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A Study of the Novels of Elisa Brune

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Abstract

This thesis studies the novels of contemporary Belgian writer and journalist Elisa Brune (b. 1966) and the ways in which they provide the readership with a partial yet effective representation of some institutions and issues found in contemporary Western societies. We first trace the developments of the Belgian historical and literary scene since the country came into existence in 1830 in order to establish the context in which Elisa Brune currently writes, as well as her potential influences and sources of inspiration. Our analysis then turns its attention to the various conventional and more innovative genres Brune has tackled so far and how each is in its own way connected to an aspect of science, history and/or socio-cultural reality. We finally investigate a series of themes present in five of Brune's novels written between 2000 and 2005, with a view to establishing how Brune's almost scientific approach to writing, in its objective and descriptive way, aims to remain close to a certain type of realism and trigger reader response. The themes examined in detail in our analysis of Brune's narratives are the representations of the institution of family (types of families, relationships and problems), education and how women gradually gained access to it and to work, and various forms of relationships (consensual or not) between men and women. Through these themes, we argue that Brune depicts several issues, behaviours and tendencies she has observed in societies and which can be problematic for individuals. Our study draws on sociological, psychological and feminist standpoint theories to establish how Brune's various representations can be deemed effective and may have an impact on her readership.

List of most frequently used abbreviations

BC – *Blanche cassé*

LT – *La Tournante*

PRC – *Petite révision du ciel*

LJC – *Les Jupiters chauds*

RI – *Relations d'incertitude*

LTE – *La Tentation d'Edouard*

HR – *Un Homme est une rose*

Introduction

Belgian writer Elisa Brune published her first text, *Fissures*, in 1996 but despite the fact that she has since become a successful author, very little criticism has so far been undertaken on her work.¹ She is mentioned in a small number of academic articles but she has never been their main focus and there is no monograph-length study on her.² Much of what can be gleaned about Elisa Brune thus comes from book reviews, which are primarily concerned with the plot and quality of her novels and less in-depth analysis of theme or with the reasons which motivate Brune to write them, and from interviews with her, mainly in Belgian newspapers such as *La Libre Belgique*, *Le Soir*, *Le Matin* and *Le Vif* or in *Le Carnet et les Instants*.³ This thesis thus seeks to fill this gap by examining the novels of this contemporary Belgian writer, but will provide no detailed discussion of her non-fiction works.

The novel uses what happens in society and, according to Nathalie Heinich, ‘en fourni[t] une élaboration imaginaire’,⁴ and it can therefore be a good medium not only for representing but also for studying society. This study proposes to examine Elisa Brune’s novels to highlight how they can be analysed as sociological and historical documents and/or journalistic reports, through their representation of specific people, socio-cultural aspects and issues found in contemporary Belgian and French society and by extension other Western societies. It explores, through the study of different themes, how Elisa Brune portrays various relationships and institutions of society that individuals have to deal with throughout their lives, and how she engages with a range of contemporary debates and issues.

¹ Elisa Brune, *Fissures* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1996).

² *La Tournante* (Paris: J’ai Lu, 2003 [2001]) has for instance been quoted as an example in more general studies dealing with rape in women’s writing, such as in Kathryn Robson, ‘“An Encounter with Death?” Life after Rape in Contemporary French Women’s Writing’, in Adalgisa Giorgio and Julia Waters (eds.), *Women’s Writing in Western Europe: Gender, Generation and Legacy* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), pp. 431-44 (p. 432).

³ See the bibliography for more details of the articles published on Elisa Brune and her work. *Le Carnet et les Instants* is a bimonthly magazine published by the department of the *Promotion des Lettres* of the *Communauté française de Belgique*. It reports on the latest activities and publications of Belgian Francophone writers as well as recent literary events. It also has a section dedicated to literary reviews. For more details see <<http://www.promotiondeslettres.cfwb.be/index.php?id=1588>> [accessed 18 October 2010]. Book reviews or interviews with Elisa Brune feature in issues 94, 111, 115, 119, 125, 130, 134, 136, 139, 143 and 155 of the magazine.

⁴ Nathalie Heinich, *Etats de Femmes: L’identité féminine dans la fiction occidentale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), p. 303.

The interpretation of literature as a ‘reflection’ of socio-cultural reality has of course been criticised in some quarters. Some, such as Michel Raimond, argue that analysing a writer’s work in such a light is ridiculous, stating for instance that there is ‘rien de plus naïf que la conception d’un romancier enregistreur et photographe [...] Aucun écrivain n’a jamais copié la réalité’ and casting doubt on the ability of the novelist to properly ‘mirror’ life in a work of fiction.⁵ Similarly, Edmund Gosse has commented on the limits of realism in fiction, due, in his view, to ‘the inherent disproportion which exists between the small flat surface of a book and the vast arch of life it undertakes to mirror’.⁶ Elisa Brune’s work however, abides by one of the rules of the realist novel, which is that ‘le récit se veut conforme à la réalité socioculturelle du lecteur. Il représente des objets, des personnes et des enchainements stéréotypés et attendus par l’énonciataire [...] il multiplie les procédés créateurs d’effet de réel’⁷ and it is this connection to the realist novel that leads us to our interpretation of Brune’s work. In addition, other researchers, such as anthropologists François Flahaut, have adopted a very different position from Raimond and Gosse and, confirming our theoretical standpoint, are of the opinion that:

Un récit de fiction peut être tout à fait vraisemblable et il arrive – Hume l’avait déjà souligné – qu’un même récit soit lu par les uns comme un roman et par les autres comme un témoignage ou un document véridique. La différence entre fiction et réalité (plus précisément entre le récit de fiction et le récit qui rend compte d’une réalité) ne tient donc pas à la nature même du récit mais à la posture mentale adoptée par le lecteur.⁸

Flahaut thus emphasises that the reader remains the most significant element in determining the fictional or documentary nature of a narrative and the importance of individual reader response. This is this posture that we have chosen to follow throughout our analysis of Brune’s novels. Furthermore, and although this is explicitly refuted by Raimond, Brune herself sees her writing as a snapshot of what she observes in society, and believes this to be an acceptable interpretation of her work:

⁵ Michel Raimond, *Le Roman* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1989), pp. 8-9.

⁶ Edmund Gosse, ‘The Limits of Realism in Fiction’, in George J. Becker, *Documents of Modern Literary Realism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 390.

⁷ As explained in ‘Le Cours autodidactique de Français écrit’ from the Université de Montréal <<http://www.serveur.cafe.edu/genres/n-romrea.html>> [accessed 15 October 2010].

⁸ François Flahaut, ‘Récits de fiction et représentations partagées’, *L’Homme*, 175-176 (2005), 37-56 (p. 37).

J'accepte tout à fait cette vision. [...] la métaphore de la photo pourrait aussi bien être celle de la peinture parce que dans les deux cas il y a le réel qui sert de base et il y a le regard de l'artiste qui transforme, qui cadre, qui refait le monde. Il y a la réalité et il y a la vision de l'artiste, le style de l'artiste, la patte de l'artiste, peu importe mais c'est une co-création.⁹

This statement by Brune enables us already to highlight the fact that the vision provided by the writer throughout her work is partial, since the artist necessarily chooses to focus ('cadre') on a few aspects of what s/he aims to represent. It also emphasises the fact that Brune's work is a combination ('co-création') of reality and fiction, for if Brune's novels, like most novels, include some 'données du réel [...] ressortissant à la dimension historique et sociologique',¹⁰ they of course remain representations and therefore at least partly imaginary. Nevertheless, as in the case of chapter 4 on education, this standpoint is corroborated by Jacques Dubois' view that even if 'le roman réaliste [n'est] pas aussi mimétique qu'il le prétend [cela] ne l'empêche pas de nous en dire beaucoup sur une réalité toujours ancrée dans l'Histoire et d'en cerner la vérité'.¹¹ Indeed, we argue throughout the following analysis that Elisa Brune's novels provide credible representations of some of society's institutions and plausible portrayals of some of its members. Therefore, her narratives, while primarily remaining works of fiction, still enable the reader to learn about the reality she bases them on.

'Elisa Brune' was born in Brussels in 1966. Few biographical details are available, since she deliberately gives out very little information, perhaps to avoid analysis of her work from an autobiographical perspective, and she uses a penname in order to keep her private life separate from her work as a writer and journalist.¹² The use of a penname is already revealing of her tendency to mix fiction and reality and she explains that her pseudonym 'colle à une activité qui est elle-même un

⁹ See my unpublished interview with Elisa Brune on 27 August 2007. Appendix B, p. 269. Also, in the words of Bourdieu, 'on ne connaît le réel qui se vit qu'en écoutant le réel qui se dit'. Pierre Bourdieu (ed.), *La Misère du monde* (Paris: Seuil, 1993) quoted in Dominique Viart and Bruno Vercier, *La littérature française au présent*, 2nd edn (Paris: Bordas, 2008 [2005]), p. 219.

¹⁰ Heinich, *Etats de Femmes*, op. cit., p. 344.

¹¹ Jacques Dubois, *Les romanciers du réel de Balzac à Simenon* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), p. 11.

¹² Elisa Brune has created her own website which lists both her published and unpublished literary and scientific work as well as the different events she attends <www.elisabrune.com> [accessed 6 July 2010].

compartiment de [sa] vie'.¹³ She chose Elisa, 'comme dans la chanson de Gainsbourg, mais avant tout parce que ça sonne bien', and Brune, 'parce que cette couleur est symbole de maturité, et donc d'épanouissement'.¹⁴ She therefore has at least two identities. This is reflected in the fact that her career is varied, as she has worked in various fields and is eager not to be limited to just one or two. She holds a doctorate in environmental sciences, is a commercial engineer, a successful scientific journalist who regularly contributes to some well-known magazines (*La Recherche*, *Ciel et Espace* and *Sciences et Avenir* for example) and a writer who is active in both scientific popularisation and literary creativity in several genres (novels, essays, theatre).¹⁵ Even though she loves science, she has explained that 'les chercheurs doivent être canalisés sur une piste. Je suis trop dilettante pour ça'¹⁶ but this background in science may be one of the reasons for her interest in creating precise illustrations in her novels of specific socio-cultural aspects and institutions of the Western society she lives in. She seems to enjoy observing and reporting on certain parts of society or some of its members, just as a scientist might observe and describe a phenomenon or an experiment s/he is working on. In her professional life as in her writing, she stresses that '[elle a] horreur de la répétition'¹⁷ and this is visible throughout her work, which encompasses a range of different themes and genres that the following analysis will examine. In a sense Elisa Brune can thus be considered as a 'free electron' as her versatility makes it hard to define her or fit her into a specific canon or genre, making her an interesting choice for study.

Given the versatility of Elisa Brune's work, a range of analytical approaches are needed, as one approach may be applied to a given theme but cannot necessarily be extended to the rest of her work. Consequently our analytical framework involves interweaving gender studies, feminist standpoint theory, history and approaches borrowed from sociology and psychology. Since themes recur across more than one novel, it is the thematic approach which has proved most fruitful, and we have

¹³ Hugues Henry, 'Elisa Brune, à livre ouvert (ou presque)', *From Solvay Business School*, June-July 2005, pp. 32-34 (p. 32).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁵ Since her first publication in 1996 with *Fissures*, a collection of short stories, Elisa Brune has to date written seven novels, nine essays (mainly scientific), several plays and numerous short stories both unpublished and published. See the bibliography for full details.

¹⁶ Emmanuelle Jowa, 'La science est un roman', *La Tribune de Bruxelles*, 4 November 2004, p. 23.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

chosen to structure our analysis around different social institutions through which, we argue, Elisa Brune, as ‘une observatrice avide et avidée’,¹⁸ represents selected aspects of contemporary Western societies. Examining Elisa Brune’s work through the different institutions and relationships that she represents in her novels enables us to demonstrate the way in which her narratives can be perceived as socio-cultural and sociological documents or reports, necessarily influenced by her white, European, middle-class vision of the world. Brune herself has stressed that her ‘travail d’écriture, [...] est nécessairement représentatif non seulement du lieu, mais de l’époque, et aussi du fait d’être une femme, aussi d’une certaine classe sociale’.¹⁹

The first chapter of this thesis examines the context in which Elisa Brune writes while the following ones focus specifically on her work. Chapter two is dedicated to stylistic aspects and the different genres Elisa Brune has chosen for her novels. Chapters three to five present a thematic analysis of Brune’s work through family and family relationships, women’s access to education and employment and how it has evolved throughout the 20th century and through the nature of relationships between men and women.

We start by investigating the context in which Elisa Brune produces her work, that is to say, the challenges faced by a contemporary woman writer living in Belgium where there are ongoing linguistic debates, political instability and uncertainty and where Belgian Francophone writers still face issues of identity (Belgian or French?) and publication (Belgium or France?). This chapter aims to analyse where Elisa Brune stands and whether these different factors affect or influence her writing. Chapter two gives an overview of the different styles and genres Elisa Brune has taken an interest in, their specificities and how they enable her to report on the topics she has chosen to tackle. This chapter also explores genres such as epistolary and documentary novels and touches on the scientific aspect of Elisa Brune’s writing, through novels which mix science and fiction such as *Petite révision du ciel* and *Les Jupiters chauds* or science and biography in *Relations*

¹⁸ André Gascht, ‘Elisa Brune, entre ciel et terre’, *Lectures*, 128, November-December 2002, p. 14.

¹⁹ Elisa Brune, Anne-Lise Grobéty, Marie-José Pigué, Silvia Ricci Lempen, ‘Entre identité et altérité: Refus, reconnaissance, intégration’, in Susan Bainbrigge, Joy Charnley and Caroline Verdier (eds.), *Francographies: Identité et altérité dans les espaces francophones européens* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), pp. 367-405 (p. 383).

d'incertitude.²⁰ Chapter three is concerned with the theme of family and family relationships in the narratives *Blanche cassé* and *La Tournante*.²¹ Supported by statistics and sociological studies, the analysis aims to demonstrate that most types of family are represented in these two fictions, which are good illustrations of the various family patterns, relationships, norms and issues found in Western societies at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st centuries. Some types of families such as 'gay' families are however not represented in Brune's novels, again emphasising the fact that her novels only provide a partial representation of any given topic she has tackled. Chapter four considers the evolution of women's access to education and employment through female characters from several generations in *Blanche cassé*, *La Tournante* and *Relations d'incertitude*. By looking at the novels in parallel with historical facts, we show how the views and behaviour of the different characters reflect successive eras of women's history and battles for access to education and work in 20th- century France and Belgium. Chapter five addresses the topic of the relationships between men and women, which is another field that individuals deal with throughout their life. The nature of the relationships examined through *Blanche cassé*, *La Tournante*, *La Tentation d'Edouard* and *Un Homme est une rose* is varied, as the narratives explore both teenage and adult relationships (exclusively heterosexual with the exception of one lesbian, Stéphanie, in *La Tournante*) but also different types of relationships from games of seduction and marriage to one-night stands and gang rapes, all connected by the significance of power and domination.²² This aspect of Brune's work is mainly analysed using gender theory and feminist sociology.

While the different chapters of our analysis focus on various themes, the unifying thread throughout this thesis, just as in Brune's versatile work, is what has been called the 'effet de réel', the mimesis of reality and use of actual facts and/or people throughout her work.²³ This unifying thread enables Elisa Brune to present her readers with a very precise and plausible – though subjective and limited –

²⁰ Elisa Brune, *Petite révision du ciel* (Paris: J'ai Lu, 2000 [1999]); *Les Jupiters chauds* (Paris: Belfond, 2002); *Relations d'incertitude* (Paris: Ramsay, 2004).

²¹ Elisa Brune, *Blanche cassé* (Paris: Ramsay, 2000).

²² Elisa Brune, *La Tentation d'Edouard* (Paris: Belfond, 2003); *Un Homme est une rose* (Paris: Ramsay, 2005).

²³ Roland Barthes, 'L'effet de réel', in Gérard Genette and Tzvetan Todorov (eds.), *Littérature et réalité* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), pp. 81-90.

representation of society and some of its members, thus anchoring her work in socio-cultural reality. This is achieved by sociological accuracy of facts, historical foundations, intertextuality and the use of biographical details about the actual people she is basing some of her characters on throughout her work. In order to establish the literary, historical and political context in which Elisa Brune writes, though, let us begin with an overview of Belgian history and literature.

Chapter 1

Background, Context and Debates

Lise Gauvin says in *Ecrivain cherche lecteur* that ‘si l’on parle au monde, celui qui parle est toujours d’un sexe, d’une culture, d’un lieu’, emphasising the importance of being aware of the circumstances in which an author writes.¹ This chapter aims precisely to define the context in which Elisa Brune currently works and also the Belgian cultural and historical roots that may influence her writing. Jean-Luc Outers argues that,

champ de bataille des grandes nations, [...] zone tampon créée entre la France et l’Angleterre, [...] la Belgique est un pays où se brassent les langues et les cultures. A ce titre elle est depuis longtemps un microcosme où se forge l’expérience européenne. L’écrivain de langue française n’est guère accroché à une identité, qu’elle soit nationale, régionale ou communautaire. [...] Ouverte à tous les vents, telle se présente donc la littérature française de Belgique.²

Outers’ statement about Belgian writers not being interested in displaying their national or regional identity is applicable to Elisa Brune and many of her fellow contemporary Belgian writers, but this has not always been the stance adopted by Belgian artists. So let us now look briefly at the history of the country, before detailing the different literary phases the country has gone through, comparing the relationship Belgium has with France with that of other Francophone countries when it comes to writers and the publishing industry. Finally, we will look at how Elisa Brune fits into this context and where she stands alongside other Belgian women writers.

Belgium is a young nation and the debate around identity, language and politics has been central since its creation. Created in 1830 following a revolution against the Dutch army, Belgium became a constitutional monarchy in 1831, but has since struggled to define its national identity.³ One aspect of this is the linguistic

¹ Lise Gauvin and Jean-Marie Klinkenberg (eds.), *Ecrivain cherche lecteur: l’écrivain francophone et ses publics* (Paris: Creaphis, 1991), p. 19.

² Jean-Luc Outers, ‘Lettres Belges de Langue Française: une littérature décalée’, *lasemaine.fr*, 2009, pp. 20-21 <<http://ler.letras.up.pt/uploads/ficheiros/8020.pdf>> [accessed 3 November 2010].

³ For more details on the history of Belgium, see Marc Reynebeau, *Histoire Belge: 1830-2005* (Brussels: Racine, 2005) and Michel Dumoulin et al., *Nouvelle Histoire de Belgique*, 2 vols (Brussels: Editions Complexes, 2005). For details about the historical relationships between Belgium, Switzerland and France, see Yves Bridel et al., ‘Table Ronde: les rapports historiques entre la Belgique, la Suisse et la France’, in Yves Bridel, Beïda Chikhi, François-Xavier Cuche and Marc

tensions which beset the country for, as Marc Quaghebeur stresses, 'il y a une culture belge, un être-au-monde, mais il n'y a pas de langue belge'.⁴ Indeed, Belgium's ten million citizens are divided into French- (41%), Flemish- (56%) and German- (1.5%) speakers, not to mention the various dialects and the other languages spoken by immigrants. The Flemish population (approximately 5.9 million) lives mainly in the north of the country whereas the French-speaking community lives in the south and totals around 3.3 million people. The small German-speaking community lives in the east of Belgium and only has a population of about 70,500. The bilingual area of Brussels has 960,000 inhabitants, 70% of whom are French speakers (which gives a 'special' status to its writers that will be discussed below), 10% Flemish and 20% are considered allophone (Moroccans, Italians, Turks, Portuguese, Greeks, etc.).⁵ Linguistic censuses were banned in 1961 because of the high number of offences and falsifications committed by both French and Flemish linguistic communities, in attempts to prevent the other main language from gaining ground. Because of the 1932 Belgian law on language use, the results of the censuses had

des conséquences au plan du fonctionnement des communes et de la langue d'enseignement. Par exemple, quand un groupe linguistique minoritaire atteignait 30 %, les avis et communications d'une commune devaient être affichés dans les deux langues, les fonctionnaires devaient être bilingues et le citoyen était libre de choisir la langue dans laquelle il voulait recevoir ses services. En plus, l'administration et le fonctionnement interne de la commune devaient être dorénavant dans la langue de la majorité (50 %). À partir de 1932, les communes à la frontière linguistique ne furent plus considérées comme un 'territoire bilingue', mais font désormais partie soit de la région linguistique néerlandaise soit de la région linguistique française (selon les résultats du recensement).⁶

Now, according to a Swiss commentator, 'il est interdit non seulement de proposer aux citoyens de décider dans quelle langue ils veulent être administrés, mais même

Quaghebeur (eds.), *L'Europe et les Francophonies: Langue, littérature, histoire, image* (Brussels: PIE Peter Lang, 2005), pp. 189-208.

⁴ Marc Quaghebeur and Laurent Rossion (eds.), *Entre aventures, syllogismes et confessions: Belgique, Roumanie, Suisse* (Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2003), p. 62.

⁵ According to figures for 2010 in 'L'Etat belge: données démologiques' <http://www.tlfq.ulaval.ca/axl/europe/belgiqueetat_demo.htm> [accessed 30 October 2010]. Switzerland, which has a population of 6.5 million, has a situation that is close to Belgium's as French is the second most spoken language in the country with 19%, behind 63.3% of German speakers and in front of Italian (9.5%) and Romansh (0.9%) speakers. See Belinda Jack, *Francophone Literatures: An Introductory Survey* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 42. As in Belgium, in Switzerland the figures can vary according to the surveyed population, whether including all residents or only Swiss citizens.

⁶ 'L'Etat belge: données démologiques', op. cit.

de procéder à un recensement linguistique'.⁷ As a consequence, there is no reliable scientific source (as researchers would have to be politically neutral and free from any community pressure) and figures can only be approximate. Today, linguistic tensions are still at the centre of the conflict that threatens to break the country up, as the Flemish community 'still feel resentful of the situation in the past when [their] language was recognised only with difficulty and there was a widespread attitude that French was linguistically and culturally superior'.⁸

In terms of religion, Belgium is a neutral country in as far as it has no state religion – as distinct from France which is secular – but religion is nonetheless problematic as it contributes to the political fragmentation of the country. Indeed, even though there is no state religion, the state finances Catholic schools and organises religious classes in public schools. Religious pluralism (in this case the fact that in a given society there exists a multiplicity of religions together) also remains problematic given the King's Catholicism. It is estimated that 75% of the Belgian population is Catholic. Islam is the second religion of the country with 3 to 4% of the population, followed by Protestantism (0.9%) and finally Judaism and the Orthodox religion (0.3%). 18% of Belgians are thought to be non-religious which is comparatively high.⁹

Another fracture among the different communities grew from the second half of the 1950s onwards when the economic crisis took its toll on Wallonia and an uneven industrial reconversion occurred. During the 19th century the Walloon economy industrialised rapidly whereas Flanders remained a relatively poor and largely agricultural area but during the 20th century the positions were reversed. While Wallonia and its traditional industrial sector and resources such as coal-mining, the steel industry, textiles, glass-making and refineries were heavily affected, in Flanders the economy boomed from the end of the 1950s, successfully developing

⁷ Jacques Neiryck, 'La Belgique: une Suisse qui ne réussit pas', *L'Hebdo*, 8 January 2009, pp. 48-49 (p. 49). Jacques Neiryck is a writer and politician who was born in Belgium in 1931 but later took Swiss citizenship.

⁸ Richard Wakely, 'French in Belgium, Belgian French, French Belgium', in Kamal Salhi (ed.), *French in and out of France: Language Policies, Intercultural Antagonisms and Dialogue* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2002), pp. 167-85 (p. 171). See also René Chiroux, 'Aux origines historiques du problème linguistique belge', in Edmond Jouve and Simone Dreyfus (eds.), *Belgique Wallonie-Bruxelles: une littérature francophone* (Paris: Association des écrivains de langue française, 1999), pp. 349-73.

⁹ See Corinne Torrekens, 'Le pluralisme religieux en Belgique', *Diversité Canadienne*, 4-3, (2005), 56-58.

a more modern industrial base (chemicals and light engineering for instance) and attracting high-technology investments (largely from abroad during the 1960s and early 1970s). This was partly because of the proximity of its ports and the perception that productivity was higher in Flanders. The relative wealth of Flanders is one reason for the regional tensions that have plagued the country for several decades. Marc Reynebeau explains that coal mines closed one after another due to depletion and lack of profitability, leading to about 420,000 job losses. In addition,

la crise structurelle qui rongait les vieux bassins industriels wallons fut d'autant plus durement ressentie que les nouvelles initiatives économiques bénéficiant des lois d'expansion économique profitèrent surtout à la Flandre. [...] la Flandre avait beaucoup à offrir aux investisseurs. Elle disposait d'une population plus jeune, généralement bien formée, et d'une réserve considérable de main-d'œuvre, moins sélective et moins exigeante suite au taux de chômage relativement haut. Les salaires étaient plus bas qu'en Wallonie [...] tandis que les syndicats se montraient plus modérés et coopérants. De plus la situation géographique de la Flandre était plus favorable, proche des ports maritimes, les nouveaux terrains industriels ne manquaient pas, tandis que l'économie y était moins confrontée qu'en Wallonie aux problèmes (et aux coûts) de la reconversion industrielle.¹⁰

Nowadays, this economic division is still deep and some argue that Belgium has reached a dead end as Flanders, active and prosperous, no longer wishes to subsidise, via the social security system, what is perceived to be a bankrupt and demoralised Wallonia.¹¹

Let us now turn our attention to the question of identity. Belgium is similar to Switzerland in the sense that large numbers of people speak different languages and there is more than one national language. In addition, since the break-up of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia following their internal tensions, Belgium, Switzerland, Luxemburg and Spain remain the only officially multilingual countries in Europe. Michel Audétat says the Belgian and Swiss nations are

deux pays en miroir. D'un poids démographique comparable. Fédéralistes l'un et l'autre. Pareillement plurilingues. Abrisant tous deux une forte minorité francophone. Et travaillés par une incertitude identitaire qui les rapproche, même si les Belges témoignent dans ce domaine d'une radicalité à côté de laquelle les états d'âme helvétiques paraissent bien timides. 'Les Belges ont l'habitude de considérer que leur pays n'existe pas', commente le Bruxellois Paul Ernst [...]. Et personne ne sait vraiment définir la culture belge.¹²

¹⁰ Reynebeau, *Histoire Belge: 1830-2005*, op. cit., pp. 246-47. See also Charles Bricman, *Comment peut-on être belge?* (Paris: Flammarion, 2011), pp. 41-42.

¹¹ See Jacques Neirynek, 'La Belgique: une Suisse qui ne réussit pas', op. cit., p. 49.

¹² Michel Audétat, 'Les Belges. Pourquoi sont-ils meilleurs que nous?', *L'Hebdo*, 17 November 2005, pp. 78-80 (p. 79).

These uncertainties around the question of identity and divisions of opinion have been reflected in the literary production of Belgian writers and in the stances they have adopted with regard to their identity and the existence of a national literature. Belgium has often identified itself in terms of France and as a result the views and relationships between Belgian writers and France moved between ‘phases centripètes et centrifuges’, from one extreme (a specific Belgian literature) to the other (there is no Belgian literature) several times before settling on a neutral position in the late 20th century.¹³ Jean-Luc Outers thinks that an ‘identité faible’ is nowadays the main characteristic of Belgian literature since ‘les auteurs écrivent d’où ils sont sans que pour autant leurs œuvres témoignent d’un quelconque attachement identitaire’, but it has indeed not always been so.¹⁴

Thus, in the 19th century, some claimed that there was no such thing as Belgian literature. For instance Pierre Claes (1805-1832) in 1830, before the creation of the country, wrote: ‘Il n’y a pas de littérature belge; nous n’avons pas de littérature nationale’.¹⁵ Others, on the contrary, claimed the specificity of Belgian literature and these included the founders of *La Jeune Belgique* in 1881, the naturalist writers such as Camille Lemonnier (1844-1913) and Georges Eekhoud (1854-1927). Parnassian poets defended the idea of ‘Soyons nous’ whilst others such as the lawyer and poet Edmond Picard (1836-1924) put forward in 1897 the concept of the ‘âme belge’, ‘multiple en ses facettes, mais unique en son noyau, originale et concentrée’.¹⁶

¹³ This concept of ‘phases centripètes et centrifuges’ was originally developed by Jean-Marie Klinkenberg in his article entitled ‘Les littératures francophones: un modèle gravitationnel’. See Jean-Marie Klinkenberg, *Périphériques Nord* (Liège: Editions de l’Université de Liège, 2010), chapter 1, pp. 17-31. Marc Quaghebeur also refers to it in ‘Les écrivains belges. La Littérature et la Langue française’, in Marc Quaghebeur and Nicole Savy (eds.), *France-Belgique (1848-1914): Affinités-Ambiguïtés* (Brussels: Labor, 1997), pp. 491-528. In this instance we quote from Michel Francart and Gabriele Franke, ‘France et Belgique francophone: Deux pays qu’une même langue sépare?’, in Bridel et al., *L’Europe et les Francophonies*, op. cit., pp. 119-38 (p. 120).

¹⁴ Jean-Luc Outers, ‘Une identité faible’, *Le Carnet et les Instants*, 162, 1 June-30 September 2010, p. 1.

¹⁵ Pierre Claes in *La Revue belge* quoted by Rainier Grutman, ‘De l’indifférence en matière de littérature’, in Jean-Pierre Bertrand, Michel Biron, Benoît Denis and Rainier Grutman (eds.), *Histoire de la littérature belge: 1830-2000* (Paris: Fayard, 2003), pp. 21-31 (p. 25). Interestingly, more than a century later, Edmond Gilliard made the same sort of comment about Swiss literature, saying ‘la littérature nationale, en Suisse, c’est la littérature “suisse”, l’ensemble des productions littéraires de la nation qui parle le ...? [...] Si nous parlons de littérature nationale, c’est que nous n’osons parler, nous ne pouvons parler de littérature suisse’. See Edmond Gilliard, *Œuvres complètes* (Geneva: Editions des Trois Collines, 1965), p. 37.

¹⁶ Jean-Marie Klinkenberg, ‘La littérature belge aura-t-elle lieu?’, in Bertrand et al., *Histoire de la littérature belge*, op. cit., pp. 43-55 (p. 48) and Anne-Marie Picard, ‘Romans francophones de Belgique: Paysage multiple, ouvert à tous vents’, *Démocratie*, 15 August 2005 <<http://www.revue->

Subsequently, in the 20th century, opinion shifted again with Franz Hellens (1881-1972) who in 1937, along with the twenty-five signatories of the ‘Manifeste du Lundi’, agreed that there was no national literature, that regionalism linked to the quest for identity was a mistake and above all that there was no difference between French and Belgian writing.¹⁷ This seemingly had an impact on the literary production of this generation of writers and those born after the 1920s, since the solution adopted at the time was to move to Paris, already then seen as the capital of publishing, and attempt to make a name for themselves as Francophone writers whilst striving to conceal their Belgian roots.¹⁸ This strategy of displacement and concealment seems to have worked since some became successful and won prestigious French literary prizes. Among these writers Dominique Rolin (b. 1913) won the Prix Fémina in 1952 for *Le Souffle*, as did Françoise Mallet-Joris (b. 1930) for *L’Empire céleste* in 1958. Béatrix Beck (1914-2008) won the Goncourt in 1952 for *Léon Morin prêtre* and so did Francis Walder (1906-1997) in 1958 for *Saint-Germain ou la Négociation*. Reinforcing this trend, Beck was naturalised French in 1955 and is said to be the ‘grande prêtresse de la négation de toute spécificité littéraire belge’.¹⁹ Suzanne Lilar (1901-1992) obtained the Prix Sainte-Beuve in 1954 for *Le Journal de l’analogiste*, as did Alexis Curvers in 1957 for *Tempo di Roma*.²⁰

democratie.be/index.php?p=art&id=379> [accessed 03 November 2010]. In the same way, as Dominique Combe explains, Ramuz can be seen as sharing the wish to remain true to oneself: ‘Ramuz cherche à se réenraciner dans le particulier pour mieux retrouver l’universel, à renouer avec le pays d’origine pour s’affranchir des modèles parisiens et être soi-même’. See Dominique Combe, *Les littératures francophones: Questions, débats, polémiques* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2010), p. 175.

¹⁷ Writers who signed the manifesto included Flemish writers such as Marie Gevers or Charles Bernard, Walloons including Charles Plisnier and Marcel Thiry as well as writers born in Brussels like Michel de Ghelderode and Franz Hellens. For more information on the ‘Manifeste du Lundi’ see Klinkenberg, *Périphériques Nord*, op. cit., chapter 10, pp. 141-63; Reine Meylaerts, ‘Enjeux nationaux et internationaux de la question identitaire’, in Bertrand et al., *Histoire de la littérature belge*, op. cit., pp. 379-89 and Lisbeth Verstraete-Hansen, ‘Du Lundisme à la déshistoire’, in *Littérature et engagements en Belgique francophone* (Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2006), pp. 25-45.

¹⁸ See Paul Gorceix, *Littérature francophone de Belgique et de Suisse* (Paris: Ellipses, 2000), p. 62. Dominique Rolin for instance ‘enjoint vivement à ses compatriotes d’émigrer à Paris et de nettoyer leur langue’, according to Isabelle Rûf, ‘Le français, en dix mots comme en mille’, *Le Temps*, 17 March 2007, p. 43. It is also interesting that amongst this generation, Flemish writers no longer wrote in French, simply because they chose at that time to write in Dutch.

