founding act of choice that opens the way to the realisation of a degree of personal autonomy and fulfilment: “We can refuse to allow things to take possession of us, impose their mark on our inclinations and our days” (102).

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<sup>1</sup> His publications also include a numerous mixed-genre works and collaborations with artists and photographers.

<sup>2</sup> Bergounioux has been awarded the following: Prix Alain Fournier et Prix François Mauriac de la Région Aquitaine (1985); Prix France Culture (1996); Prix Charles Brisset (2001); Grand prix littéraire de la Société des gens de lettres (2002); Prix Virgile (2002); Prix Roger Caillois (2009).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Bon, "Pierre Bergounioux, Descartes, une certaine paresse," "Bergounioux, le puzzle qui ne se rejoint pas," "Faulkner William par Bergounioux Pierre," "Le taiseux," *Tous les mots sont adultes* (38–30, 181, 184–85); Pierre Michon, "Smith"; Jacques Réda, "Re-saisissement," "Autoportrait".

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<sup>4</sup> *La Province en héritage: Pierre Michon, Pierre Bergounioux, Richard Millet*.

<sup>5</sup> It is also worth noting that Michon, Millet and Bergounioux have also all acknowledged their debt to William Faulkner.

<sup>6</sup> Jacquet's *Fiction Bergounioux* provides an excellent introduction to Bergounioux's work, identifies a wide range of recurrent thematic patterns and motifs and offers perceptive readings of individual texts, but its chosen corpus is explicitly limited to the novels and *récits* produced between 1984 and 1995 and, consequently, does not include *La Mort de Brune*. In his comparative study, Demanze has selected those texts that centre on family dynamics, *filiation* and on the narrator's relationship with the natural landscape.

<sup>7</sup> See Bouslama (2009), Barbarant (2009), Duffy (2008), Lioure (2004).

<sup>8</sup> With the publication in 2006, 2007 and 2012 of three volumes of Pierre Bergounioux's notebooks (950, 1260 and 1280 pages respectively), covering in total thirty-two years, rare and unusually immediate and detailed insights have been offered into the life and working methods of a living author.

<sup>9</sup> *Carnets 1991–2000*, 538. All translations of extracts from Bergounioux are my own.

<sup>10</sup> See Piégay-Gros (2002); Besser (1999); Altes and van Montfrans (2002); Demanze (2008); Larroux (2009).

<sup>11</sup> Compare: "In fact, the relationship between the peripheral and the central remains a defining characteristic of the romance, if not the defining characteristic of the genre. The process of *aventure*, which structures this movement between the center and the margins, provides a background for experiences to occur away from the court [...] Through the travels of the 'chosen' hero, the margins of fictional geography 'become the central loci of signification' in the romance, creating tension between the conventional center (namely the Arthurian court) and the geographically peripheral 'centers of attention'" (Sterling-Hellenbrand, 2001: 42).

<sup>12</sup> See Pearsall (2003: 83).

<sup>13</sup> See *Le Haut Livre du Graal: Perlesvaus*, 53, 56, 136, 283, 337; *La Mort le roi Artu*, 232; Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Roman de Perceval ou le Conte du Graal*, ll. 438–449, 1709–1773, 4675–4683, 6168–6171; *La Suite du Roman de Merlin*, §209, §210, l. 8, §401, l. 14; *Première continuation de Perceval*, ll. 13508, 13358–72, 13558; *La Queste del Saint Graal*, p. 204, 21; *L'Estoire del Saint Graal*, vol. 2, ll. 566; *Sone von Nausay*, ll. 4841–56. See Kennedy (1987) and Bloch (1980) for fuller discussion of the Waste Land topos in the Arthurian quest narratives.

<sup>14</sup> See *La Suite du Roman de Merlin*, §179; *Première continuation de Perceval*, ll. 13508, 13358–72, 13558; *Sone von Nausay*, ll. 4777–853; Malory, *La Morte D'Arthur*, Book 2, Chapters VIII, XI, XV, XIX. See also Vinaver (1971: 56–67, 59, 108); Kennedy (1987). Note that Laurichesse (2009: 32) draws a passing comparison between the evocation of the Corrèze in *La Toussaint* and the Waste Land of the quest narratives.