¹⁹ According to Marc Quaghebeur, ‘Soixante ans de littérature belge (1940-1999)’, in Christian Berg and Pierre Halen (eds.), *Littératures belges de langue française (1830-2000): histoire et perspectives* (Brussels: Le Cri, 2000), pp. 175-269 (p. 191).

²⁰ Véronique Jago-Antoine, ‘Triomphe et vacillement du néoclassicisme’, in Bertrand et al., *Histoire de la littérature belge*, op. cit., pp. 421-30.

Literary production of the late 1960s and 1970s in Belgium was preoccupied with the issue of ‘identité et déficit identitaire’.²¹ This theme and reaction to the ‘dénégation de soi et de son pays qui prévalut chez leurs pères’²² was widely recognised by the critics of the time and this generation of writers which included Conrad Detrez (1937-1985), Pierre Mertens (b. 1939), Jacques De Decker (b. 1945) and Hubert Nyssen (b. 1925; naturalised French in 1976) was labelled the ‘septentrionaux’.²³ The other characteristic of this generation of intellectual writers was their attachment to theoretical reflexion on identity which, according to Marc Quaghebeur, they perceived as a ‘déficit critique majeur, qui allait de pair avec la génération et l’emprise des modèles français, qu’il fallait combler’.²⁴ Thus, the debate about the identity and specificity of Belgian writing was reignited in 1976 by writer and philosopher Claude Javeau in the Special Issue of *Nouvelles Littéraires* (edited by Pierre Mertens) entitled ‘L’Autre Belgique’ in which the term ‘belgitude’ was first used to describe Belgian identity.²⁵ The term was first coined in jest and as an obvious reference to the ‘négritude’ of Léopold Sédar Senghor, Aimé Césaire and Léon Gontran Damas and conveys the idea of the cultural dependence and subjection of Belgium to France being not dissimilar to the position of colonies within colonial empires.²⁶ This was followed in 1980 by the publication of Jacques Sojcher’s *La Belgique malgré tout* which claimed, through its sixty-nine texts by Belgian writers from different generations, that there is ‘une réalité belge qui ne saurait être une identité’.²⁷ According to Michel Biron, however, ‘belgitude’ and its vision of the

²¹ Klinkenberg, *Périphériques Nord*, op. cit., p. 195.

²² Marc Quaghebeur, *Anthologie de la Littérature française de Belgique: entre réel et surréel* (Brussels: Racine, 2006), p. 284.

²³ Klinkenberg, *Périphériques Nord*, op. cit., p. 196.

²⁴ Quaghebeur and Rossion, *Entre aventures, syllogismes et confessions*, op. cit., p. 83.

²⁵ *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*, 2557 (1976). *Belgitude* meant to claim and stress the differences and specificities of Belgian culture. For more details see Susan Bainbrigge, *Culture and Identity in Belgian Francophone Writing: Dialogue, Diversity and Displacement* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), pp.17-20; Michel Biron, ‘De la Belgitude’, in Bertrand et al., *Histoire de la littérature belge*, op. cit., pp. 489-97.

²⁶ Marc Quaghebeur thus explains: ‘Si la nouvelle génération culturelle des années septante adopte assez largement le concept de belgitude, forgé sur l’emblématique vocable de négritude; si elle témoigne ainsi, entre autres choses, du fait que l’on peut être une ancienne puissance coloniale et un acteur économique important de la planète tout en étant, au plan culturel, dans un état de dépendance ou de sujétion partielle qui n’est pas sans présenter quelque rapport avec celui des colonisé-e-s’. Marc Quaghebeur, ‘D’où vient le malaise francophone? L’exemple belge’, in Bainbrigge et al., *Francographies*, op. cit., pp. 21-36 (p. 29).

²⁷ Jacques Sojcher (ed.), *La Belgique malgré tout. Littérature 1980*, special issue of the *Revue de l’Université de Bruxelles*, 1-4 (Brussels: Editions de l’Université de Bruxelles, 1980) as quoted by

‘pays en creux’ was only shared by and filtered through texts by some writers from Brussels (Sojcher, Mertens and Javeau for instance); it was not supported by writers from Wallonia or Flanders for whom ‘on n’écrit jamais de nulle part’.²⁸ Therefore, Brussels, geographically located in the Flemish part of the kingdom but with 70% of French speakers as noted above, looks to be a unique microcosm producing writers with their own specificity and views on the Belgian literary scene, implying that their identity is different from that of writers from the other parts of the country; an assessment which is, in our view, still valid when considering writers like Elisa Brune.

Another significant landmark in Belgian literary history was the creation and development from 1980 of the *Communauté française de Belgique*.²⁹ This followed the long process of devolution and the emergence of a federal state from 1970 – Belgium had been a unitary state since its creation and only officially became a federal one when the new Constitution took effect in 1995 – as well as the acknowledgement in the constitution of the existence of three linguistic and cultural communities with powers relating to educational, healthcare and cultural issues. The *Communauté française de Belgique* then started a ‘politique des lettres’ intended to give Francophone Belgian literature a new boost and a clearer awareness of itself through different projects such as the creation of the *Service de la Promotion des Lettres* which supports writers, publishers and bookshops in different ways and also publishes *Le Carnet et les Instants*.³⁰

To return to the question of identity, the phenomenon of Belgian identity and literature not only created interest among the Belgian literary community, it also attracted the attention of sociologists in the 1980s and in 1985 Pierre Bourdieu

Michel Biron, ‘De la Belgitude’, in Bertrand et al., *Histoire de la littérature belge*, op. cit., pp. 489-97 (p. 490). Emphasis in the original.

²⁸ Biron, *ibid.*, p. 495.

²⁹ The *Communauté française de Belgique* is ‘une collectivité politique “au service des francophones belges”. Ses compétences s’exercent en matière d’enseignement, de culture, de sport, de jeunesse, de santé. Elle dispose d’un Parlement et d’un gouvernement’. Alfonso Artico, ‘Entre francité et belgitude’, *Le Monde diplomatique*, ‘Supplément Wallonie’, December 2010, p. iv. For more details about the *Communauté française de Belgique* and its history see <http://www.cfwb.be/index.php?id=portail_histoire> [accessed 1 December 2010].

³⁰ Jacques Dubois, ‘L’institution de la littérature’, in Bertrand et al., *Histoire de la littérature belge*, op. cit., pp. 499-511 (pp. 499-500). The *Service de la Promotion des Lettres* aims to support writers, publishers and bookshops through finance, literary prizes, grants, etc. For more details see <<http://www.promotiondeslettres.cfwb.be/index.php?id=missions>> [accessed 1 December 2010].

addressed the question of the autonomy of the Belgian literary field with regard to France in his article ‘Existe-t-il une littérature belge?’³¹ According to Bourdieu, ‘les écrivains de nationalité belge et de langue française sont ainsi placés devant l’alternative de l’identification au modèle dominant – qui lorsqu’elle réussit, les dépouille de leur identité nationale – et de l’exclusion dans l’altérité’.³² He thus stresses that the dominance of France and its publishing industry over the Belgian literary scene is so considerable that Francophone Belgian writers struggle to exist by themselves. It is however a well-known fact that the case of Belgian writers is far from unique in the Francophone world since successful writers from Northern Francophone countries (Belgium, Switzerland, Québec) tend to be assimilated into French literature.³³ Francophone writers thus still find themselves either excluded from or assimilated into French literature. In addition, Belgian and Swiss newspapers regularly echo one another in stressing the similar difficulties encountered by the writers in their respective countries – ‘trop petit public, le plurilinguisme’ – and the attitude of the French publishing system which easily steals them as soon as they become famous.³⁴ The case of Belgium and its artists is therefore neither unique nor exceptional. José Lambert concludes that

dans la vie littéraire menée par la Belgique, à l’intérieur comme en dehors de ses frontières, et ce durant deux siècles, le parallélisme est sans cesse quasiment absent. La

³¹ Pierre Bourdieu, ‘Existe-t-il une littérature belge?’, *Etudes de Lettres*, 4 (1985), 3-6. This was also the title of a report in *La Revue Nationale* in 1929. Canadian poet Octave Crémazie asked this question too in 1867, trying to define the literary identity of French-speaking countries: ‘Ce qui manque au Canada, c’est d’avoir une langue à lui. Si nous parlions iroquois ou huron notre littérature vivrait. [...] Voyez la Belgique, qui parle la même langue que nous. Est-ce qu’il y a une littérature belge?’, Octave Crémazie, *Œuvres II: Prose* (Ottawa: Editions de l’Université d’Ottawa, 1976), p. 91. Similarly, Swiss writer and critic Jacques Mercanton commented: ‘On ne peut pas parler d’une littérature romande, parce qu’une littérature se définit par la langue dans laquelle elle est écrite. Or, il n’y a point de langue romande et il n’y en a jamais eu. Ainsi, donc, le terme de “littérature romande”, même si on en fait emploi assez souvent, n’a aucune signification’. Jacques Mercanton quoted in David Bevan, *Ecrivains d’aujourd’hui* (Lausanne: 24 Heures, 1986), p. 133. Congolese novelist Henri Lopès stated: ‘L’écrivain français écrit français. Nous, nous écrivons *en français*’. Henri Lopès, ‘L’écriture entre les langues’, unpublished conference paper delivered in Tokyo in 1991 and quoted in Jean-Pierre Bertrand and Lise Gauvin (eds), *Littératures mineures en langue majeure. Québec/Wallonie-Bruxelles* (Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2003), p. 21.

³² Bourdieu, ‘Existe-t-il une littérature belge?’, op. cit., p. 4.

³³ See Combe, *Les littératures francophones*, op. cit., p. 31.

³⁴ An article in *Le Vif* reminds its readers that ‘les Suisses et les Belges nagent dans les mêmes eaux de la francophonie’, L.D., ‘Impressions genevoises’, *Le Vif*, 21 December 2001, no page number available. The Swiss journalist Isabelle Rüf stressed in 2001 that ‘les artistes de la Communauté francophone de Belgique rencontrent les mêmes difficultés que ceux de Suisse romande: trop petit public, le plurilinguisme, l’attraction de Paris. La France les annexe tous volontiers dès qu’ils ont une certaine notoriété’. Isabelle Rüf, ‘Bruxelles à Genève’, *Le Temps*, 15 September 2001 <<http://www.letemps.ch/samedi/affichearticle.asp?artid=72967>> [accessed 21 September 2010].

Belgique n'est ni le pays d'une seule littérature ni le pays de deux littératures, c'est un pays où se cultivent et où végètent sans cesse plusieurs conceptions de la littérature, qui n'atteignent sans doute jamais vraiment le statut d'un 'système' littéraire autonome, – si la chose existe vraiment autrement que sous la forme d'un modèle idéal.³⁵

Today, the debate on identity goes on, fuelled by conferences and academic publications on the subject. According to Benoît Denis and Jean-Marie Klinkenberg, the generation of writers born after the 1960s and 1970s is the first which can be said to be 'sans combat et sans horizon historique dans lequel s'inscrire'. Thus, whilst the previous generation of writers conquered institutional and symbolic power by asserting their 'belgitude', nowadays, writers 'n'adopt[ent] guère la posture militante de la rupture' which was characteristic of previous generations and view identity as necessarily multiple, 'faite d'allégeances superposées et non-contradictoires'.³⁶ So much so that the contemporary generation of Belgian writers has been labelled a 'génération innommable', since nothing ties these writers or their texts to the debates on identity from previous years and they see themselves as belonging to 'une littérature qui va de soi'.³⁷

Elisa Brune is a good example of her generation since she has never got involved in the debate around national identity and being Belgian does not appear to have a particular impact on her writing either. She talked about the part her nationality plays in her writing during the round table organised at the conference *Francographies: Identité et altérité dans les espaces francophones européens* in Edinburgh in 2008, explaining that

la question de l'identité [...] n'a pas occupé beaucoup de mon attention jusqu'ici. [...] [II] est bien sûr possible de vouloir se situer. Parce que ça correspond à un désir, à un besoin, à un que sais-je. Mais il est aussi possible de ne pas vouloir. Ce serait plutôt mon option, en tout cas dans les faits. Puisque je ne me suis pas préoccupée de la chose jusqu'à ce jour. [...] En ce qui me concerne, j'ai simplement décidé de minimiser un peu le problème, c'est-à-dire de n'en jamais parler spontanément. [...] Mais disons qu'en gros ça ne m'intéresse pas beaucoup. J'essaie que ça prenne le moins de place possible pour pouvoir m'occuper de ce qui m'intéresse: des questions de connaissance.³⁸

³⁵ José Lambert, 'Conclusions: considérations globales sur les littératures en construction', in Dirk De Gest and Reine Meylaerts (eds.), *Littératures en Belgique: Diversités culturelles et dynamiques littéraires* (Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2004), pp. 419-37 (p. 431).

³⁶ Benoît Denis and Jean-Marie Klinkenberg, *La littérature belge: Précis d'histoire sociale* (Brussels: Labor, 2005), pp. 257, 259-60.

³⁷ Laurent Dumoulin, 'Génération innommable', *Textyles*, 14 (1997), 7-17; José Domingues de Almeida, 'Une littérature qui va de soi. Cadre contemporain des lettres belges de langue française', *Revista da Faculdade de Letras – Línguas e Literaturas*, 2, 22 (2005), 3-15 (p. 13).

³⁸ Brune et al., 'Entre identité et altérité', in Bainbrigge et al., *Francographies*, op. cit., pp. 381-86.

It is obvious that Elisa Brune does not feel particularly attached to her Belgian background from a cultural perspective or is not keen to let people know about it, even though she recognises that despite having ‘une culture française’ she does not have a French point of view. She also stresses that from her trajectory and education in Belgium, being aware, even uncounsciously, of such things as the Flemish culture and language is part of who she is. Therefore she more or less recognises her Belgian roots and the fact that being Belgian may play an unconscious part in ‘la coloration [...] de [ses] propos ou de son style’³⁹ but she does not consider this an important feature of her personality or feel that it plays a significant part in her writing. All in all, Brune appears not to be interested in the issue of identity and she has a practical, not to say strategic approach to not advertising her ‘Belgianness’ – which might be a commercial advantage – in case it does not suit the Parisian publishing industry.⁴⁰ This places her clearly within the contemporary trend identified as ‘post belgitude’, which resulted from the ‘belgitude’ movement becoming obsolete in the 1990s when the upcoming generation of writers (Nothomb, Savitzkaya, Toussaint, Dannemark etc.) overcame the inferiority complex of the ‘petit Belge’. Ceasing to worry so much about creating an assertive national literature, as we have already said, they abandoned altogether the ‘discours de type identitaire et/ou revendicatif’.⁴¹ This was also the era when individualism undoubtedly became the most striking feature of Belgian writers’ personalities.⁴² What we mean by individualism is the tendency of these writers to write outside any clear literary movements or with a particular political objective in mind. Each writes whatever s/he wants to, according to her/his own interests or concerns, regardless of what other writers are doing and regardless of any collective aims or trends. In short, where previous generations of writers tended to gather around a literary movement such as Surrealism (Goemans, Nougé, Lecomte) or Symbolism (Rodenbach, Verhaeren, Maeterlinck), the contemporary generation thrives on individualism, which is also strong in contemporary society,

³⁹ See my unpublished interview with Elisa Brune on 27 August 2007. Appendix B, p. 249.

⁴⁰ Brune claims being Belgian is not important to her, yet Belgium recurs in some of her early novels – through intertextual references for instance as will be explored in chapter 2.

⁴¹ Dubois, ‘L’institution de la littérature’, op. cit., p. 511; Domingues de Almeida, ‘Une littérature qui va de soi’, op. cit., pp. 4, 9. Yet, one can wonder if Belgian writers have really overcome this inferiority complex. They no longer talk about it but perhaps if they were completely at ease with the situation, perhaps they would not need to reject the topic so forcefully.

⁴² Gorceix, *Littérature francophone de Belgique et de Suisse*, op. cit., p. 77.

where individuals place themselves and their interests before those of others. This has been noted by Jacques Dubois who stated that nowadays, the Belgian writer is no longer very

soucieux d'appartenir à un champ littéraire [...] un peu comme si, à ses yeux, cette forme de fonctionnement héritée de la première modernité n'était plus adaptée à ses besoins et à ses exigences. [...] [Les] écrivains de la génération actuelle n'ont qu'un faible souci d'investir dans la 'politique littéraire', chacun préférant vivre son aventure personnelle. En cela, leur position s'harmonise bien avec l'évolution d'un champ des lettres qui a perdu son aura dominatrice, qui produit dans une effervescence quelque peu anarchique et qui s'adapte vaille que vaille à ce que l'on pourrait appeler la dispersion culturelle du nouveau siècle.⁴³

However, if identity is no longer at the centre of Belgian writers' preoccupations, their dependence upon Paris's publishing supremacy and literary prestige remains unchanged, leading many of them to make it a priority to be published in Paris. Most writers of Brune's generation, including herself, are well aware that 'il s'agit toujours de séduire Paris' and are thus keen to be flexible and play by the rules of the Parisian publishing system.⁴⁴ As a consequence, in the last quarter of the 20th century, the presence of Belgian writers on the French publishing scene has been noticed and acclaimed in the press. In September 1995 for instance *Lire* asked 'avez-vous remarqué comme le fond de l'air est belge?' and Jean-Jacques Brochier, editor of *Magazine littéraire*, stated humorously that 'En France, aujourd'hui, un écrivain français sur deux est belge'.⁴⁵ These statements not only stress the success and the number of Belgian writers being published in France but reinforce at the same time the idea that Paris still exercises a powerful attraction over Belgian writers. Being a Belgian writer published in Paris tends to be perceived as the norm, including by many writers, apparently 'sans que cela induise un quelconque malaise' either for the Belgian writers or the French publishers.⁴⁶ So, as in the case of Elisa Brune, although the Belgian nationality of most writers is not hidden, neither is it emphasised. This phenomenon, which does not result from a collective project on the part of writers – not just from Belgium but also from other Francophone countries – has been observed and commented upon by critics such as

⁴³ Dubois, 'L'institution de la littérature', op. cit., pp. 507, 510.

⁴⁴ Domingues de Almeida, 'Une littérature qui va de soi', op. cit., p. 15.

⁴⁵ As quoted respectively by Dubois, 'L'institution de la littérature', op. cit., p. 505 and by Outers, 'Lettres Belges de Langue Française', op. cit., p. 15.

⁴⁶ *Revue Nouvelle*, 3 (1997) quoted in Domingues de Almeida, 'Une littérature qui va de soi', op. cit., pp. 5-6.

Jacques Dubois or Jean-Marie Klinkenberg. Dubois explains that ‘on se retrouve écrivain de Paris pour ce qui est de la diffusion et de la reconnaissance de l’œuvre. Pour le reste, on exerce en Belgique ses activités ordinaires’, while Klinkenberg summarises how French cultural life revolves around ‘un carré de quelques centaines de mètres de côté, à cheval sur les 5^e et 6^e arrondissements [où] se rassemblent éditeurs, critiques, revues, académies, cafés fréquentés par les critiques et les écrivains qui se montrent’.⁴⁷ As a result, literary creation remains a one-way process from the peripheral Francophone countries to the Parisian centre which dominates by its prestige, long-standing tradition and the quantity of its production. Being published in Paris is therefore a pragmatic and logical decision for many Belgian writers in search of success and recognition and Elisa Brune is no exception to this phenomenon since, although she lives in Brussels, like many of her fellow contemporary Belgian writers (Nothomb, Lamarche, Lalande, Toussaint to name but a few), she too has chosen to mainly publish in Paris.⁴⁸ Brune is well aware of the difficulties of the Belgian publishing market and, seemingly motivated by the desire to sell as many books as possible, she has stated that ‘il est inutile de se faire publier en Belgique si on veut être sur le marché puisque les éditeurs belges ne sont presque pas diffusés du tout’.⁴⁹ However, if Paris today remains the place to be published in the Francophone world and attracts many Belgian writers as explained above, it does not mean this is a straightforward task and this indeed represented something of a challenge for Elisa Brune. In an interview with René Begon in 1999, she explained that the two literary prizes she had won in Belgium were not enough to open the doors of Parisian publishers and that she had to contact about twenty before managing to convince Ramsay to take their first Belgian writer on board.⁵⁰

This strength of the French publishing market and the weakness of the small and often family-run Belgian publishing houses has a long history. Pascal Durand explains that, in the past, Belgium was a centre for the production of counterfeit

⁴⁷ Dubois, ‘L’institution de la littérature’, op. cit., p. 506; Jean-Marie Klinkenberg, *Petites mythologies belges* (Brussels: Les Impressions Nouvelles, 2009), pp. 42-43.

⁴⁸ Her Parisian publishers include Ramsay, Belfond, Le Pommier and more recently Odile Jacob. It is interesting that some of her novels have subsequently been re-published by Belgian publisher Labor following their success. See the bibliography for details.

⁴⁹ See my unpublished interview with Elisa Brune on 27 August 2007, Appendix B, p. 271. Brune also made this point in Sophie Godin and Nelle Novak, ‘Elisa Brune: *Petite révision du ciel*’, *Femmes d’aujourd’hui*, 23 September 1999, no page number available.

⁵⁰ René Begon, ‘Une crise très simple’, *Le Matin*, 31 August 1999, no page number available.

copies of books, mainly between 1830 and 1854 when the practice was prohibited. French best-sellers of the time were the most important products of the Belgian publishing industry and as a consequence this reinforced the position of France as a literary nation and confirmed Paris's power of attraction for artists, as if all Belgium could do was copy, not produce original literary texts. According to the *Histoire du livre et de l'imprimerie en Belgique*, 'le choix des contrefacteurs belges [se portant] sur les livres qui remportaient le plus de succès, [...] la contrefaçon était en même temps la preuve de ce succès'.⁵¹ Furthermore, counterfeiting prevented the development of Belgian literary production, since 'la stagnation éditoriale [...] enfonce les imprimeurs [...] dans des routines [...] de reproduction et [...] bloque du coup le développement littéraire national'.⁵² After 1854, Belgian publishers turned their attention to the production of religious books, and later comics, as well as 'beaux livres' printed on luxurious paper and in unusual formats, all requiring very skilled typographers. Nowadays, the main characteristic of Belgian publishers is to publish and promote a literature that owes little or nothing to Franco-Parisian cultural models, in genres such as theatre, poetry or essays and to be 'attachés au beau livre et à des relations de proximité avec leurs auteurs', which could be seen by some writers as a positive argument in favour of publishing in Belgium.⁵³ In short, they are trying to do something different to avoid being perceived as attempting to compete with Paris, but they still struggle to achieve this goal since in Belgium 'on n'a pas vu se constituer un pôle éditorial fort autour des lettres belges contemporaines. Le politique ne s'est pas montré très entreprenant dans le domaine. Les éditeurs les plus importants se sont désintéressés de la question'.⁵⁴ As a result, Durand claims that Belgian publishing is fifty years behind French publishing and will probably never catch up.⁵⁵ In spite of the fact that smaller publishers such as Éperonniers, Le Cri, Luc Pire, Talus d'approche or Lansman have created collections open to contemporary novelists and playwrights, they have failed to attract the interest of

⁵¹ Henri Liebrecht, *Histoire du livre et de l'imprimerie en Belgique*, 6 vols (Brussels: Le Musée du Livre, 1934), VI, p. 19.

⁵² Pascal Durand, 'L'édition belge francophone sur la scène internationale: Héritages du passé et scénarios d'avenir', in De Gest and Meylaerts (eds.), *Littératures en Belgique*, op. cit., pp. 337-49 (p. 340).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 347, 348.

⁵⁴ Dubois, 'L'institution de la littérature', op. cit., p. 504.

⁵⁵ Durand, 'L'édition belge francophone', op. cit., pp. 343-44.

prominent writers. Even those who win the Prix Rossel (the Belgian equivalent of the Prix Goncourt) such as Elisa Brune, prefer to be published in Paris, as in the words of Jacques De Decker, ‘seule la griffe éditoriale parisienne ouvre les portes de la reconnaissance par la critique et les médias’.⁵⁶ In addition, just like Swiss publishers, the major hurdle for these small firms is being distributed and visible in bookshops, since ‘leur petite taille, leur dispersion, leur décentrage ne les aident guère [...] à se faire connaître et reconnaître’.⁵⁷ Publisher Luce Wilquin explains in *Le Temps* that the pool of Belgian and Swiss readers is not large enough for them and she stresses, along with Marlyse Pietri for Editions Zoé in Geneva, the importance of bookshops giving them some visibility since they do not have either the financial means of bigger publishers to advertise nor a similar number of publications.⁵⁸

Parisian domination in the field of publication is also reinforced by figures that speak for themselves. In 2006, statistics from the Association des Editeurs Belges (ADEB) – which comprised 79 publishers of Francophone literature at the time – showed that, for all languages, 7,704 titles were published by Belgian publishers that year.⁵⁹ By comparison, in France in 2007 the production figures listed 63,761 titles.⁶⁰ Although in absolute figures, France is clearly dominant, when we look at the proportion between the number of publishers, the number of titles published and the French-speaking population in Belgium, output is quite high by comparison to the French ratio – the French population is twenty times higher but the number of publications is not. Thus, although France is of course by far the biggest market,

⁵⁶ Dubois, ‘L’institution de la littérature’, op. cit., p. 504.

⁵⁷ Durand, ‘L’édition belge francophone’, p. 347. The organisers of the ‘Foire du livre de Bruxelles’ recently stressed that ‘afin de rester fidèle à sa dimension de médiateur culturel, la Foire favorise la venue des petits éditeurs. Elle permet également d’offrir à ses visiteurs une occasion unique d’accéder à des livres plus spécialisés et de découvrir des ouvrages qu’on retrouve moins facilement dans les librairies’. <<http://www.flb.be/>> [accessed 20 May 2011]. The Swiss publisher Bernard Campiche recently stressed again this problem of visibility encountered by Francophone publishers in France: ‘Point noir: le marché français qui reste hermétique aux livres Campiche. “Je fais pourtant tout ce que je peux mais la frontière ne s’ouvre pas”, constate l’éditeur’, in Lisbeth Koutchoumoff, ‘Bernard Campiche: “Moi, un éditeur vaudois? Je m’acharne pourtant à répéter que je tiens mon côté bouillant de ma mère valaisanne”’, *Le Temps*, 2 July 2011, p. 40.

⁵⁸ L.K., ‘Aux marges de Paris’, *Le Temps*, 23 October 2010, p. 42. Despite the internet making access to some books easier, small publishers still have to rely on bookshops and traditional media to advertise their publications and make them visible to potential readers.

⁵⁹ Figures from the Association des Editeurs Belges (ADEB) website <<http://www.adeb.be/general2.htm>> [accessed 22 October 2010]. More recent figures are not currently available.

⁶⁰ Figures from the Centre national du livre website <http://www.centrenationaldulivre.fr/IMG/pdf/Chiffres-cles_2008-2009.pdf> [accessed 22 October 2010]. In 2009 66,595 titles were published in France according to the same source.

these figures show there is considerable interest among the Belgian French-speaking public for literature and indicate just how productive Belgian writers are. Indeed, the figures would be even higher if national writers published in Belgium rather than in France. Evidence has however led Lise Gauvin to conclude that ‘la France reste le passage obligé pour la circulation des lettres francophones. Toute solution qui tenterait de faire l’impasse sur Paris est un leurre’ and from what we have said previously, Elisa Brune has understood this perfectly.⁶¹

To summarise, as highlighted by Belgian writer Patrick Roegiers, there are many Belgian artists but they have to export their work to gain recognition.⁶² So whilst the situation on the publishing front has evolved in Belgium and there are now more publishers than in the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, Belgium has not yet managed to stem the loss of its artistic production towards Paris. This issue, which is not specific to Belgium, has led some to question the lack of recognition of Francophone writers who have decided not to be published in Paris, and the Swiss writer Jean-Louis Kuffer to ask ‘les cultures francophones ont-elles forcément à se coller dans le moule français? N’est-ce pas au contraire dans leur authenticité qu’elles vont produire des œuvres fortes, reconnues ou pas?’⁶³ This is however not often the case and since recognition remains at the core of most writers’ motivation, the lack of visibility of small non-Parisian publishers, and thus lack of opportunities for rapid recognition by critics, becomes a weakness for these publishers, who then fail to attract new writers. According to Jacques De Decker, ‘le pas suivant sera franchi lorsque l’édition littéraire belge aura elle aussi droit de cité dans l’ensemble francophone, lorsqu’elle ne se heurtera plus aux excès du centralisme parisien, qui décourage bien des énergies’.⁶⁴

These various assessments of contemporary Belgian writers fit Elisa Brune’s perception of herself and her place on the Belgian literary scene; she does not try

⁶¹ Gauvin and Klinkenberg, *Ecrivain cherche lecteur*, op. cit., p. 20. Anne-Lise Grobéty who chose, in contrast, to publish in Switzerland, makes a similar point in Brune et al., ‘Entre identité et altérité’, in Bainbrigg et al., *Francographies*, op. cit., pp. 389-90.

⁶² Audétat, ‘Les Belges. Pourquoi sont-ils meilleurs que nous?’, op. cit., p. 80.

⁶³ Jean-Louis Kuffer, ‘Les francophones et le parisianisme’, *Le Passe-muraille*, 69 (April 2006), p. 11.

⁶⁴ Jacques De Decker, *La Brosse à relire* (Avin/Hannut: Luce Wilquin, 1999), p. 7. Several years later, in an article published in *Le Monde des livres*, De Decker stated again the dead end Belgian publishers were still in and their desire to stop being deprived of ‘la vaste audience que procure leur langue’ before ending on yet another question: ‘mais avec quelle stratégie?’ Jacques De Decker, ‘La Belgique, écrivains féconds et éditeurs entravés’, *Le Monde des livres*, 15 April 2005, p. IV.

either to deny or accentuate her national identity in her work, nor does she try to pretend she is a French writer. This is simply not at the forefront of her preoccupations as a writer. For Elisa Brune, writing is not a statement of her identity but ‘répond vraiment à un besoin profond’.⁶⁵ If being Belgian does not impact on Elisa Brune’s literary production, it appears that being a woman does influence it to a certain degree, although she is not keen on acknowledging it. The next part of this chapter will focus on Belgian women’s writing since 1830, in order to unveil potential influences on Elisa Brune’s writing and evaluate the extent to which she draws from or is similar to some of her fellow Belgian and French contemporary women writers.

As previously explained, Elisa Brune is from a generation of Belgian writers whose writing is individualistic and who identify less with ‘political’ issues than previous generations. Her writing nevertheless shares some characteristics with some past and contemporary Belgian and Francophone writers (mostly women). Just like many other contemporary women writers, Elisa Brune wants to avoid being labelled (in line with her individualism) and claims she neither writes from a woman’s point of view nor considers herself a feminist. Yet the genres she has experimented with and the themes she tackles in some of her books can be seen as central to women’s writing or linked to women’s history. In order to understand better the literary context which undoubtedly influenced Elisa Brune, let us begin with an overview of Belgian women’s writing since the creation of the country, as it appears that the motivations behind women’s writing, as well as their political commitment and some of the themes tackled in their work have evolved over time.

If 21st-century Belgian women’s writing can be considered to be thriving, this has not always been the case and prior to the 20th century there were few women writers in the country. Nevertheless, although they were rare and less well-known, Belgium has had women writers ever since its creation and, as in France, with figures such as Hubertine Auclert or Madeleine Pelletier, Belgian women’s writing from that era was often associated with the first wave of feminism and women’s demands for political rights, access to education and better living conditions, altogether quite

⁶⁵ Godin and Novak, ‘Elisa Brune: *Petite révision du ciel*’, op. cit.

different from many contemporary writers' interests. These figures include Aline Bouquié (1876-1949), Alice Defré (1850-1904), Zoé Gatti de Gamond (1806-1854) and Caroline Gravière (1821-1878) whose books deal with gender equality and women's rights and criticise 'l'enfermement des femmes, la toute-puissance du mari'.⁶⁶ Another example is Marguerite Van de Wiele (1879-1941) who was one of the few women writers of her time able to make a living from her writing. However, although she was a member of the *Ligue féministe*, she opposed allowing women to vote and her texts do not display 'le caractère subversif que l'on pourrait en attendre. Dans ses ouvrages de fiction, les femmes sortent perdantes de la guerre des sexes'.⁶⁷ Van de Wiele's political involvement with the *Ligue féministe* is thus curiously not reflected in her writing. This contradiction, although from a different era and context, is partly true of Elisa Brune, who thinks that feminism has done its work, but who continues to portray women in her novels as the losers in fields such as science or even in their relationships with men, as will be explored in the following chapters.

In the 20th century more women emerged as writers. The first part of the century saw writers engaging in different movements and with various issues such as questions of identity and feminism. The most prominent figures of Belgian 'écriture féminine' include Marie Gevers (1883-1975), Suzanne Lilar (1901-1992), Madeleine Bourdouxhe (1906-1996), Dominique Rolin (b.1913), Marie Denis (1920-2006), Maud Frère (b.1923), Françoise Collin (b.1928), Jacqueline Harpman (b.1929), Françoise Mallet-Joris (b.1930) and later on Michèle Fabien (1945-1999), Nicole Malinconi (b.1946), Caroline Lamarche (b.1955) and obviously Amélie Nothomb (b.1967). Many of these writers have published in different genres and have shown an interest in similar themes to Brune – the family, mother-daughter relationships or intimate relationships for instance – as we will analyse below, while some of them, as we will see now, were more explicitly involved in various feminist debates.

⁶⁶ Suzanne Van Rokeghem, Jeanne Vercheval-Vervoort and Jacqueline Aubenas, *Des Femmes dans l'Histoire en Belgique, depuis 1830* (Brussels: Luc Pire, 2006), pp. 36-37. Caroline Gravière was the penname of Estelle Crèveœur. For all the other quoted writers and more details on 'Estelle Crèveœur', see Eliane Gubin, Catherine Jacques, Valérie Piette and Jean Puissant, *Dictionnaire des Femmes belges XIX^e et XX^e siècles* (Brussels: Racine, 2006), pp. 71-153.

⁶⁷ Van Rokeghem et al., *Des Femmes dans l'Histoire en Belgique*, op. cit., pp. 74-75. See also 'Marguerite Van de Wiele' in Eliane Gubin et al., *Dictionnaire des Femmes belges*, op. cit., pp. 554-56.

Indeed, writers such as Bourdouxhe, Lilar, Denis, Collin and Fabien are notable for their involvement in feminism or at least the feminist nature of their writing. Chronologically, Madeleine Bourdouxhe's work is a clear example of a feminist stance with regard to matrimony for instance. She published *La Femme de Gilles* in 1937 and in this novel, as in her other texts – written before the creation of the *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes* – the female character is a 'femme tout entière face à l'homme qui est l'autre, à la fois réponse et limite du désir. [...] Il y a [...] une acceptation de l'être femme dans toute sa dimension qui dépasse le féminisme en l'englobant'.⁶⁸ This text was important enough to be referred to by Simone de Beauvoir in *Le Deuxième sexe* in her demonstration of women's alienation in the institution of marriage.⁶⁹ Bourdouxhe uses female stereotypes 'afin de leur donner une consistance qu'ils ne possèdent pas dans le monde patriarcal et [...] renverser le système des valeurs traditionnel. Sa contribution à la conscientisation de la femme recèle une potentialité révolutionnaire'.⁷⁰

Subsequently, in the 1960s Belgian women writers such as Marie Denis and Françoise Collin were actively involved in the second wave of feminism and the fight for contraception and abortion. Marie Denis published *Les Jours trop longs* in 1961 which deals with abortion and tells about a woman who

a envie – et pas envie – d'un nouvel enfant qui s'annonce trop tôt. Elle écrit ce qu'une femme ressent quand elle est *prise*, comment elle espère que *ça va se décrocher*. Elle ne nomme pas l'avortement parce que la non-envie n'est pas nécessairement le rejet.⁷¹

Another of her novels, *L'Odeur du père*, was awarded the Prix Rossel in 1967 before being published in 1972. Her best known book is without a doubt *Le Petit Livre rouge des femmes* which was published for the first ever 'Journée des femmes' on 11th November 1972 which she co-organised and that was attended by Beauvoir, with whom she corresponded a great deal.⁷² Also actively involved in the Belgian –

⁶⁸ Marie Denis, 'Madeleine Bourdouxhe ou la ferveur absolue', *Voyelles*, 21 (July-August 1981), pp. 23-24.

⁶⁹ Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième sexe*, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1976 [1949]), II, p. 181.

⁷⁰ Josette Gousseau, 'Madeleine Bourdouxhe, l'engagement au féminin', in Renée Linkhorn (ed.), *La Belgique telle qu'elle s'écrit: perspectives sur les lettres belges de langue française* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), pp. 197-209 (p. 203).

⁷¹ Van Rokeghem et al., *Des Femmes dans l'Histoire en Belgique*, op. cit., p. 217. Emphasis in the original.

⁷² For more details about *Le Petit Livre rouge des femmes* see Marie Denis and Suzanne Van Rokeghem, *Le Féminisme est dans la rue: Belgique 1970-1975* (Brussels: Politique & Histoire, 1992),

and later French – feminist movements, was writer and philosopher Françoise Collin who co-founded the GRIF and *Les Cahiers du GRIF* in 1973, which identified ‘intuitivement les thèmes qui allaient rester les grandes articulations problématiques du féminisme: le travail, y compris domestique, la politique, le corps et la sexualité – y compris l’homosexualité – le langage, la création, les violences, la maternité’.⁷³ Her feminism is more visible in her essays and articles than in her literary production which include *Le Jour Fabuleux* (1960) and *Rose qui peut* (1961), said to be the first ‘nouveaux romans’ in Belgium.⁷⁴ However, her first novels ‘subvertissent spontanément l’intrigue linéaire au profit d’une temporalité interruptive, anarchique en quelque sorte’⁷⁵ and this ‘interruption’ and ‘anarchie’ characteristic of her works of fiction are reminiscent of the way she perceives the second wave of feminism as ‘résistance, voire mouvement de guérilla’.⁷⁶ The link between women’s writing and feminist commitment is therefore evident in the work of the writers just alluded to.

Contrasting with this tendency for a ‘écriture engagée’ during the second part of the 20th century, and although the type of feminist involvement changed over time, nowadays (and since the mid-1990s), the work of contemporary Belgian women writers bears the marks of individualism and does not generally appear to be as committed or politicised as that of previous generations – a trend also visible beyond the border, in France. This has led critics such as Jeannine Paque to conclude that some contemporary women writers ‘ne se sentent pas concernées par le combat des féministes’.⁷⁷ For although Brune’s work bears the marks, through her female characters and their stories, of some feminist battles and of the evolution of women’s lives throughout the 20th century, the writer states that she is not ‘militante sur ce front-là’ but simply ‘le produit du féminisme, de celles qui ont vraiment trempé leurs

pp. 71-81. This women’s day was different from the International Women’s Day, celebrated on 8th March and which was officially recognised in 1977 by the United Nations.

⁷³ Florence Rochefort and Danielle Haase-Dubosc, ‘Entretien avec Françoise Collin. Philosophe et intellectuelle féministe’, *CLIO. Histoire, femmes et sociétés*, 13 (2001), 195-210. <<http://clio.revues.org/index1545.html>> [accessed 5 January 2011]. GRIF = Groupe de Recherche et d’Information Féministes. For more information on the GRIF see Denis and Van Rokeghem, *Le Féminisme est dans la rue*, op. cit., pp. 133-40.

⁷⁴ Jacques-Gérard Linze, ‘Les retombées du Nouveau Roman’ (Brussels: Académie royale de langue et littératures françaises de Belgique, 1988), p. 9 <<http://arllfb.be/ebibliotheque/communication/linze110688.pdf>> [accessed 2 December 2010].

⁷⁵ Rochefort and Haase-Dubosc, ‘Entretien avec Françoise Collin’, op. cit.

⁷⁶ Ibid. Françoise Collin stresses in the same paragraph that feminism ‘est passé majoritairement de l’insurrection à l’institution, avec des gains certains, et avec des pertes’.

⁷⁷ Jeannine Paque, ‘Des femmes écrivent’, *Textyles*, 14 (1997), 77-94 (p. 80).

chemises pour revendiquer des droits et des égalités dans tous les domaines'.⁷⁸ This is confirmed by the content of her novels, which do not come across as being 'obviously' feminist – quite the contrary in some cases – compared to the novels of some of the writers just described. As it stands, for Brune feminism is, as 'for the new generation [...] a taken-for-granted base line, a (rather nebulous) given'.⁷⁹ Thus, there has been an obvious shift in the perception of feminism and Brune's attitude towards feminism is widespread amongst contemporary Francophone women writers, just as attitudes to feminism amongst women in general have changed.

This distance from feminist ideas and actions on the part of some contemporary writers contrasts with the explicit commitment of some earlier women writers such as Bourdouxhe or Denis, for whom it was essential. It would appear that the current trend in women's writing is therefore for writers to differentiate themselves from their predecessors (just like the current generation of Belgian writers wishes to leave behind the issue of national identity) by not putting feminist concerns and issues at the forefront of their texts while nonetheless articulating their stories around women's lives and problems. Shirley Jordan stresses that 'a woman may therefore think of herself loosely as a feminist but not be a feminist writer and dissociate her writing from feminist points of view'.⁸⁰ This vision better summarises Elisa Brune's perception of her writing as, although she aims to study human experience as a whole in her novels (as is the case with other French contemporary writers), her work still focuses – consciously or not – on female protagonists and women's experience in particular, bringing to the fore female concerns, emotions and issues.⁸¹

To sum up, the contemporary generation of Francophone women writers has a different approach to writing from their predecessors even though they continue to tackle similar themes and still tend to place female characters at the centre of their work, suggesting that despite the fact we are now supposedly in an era of post-

⁷⁸ See my unpublished interview with Elisa Brune on 27 August 2007. Appendix B, pp. 248-49. For more details on feminism and history in Belgium see Van Rokeghem et al., *Des Femmes dans l'Histoire en Belgique*, op. cit.; Magda Michielsens, *175 ans de femmes. Égalités et inégalités en Belgique: 1830-2005* (Brussels: Publication du Conseil de l'Égalité des Chances entre Hommes et Femmes, 2005).

⁷⁹ Shirley Ann Jordan, *Contemporary French Women's Writing: Women's Visions, Women's Voices, Women's Lives* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004), p. 39.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

feminism, women's writing remains a favoured tool to implicitly denounce and combat gender inequalities and issues. Thus, Jeannine Paque reminds us that

l'écriture des femmes *demeure* un moyen de combattre précisément par la transgression les images toutes faites: les clichés sociaux et les clichés littéraires. Même métaphorisée, l'horreur du monde n'échappe pas à la réflexion féminine. La dimension historique peut se développer à partir du quotidien des faits, la valeur sociologique se dégager du sordide le plus individuel.⁸²

In a sense, this is what Elisa Brune does with some of her novels: through specific portrayals (that might be taken to be a reduced vision of society), she takes individual cases of suffering to illustrate more or less widespread issues and tendencies in society, turning these novels into sociological documents. The sociological value of some of her novels is also reinforced by the fact that she tends to pick topical subjects for her books, often drawn from actual stories, as will be looked at in chapter 2, the best examples being *La Tournante* and *Blanche cassé* which, like numerous narratives from contemporary women writers, 'disent l'horreur à vivre, dans la famille, dans la société; avec la mère, avec un homme, avec les autres, avec soi-même'.⁸³ In this sense, some of Brune's narratives echo Annie Ernaux's belief that 'le familial, le social, c'est tout un', demonstrating the complexity of some of the issues women can be faced with in Western societies and the ways in which their actions are still scrutinised and judged by those around them.⁸⁴

If we now turn our attention more specifically to the themes explored by Elisa Brune in her novels, some comparisons can also be drawn with other Belgian women writers. It is worth noting here that many narratives by contemporary women writers feature recurring themes such as 'l'exclusion, l'invisibilité, la blessure, la dissolution, mais aussi leur contraire'.⁸⁵ They 'tendent à imposer une image de la réalité' and this is the principal argument developed throughout the analysis that follows.⁸⁶ This characteristic of late 20th- and 21st-century literature has also been noted by Dominique Viart who noticed there was a renewal in literature from the early 1980s, when writers started to shift again from experimental writing back towards a form of

⁸² Paque, 'Des femmes écrivent', op. cit., p. 84. My emphasis.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 87.

⁸⁴ Annie Ernaux, *Les Années* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), p. 28.

⁸⁵ Paque, 'Des femmes écrivent', op. cit., p. 86.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

writing which is more in touch with reality, ‘en se rapprochant du monde’.⁸⁷ Thus, ‘leurs œuvres manifestent notamment une sensibilité littéraire retrouvée aux questions sociales et même, plus ponctuellement, aux réflexions de la sociologie, qu’il s’agisse pour elles d’aborder les questions du “réel”, de l’histoire commune, des divisions sociales ou des faits divers’.⁸⁸ Although this tendency is not exclusive to women’s writing, it appears that for some, ‘les écrivaines sont [...] plus proches de la réalité vécue au quotidien que leurs collègues-hommes’.⁸⁹ In line with this tendency, Elisa Brune explores difficult topical issues such as that of gang rape in her documentary novel *La Tournante* but, as will be shown in the next chapter, she is neither the only nor the first contemporary writer to do so. Indeed, *La Tournante*, in its source of inspiration, is not dissimilar to Françoise Mallet-Joris’ *Sept démons dans la ville* (1999) which echoes ‘le scandale pédophile qui a secoué la Belgique dans la deuxième moitié de la décennie 90’.⁹⁰ Furthermore, Brune’s interest in exploring personal disasters and painful destinies through some of her narratives is also found in the work of Belgian author Nicole Malinconi. Malinconi’s narratives and topics may have served as one of Brune’s models for tackling not only difficult issues but also ones directly drawn from reality and that she felt connected to, just as Malinconi felt moved by the women she met while working as a social worker. For that matter, Malinconi has explained that after *Hôpital silence* (1984) ‘les livres qu[’elle a] écrits ont trouvé leur origine dans la réalité, pourrait-on dire, dans les vies et les histoires qui ont traversé les [siennes], que la matière de [son] écriture s’est trouvée là, plutôt que dans les histoires imaginaires’.⁹¹ However, contrary to Malinconi, who does not believe that ‘l’écriture ait une mission ou un but; écrire à [son] sens, ne prouve rien, n’agit en rien’,⁹² Elisa Brune ‘préfère les livres qui font réfléchir et, à écrire, les livres qui vous transforment’.⁹³ Just like any reader or writer, Brune clearly has her own views, but she strives in her writing to leave readers the

⁸⁷ Dominique Viart, ‘Littérature et sociologie, les champs du dialogue’, in Philippe Baudorre, Dominique Rabaté and Dominique Viart (eds.), *Littérature et sociologie* (Pessac: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2007), pp. 11-28 (p. 15).

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Van Rokeghem et al., *Des Femmes dans l’Histoire en Belgique*, op. cit., p. 278.

⁹⁰ Gorceix, *Littérature francophone de Belgique et de Suisse*, op. cit., p. 65.

⁹¹ Nicole Malinconi, ‘Ecriture du Réel’, in Ginette Michaux (ed.), *Roman-récit* (Carnières/Morlanwelz: Lansman, 2004), p. 63.

⁹² Gorceix, *Littérature francophone de Belgique et de Suisse*, op. cit., p. 68.

⁹³ See my unpublished interview with Elisa Brune on 27 August 2007. Appendix B, p. 252.

freedom to make up their own minds and even though we may think we ‘know’ what her opinion is, she quite deliberately endeavours not to preach or lecture.

With regard to other themes Elisa Brune has tackled in several of her novels, which will be closely analysed in subsequent chapters, it is noticeable that just as the first novels of Dominique Rolin, including *Les Marais* (1942) and *Deux Sœurs* (1946), are concerned with ‘le noyau familial, son évolution et son éclatement incontournable’, Elisa Brune too, in *Blanche cassé* and *La Tournante*, ‘circonscriit très précisément son champ d’investigation au noyau familial qui engendre à la fois le sujet et le coince dans de mémorables impasses’.⁹⁴ Dominique Rolin’s novels referred to above are based on the creation, crisis and dislocation of the family circle as well as marital conflicts and impossible communication between generations, features which can be observed in some of Brune’s novels although, unlike Brune, Rolin’s writing is mainly autobiographical.⁹⁵ Family, a theme that has been explored by previous generations of Belgian women writers, remains common in contemporary Francophone women’s writing especially when it comes to mother-daughter relationships.⁹⁶ In addition, as Shirley Jordan points out, in contemporary writing, family

provides broader *fin de siècle* questions of origins and belonging with their intimate dimension and, as the most basic social unit within which individuals are contained and formed, it is a frequent subject of scrutiny. The spotlight generally falls on relationships between parents or between parents and children.⁹⁷

If some of Elisa Brune’s narratives follow this pattern, they differ from it too in that they stress the importance of sibling relationships and of alternative structures to the traditional family which, according to Jordan, is not characteristic of contemporary narrative fictions, an aspect which will be dealt with in chapter 3.⁹⁸

Within the broad theme of family, the topic of the difficult mother-daughter relationship tackled in *Blanche cassé* and *La Tournante*, also a common feature in contemporary women’s writing, is reminiscent of Jacqueline Harpman’s *La fille*

⁹⁴ Gorceix, *Littérature francophone de Belgique et de Suisse*, op. cit., p. 64; Quaghebeur, *Balises pour l’Histoire des Lettres belges de Langue française*, op. cit., p. 310.

⁹⁵ Jean-Pierre Damour, ‘Dominique Rolin’ in Jean-Pierre Beaumarchais, Daniel Couty and Alain Rey (eds.), *Dictionnaire des écrivains de langue française*, 2 vols (Paris: Larousse, 2001), II, pp. 1579-80. Both Brune and Rolin started their careers by publishing short stories, but, unlike Elisa Brune, Dominique Rolin moved to France.

⁹⁶ Van Rokeghem et al., *Des Femmes dans l’Histoire en Belgique*, op. cit., p. 278.

⁹⁷ Jordan, *Contemporary French Women’s Writing*, op. cit., p. 48.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

démantelée (1990), Françoise Collin's *Le Rendez-vous* (1988) or Malinconci's *Nous deux* (1993) while family relationships with their difficulties and communication problems as well as distance within a couple are themes dealt with by Maud Frère in *Les Jumeaux millénaires* (Prix Rossel in 1962). From the various examples presented here and her choice of themes linked to the family sphere, it would seem that Elisa Brune is following in the footsteps of prominent Belgian and Francophone figures of women's writing and can be considered as having both drawn from the writing of previous generations while being influenced by women writers of her own generation.

With regard to Elisa Brune's exploration of interaction between genders, domination and sexuality, this approach is obviously not unique to her; explicit sex features in many contemporary women writers' work and Brune's texts *La Tentation d'Edouard* and *Un Homme est une rose* are certainly no exception. To a certain extent, these novels share some similarities with Caroline Lamarche's texts such as *La Nuit l'après-midi* (1995) or *Carnets d'une soumise de province* (2004) in which sexuality is at the core of the plot.⁹⁹ If explicit sexuality has become a common feature of contemporary writing, eroticism and intimate relationships were also at the heart of the work of major Belgian literary figures from the previous generation such as Suzanne Lilar with *Le Burlador* (1945), *La Confession anonyme* (1960) or *Le Couple* (1963). Lilar's take on the theme is remarkable in terms of women's writing as she wishes to abolish 'les différences entre l'homme et la femme [...] et défend la notion d'androgynie'.¹⁰⁰ Lilar was indeed more involved in the political debate around women and sexuality than Elisa Brune or other contemporary women writers, with publications such as *Le Malentendu du Deuxième sexe* (1969) written in reaction to Beauvoir's famous 'on ne naît pas femme, on le devient' and in which she considers the idea that Beauvoir 'trompe les femmes avec un livre bâclé'.¹⁰¹ Far from

⁹⁹ In *La Nuit l'après-midi* (Paris: Minuit, 1998), 'une femme [...] livre les séances sado-masochistes qu'elle vit dans un hôtel de banlieue avec un individu anonyme'. Quaghebeur, *Anthologie de la Littérature française de Belgique*, op. cit., p. 360.

¹⁰⁰ Evelyne Wilwerth, *Visages de la littérature féminine* (Brussels: Pierre Mardaga éditeur, 1987), p. 214. Like Brune, Lilar had a very varied career, being both a writer and journalist, specialising in law and writing novels, plays and essays.

¹⁰¹ Van Rokeghem et al., *Des Femmes dans l'Histoire en Belgique*, op. cit., p. 210. Emphasis in the original. For more details see also the TV interview with Suzanne Lilar on *Le Malentendu du Deuxième sexe* on <<http://www.ina.fr/art-et-culture/litterature/video/I04236269/le-malentendu-du-2eme-sexe-par-suzanne-lilar.fr.html>> [accessed 13 December 2010].

being an anti-feminist text, *Le Malentendu du Deuxième sexe* offers a different vision from Beauvoir's on relationships between men and women. Lilar is yet another good illustration of the difference in political purpose between the generation of women writers who wrote during the second waves of feminism and those currently writing in this era of 'post-feminism' with no self-proclaimed political or feminist drive.

Finally, as will be explored in detail in the following chapter, Elisa Brune has adopted many different genres, from short stories to essays and different types of novels. This, combined with the fact that she has on several occasions written two novels on the same topic, indicates that she is following a similar path to Jacqueline Harpman who has been labelled 'inclassable, étant donné qu'elle touche à tous les genres littéraires'.¹⁰² Harpman has indeed sometimes 'recycled' or reworked the same story in different books as is the case with *Le Bonheur dans le crime* (1993) and *En toute impunité* (2005) whilst Brune did so with *La Tentation d'Edouard* and *Un Homme est une rose*. But, if Brune appears to be a follower in many regards, she is more distinctive when it comes to the genre of novels of scientific popularisation which will be analysed in our next chapter, since few writers have adopted this approach. There are however two genres that several Belgian women writers excel in and that Elisa Brune has not yet explored: autobiography and poetry. From Yourcenar's *Le Labyrinthe du monde* (1974) and Lilar's *Enfance Gantoise* (1976) to Rolin's *Infini chez soi* (1980), Malinconi's *Nous Deux* (1993) and *Da Solo* (1997), Harpman's *La Fille Démantelée* (1990) or even Amélie Nothomb's *Métaphysique des tubes* (2000), it is evident that autobiography is a popular genre among Belgian women writers but one that Elisa Brune is keen to avoid in order to preserve her privacy.¹⁰³ Indeed, although some details and anecdotes of her life transpire from her novels, she endeavours never to be 'totalemtent impliquée' and fears mixing her private life with her writing would make her vulnerable.¹⁰⁴ This aspect is reinforced by her use of a penname to separate her private and professional lives. Belgium has

¹⁰² Livre Groupe, *Femme de Lettres Belge: Jacqueline Harpman, Amélie Nothomb, Alexandra David-Neel, Suzanne Lilar, Anne Duguel, Irène Hamoire, Marie Gevers* (NP: Books LLC, 2010), p. 127.

¹⁰³ For more details about autobiographies and autofictions by Belgian women writers including publications by Vera Feyder, Isabelle Spaak, Lydia Flem, Régine Vandamme, see Jeannine Paque, 'L'autobiographie au féminin en Belgique francophone: Ecriture individuelle, identité collective?', in Bainbrigg et al., *Francographies*, op. cit., pp. 277-90. See also Vanessa Gemis, 'La biographie genrée: le genre au service du genre', in *CoNTEXTES*, 3 (2008) <<http://contextes.revues.org/index2573.html>> [accessed 11 April 2011].

¹⁰⁴ Henry, 'Elisa Brune, à livre ouvert (ou presque)', op. cit., p. 34.

also produced some fine poets including Claire Lejeune (1926-2008), Liliane Wouters (b.1930) and Colette Nys-Mazure (b.1939) to name but a few. Unlike autobiography, there are no obvious personal reasons for Brune to avoid writing poetry but it is reputedly more difficult to achieve success (critical and financial) in publishing poetry than novels and it also implies a close attention to language and style, aspects which are not necessarily Brune's strongest point or interest, as will be seen in the next chapter.

It is evident that, as Suzanne Van Rokeghem puts it, 'elles ont des choses à dire, les écrivaines francophones de Belgique. Elles sont inventives, créatives, remarquables et d'ailleurs remarquées, chez elles comme dans les autres pays de la francophonie! [...] elles sont nombreuses [...] [et] actives dans des domaines différents'.¹⁰⁵ Elisa Brune has many features in common with both past and contemporary Francophone women writers whether in terms of the themes she has focused her novels around or the genres in which she has published. But she is also clearly distanced – like most contemporary writers – from an explicit interest in issues of national identity and feminism, that were so central to the writing of previous generations. Individualistic, as so many writers now are, Elisa Brune's writing also displays some distinctive features such as the omnipresence of verisimilitude or 'effet de réel' throughout her texts, the exploration of the genre of the scientific novel and the mix of several genres in most narratives, all exploring some aspects of socio-cultural contemporary society. We will now analyse these characteristics of her novels, also taking in intertextual and stylistic considerations.

¹⁰⁵ Van Rokeghem et al., *Des Femmes dans l'Histoire en Belgique*, op. cit., p. 278.

Chapter 2

Style, Genres and Intertextuality

Elisa Brune is a versatile writer, who, as we have already remarked, enjoys experimenting with a range of genres while remaining close to a certain form of realism throughout her work, enabling her to explore her various interests and ‘l’intellectuel aussi bien que l’émotionnel’.¹ This chapter will explore these different genres, looking specifically at scientific popularisation, the epistolary novel and the documentary novel. We will also analyse how each genre is linked to socio-cultural reality as perceived by Elisa Brune herself and how actual events, experience and intertextuality influence her writing.²

Intertextuality, in the broad sense, is an intrinsic part of Elisa Brune’s writing and is interwoven closely into her fiction. We take intertextuality to mean that:

[...] any text is essentially a mosaic of references to or quotations from other texts; a text is not a closed system and does not exist in isolation. [...] Intertextuality is not simply a matter of influences which pass from one author to another, but of the multiple and complex relations that exist between texts in both synchronic and diachronic terms. ‘Influence’ is simply a mode of intertextuality.³

A more appropriate term could actually be that of ‘intermédialité’ since Elisa Brune makes references to different socio-cultural media and as a result, in her texts ‘se fondent images de toutes natures, musiques et textes variés’.⁴ Indeed, whatever genre or theme she chooses, Elisa Brune is keen to keep her writing close to a specific socio-cultural context and to facts with which her readership is likely to be familiar. She does so in different ways, by using her own experience or actual events as a starting point for a story or by sprinkling throughout her narratives information such as places that exist, names of scientists and scientific theories and well-known films,

¹ Stéphanie Dambroise, ‘Elisa Brune’, *Axelle*, 60, June 2003, pp. 28-30 (p. 28).

² What we might call the conventional novel is also explored by Elisa Brune in *Blanche cassé*, where we have a single narrator and a straightforward, linear narrative. This type of novel will not be analysed here but *Blanche cassé* will be specifically dealt with in chapters 3, 4 and 5. The plot of *Blanche cassé* still corresponds to Brune’s habit of remaining close to a certain type of realism since it explores the fast ascent and long fall of Clarisse and according to Jacques Dubois in *Les romanciers du réel*, ‘l’un de leurs scénarios favoris consiste à suivre la courbe d’un destin qui commence par une montée rapide et se poursuit dans une dégringolade douloureuse’. Jacques Dubois in *Les romanciers du réel de Balzac à Simenon* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), p. 51.

³ David Macey, *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), pp. 203-4.

⁴ Viart and Vercier, *La littérature française au présent*, op. cit., p. 293.

authors or books, as will be shown below when looking specifically at each genre. These references or ‘détails concrets’ as Barthes describes them, are so many indications of realism in Brune’s work.⁵ This is also visible in the way some of her characters reflect and express views on contemporary society, making them mouthpieces on a given topic (education or attitudes to love for instance), as will be more precisely analysed in the following chapters. Thus, through her characters, Elisa Brune broaches some topical issues on which her readership will potentially come to reflect. For texts affect the reader during the reading process or, in the words of Lois Tyson, ‘readers do not passively consume the meaning presented to them by an objective literary text; rather they actively make the meaning they find in literature’.⁶

In addition, by regularly referring to actual facts, people, theories etc., in other words to what the reader – possibly – knows, Elisa Brune anchors her narratives in a specific and recognisable context that gives the reader a further sense that the story s/he is reading is plausible, thus corresponding to Riffaterre and Schaeffer’s view that ‘une fiction doit toujours combiner des marques de fictionnalité avec une convention de vérité, de plausibilité, afin que les spectateurs puissent réagir à l’histoire comme si elle était vraie’.⁷ These references, while firmly grounding Brune’s work in a mimetic framework, can also encourage the reader to either reflect on a given societal issue (in *La Tournante* for instance) or encourage her/him to expand further the boundaries of their knowledge (in Brune’s scientific writing for example), but they are also a subtle way for Elisa Brune to show her readers they share the same cultural references. For if ‘human nature is a central concept for realism [...] its significance cannot be understood in isolation from the environmental context’.⁸ In a sense, Brune is writing the opposite of metafiction. Indeed, if metafiction never lets the reader forget s/he is reading a fictional work,

⁵ Barthes, ‘L’effet de réel’, in Genette and Todorov (eds.), *Littérature et réalité*, op. cit., p. 88.

⁶ Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1999), p. 154.

⁷ Michael Riffaterre and Jean-Marie Schaeffer are referred to in Jean-Paul Colleyn, ‘Fiction et fictions en anthropologie’, *L’Homme*, 175-176 (2005), 147-64 (p. 157). Alison Lee also observes that in the 19th century historical novel “‘real” people, places and events were included or alluded to in order to convince the reader of the “truth” of the fictional ones’. Alison Lee, *Realism and Power: Postmodern British Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 52.

⁸ David Levy, *Realism: An Essay in Interpretation and Social Reality* (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1981), p. 103.

Brune's narratives constantly remind the reader of the socio-cultural environment and 'détails concrets' with which s/he is familiar.

With the extensive use of both popular and more 'intellectual' intertextuality in various forms in her work, Elisa Brune is representative of yet another trend amongst contemporary writers and women writers, displayed, for example, by Annie Ernaux.⁹ Indeed, according to Shirley Jordan:

Marked by an abundance of references to cultural forms and to specific works outside itself, the postmodern work is ostentatiously intertextual, indulging in extravagant borrowing practices. [...] The postmodern text also blurs distinctions between 'high' and 'popular' culture, conspicuously creating itself with reference to both. It speculates on who we are and who we were by dragging the past into the present through ironic heritage play. [...] In addition, the levelling of high and popular cultural forms and references has doubtless made it easier for women to bring to literature important aspects of their everyday lives which may previously have been considered mundane. Literature feels more accessible, less elitist, and capable of reaching a wider readership and this is broadly positive for women writers and readers.¹⁰

Brune is therefore a postmodern writer in the sense that her work can be characterised by intertextuality as a narrative mode and she appears here again to be working with trends that are popular not only with the public but also with other writers, emphasising once more her links to them. The use of both high and popular cultural references is a strategy that enables her to target several types of reader and make sure they all get something out of her novels, either by confirming what they already know or by encouraging them to develop their knowledge or reflect on new references. The usefulness of intertextuality and other references to the socio-cultural context will be explored in more detail for each genre later in this chapter.

Elisa Brune's scientific journalistic work in parallel to her career as a writer influences her writing in terms of her desire to observe and report on various topics and issues. Just as she sees journalism as a way of commenting on the world, so too do her novels reflect this desire to have an impact and trigger a potential individual reader response while remaining as objective as possible in the representation of society. As Dambroise explains, Elisa Brune 'excelle dans l'observation du quotidien [...] [et montre] une attention constante à décrire objectivement des êtres qui se marginalisent parce qu'ils prennent une autre trajectoire que celle habituellement

⁹ For a discussion of intertextuality in Annie Ernaux's work see Elise Hugué-Léger, *Annie Ernaux, une poétique de la transgression* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 69-112.

¹⁰ Jordan, *Contemporary French Women's Writing*, op. cit., pp. 32, 33.

admise'.¹¹ In this at least, Elisa Brune's style and work can be compared to Françoise Mallet-Joris's, whose novels such as *Café Céleste* (1958) describe a believable world in a realist style and have been said to 'remain concerned with typical human needs and desires'.¹² This characteristic is also one Elisa Brune shares with Pierre Mertens whose work 'constitue un miroir critique de l'histoire contemporaine sur fond d'expérience individuelle', while its author is considered to be an 'observateur pénétrant de notre époque'.¹³ Therefore, Brune uses literature as a means of representing the society she lives in and her books provide a valuable socio-cultural portrait of some institutions (family, education) and actors (scientists, men and women) in Belgian and/or French society at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century. Her approach corresponds to Tzvetan Todorov's assessment that

[la] littérature est la première des sciences humaines; pendant de longs siècles, elle était aussi la seule. Son objet, ce sont les comportements humains, les motivations psychiques, les interactions entre les hommes. Elle reste toujours une source inépuisable de connaissance sur l'homme. [...] C'est d'ailleurs la grande raison qui nous pousse vers la lecture. S'il n'y avait pas cette perspective d'une meilleure connaissance du monde, pourquoi nous fatiguerions-nous à lire les aventures de gens que nous ne connaissons pas, pire, qui n'existent pas?¹⁴

Brune actually goes further than Todorov's analysis as some of her characters are based on actual people's lives, reinforcing the illusion of a perfect mimesis of reality and emphasising how, as Damian Grant says of Flaubert, she uses reality as a springboard for her writing.¹⁵ So, as previously stated, Brune is not interested in writing her own life, but is interested in the lives of others. Her desire to remain close to a certain socio-cultural framework and inform her readership leads her to use what may be considered a scientific approach to literature, combined with different devices to link her texts to a background most readers can relate to.

As far as style is concerned, it is not so much how Brune writes but why and what she writes that is worth studying. The 'écriture fragmentaire' of some of her

¹¹ Dambroise, 'Elisa Brune', op. cit., p. 29. This comment particularly applies to the main characters of *Blanche cassé* and *La Tournante* but is also valid with regard to Vincent in *Petite révision du ciel* and *Les Jupiters chauds* or to Edgar/d and his family in *Relations d'incertitude*.