<sup>15</sup> See Lyons's comments (1986: 141) on the scoffing female characters of Arthurian Romance. Note also the "magical" transformation from "fillette" to "grandes perches" that the music-pupils of *La Mort de Brune* appear to the narrator to have undergone: "I was on my way back once again to the attic and I thought I had got the wrong door, then, a second later, the wrong era, when I discovered, sitting on the bench, instead of the little girls from June, half a dozen beanpoles who, having shot me a disdainful glance, resumed their sniggering and whispering" (34–35).

<sup>16</sup> That is, he gives him access to an imaginary/ magical world.

<sup>17</sup> Note, too, that the "inconnu" keeps company with "an elderly eccentric who spent his life in Paris and then withdrawn, with nothing but his archives, to a disused shop where he survives as well as he can compiling, by himself, at eighty years of age the weekly bulletin in

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which he calls for Freedom, Justice, Revolution” (137-138). In the few lines devoted to these two characters, Bergounioux sketches out the quest on which the “inconnu” has embarked and identifies *his* principal helper. The “elderly eccentric” can of course be seen as a variation on the hermits who figured so prominently in Arthurian Romance. See Kennedy (1974 and 1981) on the hermit's roles in Arthurian romance.

<sup>18</sup> The Editions Rossignol, founded in 1946 by André Rossignol produced maps and educational posters from primary schools. Among the series was “Les Commerces.” See, for example, the images of the grocer, the poultry-butcher and the tailor (<http://collectionsrossignol.com>). See also Rossignol and Cordebœuf, (2007); Rossignol (2009); Cavanna (2004).

<sup>19</sup> Note, too, the passage describing the visits of other local citizens to the family home: “I’d go down to open the door and would bring in a bunch of anglers, music-lovers or veterans. We’d invite them to sit down and I would finish my dessert sitting between a lispig police-inspector and a massive dental technician [...] or else between a garage mechanic who was [...] no bigger than I was and my French literature teacher [...] or the fire-captain or the shoe-shop owner or the funny, vehement, generous, extremist elementary school teacher” (71-72). See also the description of Jean-Jacques Scherrer's painting of the assassination of Brune in which the key members of the mob that attacks him are identified by profession (cloth-maker, porter, renderer, 83–85) and the references to the various professional, union and veteran bodies that have premises in the Hôtel Labenche (11, 22, 43).

<sup>20</sup> That is, by paradigms which are complementary by virtue of the fact that, while they may contain both naturalistic and fantasy elements, the former tend to be associated more strongly with myth and magic and the latter are generally more obviously rooted in the real. English language equivalents would be books of the “When I Grow Up”/ “Jobs People Do” format.

<sup>21</sup> See Eugene Subbotsky (2010); Laurendeau and Pinard (1962).

<sup>22</sup> The ‘lady’ and, indeed, the ‘ears’ are both variants of the imaginary companion. As Taylor (1999, 62-85) has shown, the imaginary companion serves a wide range of functions in the child’s life including helping him/her to overcome fear (in this case of darkness), to deal with traumatic experiences (here, the painful clinic visits) and, by demonstrating a competence that the child does not have, to bring about a result that is beyond the latter (here, to get the better of the mocking girls).

<sup>23</sup> Mind-over-matter magic is defined by Subbotsky as “the direct effect of consciousness over matter, such as affecting or creating physical objects through the effort of will” (2010: 5).

<sup>24</sup> See Subbotsky (2010: 5).

<sup>25</sup> *Un peu de bleu dans le ciel* (15); *La Cécité d’Homère* (9–10); *L’Héritage. Entretiens avec Gabriel Bergounioux* (75, 82, 127); *Bréviaire de littérature à l’usage des vivants* (35); *Carnet de notes, 1980–1990* (160); *Carnet de notes, 1980–1990* (120, 299, 367).

<sup>26</sup> Elias (1987: xxiv); Elias (2001: 78–82); See also Mennell (1992: 159–80); Heinrich (1997: 28–31).