¹² Lucille Frackman Becker, *Françoise Mallet-Joris* (Boston: Twayne, 1985), p. 128.

¹³ Gorceix, *Littérature francophone de Belgique et de Suisse*, op. cit., p. 69.

¹⁴ Tzvetan Todorov, 'La littérature est la première des sciences humaines', *Sciences Humaines*, August-September 2010, p. 36.

¹⁵ Damian Grant, *Realism* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982 [1970]), p. 59.

novels, such as *Petite révision du ciel*, *La Tournante* or *Les Jupiters chauds* (although the fragments are not numbered in the latter two as they are in *Petite révision du ciel*), cannot fail to remind us of the style of some of Nicole Malinconi's or Caroline Lamarche's pieces. It is also notable that her writing does not appear to bear the marks of her Belgian origin as no 'belgicisms' are found in her work.¹⁶ Thus, her writing style is one of the least exciting features of her work and it is clearly not her main focus when she writes. She prefers to give detailed, sometimes report-like descriptions, injecting humour, references to 'détails concrets' and science in her texts rather than write in a complex, refined, sophisticated style. Her writing style is yet another element that is consistent with that of French contemporary women writers' texts, in which

la langue [...] est le plus souvent neutre, proche du langage parlé [...]. Rares sont aujourd'hui les femmes qui travaillent considérablement leur écriture, comme le firent autrefois Monique Wittig ou Hélène Cixous: c'est qu'il ne s'agit plus de trouver la manière propre d'une écriture spécifiquement 'féminine'.¹⁷

Hence Brune's writing style has been described as being without 'fioritures'.¹⁸ She aims above all to be realistic and/or informative through the different themes she chooses to tackle in her novels. Thus *La Tournante* for instance was said to be of 'un réalisme effrayant'¹⁹ and the style of the novel is quite lively, with the use of a language close most of the time to spoken language, as will be discussed below, while the register used by the characters in *La Tentation d'Edouard* is higher and of a more intellectual type. However, as far as Brune's scientific novels (and essays) are concerned, critic and poet Colette Nys-Mazure comments for instance that 'on peut déplorer un style souvent hâtif qui gagnerait à être émondé de certaines platitudes',²⁰ confirming our view that the style is not the most interesting aspect of her work.

Another recurring aspect of Brune's novels, which can be considered a stylistic characteristic of her writing, is their unresolved conclusions. Indeed, her novels tend

¹⁶ For details on 'belgicisms' see Michel Francard, Geneviève Geron, Régine Wilmet, Aude Wirth, *Dictionnaire des belgicisms* (Brussels: De Boeck-Duculot, 2010). It would be interesting to study the original manuscripts for Brune's texts and see if 'belgicisms' never figure in her writing or whether this is something that has been edited out of her texts.

¹⁷ Viart and Vercier, *La littérature française au présent*, op. cit., p. 340.

¹⁸ André Gascht, 'Elisa Brune, entre ciel et terre', op. cit., p. 15.

¹⁹ Stéphanie Goffaux, 'La Tournante donne le tournis', *CritiquesLibres.com* <<http://www.critiqueslibres.com/i.php/vcrit/1572>> [accessed 13 November 2005].

²⁰ Colette Nys-Mazure, 'Elisa Brune, *L'Unité de la connaissance*, *Les Jupiters chauds*, *Penser c'est autre chose*', *Indications* online <www.indications.be/brune59.html> [accessed 01 November 2005].

to finish with a silence and to remain open-ended and she claims this is something she does on purpose; she believes there's nothing worse than a novel which gives all the answers since this is not how life works – 'la vie n'est pas comme ça, aucune boucle ne se boucle avant la mort'.²¹ In addition, she considers that open endings enhance the reader's experience by enabling a reflection on what could happen next:

Ça lui laisse la liberté de reprendre le flambeau en imaginant la suite parce que fermer la fin c'est effectivement le prendre pour un benêt comme si on lui donnait la dernière béquée [...]. Je suis très opposée à toute démarche de 'spoon-feeding'. Il faut donner à manger d'une façon qui entretient l'appétit et qui l'ouvre davantage plutôt que de rassasier et l'idéal dans un livre c'est d'amener le lecteur à vivre plus, c'est donc de le projeter dans un avenir et sûrement pas de lui fermer la porte au nez en disant 'voilà c'est terminé on n'en parle plus'.²²

Even though Elisa Brune justifies the open-endedness of her novels, we would argue that the ending of some of her novels such as *Blanche cassé* and *La Tournante* can be viewed as unsuccessful and unsatisfying, for if the deaths of Clarisse and Mélissa give a sense of closure, the uncertainty in which Bénédicte and Marion are left afterwards leaves the reader with a feeling that a piece of the puzzle is missing.²³ According to Vickie Britton, by the end of a novel, 'the hero should solve his own problem', and this is clearly not the case in this instance.²⁴ Whilst Bénédicte feels liberated by Clarisse's death – 'libérée d'elle' (BC 302) – the book ends on her failed suicide attempt, suggesting the death of her sister does not solve her problems. So 'killing' one character does not bring closure for those left and may still leave the readers not feeling fully satisfied.

As far as the two epistolary novels are concerned, both close on correspondence, one of the characters clearly indicating they do not wish any further contact. On this occasion the ending appears to be dictated by the genre itself since it is a common way of ending an epistolary novel in which 'l'action est close par une lettre révélatrice ou conclusive qui marque la fin de l'histoire'.²⁵ In this instance then, even though the ending leaves the possibility for further exchanges between the

²¹ See my unpublished interview with Elisa Brune on 27 August 2007. Appendix B, p. 261.

²² Ibid.

²³ Throughout the rest of our analysis, quotations from *Blanche cassé* and *La Tournante* will be respectively followed by BC and LT and the page number.

²⁴ Vickie Britton, 'Writing the perfect novel ending', *Writing Fiction*, 3 February 2009 <<http://www.suite101.com/content/writing-the-perfect-ending-a82380>> [accessed 20 August 2011].

²⁵ Alice Achille, Odile Deverne, Michèle Gellereau and Evelyne Thoizet, *La Lettre et le récit* (Paris: Bertrand-Lacoste, 1992), p. 46.

characters, Elisa Brune has simply followed one convention of the epistolary genre and is therefore less likely to be criticised by her readership for it. However, particularly in the case of *La Tentation d'Edouard*, the reader is left with a feeling of anti-climax. Although the characters eventually do meet, which consequently brings the plot to a close, their encounter is very brief (30 pages), immediately followed by the closing letter, making the ending very abrupt compared to the slow build-up to the meeting (340 pages).²⁶

Nevertheless, if the open-endedness of some of her narratives may seem to be an easy way out, that of *Petite révision du ciel* with Vincent's decision to go back to university was strategically wise since it enabled Brune to pick up her character where she had left him in order to write the sequel, *Les Jupiters chauds*. In this instance it was a good strategy but as far as *Les Jupiters chauds* is concerned, the conclusion on a kiss under the 'Arc de Triomphe' can be characterised as a 'runaway train' ending for it 'comes up suddenly, catching the reader off guard' and suggests Brune has not really taken the trouble to lead up to it properly.²⁷ Although Elisa Brune claims to have thought the ending of her narrative through and describes the ending as 'une logique narrative' linked to Vincent's trajectory,²⁸ the closure in fact leaves the reader with the impression that s/he has been denied something and according to Patterson this 'usually stems from a writer's "need to finish"'.²⁹

For many readers, feeling let down by the unresolved plot or a sense of anti-climax, it might therefore be the case that the endings of her novels are perceived as a recurring weakness. Indeed, although Brune's desire for open-endedness in her novels and her avoidance of giving all the answers is in line with her wish to remain objective throughout her novels, it may also be questioned as it can come across as

²⁶ Unlike an epistolary novel such as *Les Liaisons dangereuses* which finishes with the illness, death or penitence of various characters, in *La Tentation d'Edouard*, once the characters meet, nothing else happens and the reader does not have any information about the impact or consequences their meeting has on their respective lives. Choderlos de Laclos, *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (Paris: Flammarion, 1996 [1782]).

²⁷ Edward Patterson, 'How to End a Novel', *Dancaster Creative* <<http://www.dancaster.com/writing/08.htm>> [accessed 20 August 2011].

²⁸ According to Brune, Vincent's trajectory is 'très ascendant en ce qui concerne sa vie professionnelle; par contre il a un revers grave dans sa vie sentimentale. La fin du livre, c'est le moment du rebond, où il prend un nouveau départ sur ce plan-là, symbolisé dans ce baiser, qui est un moment de silence'. Elisa Brune in Carmelo Virone, 'Le ciel de César, d'Alexandre et d'Elisa', *Le Carnet et les Instants*, 125, 15 November 2002-15 January 2003, pp. 18-21 (p. 21).

²⁹ Patterson, 'How to End a Novel', op. cit.

an easy way out. Since her novels are driven by plot rather than by style or psychology, once she ‘runs out’ of plot, it sometimes appears that she has nothing more to say and hence rushes to wrap up her ending. In that sense, Brune’s flaw would tend to confirm George Eliot’s view that ‘conclusions are the weak point of most authors’.³⁰

Since Elisa Brune’s writing combines several ‘*approches du réel*’, through exploration of ‘*faits divers*’, biographies or science as well as through the mix of actual events and people with fiction, this distinction between fiction and narration of reality can be blurred for the reader. Elisa Brune’s narratives are not only plausible, they are often (partial) representations of something or someone real. In what follows, the analysis will focus on the different genres in which Elisa Brune has written and their characteristics as well as how intertextuality is included in each of them and with which objectives.

Novels of scientific popularisation – *Petite révision du ciel, Les Jupiters chauds and Relations d’incertitude*

This section will look at scientific novels by Elisa Brune, two of which will not be dealt with in the following thematic chapters.³¹ In *Petite révision du ciel, Les Jupiters chauds* and *Relations d’incertitude* (which will be touched upon in chapter 4) there are links between the narrators’ story and science.³² In *Petite révision du ciel* and *Les Jupiters chauds*, the main character Vincent turns his life around and goes from being employed by an insurance company to becoming an astrophysicist while *Relations d’incertitude* is the biography of scientist Edgar Gunzig.³³ In these three

³⁰ Gordon S. Haight (ed.), *The George Eliot Letters*, 7 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954-55), II, p. 324.

³¹ Elisa Brune has also written scientific essays but they will not be analysed in this study. Her first attempt – a micro-essay – was *L’Unité de la connaissance: récit de voyage en terre savante* (Brussels: Bernard Gilson, 2002), a conference report. She pretended to be a scientific journalist, even though she had no link with a newspaper or journal, and wrote a book based on the notes she had taken. In 2004 she published another conference report, *Le goût piquant de l’univers, récit de voyage en apesanteur* (Paris: Le Pommier, 2004). Nowadays she regularly publishes in scientific journals because, according to her, ‘le regard d’un écrivain les intéresse’. See Virone, ‘Le ciel de César, d’Alexandre et d’Elisa’, op. cit., p. 21.

³² Throughout the rest of our analysis, references to and quotations from *Petite révision du ciel, Les Jupiters chauds* and *Relations d’incertitude* will be followed respectively by PRC, LJC and RI and the page number.

³³ Edgar Gunzig’s first name is spelled Edgard in the novel. In order to acknowledge this ‘dual identity’ we will subsequently refer to him as Edgar/d. This minor spelling change suggests the

narratives Elisa Brune also mixes literary creativity and scientific knowledge by including in the plot some elements from the scientific sphere based on her studies and what she deprecatingly calls '[sa] petite culture à [elle]'.³⁴ This ability to mix science and fiction has led to her being described as 'une enthousiaste soucieuse de vulgariser la science tout en peignant notre époque qu'elle observe avec sympathie, d'un œil vif, parfois caustique'.³⁵ Elisa Brune is keen to mix these disciplines, explaining that 'le romancier prend la liberté de mettre en relation des savoirs provenant de sources diverses. Il rassemble dans un même espace narratif des disciplines que l'organisation académique sépare complètement'.³⁶ Even though this is an unusual approach that may attract readers who are not so fond of pure literary production and may push some people to find out more about scientific developments, it is a somehow daring approach which may equally put other readers off. Some might not feel comfortable with the sciences and might see such novels as a return to the science classes they loathed in school, whilst others who have too advanced a level in science could find them uninteresting and unchallenging.

Scientific popularisation aims to 'transmettre des informations à des clientèles choisies de la manière la plus claire possible, de sorte qu'elles [les clientèles] en soient informées et qu'elles [les informations] leur soient utiles'.³⁷ This approach is not new as it was already a trend in the 18th and 19th centuries, but it became a subject in its own right from the mid-20th century onwards and in 1949 there were already articles about, for instance, popularisation via films and pictures.³⁸ Scientific popularisation can be found in newspapers, magazines, scientific journals, on television and radio, in museums and of course in books. The kind of books that fall

scientist may have wished to distance himself from his biography or that Elisa Brune wished to distance him in order to create a sense of mixing biography and fiction.

³⁴ Virone, 'Le ciel de César, d'Alexandre et d'Elisa', op. cit., p.18.

³⁵ Nys-Mazure, 'Elisa Brune, *L'Unité de la connaissance, Les Jupiters chauds, Penser c'est autre chose*', op. cit.

³⁶ Elisa Brune, 'De la science dans la fiction', *RDT Info*, March 2004, p. 1 <<http://www.elisabrune.com/pdf/ScienceDansLaFiction.pdf>> [accessed 20 December 2010].

³⁷ According to the International Development Research Centre <http://www.idrc.ca/uploads/user-S/11606758311Fiche06_Vulgarisation.pdf> [accessed 27 November 2010].

³⁸ For details on popularisation in the 18th and 19th centuries see Isabelle Mornat and Frédéric Prot, '*Recreo y ciencia: La vulgarisation scientifique en question (XVIII^e-XIX^e siècles)*' <<http://crec.univ-paris3.fr/loisirs/18-prot-mornat.pdf>> and Andreas Kleinert, 'Sciences varia vulgarisation scientifique' <<http://www.springerlink.com/content/c62323552u0h1270/fulltext.pdf>> [accessed 27 November 2010]. On popularisation through the medium of film see Arthur Elton and Sinclair Road, 'The Popularization of Science through Film' <<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001542/154263eb.pdf>> [accessed 27 November 2010].

into this category are however not generally novels like those by Elisa Brune, unusual in their combination of scientific popularisation and fiction, but more often dedicated scientific publications which vary in their level of difficulty and terminology and target different types of public (children, a broad adult public or the scientific community).³⁹ Popularisation has mainly been a preoccupation for the scientific and teaching communities rather than for novelists and in fact, according to Pierre de Latil, it is not just a field of research or a branch of science, it is a genre in itself. In 1966 he stated in a conference paper that ‘la vulgarisation est l’art d’expliquer quoi que ce soit, et pas seulement la science. Cet art a ses techniques, ses recettes même, qui procède [sic] de l’art d’écrire clairement, logiquement, simplement. *La vulgarisation est un genre littéraire!*’⁴⁰ This definition of scientific popularisation as a genre in its own right legitimates even further the mix of literature and science Elisa Brune has decided to adopt in some of her novels. If it remains unusual for science to appear in novels, Brune’s wish to build bridges between science and literature is not new, nor is she the only contemporary Belgian writer seeking to close that gap. Indeed in 1959, British physicist and writer Charles Snow already criticised the ever-growing gap between scientific and literary cultures.⁴¹ Recent texts by Belgian writers such as Alexandre Wajnberg (also an actor and a scientific journalist and director) and his book of scientific poetry are proof that some writers are keen to improve and increase the dialogue between literary and scientific cultures.⁴² Some Belgian artists such as Edith Dekyndt are also eager to mix science and art; like Elisa Brune, collaborating with scientists has led Dekyndt to include science in her work and ‘explore[r] des territoires passionnants

³⁹ The fact that the book remains an important tool for scientific popularisation was emphasised during a 2006 radio programme where participants discussed the fact that although ‘l’image dispose d’un potentiel de vulgarisation des sciences qui semble sans rival et qu’Internet est devenu une source majeure d’information, le livre conserve une position de force dans ce domaine’. Radio programme broadcast on Radio France on 18 March 2006 presented by Michel Alberganti and Brigitte Alléhaut. <http://radiofrance.fr/chaines/france-culture2/emissions/science_frictions/fiches.php?diffusion_id=39879> [accessed 22 September 2006]. Just as the internet cannot quite replace books and bookshops, as noted in chapter 1, neither can it totally replace books when it comes to scientific popularisation.

⁴⁰ Pierre de Latil, ‘Le rôle des moyens d’information dans la vulgarisation de la science’ (1966) quoted in Baudouin Jurdant, *Les problèmes théoriques de la vulgarisation scientifique* (Paris: Archives Contemporaines, 2009), p. 151. My emphasis.

⁴¹ Charles P. Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961).

⁴² Alexandre Wajnberg, *8 minutes 19 secondes. Perles d’étoiles* (Brussels: Impressions nouvelles, 2002).

entre arts et sciences'.⁴³ So Elisa Brune is not the only 'artist' to mix creativity and science but this is still a combination that is sufficiently rare to merit comment and it demonstrates that Brune is once again part of a 'trend' but in this case a minority one.

In addition to this desire to bridge the gap between the two disciplines, Brune states that, through her novels and essays, she is highly motivated to share the scientific knowledge she has been given the opportunity to acquire, while also aiming to highlight the work undertaken by scientists. She believes it is essential to explain to the public

ce que des gens font avec les ressources que la société dégage. Ce n'est pas une activité de tour d'ivoire, que personne ne peut comprendre et ne sert à rien. C'est quelque chose qu'on peut expliquer, en tout cas pour les principes, en des mots tout à fait simples et même captivants – en particulier en astronomie.⁴⁴

The very last part of this quotation confirms that some areas are simpler to present and explain than others, which might not be as straightforward, like mathematics. In the same interview, she also criticises the way science and its findings are often presented to the public and explains that scientific articles only report pertinent facts and steps leading to the result, tending to omit the description of the process. She considers that 'il manque beaucoup de chair dans cette façon-là d'exposer la science: la chair humaine, les gens, leurs affects, et toutes les circonvolutions de l'histoire' and that 'pour faire aimer la science, c'est certainement plus intéressant de raconter comment elle se fait plutôt que ce sur quoi elle débouche. En particulier, si on veut écrire un roman'.⁴⁵ Elisa Brune's narratives and her own comments show that she is more interested in the lives of her characters and how science is linked and intertwined with them rather than solely the scientific discoveries scientists make. She believes that it is inaccurate to say that science has nothing to do with 'les marécages fangeux et obscurs de nos émotions'⁴⁶ and the characters in the three narratives referred to above exemplify the emotional link one can have with a field of research. She goes even further and explains that

⁴³ The result was an exhibition in Fribourg entitled 'Dieu rend visite à Newton'. Elisabeth Chardon, 'Une pomme entre Dieu et Newton', *Le Temps*, 19 February 2011, p. 28.

⁴⁴ Virone, 'Le ciel de César, d'Alexandre et d'Elisa', op. cit., p. 19.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 20.

bien au contraire, la science ne peut sortir que de là. [...] Chez beaucoup de scientifiques, il y a un déni à l'origine. Très rares sont ceux qui avouent que dans leur façon même de travailler est présente cette dimension affective et émotionnelle. C'est notamment en racontant le processus de la science et pas seulement ses résultats que l'on établit le lien qui manque entre le produit et le producteur. Je ne vois pas pourquoi il faudrait gommer cette dimension-là.⁴⁷

And this is exactly what she manages to do with Vincent and Edgar/d in her three novels. She shows the link between her characters' careers in science, their discoveries and their personal lives and paths. Vincent only becomes an astrophysicist in *Les Jupiters chauds* because of his decision to drop everything and start afresh in *Petite révision du ciel*. As for Edgar/d, his career in science and his major discovery that the theory of the bootstrap can be applied to the creation of the universe are both linked to events in his childhood and his imprisonment in India later in his life.⁴⁸ In other words, neither Vincent nor Edgar/d had planned to become scientists, it just happened to them, just as Elisa Brune did not plan to become a writer or to include science in her narratives. Indeed, although it is not known why she ended up doing so, she confesses that if she has 'marié science et écriture' in some of her work, it was not something planned at all at the start of her literary career since science was not her 'objet de pensée' despite 'des études vaguement scientifiques'.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, from the start she has wished to 'faire passer des choses qui ne relèvent pas seulement de la vie quotidienne ou de la psychologie, mais aussi des idées'.⁵⁰ In the case of her scientific novels, Elisa Brune is keen to depict the life of some scientists, just as she aims to portray the lives of some women or families in other narratives that will be looked at in subsequent chapters.

Other than their partly scientific theme, the scientific novels are the only ones where the main action takes place in Belgium and in which Brune has created a male narrator. There are several possible explanations for this. Vincent is the narrator of *Petite révision du ciel* and *Les Jupiters chauds* and in the case of *Petite révision du ciel* it can be assumed that Elisa Brune set the action in the environment she knew the best. However, she may have come to realise after the novel was published in Paris that choosing Belgium (Brussels in this case) as a backdrop may not have been

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ The word bootstrap can apply to various fields (computing, business, physics etc.) and generally means a self-sustained process that proceeds without external help.

⁴⁹ Virone, 'Le ciel de César, d'Alexandre et d'Elisa', op. cit., p. 18.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

the best strategy for publication, hence she moved to plots which take place in France for most of her subsequent novels. For *Les Jupiters chauds*, logically she had to set the main action in Belgium again ('un village calme du Brabant wallon' (LJC 18), 'l'université de Liège' (LJC 12)) since this is where Vincent was at the end of the first novel. As for *Relations d'incertitude*, the choice was dictated by the biographical nature of the narrative since Edgar/d grew up and spent most of his life in Belgium. As for the choice of a male narrator for her first novel, Elisa Brune claims that this was because

c'est à la fois un garde-fou et un jeu. En début de parcours, l'écrivain a souvent la tentation de parler d'expériences personnelles. Pour éviter cette tentation, un héros masculin qui parle à la première personne. Cela me permettait en outre d'exploiter autre chose: se mettre à la place d'un homme, c'est une liberté qu'on a dans l'écriture et qu'on n'aura jamais dans la vie.⁵¹

She also justifies this choice in another interview by saying that 'à chaque livre il faut que je fasse une expérience nouvelle, que je me projette dans quelque chose d'inconnu. Dans ce premier roman, le plus inconnu était d'être un homme'.⁵² As plausible as this explanation is, there may be another one that Elisa Brune was not keen to give, which is that, on a strategic level, portraying a woman rather than a man leaving his life behind to start afresh may not have been so well received by critics and the public. Reading Vincent's story, some readers will empathise and understand the need he has to start again, but if the main character were a woman, the tendency could easily be to see such a rebellion as a hysterical and hormonal crisis, something irrational rather than a serious need for change. Therefore, while Brune's choice of a male 'hero' fits the traditional notion of 'Bildungsroman' and enables her to follow another literary tradition, it seems she has chosen the easier option not to question expectations and stereotypes in portraying a man's quest for a new life and choice of a career in science rather than that of a woman.

It is noteworthy that Vincent is a scientist and that Sophie, his new girlfriend, is a journalist. This reinforces the connection with Brune, who herself became a

⁵¹ Anonymous, 'Petite révision du ciel', *Flair*, 14 October 1999, no page number available.

⁵² See my unpublished interview with Elisa Brune on 27 August 2007. Appendix B, p. 254. Many other women writers have also felt this need to inhabit a male character. Tessa Hadley did so in her latest novel, *The Train to London* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011) and explained in an interview: 'I really enjoyed inhabiting that male perspective – it's one of the things I wanted to do when I started the book, to write as a clever man, and it was very liberating to do it'. Alex Clark, 'A life in writing', *The Guardian*, 26 February 2011, p. 12.

scientific journalist after publishing this novel, combining the interests of both her characters. In *Relations d'incertitude* there is again this connection between the characters, science and journalism since the narrators are first, a female scientific journalist (Hélène) and second, a male scientist (Edgar/d Gunzig). It would seem that where science is the main topic the narrator can only be male, which would suggest that, whether she chooses to recognise it or not, Elisa Brune has accepted the idea that exists even nowadays that science is 'masculine'.⁵³ Even though she has explained very convincingly why she chose a male narrator for *Petite révision du ciel* and *Les Jupiters chauds*, it is possible to argue that it would have been more interesting to create a female scientist as a main protagonist for her novels in order to reflect how difficult it still is nowadays for women to be part of (and succeed in) the scientific community. Elisa Brune is aware of the difficulties women face in that field and yet she has so far not chosen to tackle the subject in any of her novels, suggesting that she is not questioning these stereotypes associated with science being a male business. For she remarks that

il y a beaucoup moins de femmes chercheuses que d'hommes; celles qui le sont, dans pas mal de cas doivent concilier avec la vie de famille, ce qui les empêche d'être aussi performantes que les hommes au niveau du nombre de publications etc. Plus insidieusement encore que cela, je remarque souvent, mais vraiment souvent, que dans n'importe quel colloque, débat, réunion ou même discussion de café les femmes se positionnent en retrait. Elles – tout comme Marianne ou Hélène [d'*Un Homme est une rose* et *Relations d'incertitude*] – sont éduquées, elles sont modernes, elles sont tout ce que l'on veut mais elles ne gueulent pas aussi fort que les hommes.⁵⁴

By stating that women (however good a scientist they may be) are usually less vocal than men, Elisa Brune echoes Betty Friedan's views after she met female students at Harvard University in 1983:

These women were awesome in their competence, but they made me uneasy. They seemed too neat, somehow, too controlled, constricted, almost subdued and slightly juiceless. The ambiance is so masculine, it alienated them somehow, though they might not be aware of it.⁵⁵

⁵³ In 1985, Evelyn Fox Keller stated that 'the fact that the scientific population is, even now, a population that is overwhelmingly male, is itself a consequence rather than a cause of the attribution of masculinity to scientific thought'. Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 76.

⁵⁴ See my unpublished interview with Elisa Brune on 27 August 2007. Appendix B, p. 267.

⁵⁵ Betty Friedan, 'Twenty Years after the Feminine Mystique', *New York Times Magazine*, 27 February 1983, p. 56.

What was noticed by Friedan regarding the silence of women in the 1980s therefore appears to still be the case in the 21st century in developed countries.

Brune does not however seem interested in conveying a positive image of women scientists in her novels as her three scientific novels lack adequate representation of them and portray women who are either not interested in science, such as Sophie, or who only feel good enough to report on science but not fully participate in it like Hélène. Elisa Brune here reinforces the stereotypical view that science is masculine and that most women in male-dominated domains have difficulty asserting themselves.⁵⁶ There is no evolution between *Petite révision du ciel* and *Les Jupiters chauds* since the very few female scientists portrayed in the second novel are described as lonely, scary and/or strange. For instance, during the conference in Tenerife, Vincent states that

l'astronomie compte peu de femmes [...] et quand il y en a, bigre, elles font peur. Elles semblent toutes animées par le même besoin de se sentir infaillibles, qui ne laisse pas grand-place au charme. Je ne crois pas en avoir vu sourire une seule jusqu'ici. (PRC 68)

Later on in the novel Vincent describes another woman and adds 'encore une fois, il y a peut-être une tendance à surjouer son rôle dès lors qu'on est une femme perdue dans un monde d'hommes' (LJC 205). The other women scientists of the novel are either portrayed as even worse than the ones described above – 'imaginez ce que peut donner une femme américaine montant à la tribune. La créature qui vient d'empoigner le micro n'est plus une femme, c'est un bulldozer' (PRC 69) – or as rather fragile like Jeanne Bertoux, whom Vincent describes as 'piégée dans ces régions au-delà de l'humain' and as having 'un regard si clair et ruminer des pensées si sombres' (PRC 64; 67).

These examples of the perception of gender in the scientific sphere are quite telling and confirm Friedan's point of view quoted above while also demonstrating how Elisa Brune simply observes and reports the way women are in the minority (lost in a men's world) and stereotypically perceived in science and research. In this instance, and as is usually the case, Brune does not have any of her characters at least

⁵⁶ This assessment of women struggling in male-dominated environments is also valid for women in academia in general as Valérie Cossy explains in a recent article. Elisa Brune is thus portraying something that is true but not questioning why it exists or how it might change. See Valérie Cossy, 'Une carrière à l'aune de l'égalité des chances', in Farinaz Fassa and Sabine Kradolfer (eds.), *Le plafond de fer à l'université: Femmes et carrières* (Zurich: Editions Seismo, 2010), pp. 195-205.

questioning or trying to understand the reasons behind this vision in her novels and such an approach may not lead readers to think about this particular issue. According to research, a possible explanation of the way women scientists behave in their professional lives, and are often said to be unattractive, is that ‘shedding the trappings of “femininity” [is] often necessary for a woman to be taken seriously as a scientist’, and ‘it is also often important for preventing unwanted attention to her sexuality’.⁵⁷ Elisa Brune, instead of shedding light on the behaviour displayed by some women scientists and explaining the reasons behind it, simply avoids the issue by adopting the widespread stereotypical perception and not presenting the reader with an alternative, more positive view.

The difficulties encountered by women scientists have been explored by scholars and, in her chapter entitled ‘Science and Private Life’, Londa Schiebinger explains the sacrifices made by some women scientists in order to remain effective and highly regarded by their colleagues.⁵⁸ This includes for instance planning to have babies during long vacations or research leave so the pregnancy goes unnoticed, or having a labour induced at the weekend in order to be able to go back to work on the following Monday. She also stresses that female scientists are no exception to the phenomenon of finding it difficult to combine career and family – ‘domestic versus professional responsibilities, tenure clock versus biological clock’⁵⁹ – and that ‘the “playing field” of science will never be levelled as long as child care and household management continue to be seen as primarily a woman’s concern’.⁶⁰ Therefore, by choosing a male hero for her scientific novels and not a female scientist juggling all these roles, Elisa Brune, in this instance, reflects the fact that the scientific field excludes women or keeps them hidden but misses the opportunity both to criticise the situation of women in a given context. Although objective in her representation, the use of a male narrator who has not thought about the situation of women in science and uses stereotypes to describe them may convey the impression that this situation is normal rather than needing to be changed. All in all, Brune’s portrayal of women scientists is not positive and she does not seem to be interested in exploring

⁵⁷ Londa Schiebinger, *Has Feminism Changed Science?* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 76.

⁵⁸ Schiebinger, ‘Science and Private Life’, *ibid.*, pp. 92-103.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

the reasons behind the stereotypes in her novels, despite being keen in interviews to recognise the numerous issues and hurdles encountered by women scientists in their careers.⁶¹ As a result, and although Vincent may only be meant to illustrate the prejudices men have concerning women scientists, Brune did not find (or did not look for) a mechanism to get a different view across in the narrative and her portrayals of women through the eyes of her ‘double’⁶² fail to reveal how these women have to struggle to get where they are and to remain there.

The scientific fields that are the focus of *Petite révision du ciel* and *Les Jupiters chauds* are mathematics, physics and astronomy, traditionally and stereotypically perceived in education as intellectually the hardest. In addition, mathematics and physics are the two fields where the fewest women are found, in contrast to biology for instance. As Londa Schiebinger points out, ‘the hardness of science – in what it studies, how it studies it, and the degree of difficulty attributed to it – correlates with prestige, with funding, and, negatively, with the number of women in the field’.⁶³ She adds that ‘the prestige of science often depends on its degree of mathematization, and the more math required for a particular job, the higher the pay and lower the rate of women’s participation’.⁶⁴ In essence, this is the view that Brune’s three scientific novels seem to convey. We need also to determine whether these are accessible and accurate novels of scientific popularisation and the degree to which the reader can feel connected to this socio-cultural environment, so let us now turn to these questions.

⁶¹ The only positive perception of women scientists is found at the end of *Les Jupiters chauds* when Vincent listens to a conference paper by Caroline Mercier and states that ‘c’était la première fois, tout simplement, que je regardais une femme de la profession comme une femme et non comme un ordinateur’ (LJC 415). This statement however only reinforces the fact that things are different for men as nobody questions their ability to be a man and a serious scientist at the same time. It also shows how rare it is, according to Vincent and possibly by extension Brune, for a woman scientist to appear ‘normal’.

⁶² See my unpublished interview with Elisa Brune on 27 August 2007. Appendix B, p. 253. Vincent is 33 in the novel, about the same age as Elisa Brune when she published the narrative in 1999.

⁶³ Schiebinger, *Has Feminism Changed Science?* op. cit., p. 162. Josette Coenen-Hunter also analysed how women are considered not good enough for maths. She gave the example of transsexual neurobiologist Ben Barres who, when he was still a woman and student at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) managed to solve a difficult maths problem. The teacher doubted she was good enough to solve it herself and said her boyfriend probably solved it for her. Josette Coenen-Hunter, *L’égalité professionnelle entre hommes et femmes: une gageure* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2009), p. 67 and quoted in Françoise Messant, ‘Josette Coenen-Hunter, *L’égalité professionnelle entre hommes et femmes: une gageure*’, *Nouvelles Questions Féministes*, 30, 1 (2010), 118-20 (p. 119).

⁶⁴ Schiebinger, *Has Feminism Changed Science?* op. cit., p. 171.

Petite révision du ciel

Petite révision du ciel was Elisa Brune's first novel and the unusual mix of narration and science must have contributed to its success when it was published in 1999. As well as being a scientific novel and fitting the notion of 'Bildungsroman', *Petite révision du ciel* has been considered by some critics as a kind of 'roman de la déviance' in which traditionally

un personnage, lassé de l'existence qu'il mène, rompt brutalement avec sa profession, son entourage, ses habitudes, et se met à dériver sans but précis, observant d'un regard neuf, incrédule, ironique ou désabusé selon les cas, le monde où il évoluait naguère.⁶⁵

It is worth mentioning that already in the opening pages of her first novel, the main themes Elisa Brune will explore in her subsequent novels are already apparent. For instance, education – 'dix-huit ans d'éducation standardisée, cinq ans pour obtenir ma licence de maths et ma spécialisation' (PRC 8) – science, the nature of relationships between men and women and also between parents and children. Also, like most of Brune's other characters (Clarisse, Bénédicte, Marion etc.) Vincent feels empty and has 'le sentiment de [s']être laissé berner' (PRC 8) and makes an unconventional choice in changing the course of his life even though he then returns to a conventional path in academia.⁶⁶

If the book is primarily a fiction, the link with actual science is obvious through the exploration of various scientific concepts. To begin with, the structure of the novel itself is inspired by mathematics since the book is divided into 256 numbered fragments – 4 to the power of 4 – which are spread over 16 parts. The name of the main protagonist, Vincent, is also a *clin d'œil* to numbers (vingt + cent). In addition, many fragments of the novel deal with 'des digressions sur la physique,

⁶⁵ Daniel Arnaut, '(Méta)physique des passions', *Le Carnet et les Instants*, 111, 15 January-15 March 2000, pp. 52-53 (p. 52). He explains that *Petite révision du ciel* 'prend comme argument un thème connu. Tellement connu que les sociologues de la littérature lui ont donné un nom: ils ont appelé cela le "roman de la déviance". De Simenon à Peter Handke, en passant par le remarquable récit de Botho Strauss, *La dédicace*, nombreux sont les écrivains modernes qui l'ont illustré. Le point de départ en est à peu près toujours le même.[...]. Elisa Brune reprend ce thème, tout à la fois en le poussant à ses conséquences extrêmes et en le renouvelant en profondeur'. Another definition of the 'roman de la déviance' was given by Jacques Dubois. According to him, in this type of novel, we generally find 'un homme d'âge mûr, qui englué dans sa vie routinière, décide de rompre avec son milieu ou, en tout cas, se laisse dévier par rapport à ce milieu et qui s'engage dans une aventure singulière'. Jacques Dubois quoted in Robert Frickx and Raymond Trousson (eds.), *Lettres françaises de Belgique: Dictionnaire des œuvres*, 4 vols (Paris-Gembloux: Duculot, 1988-1994), I, p. 209.

⁶⁶ This corresponds again to Stéphanie Dambroise's comment quoted above about Brune's characters choosing unconventional trajectories and constitutes another recurring pattern within Brune's writing.

les bizarreries mathématiques, ou encore la logique et ses apories. C'est que Vincent a lui-même une formation de mathématicien. Et c'est vers les mathématiques qu'il retournera, à la fin du livre'.⁶⁷ Thus, the novel is a sort of enquiry, interwoven with philosophical and scientific considerations, into the life of the narrator, who tries to understand why he needed to leave everything behind. Elisa Brune has explained that she wanted to 'étudier la crise de quelqu'un qui n'a pas de problèmes',⁶⁸ unlike some of her subsequent novels in which the main characters have significant problems.

Throughout the narrative, Elisa Brune includes no fewer than twenty-five references to science: physics, mathematical concepts, names of scientists and experiments. For instance she refers to mathematical concepts such as Gödel's incompleteness theorem (PRC 9, 169) and explains what 'palindromes numériques' are (PRC 121); she mentions the theory of relativity (PRC 106, 107), Heisenberg (PRC 93-94) and makes an intertextual reference to the scientific magazine *Scientific American* (PRC 121). Although the way science is incorporated into the novel is most of the time accessible enough for a non-specialist to roughly follow the explanations given,⁶⁹ it nonetheless remains complex for a non-scientist to evaluate the degree of difficulty of the concepts Elisa Brune refers to in the narrative and sometimes they prove too complicated for a non-initiated reader.⁷⁰ It seems that the scientific concepts and theories she uses would usually be known and mastered by scientists but not necessarily by someone with little scientific background. So, her desire to make science more accessible to non-scientific readers is likely to be effective if she can trigger their curiosity and encourage them to discover more by themselves but it may equally deter them from reading her novel. Brune generally does not go into detail here with a given topic but appears to understand correctly the various theories she uses.⁷¹

Most of the time Elisa Brune takes an insignificant event in Vincent's life as a starting point for a scientific explanation. For instance, Vincent starts by considering

⁶⁷ Arnaut, '(Méta)physique des passions', op. cit., p. 53.

⁶⁸ Begon, 'Une crise très simple', op. cit.

⁶⁹ Unlike for example, the way Georges Perec injected a paragraph of complex mathematics into *La Vie mode d'emploi*. However, unlike Elisa Brune, Perec probably did not intend it to be comprehensible. Georges Perec, *La Vie mode d'emploi* (Paris: POL, 1978), p. 24.

⁷⁰ Information about the level of difficulty of the concepts presented and Elisa Brune's mastery of them comes from a discussion with mathematician Dr Daniel Lines.

⁷¹ One exception is the 'point catastrophique' of René Thom (PRC 115) which she has apparently not understood.

the fact that the Japanese eat the best part of their meal first in case there is an earthquake, whereas in Western cultures we tend to keep the best dish for last. Thinking about this leads him not to know what to do anymore and he takes this as an opportunity to explain some quantum physics:

dès que j'y pense, je ne sais plus très bien que penser, ni quel ravioli attraper. Ce qui me mène tout droit à la physique quantique et au principe d'incertitude d'Heisenberg. Heisenberg dit: quand on observe le comportement d'une particule, on ne peut faire autrement que de modifier son comportement. (PRC 93)

In this instance the inclusion of science within the narration works well and it is easy enough for any averagely educated reader to understand the basic principle of Heisenberg's theory. With regard to Heisenberg's theory, it is worth commenting here on Vincent's conclusion that 'observer, c'est modifier, du moins à l'échelle individuelle' (PRC 94). This comment is quite revealing of what Brune does in her novels, that is to say, observe and report and by doing so perhaps modify her readers' behaviour, as if one of her aims was to apply Heisenberg's theory to her readership.

However, she is not always as successful in achieving her aim of sharing specific items of scientific knowledge, as for some scientific concepts, the readership needs to have a certain level of knowledge to really understand and appreciate some fragments of the novel. There are thus instances where this insertion of science does not really function as part of the story and seems disconnected from the text surrounding it, like fragment 162 which starts directly with an explanation of infinity which lasts the whole fragment (PRC 150-52).

Il faut que je revienne sur l'infini, la pire des impasses logiques, celle qui n'a cessé de me hanter depuis l'adolescence. [...] Georg Cantor s'est fait une spécialité de distinguer plusieurs sortes d'infinis. [...] Ce type de démonstration par appariement (ou bijection) est devenu un grand classique et produit de nombreux paradoxes fondés sur l'ambivalence de tout avec l'une de ses parties. [...] On se demande si le temps est infini ou s'il a un début. Stephen Hawking et Roger Penrose proposent une preuve par l'absurde. (PRC 150-51)

This fragment does not have any link with the one before or after, does not contribute anything to the plot and does not seem to fit properly in the novel. It is as though Elisa Brune wanted to include a reference to infinity, Georg Cantor and Stephen Hawking in the novel but did not know how to introduce it. In addition this fragment, whilst a standard scientific reference for scientists, is highly complex and possibly too difficult to be grasped by non-specialists. Thus, Elisa Brune is not always

successful in making science accessible in her work, as demonstrated by *Le goût piquant de l'univers*, on which a critic from magazine *Ciel & Espace* comments that

Elisa Brune en profite pour vulgariser autant que faire se peut. La gravitation de Newton (oui, bon, la pomme...), d'Einstein (ça va encore), la constante cosmologique (euh?), les branes (aïe!), la théorie des cordes (ouille!). Bon, on n'a pas toujours tout compris, et elle non plus.⁷²

This shows that in her essays too she mixes, not always successfully, both popular and more elaborate scientific references that are going to appeal to different readers and it also suggests that it may be difficult, even impossible, to get the level right.

In terms of style, the use of the fragment in this novel and in *Les Jupiters chauds* corresponds to a narrative strategy on Brune's part to render an "effet de réel" dont le mimétisme est affaire de flux, de rythme, de musique peut-être [...] "Une écriture qui épouserait la vie réelle".⁷³ In another interview she insisted that she 'tenai[t] à cette écriture fragmentaire et désordonnée, en miroir de ce qui se passe dans la vie quotidienne'.⁷⁴ With this first novel, Elisa Brune thus already had in mind a desire to reflect the socio-cultural context she and her potential readership know. This is also achieved through the use in the novel of intertextual references and the description of Vincent's daily life on the fringes of society. The description of everyday actions and the use of references readers can relate to are helpful devices to depict the life story Elisa Brune aims to portray in this novel.

Intertextuality in the novel comes in several forms. At the beginning of the narrative, Elisa Brune chooses to have Vincent work in an insurance company located in 'boulevard Anspach' (PRC 12), a street in Brussels, and read *La Libre Belgique* (PRC 83), details that help the reader to picture Vincent as a standard Belgian, living and working in the capital and reading a popular national newspaper, while rooting the narrative in the Belgian landscape and culture. In addition, throughout the novel, the reader finds a plethora of both high and popular references to various artistic and literary fields on top of the scientific ones described above, in line with the practice of many contemporary writers, as pointed out at the beginning of this chapter. Thus, there are several more or less popular cinematic references

⁷²Jean-François Haït, 'Le goût piquant de l'univers', *Ciel & Espace*, 410, July 2004, no page number available.

⁷³Begon, 'Une crise très simple', op. cit.

⁷⁴Anonymous, 'Petite révision du ciel', *Flair*, op. cit.

such as to the (rather sad) Finnish filmmaker Kaurismäki (PRC 16) or to films such as Alan Parker's *Birdy* (PRC 20), Chaplin's *Les Temps Modernes* (PRC 51) and Robert Flaherty's 1920s documentary *Nanouk* (PRC 200). In terms of music and art, Vincent likes Vivaldi's *Stabat Mater*, 'les ballades pour piano de Brahms' (PRC 48), Wagner (PRC 119), Anna Pavlova (PRC 51), Maurice Béjart's choreography of Ravel's *Boléro* danced by Jorge Donn (PRC 126) and the 1913 Egon Schiele painting *Wally avec une blouse rouge* (PRC 153; 187), all of which suggest that Vincent comes from quite a cultured middle-class background. There are allusions throughout the novel to various other popular international and Francophone artists, film characters or sportsmen,⁷⁵ and if we consider literature, Elisa Brune in this instance again mixes high and popular as well as typically Belgian and international references. Indeed, she mentions on several occasions well-known popular Belgian comics and comic characters in comparisons: 'je vibraï de la même euphorie que le capitaine Haddock après le départ de la Castafiore' (PRC 99) or 'une image d'ordre qui recouvre souvent un cafouillis extravagant soigneusement camouflé, comme les armoires de Gaston Lagaffe' (PRC 135), while Vincent and Sophie discuss authors and philosophers such as Hume (PRC 122), Dostoyevsky, Kafka (PRC 194), Wittgenstein, Kierkegaard and Hofstadter (PRC 234). This mix of references to popular culture and more cultivated allusions enables Elisa Brune to provide each reader with at least some socio-cultural elements with which s/he is familiar, whatever their background and indicates that she is clearly writing with her varied readership in mind. Elise Huguëny-Léger has remarked something similar in the work of Annie Ernaux, explaining that her work 'fourmille [...] de marqueurs d'un réseau intertextuel populaire, facilement repérable et accessible pour le lectorat. La mention de ces références s'inscrit dans une volonté de dialoguer avec le lectorat, qu'il soit de souche populaire ou non'.⁷⁶ Elisa Brune does the same in her novels, a characteristic that clearly links her practice to that of contemporary women writers, as we saw earlier.

⁷⁵ These references include Marillion (PRC 26), Johnny Hallyday (PRC 109), tennis player Boris Becker, Alain Souchon (PRC 167), Sylvie Vartan (PRC 187), Dr Spock (PRC 193; 198), Kate Bush (PRC 230) and Michel Jonasz (PRC 235).

⁷⁶ Huguëny-Léger, *Annie Ernaux, une poétique de la transgression*, op. cit., p. 103.

Finally, it is interesting to remark that writing this novel led to a change in the author's life. Indeed, Elisa Brune confesses that Vincent was primarily a projection of what she wanted to do at the time, and that leaving her job and starting afresh was

un peu un saut dans le vide, que j'ai fait d'ailleurs après Vincent, le héros de *Petite révision du ciel*: je l'ai écrit avant de faire ce qu'il a fait. C'était une sorte de répétition, parce que le roman est sorti en 1999 et j'étais toujours en contrat de thèse, ce qui fait que j'étais quand même dans une coquille, un cadre défini. Ça me démangeait en effet de sauter du train, comme lui a fait, donc c'est un fantasme que j'ai mis sur papier et que j'ai suivi après, et qui en même temps est une sorte de modèle pour tous ceux qui liraient ce texte et qui se reconnaîtraient dans un notoire mal-être, dans un inconfort, de se plier à des rythmes et des procédures qui sont dictées de l'extérieur.⁷⁷

Therefore, if usually it is the novel that may have a life-changing influence on its reader – for as Gill Rye remarks 'powerful reading experiences can lead to change in reality'⁷⁸ – it appears that writing a novel can also have a significant influence on its author and be a 'rehearsal' for real life. The effect the novel had on Brune was the one she intended for some of her readers. Therefore, Elisa Brune's novel confirms the possible transformative power of reading already touched upon earlier in this chapter. Susan Rubin Suleiman indeed argues that 'potentially, every genuine reading experience is a life-changing encounter, even though few individual books can be said to have truly transformed one's life'.⁷⁹ After changing her life and career following *Petite révision du ciel*, Elisa Brune returned to the character of Vincent a few years later, but this time using her own experience of the scientific sphere combined with that of David Charbonneau as a basis for the narrative. Indeed in the acknowledgments at the end of *Les Jupiters chauds*, Elisa Brune reveals that

David Charbonneau est le seul chercheur qui n'est pas cité dans mon livre, et pour cause: Vincent, c'est lui. Il a accepté de s'effacer derrière ce personnage qui existait déjà, et sur lequel j'ai enfilé comme un gant la fabuleuse histoire de la découverte du premier transit extra-solaire. (LJC 435)

Therefore Vincent evolved from a purely fictional character that was Brune's projection and double in *Petite révision du ciel* to somebody else's double and a sort of 'host' for his actual story. Vincent is therefore a hybrid character as he is both a creation and a representation of somebody's life, yet another example of Brune's

⁷⁷ See my unpublished interview with Elisa Brune on 27 August 2007. Appendix B, p. 253.

⁷⁸ Gill Rye, *Reading for Change: Interactions between Text and Identity in Contemporary French Women's Writing (Baroque, Cixous, Constant)* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2001), p. 44.

⁷⁹ Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Risking Who One Is: Encounters with Contemporary Art and Literature* (London: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 195.

penchant for combining fiction and reality. The evolution between the two novels and the decision to base the sequel, *Les Jupiters chauds*, on the story of an actual scientist is indicative of the way Brune's writing has evolved and discloses the process by which the injection of actual facts and people in her fictions has gradually become a permanent feature of her writing and a thread running through all her work.

Les Jupiters chauds

In *Les Jupiters chauds* again Elisa Brune mixes fiction and science in the narrative, but in a different way. Indeed, the feeling in this instance is more one of alternation between scientific and traditional narration. This is reflected in the structure of the novel, which is divided into eight parts that alternate between the narration of Vincent's life in Belgium on the one hand and his trips around the world for his research and to conferences on the other. Thus parts 1, 3, 5 and 7 – each further divided into seven or eight fragments – are dedicated to Vincent's relationship with Sophie⁸⁰ and the evolution of his life in Belgium whereas parts 2, 4, 6 and 8 – each further divided into ten to thirteen fragments – deal with conferences Vincent attends and his trips to Chile and Colorado for research. This is combined with observation and reports on the scientific community and 'de larges pans de reportages scientifiques (visite d'observatoire, rencontre d'astrophysiciens etc.)'.⁸¹ Quantitatively, the content of the book is thus more science-related and the alternating and more extended rhythm with which science appears in the novel is different from *Petite révision du ciel* with its occasional injection of science. This results in much longer passages focused around the theme of science – especially astronomy – and scientists. This unusual alternation and mix of genres has been remarked upon by some critics who said the novel was one in which not only 'science et fiction romanesque [...] s'intriquent étroitement et où l'auteur joue du

⁸⁰ Regarding the relationship between Vincent and Sophie, Colette Nys-Mazure admits that Elisa Brune manages to depict 'avec finesse la vie des couples qui se font et se défont, tentent de s'adapter aux exigences professionnelles tout en veillant à leur relation [et] les ravages que produit au sein des couples les plus harmonieux la passion de la profession ou de la recherche lorsqu'elle s'avère très/trop prenante'. It is interesting to mention this aspect of a couple's relationship here, as relationships between men and women in scientific novels or the impact of professional commitments on a romantic relationship will not be further analysed in chapter 5. Nys-Mazure, 'Elisa Brune, *L'Unité de la connaissance, Les Jupiters chauds, Penser c'est autre chose*', op. cit.

⁸¹ Isabelle Burgun, 'La Muse scientifique', *Science pour tous*, 90, 9 April 2003 <<http://www.sciencepourtous.qc.ca/bulletin/2003/90/articles3.html>> [accessed 24 November 2006].

télescope de l'astronome et de la loupe du naturaliste avec la même maîtrise⁸² but also one in which 'la fiction et la réalité s'interpénètrent étroitement', thus highlighting both Brune's habit of mixing different genres in her writing and her ongoing desire to represent society as accurately as possible in her work.⁸³

The four parts dedicated to science and conferences are evocative of Elisa Brune's essays/conference reports *L'Unité de la connaissance* and *Le goût piquant de l'univers*. The style of these sections is almost journalistic, with passages reporting purely what has been said or how an experiment was run. For instance, a passage in part 2:

Jean-Philippe Beaulieu [...] a observé l'événement MACHO-97-BLG-41, et bien plus en détail. Lui aussi a observé le pic anormal dans la séquence d'amplification lumineuse de l'étoile cible. [...] Une lentille double ne fonctionne pas comme une lentille simple. Il faut prendre en compte la rotation du système pour modéliser la variation de lumière observée. Ses calculs produisent exactement le profil qui a été observé, sans devoir introduire la moindre planète dans le système. (PRC 84-85)

A similar passage occurs in part 4 during Vincent's trip to Chile:

Le programme Eros consiste en observations répétées d'un vaste champ d'étoiles en vue de détecter des événements de microlentilles. La probabilité d'un alignement exact de trois corps dans l'espace est extrêmement petite, de l'ordre de un millionième (eh oui, le ciel est si vaste, il est essentiellement vide à vrai dire). Par conséquent, le seul moyen d'observer un événement de microlentille de temps en temps, c'est d'observer toutes les étoiles tout le temps, une sorte de garde à vue généralisée. [...] Lorsqu'un événement de microlentille apparaît, l'alerte est donnée sur une série de télescopes associés [...]. Cela fournira une courbe très rapprochée et très précise de l'événement, qui peut durer de quelques heures à un mois suivant la géométrie de l'alignement, les masses des corps, leurs distances et leurs vitesses respectives. (PRC 174-76)

The difficulty and specificity of the science described in some parts of *Les Jupiters chauds* is reflected in the regular use of explanatory footnotes in the novel to assist the reader, which is more usual in academic writing and specialised articles than in a novel targeting the wider public.⁸⁴ This is another way in which Elisa Brune mixes genres and yet another indication that science and scientific ideas are not necessarily straightforward to explain and convey. However, these sections of the novel are also very much an observation of and report on the scientific community, enabling the reader who is not familiar with conferences and the world of science to discover how things work and what the atmosphere is. These sections can also easily remind

⁸² Ghislain Cotton, 'Merci, docteur!', *Le Vif/L'Express*, 6 September 2002, p. 100.

⁸³ Gascht, 'Elisa Brune, entre ciel et terre', op. cit., p. 14.

⁸⁴ Footnotes explaining scientific concepts are found on pages 38, 72, 76, 82, 168, 169, 175, 200, 291, 298, 299, 328, 388, 412, 416 and 423.

readers who are familiar with what Elisa Brune is describing about their own experiences and encounters – good or bad. Therefore the fictional component in the scientific parts of the novel can be said to be marginal since Elisa Brune used her own experience (for example the research trip to Chile) to create the character of Vincent, while also adding elements of David Charbonneau’s life.⁸⁵ The ‘effet de réel’ is in addition reinforced by the fact that, in addition to Vincent, who is only partially fictional, and a few fictional characters, Elisa Brune keeps the real names of the scientists she includes throughout her narrative – Marcel Arnould, Alain Jorissen, Stéphane Goriely, Dimitri Pourbaix, Stéphane Brillant, Jean-François Gonzalez, Jean-Philippe Beaulieu, Michel Mayor etc.⁸⁶ Since she is portraying real scientists and describing their work, she finds it ‘plus honnête de donner leur vrai nom pour ne pas les déposséder’.⁸⁷ Even though Elisa Brune’s initiative is thought-provoking and is a feature of several of her novels, it can nonetheless potentially be problematic to mix fictional characters and real people in the same book – as is equally true for *Relations d’incertitude*. Whilst some readers may find this intriguing, some may get confused by the mix of fictional and real protagonists and between what is biographical or historical, what is totally or even partially fictional. While blurring the distinction between the actual and the fictional may be thrilling for the writer who knows everything, it may diminish the credibility of the whole story in the eyes of the reader. If s/he reads a biography, the pact with the author is clear, as it is when it comes to a work of fiction, but a blend of both, as with some books by Elisa Brune, can be problematic for the readership. From the point of view of the critic it is an engaging approach to analyse but in the position of reader it may be unsettling not to know what is true and what has been invented for the purposes of the story. To a certain extent the hybridity and lack of clearly defined ‘identity’ of some novels could lead to them being perceived as neither one thing nor the other.

⁸⁵ Elisa Brune explains that reading Alfred Vidal-Madjar’s *Il pleut des planètes* (Paris: Hachette Pluriel, 2005) was ‘un événement fondamental, qui [lui] a donné l’impulsion de faire une démarche concrète: aller voir des gens, les interroger. De fil en aiguille, [elle a] été emmenée beaucoup plus loin [qu’elle] pensai[t] [...]’. She then applied for funding which allowed her to go on a field trip to Chile (like Vincent in the novel) and she now wonders if ‘plutôt que de faire des recherches pour préparer un roman, [elle n’a] pas plutôt écrit un roman dans le but de pouvoir vivre ce [qu’elle a] vécu’. See Virone, ‘Le ciel de César, d’Alexandre et d’Elisa’, op. cit., p. 18. This can be linked back to interaction between life and fiction previously discussed for *Petite révision du ciel* which she wrote and which then changed her life.

⁸⁶ For the full list of names see *Les Jupiters chauds* pp. 435-37.

⁸⁷ Virone, ‘Le ciel de César, d’Alexandre et d’Elisa’, op. cit., p. 18.

Not only does Elisa Brune use the real name of and actual details about the scientists she portrays in her novel, she also aims to provide her readers with an accurate account of their lives. This observation and depiction of the scientific community in its daily routine leads us to agree with Carmelo Virone's assessment that *Les Jupiters chauds* is 'une petite sociologie de la science' which establishes once more how Brune's fictions are plausible representations of some aspects, institutions or actors of contemporary society. The sociology of science is the study of how scientific knowledge is produced and it looks particularly at scientific institutions, the research activities of scientists and the way scientific communities are structured. Elisa Brune describes scientists and their work in the narrative and can therefore be seen as providing her readers with a sociological document about science and those who carry it out. Brune does not aim to criticise scientific institutions but simply means to convey 'les échos que les acteurs eux-mêmes [...] en donnent. Souvent, ils sont ironiques, critiques....il n'empêche que tous disent qu'ils font le métier qu'ils ont envie de faire et qu'ils ne voudraient jamais faire autre chose...' ⁸⁸ She therefore aspires to give an accurate picture in her novels of the work of scientists and of their point of view, in line with her intention to represent not only the results of science but also how it is produced and linked to the human beings that are behind it. In the main, Brune gives a positive view of science and scientists even though she does not fail to voice some of the concerns of the scientific community when it comes to their heavy workload. Indeed,

pour mener à bien l'activité de recherche elle-même, expérimentale et théorique, l'enseignement, les tâches administratives et la course aux publications, les chercheurs sont le plus souvent portés à travailler comme des forçats. Si en plus il faut s'occuper du public, on va devenir fous, disent certains. (LJC 137)

So although scientists are aware that making science accessible to the general public is a positive thing, they feel they have little time to do so, which is where novels of scientific popularisation such as Brune's may be regarded as valuable for disseminating scientific knowledge. So is *Les Jupiters chauds* an accessible novel of scientific popularisation? According to Pierre Maury, it is. In his view, when a writer tackles science usually either s/he masters his/her topic but quickly loses his/her readers, or s/he does not master it and 'le plaque artificiellement sur le reste de

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 20.

matériau fictionnel. [...] Elisa Brune se situe ailleurs: son sens de la vulgarisation [...] lui permet de nous faire comprendre sans efforts apparents les données les plus complexes de l'astronomie'.⁸⁹ However, not everyone shares his view. This may indeed be an entertaining book if the reader is fond of astronomy but the interest of the novel is greatly diminished for the reader who is not keen on scientific explanations and the search for new planets. Although this is hardly good reading practice, the chunks of science are small enough in *Petite révision du ciel* to be skipped or ignored, should the reader wish to do so, without impeding the understanding of the plot, but this is not the case of *Les Jupiters chauds* where one would have to skip an average of forty-five pages to get back to non-science-related narration. As for the non-scientific part of the story, it is also different from *Petite révision du ciel*, as many more characters are involved in the story around Vincent, and in spite of the original mix between science and narration, some critics regret the plot was so predictable. Thus, despite finding the whole story enjoyable and praising the originality of Brune's novel, Guy Duplat comments that it is 'dommage [...] que tout soit si prévisible' while Colette Nys-Mazure emphasises that the plot is 'cousue de fil blanc, même assez simpliste'.⁹⁰ Indeed, right from the start the reader expects Vincent to make a scientific discovery, suspects that his love life may not be as straightforward as he thinks but that everything will work out for him in the end.

This can therefore lead us to wonder about the kind of public that reads *Les Jupiters chauds* as the amount of science covered can deter some readers while the plot can prove too straightforward for others. Brune sent copies of the narrative to the scientists she met and portrayed in the book and according to her,

ils ont adoré ça. Ça les change un peu de leur quotidien. Ils sont souvent très occupés par leur boulot et les rares lectures qu'ils font, c'est dans le domaine scientifique. Ils ne lisent pas beaucoup de romans. Là, tout à coup, ils se rendent compte qu'on peut parler de science de façon tout à fait exotique pour eux, et en général ça les met en joie.⁹¹

So scientists are enthusiastic about the novel and its mix of genres (perhaps also about appearing in a novel) but as for non-scientific readers, it is harder to say if they

⁸⁹ Pierre Maury, 'La musique des sphères', *Le Soir*, 25 September 2002, no page number available.

⁹⁰ Guy Duplat, 'Les étoiles peuvent aveugler', *La Libre Belgique*, 26 September 2002 <<http://www.la libre.be/culture/livres/article/81804/les-etoiles-peuvent-aveugler.html>> [accessed 1 November 2005]; Nys-Mazure, 'Elisa Brune, *L'Unité de la connaissance*, *Les Jupiters chauds*, *Penser c'est autre chose*', op. cit.

⁹¹ Virone, 'Le ciel de César, d'Alexandre et d'Elisa', op. cit., p. 20.

really enjoy the combination. Indeed, most of those who read and enjoyed the novel are interested in science, as far as we can tell from literary forums and recommendations left by readers on websites such as *Amazon*: ‘Ce livre est à posséder par toutes personnes intéressées par l’astronomie’ according to a visitor to the website who enjoyed the novel, which might suggest, as we believe, that this novel is not recommended if you are not at least keen on astronomy.⁹² Besides, Elisa Brune is aware that the readership that enjoys this type of publication may be restricted since she has Vincent explain in the novel that ‘la vulgarisation scientifique n’est évidemment une cause noble que pour autant que le public soit consentant’ (LJC 137). This may be one of the reasons why Elisa Brune, realising she needed to please a wider readership, subsequently turned to another more commercial and accessible field of science, by exploring female sexuality in several novels and essays which have indeed proven more popular with the wider public.⁹³ In this case again, it would appear that her choice of topic may be linked not only to her personal interests but also to a more strategic approach to writing books that the public is keen to purchase.

Finally, if we turn our attention to intertextuality in *Les Jupiters chauds*, we can note that it figures first and foremost according to its definition quoted above, that is to say as ‘a mosaic of references to other texts’.⁹⁴ Intertextuality here includes references to *Petite révision du ciel* since Vincent alludes regularly to his life as it was: his first encounter with Sophie and the Aki Kaurismäki film they went to see in the previous novel (LJC 256), and even a footnote evoking his previous life working for an insurance company (LJC 33). The set of references that is otherwise used in *Les Jupiters chauds* is different from that previously developed in *Petite révision du ciel* since the sequel presents more of a mix between traditional cultural references

⁹² <<http://www.amazon.fr/jupiters-chauds-Elisa-Brune/dp/2804023133>> [accessed 11 February 2011].

⁹³ See notably Elisa Brune, *Alors heureuse...croient-ils! La vie sexuelle des femmes normales* (Paris: Le Rocher, 2008), Elisa Brune and Yves Ferroul, *Le secret des femmes: Voyage au cœur du plaisir et de la jouissance* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2010). Although no sales figures are currently available, the latter publication appears to have attracted more attention than most of her previous work (especially in France) since in August 2010 it even made the cover of *Le Nouvel Observateur* which also devoted a seven-page article to it. See *Le Nouvel Observateur*, n°2389, 19-25 August 2010, pp. 9-16.

⁹⁴ See note 3 in this chapter.

and scientific ones, with fewer of the former and more of the latter.⁹⁵ In terms of scientific press and media, references are made to ‘la revue *Nature* au mois d’août 1995’ (LJC 79), or ‘l’*Astrophysical Journal*’ (LJC 239) for instance. These match the shift in Vincent’s career and interests. While he was open to his surroundings and eager to rediscover himself and what he liked during the ‘pause’ in his trajectory depicted in *Petite révision du ciel*, his new career path obviously leads to a narrower, more specific set of interests. Where he took the train to go to Paris and see the Eiffel Tower in *Petite révision du ciel*, in the sequel he takes the train to visit fellow scientists at the Institut d’Astrophysique de Paris (LJC 19), and meets colleagues from ‘l’observatoire de Nice’ (LJC 76) or the ‘Lick Observatory de l’université de Californie’ (LJC 81). There are also however, as in *Petite révision du ciel*, a set of typically Belgian references: thus, Vincent, who states that ‘tout a toujours commencé à Bruxelles’ (LJC 342), is a PhD student at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, spends some time on the ‘Grand-Place’ (LJC 346-51), goes for a walk in the ‘forêt de Soignes’ (LJC 351) and follows a girl ‘chaussée d’Ixelles’ (LJC 364) while Sophie visits Louvain-la-Neuve (LJC 253) and the novel even contains a mention of Belgian dishes such as ‘salade liègeoise ou [...] waterzoi’ (LJC 127). An even more striking reference to Belgium and its people relates to Marc Dutroux: ‘imaginons un instant la foule pour applaudir Marc Dutroux électrocuté sur la Grand-Place de Bruxelles...’ (LJC 100). In this case again, the intertextual references, whether cultural, geographical or scientific, enable Elisa Brune to root her narrative on the border between fiction and actual report or biography. In addition, Elisa Brune uses *Les Jupiters chauds* and Vincent’s stay in Colorado to make the only allusion in any of her novels to the way Belgians and Belgium are perceived as exotic if not non-existent for many around the world. During a party at a friend’s,

la grand-mère avait refusé de croire que j’étais belge sous prétexte qu’elle n’avait jamais vu de Belge de sa vie et que ça ne pouvait pas exister. Ce ne fut qu’en inspectant ma carte d’identité sous toutes les coutures qu’elle admit l’éventuelle réalité de ma nationalité. (LJC 293)

⁹⁵ References include Pablo Picasso (LJC 74), Jackson Pollock (LJC 289) Jacques Chirac and Claudia Schiffer (LJC 111), German film director Wim Wenders (LJC 152), Bach and Dire Straits (LJC 164), Jacques Dutronc (LJC 203), *Buena Vista Social Club* (LJC 211), the Beatles, Julien Clerc, Jacques Brel and Johnny Hallyday (LJC 308).