<sup>27</sup> Elias (1987:4–5).

<sup>28</sup> Elias (1987: 45, lxii–lxvii). Note also Elias’s use of a passage from Hemingway’s *Death in the Afternoon* as epigraph to *Involvement and Detachment* (3) and the citation in *The Society of Individuals* of the narrators of Sartre’s *La Nausée*, Camus’s *L’Etranger* and Jean-Philippe Toussaint’s *La Salle de bain* as instances of the ‘we-less I’ (199–200). See too Kuzmics (2002).

<sup>29</sup> See Norbert Elias, *What is Sociology?* (1978: 22, 27). See also Mennell and Goudsblom, “Introduction” 29-30; Krieken, 142-44).

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<sup>30</sup> Critics have rightly drawn attention to the pivotal role played in Bergounioux's intellectual development of his discovery in his teens of Descartes's *Méditations*. However, if Descartes's detachment of the mind from senses suggested to him the possibility of surmounting *les choses*, of achieving the distance from and perspective on contingent circumstances that permit conceptualisation and understanding of the world and of one's relationship to it, Bergounioux's thinking is, nevertheless, not idealist or anti-materialist. His conception of the relationship between man and his world is much closer to that of Elias and the latter's stress on the dynamic interplay between involved and detached modes of being.

<sup>31</sup> Compare the unexplained hostility of the latter to whom the narrator attributes mind-reading powers (64–65).

<sup>32</sup> However, it should be noted that the books he reads in the library are not just a source of factual information but also a trigger to his imagination.

<sup>33</sup> As Taylor (1999, 120) points out, imaginary companions tend to disappear when the child no longer needs them.

<sup>34</sup> See Subbotsky (2010); Harris (2000); Woolley (1997).

<sup>35</sup> Elias (2001: 14).

<sup>36</sup> Elias (2001: 33).

<sup>37</sup> Note again the difference between Bergounioux and Descartes, notwithstanding the impact that the *Méditations* had on the former's development.

<sup>38</sup> See Duffy (2007).

<sup>39</sup> The traditional ABC book or *grand imagier*, by virtue of the fact that it aims to help the child to acquire a code and to develop classification skills is based on normative principles, assumes a social/ cultural consensus and can, therefore, be seen as a potentially powerful tool of social conditioning. As educationalists and gender studies scholars have demonstrated, the presentation of gendered occupational stereotypes implicitly delimit expectations and choice. More generally, the traditional *grand imagier des métiers* might be seen as an instance of very early anticipatory socialisation. In *La Mort de Brune*, the format has been reworked to suggest the push-pull dynamic of socialisation and individuation: while the occupations presented in each chapter offer an indicative sample of the roles open to the *brivois*, Bergounioux's detailed portraits of the individuals concerned allow him to explore the ways in which these characters have each, quite inadvertently, also contributed to the protagonist's individuation and his development of a sense of a relative personal autonomy.

<sup>40</sup> *Carnet de notes 1991–2000* (566). Compare: “The images that we leave along the way, that stand guard in the corridor of forgotten things, amount to very little, but not exactly nothing. If a part of ourselves lingers in bygone times, it is because it hinged on those times that there were other times, a way out, a future that negated the unhappiness, the past, the absence of which the present consisted” (128). See also: “[This account] denounces what it pronounces, in defiance of the conditional causality that made those of whom I speak what they became. They could not be other than they were. That is how it was. But the annoyance, the fear, the corrosive weariness, the animosity that I developed in consorting with them was something else altogether [...]” (*Carnet de notes 1991–2000* 530).

<sup>41</sup> The "prince of entomology" Latreille remains an intellectual point of reference for the narrator who, as an adult, visits for the first time the library of the local archaeological society in order to consult Latreille and Dejean's *Histoire naturelle et iconographique des Insectes coléoptères d'Europe* (29–30). As he leaves the library he speculates that Latreille had perhaps deposited this copy in the collection for the 'edification' of the locals: i.e. he had maintained a presence among the community and had offered a means of access to knowledge.