Through this very rare comment, disguised in Vincent's story, Elisa Brune expresses for once in her narrative work, the lack of visibility of Belgian citizens around the world, often assimilated to the French when they are abroad, and it appears that scientists are no exception. Thus, through intertextual references throughout *Les Jupiters chauds* and the above quotation from the novel, Elisa Brune grounds her narrative in the Belgian socio-cultural context as well as in the international scientific context which is something that does not occur in the other types of novels written subsequently, with the exception of *Relations d'incertitude* that we will now analyse.

Relations d'incertitude

Unlike *Petite révision du ciel* and *Les Jupiters chauds*, *Relations d'incertitude* is not simply a novel of scientific popularisation in which Elisa Brune tries to integrate science into a fictional framework, since here she does so in a 'récit de vie'. Thus she goes even further than with *Les Jupiters chauds*, in which she inserted biographical elements from David Charbonneau's life into the story of Vincent, this time building some fictional elements around the actual biography of scientist and co-author of the novel Edgar/d Gunzig. In doing so she follows yet another literary tradition, that of the 'fiction biographique' which, according to Dominique Viart and Bruno Vercier, '[mêle] biographie et autobiographie, portraits et tombeaux, mais aussi essais et fictions [...] [et] dépays[e] le lecteur académique en combinant une "géographie littéraire mentale" et une "géologie culturelle."' ⁹⁶ This is another hybrid genre with potential problems which are similar to those of *Les Jupiters chauds*, as will be developed below. In this instance, Elisa Brune links her narrative to some aspects of reality in yet another manner through the combination of science, biography and 20th-century European history. Indeed, according to Edgar/d Gunzig himself, the book 'croise toute l'histoire du siècle' ⁹⁷ since he was born in Spain during the Civil War and his father died in a concentration camp during the Second World War 'comme résistant, comme communiste et comme juif' (RI 39) before Edgar/d went back to Poland with his mother in 1952 (RI 41). ⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Viart and Vercier, *La littérature française au présent*, op. cit., p. 124.

⁹⁷ Guy Duplat, 'L'homme du bootstrap', *La Libre Belgique*, 10 September 2004, p. 2.

⁹⁸ Chapter 4 explores further the historical aspect of the novel and the education of Rachel, Edgar/d's mother. The link with Belgian history and the fact that Edgar/d's father really existed is evidenced by

However, if most of the writers tackling ‘fiction biographique’ usually ‘interroge[nt] les grandes figures du passé’,⁹⁹ (generally writers, painters, musicians or historical figures), Elisa Brune departs from this convention of the genre and deals with a scientific figure still very much alive. Although this is not common, well-known scientific figures such as Ettore Majorana for instance, who was part of Enrico Fermi’s team in Rome before he disappeared in 1938, have been the focus of literary work.¹⁰⁰ In this instance the scientist, having disappeared, was not involved, but Edgar/d Gunzig was very much a part of the project and himself asked Elisa Brune to tell his story. According to Brune

tout ce qui se rapporte au passé d’Edgar, de Rachel, de Jacques, de Diane, est rigoureusement vrai...pour autant que ce qu’Edgar m’a raconté soit vrai! Et c’est là l’ambiguïté intéressante. Il m’est totalement impossible de savoir si Edgar a dit la vérité ou non [...]. Et je n’ai pas cherché à le vérifier, précisément parce que je ne faisais pas une biographie mais un roman.¹⁰¹

This statement shows that even the author herself finds it hard to classify this book. She says it is a novel but the fact that it is about an actual person and his story makes it more a biography, even though some fictional elements have been inserted. The mix of several genres and of reality and fiction can appear confusing in this case again when it comes to defining the objective of the book.

Furthermore, another feature of the ‘fiction biographique’ is that ‘le narrateur biographe se met en scène et en question dans son propre texte’,¹⁰² which is precisely what Elisa Brune does with Hélène, the young scientific journalist who helps Edgar/d in the novel.¹⁰³ Indeed, the resemblance between Elisa Brune and Hélène is so striking that some readers and critics are convinced that both Hélène and Edgar/d are

the inclusion in the novel of an extract mentioning Jacques G. from Rudi Van Doorslaer’s *Enfants du Ghetto. Juifs révolutionnaires en Belgique (1925-1940)* (Brussels: Labor, 1997).

⁹⁹ Viart and Vercier, *La littérature française au présent*, op. cit., p. 105.

¹⁰⁰ Leonardo Sciascia, *La Disparition de Majorana* (Paris: Flammarion, 1984); Jordi Bonnells, *La seconde disparition de Majorana* (Paris: Liana Levi, 2004).

¹⁰¹ Lise Thiry and Elisa Brune, ‘Les incertitudes du roman’, *Le Carnet et les Instants*, 136, 1 February-31 March 2005, pp. 16-17 (p. 17).

¹⁰² Viart and Vercier, *La littérature française au présent*, op. cit., p. 110.

¹⁰³ Elisa Brune uses the character of the young journalist in *Relations d’incertitude* with Hélène but also of the young researcher with Marianne in *Un Homme est une rose*. Elisa Brune justifies this recurrent use of similar characters as ‘un personnage qui est le bon filon narratif pour investiguer un milieu ou un personnage qui lui est campé comme expert ou comme maître; c’est toujours une façon d’entrer dans l’enquête. Puisque en fait dans les romans psychologiques comme dans les essais de science, c’est une enquête que je mène pour savoir ce qu’est l’astrophysique ou pour savoir qui est ce personnage. Peu importe mais pour mener une enquête il faut une enquêtrice ou un enquêteur et le journaliste ou la chercheuse c’est typiquement la bonne ficelle’. See my unpublished interview with Elisa Brune on 27 August 2007. Appendix B, p. 259.

‘les doubles des auteurs’,¹⁰⁴ even though Hélène is apparently a fictional character. This led critic Lise Thiry to tell Brune that ‘n’était le prénom d’Hélène, je n’ai pu m’empêcher de vous suivre, Edgar et vous, tout au long du roman’.¹⁰⁵ Elisa Brune replied that she only identified herself ‘très vaguement’ with Hélène and that only she precisely knew ‘la part [d’elle] qui loge dans Hélène’.¹⁰⁶ The fact that the novel deals with the life of an actual person and that the journalist can be perceived as being Elisa Brune herself reinforces the link between the novel and reality and also underlines the connection with the real-life characters/authors. At the same time, such links emphasise the thin border between fiction and biography the book sits on. However, Brune’s desire to maintain the mystery surrounding what and who is fictional or not leaves an element of confusion for the reader, who may wish to clearly identify what s/he is reading and this is potentially, on top of the book’s aim for scientific popularisation, what led one critic to judge the novel to be too ambitious.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, by taking the reader onto several different (albeit connected) tracks and topics, the narrative may be perceived by some as lacking a clear aim and direction and attempting to do too many things at once. According to Brune, the interest of the novel was primarily meant to lie in the popularisation of the scientific ideas developed by Edgar/d Gunzig throughout his career but has ended up being centred on the life of Edgar/d and how science became a refuge and helped him throughout his life, ‘le “machin” qui vous sort du pétrin’ (RI 47). In addition, his life has been so eventful that the novel takes the reader on a tour of European history and the history of the persecution of the Jewish people. So while the book seeks to inform the reader on several levels, scientific, historical, biographical, it may be trying to cover too many topics at the same time.

To sum up, this novel is hybrid on several levels since it mixes fiction, biography and history on the one hand and real and fictional characters on the other and it is thus difficult to pigeonhole it as a biography or a fiction, a scientific or an historical novel. On the margin of several genres and on the border between fiction

¹⁰⁴ Jean-Marc Levy-Leblond, ‘La science – et puis après?’, *La Recherche*, 379, October 2004 <<http://www.larecherche.fr/content/recherche/article?id=2870>> [accessed 6 January 2006].

¹⁰⁵ Thiry and Brune, ‘Les incertitudes du roman’, op. cit., p. 17.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Pierre Maury, ‘Elisa Brune et Edgard Gunzig, la fusion des mondes’, *Les Livres du Soir*, 12 November 2004, p. 2.

and reality, Elisa Brune shows once more how it is her ‘habitude de mêler réalité et fiction et [que] cela n’est en rien problématique à [ses] yeux, pour autant [qu’elle] n’expose l’intimité de personne contre son gré’.¹⁰⁸ She also proves here again her versatility and originality as a writer while stressing her wish to blur the margins between fact and fiction, despite the fact some readers keen to read either a biographical account or a novel of scientific popularisation may find this confusing, lacking consistency or a clear thread.

Even though the narrative has ended up being a partly fictional biographical and scientific novel, the idea at the heart of the collaboration between Elisa Brune and Edgar/d Gunzig was truly to write a book of scientific popularisation on his work.¹⁰⁹ For Brune the interest of combining scientific explanations and biographical data about the scientist is, as previously mentioned, to establish the link between the scientist as a person and the science s/he produces, since she is adamant that ‘le parcours intellectuel d’un homme s’enracine toujours dans l’émotionnel’ (RI 47), which may be the key to analysing Brune’s three novels of scientific popularisation. *Relations d’incertitude* and Edgar/d’s life story give her the opportunity to demonstrate this connection between the scientist’s work and his personal circumstances. This is stressed by Hélène at the beginning of the narrative:

On affirme volontiers que la créativité de l’artiste s’enracine de préférence dans une expérience douloureuse. [...] J’en viens aujourd’hui à me demander s’il n’en va pas de même pour la créativité du scientifique – et s’il ne s’agit pas de la même source, au fond, qui chanterait dans des tonalités différentes. (RI 27)

Thus, with *Relations d’incertitude*, Elisa Brune ‘s’intéresse non seulement [aux] théories [d’Edgar/d], audacieuses et brillantes, mais aussi à sa vie’.¹¹⁰ This feature is in addition characteristic of ‘fictions biographiques’ which seek to ‘interroger la création dans son rapport à une existence, de produire ce que notre temps appelle “une étude de cas.”’¹¹¹ In this novel, the scientific journalist observes the scientist rather than science and Hélène has the same effect on Edgar/d as a physicist who observes a particle, that is to say s/he modifies its behaviour – ‘l’expérience est influencée par l’expérimentateur’ (RI 467). Indeed in physics, to observe is to

¹⁰⁸ Thiry and Brune, ‘Les incertitudes du roman’, op. cit., p. 17.

¹⁰⁹ Duplat, ‘L’homme du bootstrap’, op. cit., p. 2.

¹¹⁰ Maury, ‘Elisa Brune et Edgard Gunzig’, op. cit., p. 2.

¹¹¹ Viart and Vercier, *La littérature française au présent*, op. cit., p. 117.

modify and by scrutinising Edgar/d and his life, a change is effected in his behaviour and his perception of his life. Also, Edgar/d is unable to act normally when someone is looking at him, suggesting that he behaves like the particles in physics: ‘Edgard n’était si maladroit que lorsqu’il sentait un regard posé sur lui. [...] [il] ne pouvait travailler que dans la solitude totale’ (RI 513-14). As mentioned earlier, it is therefore as if Elisa Brune has applied Heisenberg’s theory to her characters and stories, which is another possible key to reading and understanding most of Brune’s narrative work, aiming to produce change through observation and description. Observation has an impact and triggers change on the observed thing, person, phenomenon or issue.

Nevertheless, amidst Edgar/d’s biography and details about his collaboration with Héléne, the book retains some scientific explanations dotted here and there, as was the case with *Petite révision du ciel*. These occur in small chapter-long (rather than fragment-long) exposés usually bearing the names of topics or the scientific object they explore, such as relativity (RI 59-63), bootstrap theory (RI 75-79; 251-53; 311-21; 498-501 & 573-76), or the vacuum (RI 174-78) but most of the time they are put in perspective in relation to Edgar/d’s story and how a specific theory helped him. One example of this is Edgar/d’s perception of the vacuum:

Si le vide au sens du néant, de rien absolu, fait encore partie aujourd’hui de la métaphysique, il n’est plus un acteur de la physique. Il n’y a pas de vide. [...] Retenu dans ma cellule, en prison, j’arpentais concrètement ce que peut être l’état de vide du psychisme humain, c’est-à-dire de son énergie minimum. (RI 175)

As was previously discussed, in Brune’s scientific novels, the scientific parts are not always straightforward for a lay reader to understand. For instance the following passage on bootstrap theory is rather complex for someone with little scientific background:

Petit retour au royaume des particules. Vous pensez que A est une particule fondamentale. En essayant de la décortiquer, vous voyez surgir B et C. Alors, vous allez dire que B et C sont des particules fondamentales, et A une particule composée. Mais si vous les décortiquez, vous trouvez que B est composée de A et de C, tandis que C est composée de A et de B. Aucune ne précède l’autre. (RI 251-52)

The narrative thus provides the reader with yet another type of combination: that of specifically scientific explanatory passages and of some fragments mixing science, human experience and interpretation. *Relations d’incertitude* therefore shares some

similarities with *Petite révision du ciel* in the way science is incorporated and is sometimes slightly too complex for a work of popularisation.

Due to the nature of the narrative and the themes it deals with, the use of intertextuality in *Relations d'incertitude* differs from Brune's two other novels of scientific popularisation. The emphasis here is on history and science and these are the main intertextual references found throughout the book, emphasising the connection between the historical background of the story, science and the character of Edgar/d. This suggests that Elisa Brune carefully adapts her use of intertextuality to the type of novel she is writing.

As in *Les Jupiters chauds*, the actual names of scientists Edgar/d has worked with throughout his career have been retained: Ilya Prigogine, Isabelle Stengers, Michel Serres, Pascal Nardone, Robert Brout and François Englert to name but a few.¹¹² The reader comes across several scientific publications and foundations such as Landau and Lifchitz's five-volume Physics Manual (RI 51), the *Journal of Mathematical Physics* (RI 289) or the *Gravity Research Foundation* (RI 72, 94) and famous scientists: Galileo, Newton (RI 15), Einstein (RI 15, 39, 44, 361). These references help embed the narrative into the scientific context Edgar/d has frequented over the years and for the reader who knows a little about science and especially physics, reading the names of well-known scientists and publications adds to the plausibility of the account. In addition, including explanations of Edgar/d's work in the narrative will also help his achievements as a scientist to be further recognised by a wider public, which in itself contributes to the popularisation of physics.

Other than scientific figures, historical ones are referred to throughout the book. Thus the reader comes across names such as Napoleon, Julius Caesar and George Bush (RI 15), Ramses II and Martin Luther King (RI 176) as well as Hitler, Franco, Mussolini and Stalin whose names are mentioned regularly throughout the novel. There are allusions to well-known historical events most readers will know about, such as 9/11, Pearl Harbor (RI 23), the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Spanish

¹¹² Scientists are mentioned on the following pages: Ilya Prigogine (who is mentioned no fewer than eleven times between pages 33 and 275), Isabelle Stengers (RI 33, 65, 160), Michel Serres (RI 33), Pascal Nardone (RI 91, 117, 203, 275, 383), Robert Brout and François Englert (RI 67, 275).

Civil War, the Prague Spring or the Bay of Pigs invasion (RI 205).¹¹³ The use of these historical details and figures is paramount in this instance to ground the narrative in the 20th-century historical context and reinforce the sense that beyond simple credibility, as was the case with Vincent, the account is actually that of Edgar/d's life. His life is so connected to the European history of the latter part of the 20th century that Elisa Brune could not have told his life story without referring to some of its most significant events and figures.

Since science and history are so central to explain Edgar/d's trajectory, there are fewer intertextual references to art, music or cinema in the narrative than in *Petite révision du ciel* and *Les Jupiters chauds*. But the narrative nonetheless includes mentions of *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* (RI 425), Woody Allen (RI 39), Charlie Chaplin (RI 390), the film *Midnight Express* (RI 94, 159), Picasso (RI 252), Bach (RI 284) or Nietzsche (RI 393).¹¹⁴ As in *La Tournante*, discussed below, the 'effet de réel' is further emphasised by the insertion in the narrative of some passages from published work, which is yet another way for Brune to mix genres. As with the footnotes in *Les Jupiters chauds*, which enable a crossover between fiction and reality, so the extracts from Marcel Braitstein's account *Enfant traqué, enfant caché* (RI 196-200) and Rudi Van Doorslaer's *Enfants du Ghetto. Juifs révolutionnaires en Belgique (1925-1940)* provide a link between the novel, the biography and history.¹¹⁵ These additional insertions strengthen the credibility of Edgar/d's biography and Brune's account of his story while highlighting yet again the connection between Edgar/d's life, his family and European history.

To conclude, this analysis of Brune's novels of scientific popularisation has shown that here too the representation of an accurate socio-cultural framework or historical context through various media is at the heart of her concern when writing. As we have previously indicated, although she remains ostensibly objective, we can sense that she simultaneously seeks to have an impact on her readers. This is also a

¹¹³ There are also mentions of the 1956 uprising in Budapest (RI 213), the Slansky trial (RI 430, 436) and the Geneva Agreements (RI 476) among others.

¹¹⁴ Other references include *Alice in Wonderland* (RI 28), the *Thousand and One Nights* (RI 154), Régis Wagnier's *Est-Ouest* (RI 443), *Le Pianiste* (RI 444), Michelangelo, Rodin, Modigliani and Maillol (RI 191), Burt Lancaster and Cary Grant (RI 241).

¹¹⁵ Marcel Braitstein, *Enfant traqué, enfant caché* (Montréal: Editeur XYZ, 1995); Rudi Van Doorslaer, *Enfants du Ghetto*, op. cit.

characteristic of the rest of her work as we will now see by looking at Brune's approach to the genre of the documentary novel.

Documentary novel – *La Tournante*

Elisa Brune's third novel has been characterised as a 'roman-reportage' by Jacques de Decker and as a 'roman fait-divers' by others.¹¹⁶ The name of this genre itself clearly aligns Brune's work with 'une écriture du réel'.¹¹⁷ This trend, popular for the last fifteen years in Francophone literature, is being followed by other well-known Belgian writers such as Françoise Mallet-Joris as explained in chapter 1, or Nicolas Ancion for example. In his collection of short stories *Les Ours n'ont pas de problème de parking*, Ancion dedicated one ironic short story entitled 'Le grand méchant Marc' to Marc Dutroux's failed prison break.¹¹⁸ In 2001 Emmanuèle Sandron published *Sarah Malcorps* which centres on a teenager who ends up reporting her father for sexual abuse and which has been considered more as a report than a literary creation.¹¹⁹ These examples of literary works published in the same year as *La Tournante* suggest that there is a trend involving literary creation based on difficult true stories. The genre of the 'roman fait-divers' has also been experimented with by contemporary French writers such as Philippe Besson and before him Emmanuel Carrère.¹²⁰ It is however nothing new for writers to take a 'fait divers' as a starting point for their story since Stendhal used the story of a woman murdered by her young lover – 'les affaires Lafargue et Berthet' – as inspiration for *Le Rouge et le Noir* and Flaubert was inspired by the 'affaire Delamare' to write *Madame Bovary*. Others novels such as Mauriac's *Thérèse Desqueyroux* or Camus' *L'Étranger* were also suggested by actual events. However, contemporary writers approach these 'faits divers' differently from earlier writers since 'désormais la littérature s'interroge

¹¹⁶ Jacques De Decker, 'Brune et le roman-reportage', *Le Soir*, 29 August 2001, no page number available.

¹¹⁷ Viart and Vercier, *La littérature française au présent*, op. cit., p. 211.

¹¹⁸ Nicolas Ancion, *Les Ours n'ont pas de problème de parking* (Brussels: Le Grand Miroir, 2001).

¹¹⁹ Emmanuèle Sandron, *Sarah Malcorps* (Avin: Luce Wilquin, 2001).

¹²⁰ Philippe Besson, *L'enfant d'octobre* (Paris: Grasset, 2006) is based on the story of Gregory Villemin's murder; Emmanuel Carrère, *L'Adversaire* (Paris: P.O.L., 2000) tells the story of Jean-Claude Romand. Other names come to mind, such as François Bon, *Un fait divers* (Paris: Minuit, 1993), Danièle Sallenave, *Viol* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), Laurent Mauvignier, *Dans la foule* (Paris: Minuit, 2006), Jean-Yves Cendrey, *Les jouets vivants* (Paris: L'Olivier, 2005) and *Corps enseignant* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), which is based on a real story he was told about the young victim of a paedophile.

plus largement non seulement sur le fait divers lui-même – sa “monstruosité” – mais sur les conditions sociales qui l’ont rendu possible et, surtout, sur ses répercussions dans le corps social’.¹²¹ Thus, contemporary narratives are deemed to be more critical than those written in the past as they can be characterised as ‘moins romanesque[s], plus en prise sur les sciences humaines, plus “interrogeante[s]”’.¹²² This fits with the distinction we drew earlier between documentary work and creative fiction and corresponds to the way in which Brune wrote *La Tournante*. As François Busnel concludes, ‘la littérature de fiction a souvent fait son lit de la réalité la plus sordide’ and in exploring this genre Elisa Brune shows that she is part of a long-standing tradition.¹²³

In addition, this genre suits Brune, who is not ‘une adepte des sujets faciles, traités sur un mode consensuel’ and who displays a ‘détermination à ne rien masquer d’une réalité, fût-elle la plus désespérante’.¹²⁴ The fact that this genre ‘suppose que l’on s’intéresse à la société, que l’on se documente’ corresponds to Elisa Brune’s profile as a writer who has an almost scientific approach to writing and likes to insert many links to reality into stories to emphasise their verisimilitude.¹²⁵ In doing so she follows yet another tendency of contemporary documentary novels which ‘dans l’effort pour proposer une nouvelle saisie du réel effectif, [...] se sont empar[és] de faits divers susceptibles d’éclairer les manifestations les plus aigües de la société actuelle’.¹²⁶ Indeed, Elisa Brune does not hide the fact that she gets her inspiration for some of her fictions from the world she observes around her on a daily basis and in the case of *La Tournante* she presents the reader with an actual ‘fait divers’. However, she chose not to keep the exact content of the story she was told and explains she felt compelled to alter it slightly and transform ‘le vrai pour qu’il devienne vraisemblable’ as she felt the initial story was so extreme that it would have lacked credibility if presented in a novel.¹²⁷ Also, in order for her narrative to further

¹²¹ Viart, ‘Littérature et sociologie, les champs du dialogue’, in Baudorre, Rabaté and Viart (eds.), *Littérature et sociologie*, op. cit., p. 26.

¹²² Viart and Vercier, *La littérature française au présent*, op. cit., p. 212.

¹²³ François Busnel, ‘La fiction et le fait divers’, *Lire*, May 2006, p. 10.

¹²⁴ Jean-Claude Lebrun, ‘Elisa Brune au cœur du social’, *L’Humanité*, 25 October 2001, no page number available.

¹²⁵ De Decker, ‘Brune et le roman-reportage’, op. cit.

¹²⁶ Viart and Vercier, *La littérature française au présent*, op. cit., p. 235.

¹²⁷ Henri Sonet and Nicole Debarre, *Culture Matin*, 19 September 2001, <<http://www2.rtbf.be/jp/matin/2001/09/19/affiche.html>> [accessed 14 March 2006].

correspond to what usually happens in actual cases of gang rape (recruiting process, omertà, lack of justice), Elisa Brune researched both the media and the law and interviewed people working with teenagers in order to put together the various pieces of the puzzle and make sure the story was coherent. As a result, she presents her readers with an ‘observation clinique d’une réalité vécue’ and a ‘constat social accablant et dérangeant’.¹²⁸

Again, Brune attempts to maintain objectivity despite the shocking situation she depicts in her novel, even though some of her characters, such as Céline, can be perceived as expressing opinions on her behalf. As De Decker comments, Elisa Brune ‘ne se permet pas de commentaire. Elle donne la parole au maximum d’intervenants, accumule les témoignages, cite même des extraits de presse tels quels’.¹²⁹ Indeed Brune included three extracts from French newspaper articles concerning trials involving groups of young rapists who were protected by a form of omertà.¹³⁰ Brune extends her study of the phenomenon and her desire to share information by adding an appendix to the book summarising the various laws and penalties on sexual abuse and assaults in different European countries (LT 183-6). She is keen to bridge the gap between fiction and reality by using the novel to relay information on a specific issue to the public, as does a journalist, thus proving how the details (often ‘détails concrets’ in her case) and characters contained in a narrative can be ‘plus que d’improbables constructions imaginaires, [et] [...] perme[ttre] à la littérature de se confronter à des situations concrètes et de mesurer ce que celles-ci révèlent de l’état présent du monde’.¹³¹ Although Brune’s failure to express a judgement in her narrative might be perceived as a weakness by some readers and risks making her look detached, it has to be kept in mind that she has a scientific approach to story-telling and wishes to have an impact by only observing and describing, linking back to our previous reference to her – not necessarily conscious – application of Heisenberg’s theory to her writing.

¹²⁸ Monique Verdussen, ‘L’inquiétante tournante d’Elisa Brune’, *La Libre Belgique*, 10 October 2001, p. 18.

¹²⁹ De Decker, ‘Brune et le roman-reportage’, op. cit.

¹³⁰ Articles from *Le Monde.fr* (24 April 2001), *l’Humanité* (6 December 1999) and *Marie-Claire* (April 2001) (LT 120-1, 137-9, 164-5).

¹³¹ Viart and Vercier, *La littérature française au présent*, op. cit., p. 236.

Another characteristic of *La Tournante* is the use of multiple narrators/voices and points of view. The narrative is divided into 39 short chapters, most of them named after the 19 narrators, whose various voices and points of views are the different ‘voix de la collectivité, partagée entre scandale et tentative de compréhension’.¹³² The novel focuses not only on the main protagonist’s perception of and feelings regarding being repeatedly raped and abused, but also widens its scope to represent peripheral points of view on the topic of gang rape, taking in those of the victim’s family and the rapists. This use of multiple narrators and standpoints to reflect on Marion’s situation and on the characters’ lives is reminiscent of Caroline Lamarche’s *Le Jour du chien* in which six narrators give their view on the dog they witnessed running along the motorway and reflect on how this insignificant event is a reflection of the drama in their own lives.¹³³ But more strikingly, the type of structure and approach adopted by Brune in *La Tournante* can be found in other novels such as for instance Cendrey’s 2007 *Corps Ensaignant*, in which the writer

bâtit un récit en s’appuyant sur des témoignages recueillis autour de la mort de Céline, victime de l’enseignant pédophile Berthe. À l’exception du premier chapitre, qui prend la forme d’une lettre adressée par l’auteur à la victime, chacun des autres chapitres du roman exprime le point de vue d’un personnage impliqué dans l’événement: la mère de Céline, son père, un garçon qu’elle fréquentait avant de mourir, un professeur de l’école, un animateur, une voisine, un policier, etc. [...] Que des faits bruts, des témoignages consignés dans un rapport.¹³⁴

Such examples suggest that this type of narrative strategy is recognised as being an effective way of objectively relaying the information and story that a writer wishes to share.

If we consider the style and language of the narrative, it appears that the language used by the various narrators is realistic and closely reflects the way people actually speak, as already touched upon at the start of this chapter. According to Monique Verdussen, Elisa Brune’s language reflects the situation she depicts in her novel: ‘Elisa Brune dit crûment, violemment, vulgairement parfois une réalité crue, violente et vulgaire’.¹³⁵ Thus, the protagonists’ use in some cases of crude, mimetic colloquial spoken language or in others of a higher register conveys not only their

¹³² Ibid., p. 242.

¹³³ Caroline Lamarche, *Le Jour du chien* (Paris: Minit, 1996).

¹³⁴ According to Daniel Ducharme <http://www.ecouterlirepenser.com/textes/dd_lc_cendrey.htm> [accessed 16 March 2011].

¹³⁵ Verdussen, ‘L’inquiétante tournante d’Elisa Brune’, op. cit., p. 18.

social background and level of education but also the gap between the different generations in the novel. Rachid, one of Marion's rapists, speaks in crude language about the pleasure he has raping girls and how they deserve it: 'Ça faisait longtemps que je cherchais un plan pour niquer cette salope de Marion' (LT 145), 'baiser ça doit ressembler à buter, sinon c'est chiant' (LT 146), 'on la bouillave à sept et sans cagoule' (LT 147) or 'y a que ça ici, des chiennes en chaleur' (LT 148). Conversely, Céline, Marion's aunt, is the most educated narrator of the novel and expresses herself in a more refined manner, using feminist terms and conveying a fair amount of social criticism in her discourse: 'je l'ai laissée pleurer tout son soûl sur mon épaule' (LT 65), 'c'est invraisemblable à quel point le despotisme sexuel peut encore pourrir nos vies' (LT 66), 'j'ai souvent l'impression d'une curieuse dichotomie' (LT 67), 'vision simpliste qui excuse par définition les hommes et ne laisse aux femmes d'autres possibilités que de rester cloîtrées' (LT 99).

Despite convincing and varied dialogue and descriptions throughout the text, and although *La Tournante* has been considered by some as a straightforward and effective way of warning readers about over-permissive attitudes to teenage sexuality, the novel has also been criticised in some quarters as 'littérairement guère abouti'.¹³⁶ This is, in our view, mainly because in this book and as is often the case throughout her work, style is not Brune's primary concern. It is the theme and the representation of the impossible situation some girls end up in when caught in gang-rape that is first and foremost Brune's concern. The book is factual, which, together with the use of realistic dialogue, can be seen as a style in and of itself. Had Elisa Brune adopted a more literary style, the impact of the story on the reader may have been greatly diminished since the book aims to represent the crude reality faced by some girls, not to wrap it in layers of pompous style. Therefore it is only logical that a character such as Rachid speaks the way he does as there would be a lack of 'realism' if such protagonists spoke 'out of character'.

In the case of *La Tournante* the primary connection between fiction and reality is the fact that the narrative arose from an actual account which left Brune feeling

¹³⁶ Gascht, 'Elisa Brune, entre ciel et terre', op. cit., p. 14.

‘interpellée personnellement’.¹³⁷ Whereas in *Petite révision du ciel* and *Les Jupiters chauds* she inserted elements of the real world in the fiction to reinforce their plausibility, in *Relations d’incertitude* and *La Tournante* she did the opposite and incorporated fiction around reality to make the story more bearable for readers. In *Petite révision du ciel* and *Les Jupiters chauds* Brune kept the actual names of some people but here she did the opposite and inserted fictionalised characters into a real story that was too personal and harsh. There was a need for anonymity here whereas deliberately keeping the names of scientists in the scientific novels was a good way of advertising their work as well as a nice connection between fiction and reality. Much shorter than most of the other novels discussed here, *La Tournante* contains fewer intertextual references and the serious nature of its topic does not lend itself to a wide display of intellectual allusions. Most geographical references are related to Paris and its different and easily recognisable areas – Vincennes, Bastille, Montmartre, Pigalle, Barbès – demonstrating how Elisa Brune is keen to use a landscape in her narrative that the French reader (or anyone who knows Paris) will connect to, in stark contrast with the scientific novels analysed above. The textual extracts used to link the novel to the socio-cultural context also all come from well-known French newspapers and magazines. This, combined with the very topical issue, may explain why this novel was the first one of Brune’s to be truly noticed by the French public and media. Elisa Brune strategically chose a controversial topic bound to attract attention from the critics and setting the plot in Paris strengthened the impact on the larger French readership she wished to target by publishing in Paris. The few socio-cultural and intertextual references that are found in the novel are the ‘Lac des cygnes’ (LT 8), Betty Boop (LT 22), the Spice Girls (LT 94), the football World Cup (LT 111), Almodóvar’s *Talons aiguilles* starring Victoria Abril (LT 159) and singers Barbara and Eminem (LT 170). This is numerically far less than in the other novels but these references are sufficient to suggest the popular culture and background in which Marion has been brought up. There are a couple of historical references to World War Two and Hitler when dealing with Marion’s father’s childhood and mentions of philosophers studied by her aunt – Aristotle,

¹³⁷ Elisa Brune, *L’écrivain et la blessure* (32^{ème} rencontre québécoise internationale des écrivains, 23-26 avril 2004) <<http://www.nuitblanche.com/AfficherPage.aspx?idMenu=0&idPage=195>> [accessed 20 May 2006].

Sophocles, Seneca, Montaigne and Jankélévitch highlighting Céline's cultural level – although all of them easily recognisable for most readers. Finally, another striking choice of French popular reference by Brune is the comparison of Marion with 'Miss France' (LT 156), which conveys a vivid and stereotypical image for most French readers and is associated with a certain kind of young woman with good morality rather than with a sexually liberated teenager. To sum up, these choices of well-known popular references suggest that Elisa Brune wanted to reach as wide a public as possible and their relatively small number is representative of the fact that the novel was primarily intended to inform the public, as would a journalist in an article, and not so much to educate and entertain as was the case with the scientific novels previously discussed or with the epistolary novels that will now be looked at.

Epistolary novels - *La Tentation d'Edouard* and *Un Homme est une rose*

Both *La Tentation d'Edouard* and *Un Homme est une rose* have been characterised as 'romans de séduction',¹³⁸ in which the tone and style are lighter than in Brune's previous darker novels such as *La Tournante* and *Blanche cassé*.¹³⁹ Both narratives are epistolary novels or more precisely 'duologue' letter-novels only involving the two main characters' correspondence and, as is customary in such novels, the plot is centred on love and surrounded by debates on other topics such as art or work.¹⁴⁰ Like Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (1721) or Laclos' *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782),¹⁴¹ in some parts of the narratives the epistolary exchange is not only part of, but actually constitutes the action.¹⁴² So in writing epistolary novels, Elisa Brune connects to yet another literary tradition but also to other contemporary Belgian

¹³⁸ Daniel Arnaut, 'Les jeux de l'amour et du savoir', *Le Carnet et les Instants*, 139, 1 October-30 November 2005, p. 71. The various types of relationships between men and women will be analysed in chapter 5. Throughout the rest of our analysis, quotations from *La Tentation d'Edouard* and *Un Homme est une rose* will be respectively followed by LTE and HR and the page number.

¹³⁹ Indeed, if Elisa Brune portrays some aspects of reality of contemporary society through these two epistolary novels, she does it in a rather entertaining style and it must also be noted that there is nothing as serious as in *La Tournante* or *Blanche cassé* at stake, both plots aiming towards a possible meeting and relationship between the characters.

¹⁴⁰ As defined in the article 'Epistolary Novel', in Peter France (ed.), *New Oxford Companion to Literature in French* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 285.

¹⁴¹ Montesquieu, *Lettres persanes* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995 [1721]).

¹⁴² Indeed according to Henri Benac, in epistolary novels such as *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, 'les lettres ne se contentent pas de raconter, mais sont des instruments même du récit et de l'action'. Henri Benac, *Guide des idées littéraires*, (Paris: Hachette, 1988), p. 283. See also Achille et al., *La Lettre et le récit*, op. cit., p. 46.

women writers such as Sophie Buyse with *La Graphomane* and Monique Thomassetie with *Le Maître d'or*, who also chose to 'emprunte[r] les chemins déjà foulés d'un genre éprouvé ou familier, le roman épistolaire'.¹⁴³

However, as well as referring back to the 18th century and the heyday of the epistolary novel, Brune's narratives are contemporary adaptations of the genre. Indeed, neither narrative is exclusively based on letters, since part of both books is narrated by female characters Geneviève and Marianne. Other interesting contrasts emerge between the two narratives. On the one hand, *La Tentation d'Edouard*, although set in the 21st century, can be viewed as traditional, for the exchange between Edouard and Geneviève is based exclusively on letters – 'à l'ère de l'informatique et du multimédia, je suis en effet le seul véritable explorateur de l'amour virtuel (pour lequel suffisent un bic et du papier)' says Edouard (LTE 130), suggesting traditional ways of communicating and courting are still effective even though his comment may sound anachronistic. On the other hand, the exchange between Marianne and Michel in *Un Homme est une rose* is based on e-mails, a modern version of the genre that we might label the *e-pistolary novel*. It is as if Elisa Brune is trying to modernise the genre or is experimenting with what is possible by starting from the traditional and evolving towards the contemporary mode of communicating. This enables her to present her observations in the domain of communication in an era when people increasingly keep in touch electronically rather than via letters, and thus represent the latest trends in terms of relationships, that of the 'relation cyberépistolaire [et] éroticotechnologique'.¹⁴⁴

Given her desire to reflect in her novels the world she observes around her, the epistolary genre is a useful tool for Elisa Brune, as the letter (and by extension nowadays the e-mail)

est souvent donnée en gage de vraisemblance du roman. [...] et la lettre fait figure de texte réel vis-à-vis du texte fictif qu'est le roman. En outre, la spécificité du genre épistolaire [...] contribue à ranger les lettres du côté du monde réel et du quotidien.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Paque, 'Des femmes écrivent', op. cit., p. 88. Sophie Buyse, *La Graphomane* (Toulouse: L'Ether Vague, 1995); Monique Thomassetie, *Le Maître d'or* (Avin: Luce Wilquin, 1996).

¹⁴⁴ Tasha Rumley, 'Les nouvelles drogues de la drague', *L'Hebdo*, 6 August 2009, pp. 28-31 (pp. 28, 30).

¹⁴⁵ Achille et al., *La Lettre et le récit*, op. cit., p. 63.

Therefore, the genre in itself is riddled with elements meant to emphasise the plausibility of the narratives and their characters. In addition, by putting ‘au premier plan les épistoliers-acteurs, [le roman épistolaire] est le double parfait, une copie d’une correspondance réelle, ce qui fait qu’on voit moins que c’est un roman’.¹⁴⁶ This ‘effet de réel’ provided by the letters and e-mails in the narratives gives the reader a further sense that s/he is getting an intimate view of the characters’ private lives, which is also one of the features of the epistolary genre.

With the epistolary novel, Elisa Brune once again connects herself to a hybrid genre which has a dual objective: ‘la lettre impose une structure communicationnelle particulière et le roman tente de modifier considérablement sa teneur et sa portée en cherchant la voie de l’introspection et de la vraisemblance’.¹⁴⁷ Another advantage of the epistolary novel from Brune’s point of view is that it is said to ‘rapproche[r] le lecteur du sentiment vécu tel qu’il est vécu’¹⁴⁸ and by exploring this genre Elisa Brune uses yet another technique enabling her to remain close to both the socio-cultural context and the authentic feel she likes to give her novels. For,

même si la lettre semble parfois s’interposer entre le roman et le réel, elle est aussi la garante de sa vraisemblance dans la mesure où elle appartient à un genre qui, à l’origine, n’est pas du domaine de la fiction. Si elle peut assumer cette fonction, c’est parce qu’elle a un double statut: celui de *texte littéraire* et celui de *texte réel*.¹⁴⁹

It is thus evident that Elisa Brune, although she has frequently changed topic and discipline, has kept working with the same sort of characteristics – hybridity and verisimilitude – despite the fact that these two novels are more clearly fictions than the previous novels discussed in this chapter and are not based on actual facts or people.

Other than her tendency to use the same pattern or theme in two novels, writing two epistolary novels, one traditional and one contemporary, allowed Elisa Brune to represent two different sets of characters and seduction behaviours, as will be detailed in chapter 5. By reinventing this genre, she may have wished to become part of its long tradition which in the 18th century served not only to entertain the reader but also to portray and criticise – though not openly – the mores of society (as she is

¹⁴⁶ Frédéric Callas, *Le Roman épistolaire* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2007), p. 23.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁴⁸ Jean Rousset, *Forme et signification: essais sur les structures littéraires de Corneille à Claudel* (Paris: Corti, 1967), p. 67.

¹⁴⁹ Achille et al., *La Lettre et le récit*, op. cit., p. 65. Emphasis in the original.

also doing elsewhere in *La Tournante* or *Blanche cassé* for instance). In addition, writing these two books in different styles – traditional and modern – gives her the opportunity to report on whether or not, and if so how, relationships between men and women have evolved. For example, through these narratives, Brune illustrates the need for men and women to present themselves differently when trying to seduce someone and stresses the significance of power and domination in relationships even in an epistolary exchange, which will be further explored in chapter 5. For, according to Alice Achille

la correspondance peut [...] amener la prise de pouvoir du destinataire sur le destinataire et vice versa. D'abord, c'est le scripteur qui exerce une pression sur son lecteur; [...] Inversement, le destinataire exerce lui aussi un certain pouvoir sur le destinataire: il accepte de recevoir la missive, créant en quelque sorte un lien de subordination.¹⁵⁰

Conversely, the recipient can also refuse to read the letter or cease the exchange, restoring his/her power as happens at one point in both novels.

The contrast between traditional and modern forms is reflected in the layout and style of each novel. The letters Edouard and Geneviève send one another all follow the classic layout of a letter with a date, sometimes a place and the usual starting line 'Cher/Chère...' and follow the traditional rules of 'mise en page', 'marquage temporel et spatial', 'protocole de l'en-tête', 'corps de la lettre' and 'protocole de clôture'.¹⁵¹ Throughout the narrative, the style is formal, the characters always use the 'vous' form and the ending is always courteous. In addition Geneviève notes that 'c'est parce qu'il argumente bien qu'on a envie de l'écouter' (LTE 40), showing that both style and content have to be of a certain standard to be appreciated by the recipient targeted for seduction if s/he is of a particular social or intellectual level, as is the case with Geneviève. However, she also states that the recipient 'sent bien que ce n'est pas l'amour de lui qui a inspiré la lettre, mais l'amour de l'amour' (LTE 8), implying she is aware of and understands the rules of this epistolary game and genre. This last quotation is reminiscent of Roland Barthes' assessment of the love letter, which he described as 'écartelée entre code et désir [...] à la fois vide (codée) et expressive (chargée de l'envie de signifier le désir)'.¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 47.

¹⁵¹ As explained in Achille et al., *ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

¹⁵² Roland Barthes, 'La lettre d'amour', *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, in *Œuvres Complètes*, 5 vols (Paris: Seuil, 1995), III, p. 607.

As for Michel and Marianne's 'échanges internautes' (HR 54), they match the conventional layout of e-mails with the sender, date, time, recipient and subject mentioned at the start of each e-mail. The style is less formal and their exchange quickly goes from formal to familiar, in terms of both content and language. Michel at one point starts to use the 'tu' form (HR 54), thus adopting a certain familiarity with a woman he has never met.¹⁵³ This of course reflects the fact that the e-mail is a form of correspondence which is informal compared to the letter, giving Brune the opportunity to reflect 21st-century practices. As one commentator has said,

email is popular in part because it is informal: the norms associated with letter-writing do not apply to emails and thus do not act as a barrier. Its informality and immediacy allow the sending of short, conversational comments in a way that would be strange in other mediums.¹⁵⁴

Logically, given the speed of email correspondence, the relationship between Michel and Marianne evolves much faster than the one between Edouard and Geneviève. Hence Marianne's attempt to slow things down by reminding Michel: 'Je sais que l'époque va vite, mais tout de même' (HR 54). The length of characters' correspondence is also something which can be noted. Edouard and Geneviève's letters are usually quite long whereas Michel and Marianne's e-mails are more direct and therefore usually short. Also, Marianne and Michel begin their correspondence right at the beginning of the novel – reflecting an era where things go fast – whereas Edouard is forced into a sort of long monologue lasting six letters and twenty-four pages before Geneviève eventually agrees to enter the epistolary scene, replying with a letter of one sentence – reflecting a slower and more reserved era.

As we have already pointed out, neither narrative is exclusively epistolary – though letters and emails are at the origin of the action – and when the content switches to narration rather than letters Elisa Brune chooses to use women narrators (unlike in some of her novels of scientific popularisation), therefore privileging the female point of view in this instance, whilst the use of the epistolary genre enables her to give a voice to male characters too. So Brune is not only mixing genres in her novels, but also narrative techniques. The use of both letters and narrative devices

¹⁵³ He oscillates between the 'tu' and the 'vous' form in a couple of e-mails (especially e-mails pp. 54-59) whilst Marianne does not follow his lead and keeps using the 'vous' form.

¹⁵⁴ Anna Dickinson and Robin Hill, 'Keeping in touch: talking to older people about computers and communication', *Educational Gerontology*, 33 (2007), 613-30 (p. 624).

makes it possible to present several points of view and indeed for characters to contradict themselves or be shown to be dishonest. For the way the characters, both male and female, portray themselves in writing does not necessarily correspond to who they really are and the protagonists in both narratives assume ‘personae’ in the letters as they are well aware of the freedom and cover they provide. Thus, Michel warns Marianne early on in their exchange that he is very different from the image people have of him from his books, and talks about ‘cette question de personnalité telle qu’elle apparaît à travers l’écriture et dans la vie’ (HR 24). This difference between the way a person writes and the way s/he really is can be linked to classic epistolary novels such as *Les Liaisons dangereuses* for instance, in which characters are cautious and secretive. This is further discussed when Marianne confesses she has already used an online dating service – another reference to a fast-developing contemporary trend – where she noticed that there a significant gap ‘du message au bonhomme. Je dis ça pour moi autant que pour vous. Ne croyez pas que je vous plais, c’est ma voix qui vous plaît [...] vous me croiseriez dans la rue [...] vous ne feriez jamais le rapprochement’ (HR 33).¹⁵⁵ This allusion enables the reader to picture the context in which the stories of these men and women unfold and how, as Jean-Claude Kaufmann points out, online, one can ‘tout dire sans que ça porte réellement à conséquence. [...] Le contexte construit la perception de l’autre de manière différente’.¹⁵⁶ Moreover, Geneviève stresses that the epistolary game is ‘un jeu où on choisit son masque’ (LTE 171) – ‘sous ses apparences de genre codifié, la lettre autorise une plus grande liberté d’expression, elle joue le rôle de masque’¹⁵⁷ – and therefore there is necessarily a gap between an individual and their work. The use of the word ‘masque’ indicates the intention of the characters not to reveal their true personality, yet another link to a widely used literary device employed by writers such as Molière or Marivaux for instance. Therefore both correspondents must ensure they do not mix up ‘le jeu et la réalité. L’histoire vécue et celle que l’on

¹⁵⁵ Through these comments suggesting that the writer is not necessarily as you imagine her/him, Elisa Brune also may be alluding to herself since, as previously stated, she herself likes to have multiple identities and not give away who she really is.

¹⁵⁶ Jean-Claude Kaufmann, ‘L’idée qu’internet rend la séduction plus facile est une illusion’, *Sciences Humaines*, 217, July 2010, p. 45.

¹⁵⁷ Achille et al., *La Lettre et le récit*, op. cit., p. 70.

raconte. Le possible et le permis’ (LTE 157).¹⁵⁸ Indeed taking part in the kind of epistolary exchange Brune describes in these two narratives implies, almost naturally, playing a part. The similarity with theatre is further enhanced by Michel, stressing the need to ‘faire avancer l’intrigue’ (HR 38).¹⁵⁹ This is also the reason why Geneviève doubts the portrait Edouard gives of himself in his letters. Indeed, words may lie and Geneviève is very aware of this when she states that ‘l’idée de la lettre considérée comme une photo de l’auteur, elle n’y croyait qu’à moitié. On peut avancer de façon tellement camouflée sous le couvert des mots’ (LTE 47). Therefore, hiding behind a letter or an e-mail is rather easy and gives the author a sense of control and power, as will be further developed in chapter 5. As Pascal Lardellier, (referring specifically to e-mails) explains, ‘en ligne sont oubliés les toussotements nerveux, les mains moites, l’impression vague et confuse de ne pas être à la hauteur de ce que l’autre attend. [...] c’est dans cette absence des corps que le Net trouve son grand succès’.¹⁶⁰ Indeed, both correspondents are invisible, relying solely on words to seduce the other and in this way the exchange is not based on powerful physical criteria.¹⁶¹ Hence Geneviève insists that, whether beautiful or ugly, through letters,

le pouvoir qu[’elle] exerce sur [lui] est le même. Avec [s]es lettres et [s]es photos, [elle le] sédui[t], [...] aux limites de [ses] possibilités, et [il] voudr[ait] [lui] ôter cette griserie que confère une autorité absolue? Il est normal qu[’elle s’]insurge. La planque est trop confortable (LTE 175-76).

Hence her pledge to keep the epistolary relationship and not turn it into a physical encounter, especially when Edouard starts complaining so much that she begins to doubt ‘l’authenticité du personnage’ (LTE 205). Indeed she thinks his letters

laissaient trop clairement entrevoir sa volonté de séduction. Et pour séduire, il se voulait tour à tour touchant, autoritaire, comique, tendre, désemparé, bouddhiste, etc. [...] Il était constamment en train de composer un personnage. Bien sûr ce trait était permis et

¹⁵⁸ ‘L’histoire vécue et celle que l’on raconte’ is another connection to the ‘réel’ as these are not real letters but they are trying to give the impression that they are.

¹⁵⁹ Callas in *Le Roman épistolaire*, op. cit., says: ‘La communication épistolaire ressemble à la communication théâtrale où le spectateur assiste à une représentation faite, dans ce cas-là, pour lui’, (p. 15).

¹⁶⁰ Pascal Lardellier, ‘Rencontres amoureuses sur le net’, *Sciences Humaines*, 217, July 2010, pp. 43-44 (p. 44).

¹⁶¹ When *Un Homme est une rose* was published in 2005, internet facilities enabling you to see pictures of your correspondent such as Facebook (which only became available to all in 2006) were not widely used. If Brune had written her novel a few years later, the nature of the exchange between Michel and Marianne could have been different and physical criteria would necessarily have played a part – although it is always possible for an individual to display pictures of someone else on their profile.

renforcé par l'écrit. La personnalité qui transparaît dans une lettre est nécessairement composée. (LTE 202)

This quotation is yet another link to theatre and playing a role ('composer un personnage'). It however also demonstrates that the epistolary genre, while enabling the protagonists to 'faire part de leurs réflexions sur un certain nombre de points théoriques sans que cela nuise au déroulement de l'intrigue',¹⁶² is at the same time

une réflexion sur *l'écriture et la subjectivité*. La lettre étant écrite à la première personne, elle donne une impression de vécu, elle permet de saisir les hésitations, la mobilité des pensées ou des sentiments, ou les nombreuses facettes d'un personnage qui [peut] chang[er] d'image [...].¹⁶³

This underlines the privileged space which the epistolary exchange represents for the characters of both novels and also stresses their awareness of the role they must play in this context. Indeed, the relationship on which the protagonists are embarking is entirely virtual at the start and is privileged because they are allowed, if not made, to play roles which would be more complicated if the relationship were not virtual. Indeed it is unlikely the characters would express themselves the way they do in their letters if the novels were not letter-based and did not allow the characters to hide and invent a 'parallel' world for their story. Brune uses both stories to illustrate the several layers between the role one plays and one's true personality. Language is the only resource – or even weapon in the case of the male characters – the characters possess to seduce and attract the recipient, as will be analysed in chapter 5. It is therefore highly important that they express their ideas in the best possible way, as they can rely on nothing but the quality of their written 'performance'.

Another dimension of the epistolary novel possibly seen as part of the genre's tradition, to a certain extent, is the importance of eroticism in both narratives – both in the letters and during the narration.¹⁶⁴ Indeed, both male characters have scenarios in mind and do not hesitate to reveal them explicitly, as will be explored in our last chapter. Edouard – whose bookcase contains 'quelques volumes prometteurs sur l'érotisme, et le *Kāma Sūtra*' (LTE 218) – imagines for instance: 'Je vous lécherais délicatement les oreilles. Je vous peignerais le sexe avec une plume avant de m'y introduire résolument' (LTE 132) and tries to convince Geneviève of the 'potentiel

¹⁶² Benac, *Guide des idées littéraires*, op. cit., p. 283.

¹⁶³ Achille et al., *La Lettre et le récit*, op. cit., p. 55.

¹⁶⁴ This is reflected in the fact that Marianne goes as far as stating that they are in 'un polar érotique' (HR 47).

érotique de [ses] pieds’ (LTE 133). As for Michel, he asks Marianne to come to his flat and wait for him ‘dans le lit qui est dans la grande chambre, sur le dos, nue et totalement disponible’ (HR 45). Therefore in choosing to include an erotic dimension in her letter narratives, Elisa Brune is here again reworking a traditional element of the epistolary genre and modifying it to better reflect eroticism in 21st-century society. The way the characters talk or write about eroticism is more direct than was the case in more traditional epistolary novels, in which things were less explicit. In Elisa Brune’s novels the characters openly discuss eroticism or sex, and men – in particular Michel in his e-mails – can actually be quite crude in their choice of words.¹⁶⁵ Both women seem to stick to a limited register, which may reflect the fact that women are usually more careful in their choice of words when dealing with a topic such as eroticism, in line with social expectations. This erotic feature led some critics to think that, ‘peut-être [...] Elisa Brune est-elle en train d’inventer quelque chose comme un genre, que l’on pourrait nommer le roman érotico-scientifique – ou comment le désir sexuel entre en résonance (ou en discordance) avec la sphère du savoir’,¹⁶⁶ suggesting once again her habit of mixing genres and style. Her interest in eroticism is also visible in her various works on the topic that have been published since, and in the intertextual references sprinkled throughout both narratives, as will be seen now.

One of the constraints of the epistolary novel being mimesis (the representation of reality in art and literature), it is logical that Elisa Brune has inserted many intertextual references in both novels – some of which echo one another in the epistolary novels or in other Brune’s narratives. First of all, *La Tentation d’Edouard* can be considered as Brune’s first resolutely Parisian novel. Indeed, in previous novels such as *Blanche cassé* the action was not precisely situated geographically and if *La Tournante* was set in Paris, this was, in our opinion, as much a constraint linked to the actual location of a ‘fait divers’ (since the ‘tournantes’ phenomenon seemed to be centred there), as a strategy to attract the readership. Epistolary novels gave Elisa Brune a choice and she opted to set her stories in Paris, Nice and on the

¹⁶⁵ Michel for instance says: ‘un physique me plaît, [...] me fait bander au premier regard, disons une petite brunette malicieuse avec des boucles sur le front et un peu salope sur les bords [...]’ (HR 37).

¹⁶⁶ Arnaut, ‘Les jeux de l’amour et du savoir’, op. cit., p. 71. We would argue that this statement could also be made about *Petite révision du ciel* and *Les Jupiters chauds* and highlights again Brune’s tendency to mix different genres.

French motorways. Thus, both novels are riddled with geographical references to the French capital, such as names of metro and railway stations,¹⁶⁷ as well as easily recognisable landmarks such as Notre Dame (LTE 75, 80), the Louvre (LTE 142 & 259) or the Eiffel Tower (LTE 206).¹⁶⁸ The reader thus feels as if Elisa Brune wished her/him to be able to physically follow the footsteps of the characters around Paris. In this case, as with the scientific novels, the naming of a precise, well-known place or museum referred to by the protagonists, can trigger the interest of the reader who might have been there or at least heard of it and create a sense of shared knowledge and satisfaction.

In terms of intertextuality in *Un Homme est une rose*, the reader mainly comes across names from the academic and philosophical spheres given the level of education of the protagonists and the fact that their primary exchange is professional, resulting in references to journals such as *Histoire des idées* (HR 11) as well as to philosophers like Kant (HR 22), Nietzsche (HR 25, 26) and Jaccard (HR 22, 23, 26, 29).¹⁶⁹ As was the case with the novels of scientific popularisation and their set of scientific facts, these numerous allusions to philosophers and their work indicate yet another clear connection to a specific set of socio-cultural references and reinforce the characters' features as academics sharing knowledge, even though the style of the novel is not as formal as that of *La Tentation d'Edouard*. This underlines the fact that Elisa Brune did some background research to create her characters and that she may have used her own literary repertoire in her work.

Edouard and Geneviève's references are more literary and artistic, with allusions to 'Cassandra' (LTE 20), Kafka (LTE 69), 'Mme Bovary' (LTE 128 & 153) or Michaux (LTE 134). It is worth noting that the 'questionnaire de Proust' (LTE 10; HR 247), Schopenhauer (LTE 89; HR 54) and Aristotle (LTE 160; HR 168) are mentioned in both novels, suggesting that Elisa Brune may have wished to

¹⁶⁷ These references include 'Métro Opéra', 'station Temple' (LTE 181 & 182), 'Gare Saint-Lazare' (LTE 25), 'Gare de Lyon' (LTE 114 & 179; HR 99) and 'Gare du Nord' (LTE 280 & 286; HR 194 & 245) amongst others.

¹⁶⁸ Other references are to the 'Jardin du Luxembourg', the 'Tuileries', the 'Buttes-Chaumont, le parc Montsouris' and the 'parc Monceau' (LTE 162), the Sorbonne (LTE 170), Saint-Michel (LTE 305; HR 243), Cluny (HR 243), the Bastille, Beaubourg, Saint-Michel, the Halles and Saint-Germain-des-Près areas (LTE 200, 262, 305 & 306).

¹⁶⁹ The characters also talk about Hegel (HR 25, 65), Cioran (HR 26, 29, 34), Koestler (HR 28), Freud (65), Edgar Morin (HR 80), Lacan and Derrida (HR 162) or Marcel Conche (HR 236).

add another link between them.¹⁷⁰ Art and architecture are referred to through several comments on the Sistine Chapel (LTE 43), the Italian Renaissance (LTE 145), Rubens (LTE 185) and Leonardo Da Vinci (LTE 294) as well as to more contemporary artists such as Picasso (LTE 161 & 201), Frida Kahlo (LTE 232), Jackson Pollock (LTE 294) and Patricio Lagos (LTE 138-39, 283). One part of the book is also centred around Rodin, the ‘musée Rodin’ and the sculpture *La Promise* which is mentioned several times (about 18) throughout the narrative.¹⁷¹ Connecting with the more ‘contemporary’ format, there are far fewer artistic references in *Un Homme est une rose* with only one to Kandinsky (HR 95), one to Gustave Courbet’s *L’origine du Monde* (HR 242) and one to photographer Helmut Newton and the Museum dedicated to him in Berlin (HR 242). To summarise, it appears that in both narratives Elisa Brune deliberately has her characters mention European and Northern American artists and pieces of art all connected to high culture, which her readers will potentially recognise and identify with.

As in her other novels, Brune inserts a fair number of cinematographic and popular musical references. In this instance the reader comes across names such as Wim Wenders (LTE 79), Woody Allen (LTE 73, 76, 103 & 218) and Almodóvar (LTE 218) – which are also found respectively in *Les Jupiters chauds*, *Relations d’incertitude* and *La Tournante* – but also Sandrine Kiberlain (LTE 116, 147, 175), Raymond Depardon (LTE 25), Fellini, Godard, Rohmer and Bergman (LTE 218), all emphasising, as exemplified in *Petite révision du ciel*, that Edouard is a cultivated man.¹⁷² Conversely, the set of cinematographic and artistic allusions is smaller and more popular in *Un Homme est une rose*, as Marianne says her story with Michel is ‘un croisement entre Richard Gere et Bridget Jones’ (HR 207). This reference to contemporary chick lit and chick flicks not only enables the reader to picture the characters of the narrative – both morally and physically – and their flaws but also reinforces the sense of ridicule, and even the comedy of ‘situation’, of certain scenes

¹⁷⁰ Some critics may however see this use of the same references as Brune simply repeating herself.

¹⁷¹ Pollock and Picasso are also mentioned in *Les Jupiters chauds* and Rodin in *Relations d’incertitude*.

¹⁷² This is reinforced by Geneviève adding that there was no sign of films such as *Les Bronzés* or *Rambo* or any pornographic films (LTE 218).

throughout the book. It also connects with the more informal style of the novel, even though it contrasts starkly with the more ‘academic’ references mentioned above.¹⁷³

Moreover, both novels include titles of literary work dealing either with eroticism and domination or with male impotence. Indeed, in *La Tentation d’Edouard*, Edouard and Geneviève talk about domination through books such as *Histoire d’O* (LTE 206) or *La Mécanique des Femmes* (LTE 245) and authors such as Anaïs Nin (LTE 50).¹⁷⁴ These authors and texts all explore the dominance/submission relationships between men and women and quoting them gives Elisa Brune a starting point for her characters to discuss the problem of submission while allowing her to connect to the wider world of literature. Quite differently, there is clearly a mix of literary and scientific approaches to love and relationships in *Un Homme est une rose* with on the one hand reference to impotency in literature (Montaigne, Barrico, Stendhal, Bataille, Gary, Rouart (HR 172)) and on the other contemporary reflections on the topic with Bruckner and Finkielkraut’s *Le Nouveau désordre amoureux* (HR 67) for instance. Also, the title of Marianne’s paper for the conference she attends – ‘Les médicaments érectogènes ou le désir du désir’ – is the same as Elisa Brune’s when she attended the conference *Sexe, amour et médicament* in 2002,¹⁷⁵ providing us with another form of intertextuality and perhaps a bit of an in-joke too that only people knowing her well enough will notice. Thus, she is referring to herself in a world where she is not Elisa Brune and simultaneously referring to another type of writing: the academic. The insertion in the novel of some scientific explanations under the form of a conference paper (HR 159-66) is yet another indication of Elisa Brune’s interest in mixing the genres and

¹⁷³ Other references to the seventh art include *Elephant Man* (HR 24, 55), *Amélie Poulain* (HR 43), *Delicatessen* (HR 48), *James Bond* (HR 102), *Bambi* (HR 154) and actors Richard Gere (HR 93, 97, 171, 172, 193, 199) and Penelope Cruz (HR 150). Musical references remain popular and mostly French in this novel with Brassens, Piaf, Ferré, Dutronc and Gainsbourg (LTE 218).

¹⁷⁴ Pauline Réage, *Histoire d’O* (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1954); Louis Calaferte, *La Mécanique des Femmes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994). These references clearly show that Elisa Brune explored erotic literature to write this novel and might be seen as a form of showing off by her, but it may also be that these texts inspired her or maybe she just read them to gather information, as a scientist, to be able to refer to them and give more weight to her argument.

¹⁷⁵ Elisa Brune, ‘Les médicaments érectogènes ou le désir du désir’, seminar *Sexe, amour et médicament*, organised by the association Economie et Santé in March 2002 <<http://www.elisabrune.com/pdf/Viagra.pdf>> [accessed 16 August 2008].

inserting science in her writing whenever it is possible, even in an epistolary novel.¹⁷⁶

Having looked at several novels in this chapter, it appears that *La Tentation d'Edouard* and *Un Homme est une rose* are the ones in which Brune uses the most and the greatest variety of intertextuality. The use of different sets of socio-cultural references in both novels suggests that the contrast between the traditional and modern styles of the narratives is continued through the characters' set of cultural references and behaviour, as will be further analysed in chapter 5. All in all, with these two novels, Elisa Brune has tackled yet another hybrid genre enabling her to insert herself into and rework a literary tradition in which the 'effet de réel' plays an important part, thus allowing her to keep on spinning this thread throughout her work. In connecting with (and rewriting) a recognisable form of literature, she reaffirms that she is a 'serious' writer with a serious cultural background who is not only imitating but also contributing something to literary history.

This overview of Brune's novels, style and use of intertextuality has shown that mixing genres and styles is a recurrent feature of her writing, just as the credible representation of any theme or issue she chooses to tackle is at the heart of her concerns. There is always one element of her narratives that connects them to socio-cultural reality or context or to real people and this is a characteristic that bears her stamp and enables the reader to identify her. As Daniel Laroche says, 'un roman, une pièce de théâtre expriment nécessairement, fût-ce de manière indirecte ou masquée, quelque chose des circonstances (historiques, économiques, sociales, etc.) dans lesquelles elles ont été créées'.¹⁷⁷ Although Brune sprinkles details of her own life throughout her work, such as references to her own career in *Les Jupiters chauds* or *Un Homme est une rose*,¹⁷⁸ she only uses them to create characters that ultimately are not her. This is another connection to 'her reality' but this is not autobiography.

¹⁷⁶ To some extent, *Un Homme est une rose* could even be labelled an erotico-scientific-epistolary novel.

¹⁷⁷ Daniel Laroche, 'Littératures "françaises" ou "francophones"?' , *Le Carnet et les Instants*, 155, 1 February-31 March 2009, pp. 16-21 (pp. 20-21).

¹⁷⁸ In *Un Homme est une rose*, Marianne, like Brune, is interested in 'la part d'irrationnel dans le discours scientifique, l'anthropologie des croyances' (HR 13, 15) and aims to make science more accessible to people (HR 14).

The combination of genres observed in Brune's work is not, as we have seen, always successful and, whilst not yet being widespread, it corresponds to an emerging trend that has been noticed by critics. Indeed, as Viart and Vercier comment,

la fiction contemporaine est le creuset où peuvent se penser *en liaison* des disciplines souvent devenues trop spécialisées pour se rencontrer aisément ou, du moins, pour se rencontrer ailleurs que dans le champ de la philosophie qui seule tente de toutes les embrasser, mais ne parvient à le faire qu'en termes conceptuels. Or la littérature ne privilégie pas les concepts, mais incarne les questions grâce au truchement littéraire des fictions.¹⁷⁹

As has been remarked throughout this chapter, Elisa Brune's books can be seen as aiming to modify something in the lives of readers by expanding their knowledge, as in the scientific novels, triggering their curiosity to find out more about a particular topic or simply raising their awareness of a specific social issue as with *La Tournante* – change triggered by description as we have already stated. This fits in closely with Gill Rye's assessment that 'at each time of reading, each reader brings different perspectives to the text and takes away different experiences from it. Thus, we could even say that to some extent the reader is *always* changed by his or her reading'.¹⁸⁰ As Elisa Brune herself says, this is something she is keen to achieve through her narratives:

si j'écris c'est en partie pour me sortir de problèmes existentiels, mais [aussi] pour faire du bien à certains lecteurs; [...] les aider à réfléchir sur certains problèmes qui se posent à eux et ça peut être des choses assez diversifiées, comme un viol collectif, [...] une relation sœur-sœur difficile, [...] une relation amoureuse ou sexuelle qui pose des questions; autrement dit je ne peux pas concevoir d'écrire un livre de simple délasserment ou de simples plaisirs. [...] il faut qu'il y ait une possibilité de transformation en lisant.¹⁸¹

So even though her novels may have some weaknesses, in not being accessible enough when it comes to science for instance, in trying to achieve too many things at once or in ending on an anti-climax, Elisa Brune hopes that her reader will always take away an element that could potentially alter her/his knowledge or her/his view on a given topic. This is helped by Brune's generally closely observed representations of contemporary society, institutions and citizens that are found throughout her narratives and, with this in mind, we will now look specifically at the

¹⁷⁹ Viart and Vercier, *La littérature française au présent*, op. cit., p. 283.

¹⁸⁰ Rye, *Reading for Change*, op. cit., p. 43. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁸¹ See my unpublished interview with Elisa Brune on 27 August 2007. Appendix B, pp. 251-52.

ways in which the institutions of the family and education as well as the relationships between men and women are represented in five of Brune's novels.

Chapter 3

Family Portraits

This first thematic chapter aims to explore how, through *Blanche cassé* and *La Tournante*, Elisa Brune provides her readership with an overview of the institution of family in contemporary Western societies. Since family is the first institution most individuals experience in their life, Brune's readership is likely to be able to identify the different types of families she depicts in the two narratives, giving a strong 'effet de réel' to both novels. Family is however perceived differently by individuals. Thus, for France Quéré, '[la] famille [...] est le groupe que l'on quitte, et le groupe que l'on fonde', showing how important its role is in the reproduction and continuity of society.¹ Others see the family as 'universal because its functions cannot be performed by any other institutions'.² This is a good starting point for our analysis, as it includes the notions of both institution and function that we intend to discuss.

In these narratives, Brune represents some aspects of Western societies through two families, their problems, their relationships and how they perform – or fail to perform – their functions. Both texts could therefore be seen as sociological 'enquêtes'. In addition, and as developed in the previous chapter, the fact that both novels are inspired by true stories ties in with our argument that in her work Brune is observing and reporting on the society she lives in. We argue that her representations of different types of families in contemporary French and/or Belgian society and their flaws serve at a starting point from which Elisa Brune attempts to illustrate some social problems and perhaps indirectly (she never passes judgement) trigger reader response and encourage her readers to think about the society they live in.

Blanche cassé and *La Tournante* can actually be labelled 'fictions critiques' in that they mix fiction and also some elements from the social sciences, sociology in this case. Viart and Vercier explain that 'ce phénomène se signale par l'irruption insistante et concertée des diverses sciences humaines dans l'écriture fictive'.³ As a result we mainly draw from sociological studies for the following analysis in order to define the institution of family. Family is a sociological concept as well as a

¹ France Quéré, *La Famille* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), p. 20.

² Mark Kirby et al., *Sociology in Perspective* (Oxford: Heinemann, 2000), p. 47.

³ Viart and Vercier, *La littérature française au présent*, op. cit., p. 280.

multifaceted reality for which many definitions are available but to summarise we can say that a family is a unit within society but it is also a group of human beings related to each other who have to live in a community for some time. Elisa Brune's families in the two narratives appear to follow different types of family patterns and we contend that, through these families, she represents not only the ways contemporary families work but also her own disguised personal view on the subject, for according to her 'la famille [est] une horrible blague'⁴ and 'une prison volontaire'.⁵ Let us emphasise here that this negative perspective on the topic is likely to influence the representation she makes of it in her work and as will be seen throughout this chapter, Brune indeed describes family relationships in a rather gloomy way. Her vision of the family is similar to that of Dominique Rolin in *L'Infini chez soi* where the author describes 'l'horreur de toute vie destinée à la mort, dont la famille nucléaire ébauche les prémices'.⁶

The different types of family

The different types of family encountered in the two novels are the nuclear, the recomposed and the single-parent family and, in representing them, Elisa Brune reflects postmodern Western societies in which '[a]t the current moment [...], no single family pattern is statistically dominant, and our domestic arrangements have become increasingly diverse'.⁷

The nuclear family

The nuclear family is perceived as the traditional household unit in modern society and, according to sociology is 'composed of a man and a woman in a stable marital relationship, and their dependent children'.⁸ This conception of what a family ought to be, derived from Talcott Parsons' controversial definition from 1956, has become the stereotypical norm for a family and both families at the centre of the two novels

⁴ Brune, *L'écrivain et la blessure*, op. cit.

⁵ See my unpublished interview with Elisa Brune 27 August 2007. Appendix B, p. 262.

⁶ Jean-Pierre Damour, 'Dominique Rolin', in Beaumarchais, Couty and Rey (eds.), *Dictionnaire des écrivains de langue française*, op. cit., II, pp. 1579-80. Dominique Rolin, *L'Infini chez soi* (Paris: Denoël, 1980).

⁷ Judith Stacey, *In the Name of the Family: Rethinking Family Values in the Postmodern Age* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), p. 45.

⁸ Tony Bilton et al., *Introductory Sociology*, 4th edn (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 230.

studied match this definition, at least initially.⁹ It is important to note that this conception of family is a product of historical transformations and

although Parsons' writing may be outdated in terms of demographics, the 'ostrich position' adopted by some [...] in relation to social changes suggest that it is highly relevant in terms of social attitudes. [...] Parsons' work [is] still important, because in constructing the 'nuclear' family as the norm, he has validated the tendency for society to define anyone who does not fit into that pattern as marginal or 'other' and to construct them as responsible for declining social standards.¹⁰

This quotation expresses the view held by many that anyone not conforming to the norm can or should be shown they have not succeeded – as happens to some characters in Elisa Brune's narratives.

In *La Tournante*, the Dumeyne family is composed of Hermann, Iris and their two children, Marion and Thomas. In *Blanche cassé*, the family, whose surname is never revealed, suggesting that it could be any family, is composed of the 'mother' (whose name is never given either), Jacques the father and the two daughters, Bénédicte and Clarisse.¹¹ The fact that both households from the narratives only have two children matches the trend for the size of households in most Western societies, which started to decrease substantially from the 1970s and is an element contributing to the verisimilitude of the novels.¹²

From the background given in the novels, it can be deduced that Elisa Brune sets her action in two families representative of the white, middle-class family. The Dumeynes live in a flat in the 18th arrondissement in Paris, 'au milieu des dealers et des chambres de passe' (LT 158), which is yet another recognisable geographical reference for most readers, whereas the family in *Blanche cassé* lives 'dans la banlieue calme d'une ville de province, une grande maison entourée de verdure' (BC 21) that could be either in France or in Belgium. Thus, at the start of both novels, the families seem to be two ordinary families about whom there is nothing extraordinary to say. Elisa Brune is therefore setting her novels in ordinary, stable family

⁹ See Talcott Parsons and Robert Bales (eds.), *Family: Socialization and Interaction Process* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956).

¹⁰ Caroline Gattrell, *Hard Labour: The Sociology of Parenthood* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2005), p. 35.

¹¹ Just like the grandmother in *La Tournante*, we do not know the name of the 'mother' in *Blanche cassé*. She is constantly referred to as 'ma mère' by the narrator throughout the novel, which seems ironic given that she shows very little maternal love and displays few parenting skills.

¹² Pamela Abbott, Claire Wallace and Melissa Tyler, *An Introduction to Sociology: Feminist Perspectives*, 3rd edn (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 156.

environments where things evolve towards sad and complicated outcomes; a choice which suggests that Brune chose to illustrate the fact that such terrible things happen not only in families ridden with problems, poverty or violence. The two families correspond to the stereotype of the standard ideal family and yet, contrary to first appearances, they are far from ideal – as is often the case. As Leo Tolstoy's famous quotation reminds us, 'toutes les familles heureuses se ressemblent. Chaque famille malheureuse, au contraire, l'est à sa façon'.¹³

Indeed, behind the façade of normal family life the reader discovers later in *Blanche cassé* that the parents do not love each other anymore and only stayed together for the sake of the children, as often happens. For indeed, 'there is [...] evidence that adults (especially women) do stay in unsatisfactory relationships when children are involved, and that children remain the key focus and responsibility once adult intimate relationships have ended'.¹⁴ The family therefore follows a pattern that has been observed. Despite this, the unit formed by the family in *Blanche cassé* matches the stereotype of the nuclear family as defined by sociologists. Thus, Elisa Brune suggests here that the ideal family, what Edmund Leach calls 'the cereal-packet norm family',¹⁵ hardly exists anywhere other than in theoretical books, despite people considering it to be 'normal, natural and inevitable'.¹⁶

To sum up, by starting the two narratives with the image of what many readers consider to be a 'normal' family and by giving her readership something they may feel familiar with, Elisa Brune makes it easy for the reader to picture the action and connect with the plot. In addition, this is a useful device for the message she wishes to convey without ever openly revealing her intentions and may help to generate a potential reader reaction as explained in chapter 2. While the nuclear family is the dominant type of family encountered in these two novels, it is not the only one present. In *Blanche cassé*, the nuclear family evolves into a recomposed family, which enables Elisa Brune to illustrate other family models. So starting with a 'normal' family allows her to show how the family is going to disintegrate.

¹³ Léon Tolstoï, *Anna Karénine*, 2 vols (Paris: Le livre de poche, 1994 [1877]), II, p. 3.

¹⁴ According to Carol B. Smart and Bren Neale, *Family Fragments?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), referred to in Gatrell, *Hard Labour*, op. cit., p. 38.

¹⁵ A family unit consists 'of a breadwinner husband and children, all being cared for by a smiling wife' as described by anthropologist Edmund Leach in 1967 in Abbott, Wallace and Tyler, *An Introduction to Sociology*, 3rd edn, op. cit., p. 144.

¹⁶ Ibid.

The recomposed family

A recomposed or reconstituted family is composed of an adult couple, married or unmarried, living with at least one child born from a previous union of one of the spouses.¹⁷ This type of family is only encountered in *Blanche cassé*. Although we do not know whether the action takes place in France or in Belgium, it is worth noting that in 2001, for every 100 marriages, there were 69.6 divorces in Belgium and 39.1 divorces in France, suggesting that the recomposed and single-parent family has become common in contemporary society following a divorce.¹⁸ It is also worth stressing that in *Blanche cassé* the parents initially got married for one of the top eight reasons cited, that is to say family pressure, amplified in their case as the ‘mother’ was pregnant.¹⁹ Their marriage was a failure from the start because it was imposed on them and they then forced themselves to fulfil an apparent parental duty by staying together. Thus they match society’s view of the ideal family by keeping up appearances and behaving as expected. Once the parents think they have pretended to be a happy family for long enough – the importance of appearance is obvious in this case – and consider their daughters old enough to understand, they separate and impose their lovers and a new life on their daughters. It seems that the parents move from one extreme to another; from doing exactly what is socially expected, to putting themselves first and forgetting about their daughters in the process.

Therefore, after separating, both the ‘mother’ and the father start a ‘new’ relationship. The adjective ‘new’ is not entirely appropriate, for both of them had already met and started a relationship with another person (with their spouse’s consent) a long time before but had kept it secret from the children.²⁰ From this point

¹⁷ Institut national d’études démographiques, <<http://www.ined.fr/en/lexicon/bdd/mot/Reconstituted+family/motid/60/>> [accessed 15 May 2006]. Recomposed families are of course not a new thing; they were already common in the past when many women died in childbirth, as explained in Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot (eds.), *Histoire des Femmes en Occident*, 5 vols (Paris: Plon, 1991), II, p. 374 and in Marie-Odile Mergnac, ‘Familles recomposées d’hier et d’aujourd’hui’ on <<http://www.notre famille.com/v2/editorial-dossiers/famille-recomposee.asp>> [accessed 27 August 2010].

¹⁸ Maureen Baker, *Choices and Constraints in Family Life* (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 120. Figures also reveal that divorce occurs on average after 13 years of marriage in Belgium and 13.3 years in France.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 119. This aspect will be further dealt with in chapter 5.

²⁰ The theme of the ‘secret’ is recurrent in the two narratives studied and will be returned to throughout this chapter but it is interesting that in the case of *Blanche cassé* there was already a secret in the family at the time they were considered a ‘normal’ nuclear family.

on the nuclear family disappears and two reconstituted families are created: René, the ‘mother’s’ partner, moves in with her and the children while Jacques, the father, moves in with his partner Nelly. Elisa Brune, in introducing recomposed families in her narrative, adopts a pattern that, as well as being widespread in society, is often used in literature and cinema to explain a mother’s distance from her children. As Caroline Eliacheff and Nathalie Heinich have said:

Il n’est rien de plus efficace que la passion amoureuse pour précipiter le détachement d’une mère à l’égard de son enfant. [...] la liaison [...] consécutive au divorce [...] de la mère “plus femme que mère” est fort prisée des romanciers et scénaristes.²¹

This distance between the ‘mother’ and her two daughters is an important feature in *Blanche cassé* and will be analysed in detail later on in this chapter.

The recomposed family formed by the ‘mother’, René and the girls is far from ideal since both the girls dislike their step-father from the start – something quite common in recomposed families. However, this model chosen by Brune reflects the tendency whereby, quite typically, children stay with the mother after a divorce, which in France for instance represents 83% of cases.²² Even though when René moves in, the ‘mother’ ‘avait enfin un interlocuteur’ (BC 73), the girls hate their mother ‘d’avoir introduit dans la maison ce pédant qui nous rebattait les oreilles de ses avis éclairés’ (BC 74). Clarisse ignores René whilst Bénédicte puts up with the situation ‘pour ne pas rendre la vie totalement insupportable, mais [elle] regardai[t] [sa] mère avec pitié’ (BC 74), epitomising the typical difficulty of children in adapting to this new household. This attitude that Elisa Brune borrows from reality has been studied by Allan and Crow who stress that

[t]he chief contradiction is between ‘family’ on the one hand and ‘household’ on the other. The child has to accept that the step-parent, as an adult in the household, will impact on daily activities and hold a degree of authority. This, though, does not make him/her ‘family’ *per se*. The necessary solidarity has first to be established, a process which can frequently be precarious. [...] The relationship is primarily built upon sexual/romantic commitment between the parent and the step-parent, and, however sensitively handled, this reality colours the stepchild/step-parent relationship.²³

²¹ Caroline Eliacheff and Nathalie Heinich, *Mères-Filles: une relation à trois* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2002), p. 76.

²² Figures according to <<http://www.lesbridgets.com/index.php/Etude/-/Statistiques-sur-le-couple/Mariage-puis-divorce-les-chiffres.html>> [accessed 17 August 2010].

²³ Graham Allan and Graham Crow, *Families, Households and Society* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 163.

However, four years later, the ‘mother’ and her partner separate (BC 190) because René has regularly been visiting prostitutes (usually very young ones).²⁴ This sheds new light on René’s behaviour towards Bénédicte, whom he has been molesting throughout those four years, as we will discuss in more detail in chapter 5. Bénédicte is an easy prey who, in addition, puts up very little resistance as she keeps thinking about the ‘dégâts dans la famille’ this would cause and also because she knows that if one day her mother finds out about it ‘ce serait à [elle] qu’elle en voudrait’ (BC 105). Consequently, by keeping this secret, Bénédicte ‘enfon[ce] le couteau en [elle] plutôt que de l’enfoncer ailleurs, dans son amour-propre ou dans le ronronnement confortable de la famille’ (BC 127). The vocabulary here suggests at the same time self-harm or self-sacrifice (by remaining silent she hurts herself, on top of being hurt by her step-father, in order not to make her mother suffer) and the idea of routine with the use of ‘ronronnement confortable’ which suggests not only both the frequency and ease of René’s attacks but also the idea of how easy it is to keep the external appearance of normality intact.²⁵ Elisa Brune is thus giving the reader an example of what happens behind closed doors, and tears the appearance of normality apart. Furthermore, the type of violence Brune has her character endure from her step-father is one of the most common, enabling her to illustrate yet another aspect of hidden violence within some families. Indeed, in the words of Maryse Jaspard,

d’une façon générale, les agressions sexuelles sont commises par des hommes proches, plus rarement des inconnus. [...] la grande majorité [...] touche des femmes jeunes, de moins de 25 ans [...] [et] celles des familiers, [...] se répètent et parfois s’éternisent [...]. Tous les milieux sociaux sont concernés par ces agressions sexuelles intrafamiliales pendant et depuis l’enfance.²⁶

By choosing this pattern for Bénédicte, Elisa Brune confirms not only that sexual abuse happens most often within the family but also represents the difficult dilemmas

²⁴ Both René’s behaviour with the ‘mother’ and the fact that he regularly visits prostitutes can be seen as yet another example of what happens in some couples. It is not easy for women to start afresh after a divorce and this is maybe the reason why she tolerated René’s behaviour for so long if she knew about it, as some women do, to keep up the appearance of a stable relationship. René may also have specifically targeted a woman with teenage daughters.

²⁵ In her relationship with Clarisse, Bénédicte also suffers in silence for a long time before putting a certain distance between them in order to protect herself.

²⁶ Maryse Jaspard, *Les violences contre les femmes* (Paris: La Découverte, 2005), p. 80.

rape/incest victims are faced with when it comes to choosing either to tell their family or keep it secret.²⁷

In addition, by presenting the reader with these two different facets of the relationship between Bénédicte and her step-father, Elisa Brune emphasises simultaneously the strength and weakness of such a family unit. Despite the various on-going problems with which Brune has riddled this fictional family, she is also illustrating how its members – at least some of them – try their best not to destroy its unity or make the others suffer. As a result Bénédicte's silence can be seen as a typical example of a child trying to protect her family's (remaining) unity even though this is at her own expense.²⁸ Being a recomposed family means that it has already lost its original apparent unity but despite teeming with weaknesses and problems, Brune represents individuals who feel they have to keep the family together. Through the desire of the family in *Blanche cassé* to carry on being perceived as a unit (almost at any cost), Elisa Brune illustrates the extent to which people are attached to the institution of family, to the need to fulfil expectations and to the image it projects of them in a society which values appearances. Indeed,

one of the most powerful symbolisms of family in contemporary society is that of 'unity'. [...] the notion of 'family' implies ideas about solidarity and affinity, and, in consequence, about difference. [...] Culturally, everyone accepts that disagreements and rows occur within families. However, within this conception, such conflict as arises does not undermine the solidarity at the core of family life. If it is to remain a family rather than be dissolved [...], each family needs to develop ways of handling episodes of conflict which allow for the symbolic reassertion of their collective commitments.²⁹

In having Bénédicte and her mother accept René's behaviour (at least before they separate), Brune provides an effective illustration of the way in which family members handle issues to protect the unity of the family, even if it is only for the sake of appearances.

In *Blanche cassé*, the other reconstituted family is formed by Jacques and Nelly although they do not fully match the definition as they do not live with any of

²⁷ On the silence of victims of incest see for instance Eva Thomas, *Le viol du silence* (Paris: Aubier, 1986).

²⁸ The fact that Bénédicte never says anything about René molesting her in order not to hurt her mother exemplifies how members of a family try to maintain its unity despite difficult circumstances and can be interpreted as a form of solidarity, as will be developed below. Since everybody looks happy, Bénédicte is 'obligée de faire bonne figure' (BC 84) in order not to alter this situation. Her silence, though negative, is a form of solidarity to a certain extent just like the girls' silence in *La Tournante*.

²⁹ Allan and Crow, *Families, Households and Society*, op. cit., p. 155.

their children. Their relationship appears much happier than the one the ‘mother’ has with René. Bénédicte notices that ‘cette nouvelle vie avec Nelly profitait à [son] père. Il émanait maintenant de lui une tranquille assurance qui n’avait jamais pu s’affirmer lorsqu’il vivait avec [sa] mère’ (BC 141). However none of the parents, happy or not in their new relationships, notices that their daughters are encountering problems. In a sense, it appears that both recomposed families fail – just as the nuclear family did – to properly look after the children. Elisa Brune therefore paints a negative image of both types of family, as if for her the family cannot be successful. This underlines her aforementioned view of the family as farcical and something that cannot be relied upon.

Finally, on another level, the definition of the reconstituted family can be widened. Indeed, it is becoming more and more common for children to be brought up by parents who are not necessarily their biological parents and Brune may have wanted to represent another type of recomposed family in this narrative. Consequently, it is possible to perceive the family unit constituted for a while by Clarisse, her son Basile, and Bénédicte as a recomposed family with Bénédicte in the role of the second parent or ‘father’ as she says herself at one point (BC 105). Because the child has a mother, it seems only logical to her that he also needs a father figure. Through Bénédicte’s view of what a ‘normal’ family is (a family equals a mother and a father), Elisa Brune is perhaps hinting at the traditional view held by most people and society’s aim to gender family roles and family patterns. By presenting Bénédicte, Clarisse and Basile as a recomposed family unit, Elisa Brune may subtly be encouraging her readership to keep an open mind as to the different shapes a family can take. Indeed, a child in a single-parent family – examples of which are found in both novels – can very well grow up without being any more deprived of what s/he needs than children in two-parent families, even though it has to be said that the single-parent families of her narratives are not particularly successful.

The single-parent family

A single-parent family is ‘a household unit where only one parent, often the mother, resides with her children’³⁰ and statistics indeed confirm that ‘[m]ost single-parent families are headed by a mother rather than by a father’.³¹ In France, in 1990, there were 472,556 divorced female heads of single-parent families compared with 81,628 divorced males, and single women like Clarisse accounted for 249,804 families against 19,004 single men.³² Elisa Brune explores three credible cases of single-parent families in *La Tournante* and *Blanche cassé*.

In *La Tournante*, Elisa Brune chooses to represent a single-parent family with a single mother stereotypically struggling to raise her daughter on her own and the father is never mentioned. Having to work long hours, the mother cannot dedicate much time to her daughter and, therefore, Mélissa easily manages to hide her problems. Mélissa’s mother is a good example of how, in contemporary Western societies, ‘in attempting to combine paid employment with child-care, lone mothers confront all the problems encountered by the working mothers in general but may also face particular difficulties because of their sole responsibilities for child-care’.³³ Because she is so busy, Mélissa’s mother trusts her daughter to take care of herself and does not worry when she disappears, thinking she is at Marion’s house. Through this situation in the novel, Brune illustrates well the difficulty for single parents (usually women) to cope with everything on their own and her scenario fits the view that ‘single parents often experience role strain from attempting to balance wage-earner and parental responsibilities’.³⁴ Although this situation is not dealt with extensively in the novel, Elisa Brune is here tackling ‘en passant’ yet another complex phenomenon of contemporary society where single parenthood is more and more common, thus reinforcing the plausibility of the situation depicted in the narrative. The fact that Mélissa ends up following Marion into the ‘tournante’ can be

³⁰ Bilton et al., *Introductory Sociology*, op.cit., p. 230.

³¹ Brid Featherstone, *Family Life and Family Support: A Feminist Analysis* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 33.

³² According to INSEE statistics in Corinne Benveniste and Jeanine Soleilhavoup, *Les familles monoparentales* (Paris: INSEE, 1994) p. 31. For more figures see also Duby and Perrot, *Histoire des Femmes en Occident*, op. cit., v, p. 559.

³³ Faith Robertson Elliot, *The Family: Change or Continuity?* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1986), p. 162.

³⁴ Sandra Kerka, ‘Single Parents: Career-Related Issues and Needs’, ERIC Digest n° 75 (1988), <<http://www.ericdigests.org/pre-928/single.htm>> [accessed 23 March 2006].

linked to ‘a considerable body of research [that] purports to show that children growing up in one-parent families have a lower level of educational attainment [...] and are more likely to be emotionally disturbed, delinquent and confused in their sex-role identification’.³⁵ However, not all children from single-parent families end up in difficult situations and Elisa Brune’s use of this stereotypical situation could reinforce or validate the cliché in the reader’s mind rather than leading her/him to question it. As in the case of the two other types of family previously dealt with, Elisa Brune portrays the single family in a negative light which, although in line with her overall personal view on the topic of family, remains only a partial representation.

The case of the single-parent family is more developed in *Blanche cassé* in which Brune presents the reader with two further types of single-parent families: on the one hand the representation of the single father through the character of Yves looking after his children on his own every other week and on the other that of the teenage single mother through Clarisse. Yves, Clarisse’s forty-year-old lover, is divorced with three children – 43.1% of male single parents are aged 40-49 in France.³⁶ He does not appear to be struggling financially, contrary to most single parents and seems to fulfil his parental responsibilities with ease. Clarisse is impressed by the way he is bringing his children up: ‘il semblait s’élever autant qu’eux. [Ils] étaient écoutés, encouragés, poussés plus loin’ (BC 92). This time, Elisa Brune represents the single-parent family in a positive light and goes against the stereotypical view that men do not know how to raise children, especially on their own. Whilst Brune manages to provide her readers with both a positive and a negative illustration of single parenting, it seems that she tends to represent men as being successful at what they do, just like in the novels of scientific popularisation discussed in chapter 2. In this instance both single mothers struggle but the male single parent copes perfectly well with the situation, which, while it provides a positive image for fathers, also sheds unnecessary doubts on women’s abilities to juggle their career and family. So although Brune, for once, provides her readers with a more complete picture of a chosen aspect of society by looking at both male and female perspectives, she fails to picture women as successful, even as mothers.

³⁵ Robertson Elliot, *The Family*, op. cit., p. 167.

³⁶ See Benveniste and Soleilhavoup, *Les familles monoparentales*, op. cit., p. 33.

Although he is a successful single father, Yves does not however want any more children and makes this clear to Clarisse. She does not listen to him and he leaves her when she reveals she is pregnant (BC 108), as will be further discussed in chapter 5.

Brune's choice to have teenager Clarisse deciding to become a mother enables her to illustrate several views about and causes for teenage pregnancies. On the one hand, Clarisse's pregnancy can be perceived as positive from the perspective of women's freedom to choose, as it is not imposed on her by a man or by family tradition ('un enfant si je veux quand je veux', 'dans mon ventre, c'est chez moi', 'maîtresses de notre ventre')³⁷ as was the case with her mother. Conversely, Clarisse's pregnancy and maternal desire are somehow forbidden by Yves in the narrative and, from a feminist point of view, Clarisse could be seen as reacting against a 'diktat'. Indeed just as pushing a woman to have children can be seen as oppression, so can preventing her from having one if she wants to. On the other hand, Clarisse's desire for a child (while still a teenager) can be perceived as negative since she is attempting to force Yves to stay with her to assume his responsibility – and in doing so reproducing her parents' mistake by forming a relationship based on pregnancy.³⁸ On another level, pregnancy is an 'easy' way of escaping school and the education Clarisse despises – as will be suggested in the next chapter – and being able to stay at home and fulfil the mother's role as defined by certain sociologists, perhaps in reaction to her mother being absent from her upbringing because of work commitments. It seems that Clarisse feels 'deprived' and Elisa Brune, in creating a character who sees early childbearing as a source of love and satisfaction, provides a credible example of the behaviour of some teenagers, as will be further discussed in chapters 4 and 5.

Basile is born when Clarisse is sixteen and still financially dependent on her parents.³⁹ Later on, Basile's christening allows Brune to reveal a family's perception of the situation of a teenage single mother. Thus, in this family

³⁷ Slogans quoted in Van Rokeghem et al., *Des Femmes dans l'Histoire en Belgique*, op. cit., p. 211 and from the Dutch Feminist group Dolle Mina quoted in Duby and Perrot, *Histoire des Femmes en Occident*, op. cit., v, p. 687.

³⁸ The strategy of pregnancy as a way of making sure a relationship will last is dealt with in more detail in chapter 5.

³⁹ According to INSEE statistics, 4% of single mothers in France were under 25 in 1990, in Benveniste and Soleilhavoup, *Les familles monoparentales*, op.cit., p. 33. Figures from UNICEF show that in 1998, in Belgium, there were 9 births for 1,000 females aged 15-19 years old and 8 in France.

on s'évertuait surtout à ne pas s'appesantir sur le tragique de la situation, dix-sept ans, un bébé, pas de mari, pas de diplôme et pas de boulot. Elle aurait été la honte de bien des familles, mais ici on préférerait parler d'autre chose puisque le mal était fait. (BC 123)

Through the vocabulary used in this quotation Elisa Brune pinpoints what a middle-class family might think. Clarisse's situation is seen as 'tragique', so much so that they prefer to talk about something else, which ties in with the idea of secrets already mentioned. This also reveals the Manichaeian stereotype of success or failure as conceived by the 'bourgeois' family. Although more and more common, single-parent families

are not seen as normal or desirable. Indeed, these [...] families in which no father exercises control are often seen in Western Europe as the cause of many social problems [...] [notably] people's inability to take on responsibility for their own economic and social support.⁴⁰

Furthermore the use of 'pas de mari' reinforces the fact that what is expected in a traditional white middle-class family would be for Clarisse to have a husband, not even simply a boyfriend. Obviously, in Clarisse's case, the family plays a crucial role as it supports her in many ways, despite judging her 'unconventional' situation negatively – 'le mal était fait'. In addition, Elisa Brune has Clarisse's family in the rest of the novel attempting to set her on the 'right' path by encouraging her to find a job and become financially independent, in other words seeking to implement social reproduction – as will be analysed below – by directing her towards doing what is expected of her.

From this analysis of the different family patterns in the narratives, it is already evident that Elisa Brune is keen to provide her readership with a varied (though still partial) representation of the different types of families likely to be encountered in her socio-cultural environment in Belgium or France. The families she portrays, like most families, seldom correspond to the sociological definitions from manuals but can actually be seen as more accurate since they represent practice, not theory. Considering that none of the family types seems to be really successful, Elisa Brune

See June L. Leishman and James Moir (eds.), *Pre-teen and Teenage Pregnancy: A Twenty-First Century Reality* (Keswick: M&K Publishing, 2007), p. 9. More recent figures are not currently available.

⁴⁰ Pamela Abbott and Claire Wallace, *An Introduction to Sociology: Feminist Perspectives*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 138-39. A single teenage mother is not positively perceived in middle-class families such as Clarisse's as it does not give a good image and appearances are important, as already mentioned.

conveys in her novels the negative view of the family that she has, but that is not to say that she totally rejects the institution, more that she tries to prove – through the negative portrayals themselves rather than by passing judgement⁴¹ – that it rarely manages to fulfil its theoretical purpose. Whatever its type, family is indeed supposed to perform certain roles that we will now explore to see how Elisa Brune uses them to further illustrate some potential issues in families.

Family roles

According to Sam Porter, a role is

a combination of normative expectations relating to the rights and duties of an individual in a given social position [...] it involves expectations of how we should interact with others. When particular roles are generally accepted by large numbers of people, they become institutionalised.⁴²

Family is responsible for reproducing what already exists in a given society and according to structural-functionalist sociologists such as Talcott Parsons and Robert Bales, the family operates as the ‘backbone of society – an institution that serves the interests of society as a whole’.⁴³ Therefore, the family performs a variety of functions and is meant, in theory, to reproduce social patterns by ensuring socialisation of children, regulating sexual activities, maintaining social placement and providing material and emotional security.⁴⁴

The families created by Elisa Brune exemplify different ways of carrying out these roles. The two narratives only illustrate the socialisation and solidarity roles of the family and therefore only these two aspects will be dealt with in the following analysis. On another level, in these novels, Elisa Brune hardly touches upon what feminists consider the main problem of the family, that is the family as a structure which oppresses women notably through domestic labour and reproduction. This is mainly due to the fact that both narratives are either narrated by one of the children – whose main concern is not the gender inequality in a given household as they do not

⁴¹ Although her deliberate choice of negative scenarios could be seen as a form of (indirect) judgement.

⁴² Sam Porter, *Social Theory and Nursing Practice* (London: Macmillan Press, 1998), p. 23.

⁴³ According to Parsons and Bales (eds.), *Family, Socialization and Interaction Process*, op. cit., referred to in Abbott, Wallace and Tyler, *An Introduction to Sociology*, 3rd edn, op. cit., p. 146.

⁴⁴ For more details see Abbott, Wallace and Tyler, *ibid.*, p. 146.

have the necessary level of awareness – or centred on one of the children’s problem(s).

In Elisa Brune’s narratives, family seems far from being a haven and is more like a prison, in line with Brune’s own view stated above and which, as revealed through her work, is close to that of Ronald D. Laing who

sees the family’s influence as baneful [and] emphasises the importance of individual autonomy, freedom and self-awareness, and from this point of view sees the close family bond as suffocating. For Laing, the family restricts individuality and smothers self-awareness while expectations of reciprocal concerns accumulate constant and unremitting obligations.⁴⁵

Elisa Brune’s various characters from the two narratives are good examples of how some individuals restrict themselves and conform to obligations following the influence of their family (Bénédicte, Iris, the grandmother) while others reject the influence their family tries to have on them and choose a more autonomous yet often criticised and misunderstood path (Clarisse, Marion, Céline). The families’ attempts to implement social reproduction and socialisation will now be analysed, while the aspect of material and emotional solidarity will be dealt with throughout the analysis of the different family relationships.

Social reproduction and socialisation

Social reproduction is the process through which, over time, groups of people, notably social classes, reproduce their social structure and patterns, whilst socialisation is an ongoing process whereby individuals learn to conform to society’s prevailing norms and values.⁴⁶ Social reproduction and socialisation can be achieved in several ways, one being education, which will be the focus of the next chapter, another being upbringing. In both novels the types of upbringing Brune has chosen to represent are unconventional and lead to criticism from either outside or inside the family sphere, indirectly representing society’s view of what is acceptable and expected and what is not. This section aims to describe the upbringing given to the children and how it is received in both books and will consider how Elisa Brune uses it to illustrate society’s reactions to and criticisms of what is not conventional or fails. According to sociology, ‘we most often follow social norms because, as a result

⁴⁵ Ronald D. Laing referred to by Robertson Elliot, *The Family*, op. cit., p. 124.

⁴⁶ Bilton et al., *Introductory Sociology*, op. cit., p. 548.

of socialization, we are used to doing so. [...] All social norms are accompanied by sanctions that promote conformity and protect against non-conformity'.⁴⁷ Elisa Brune's families and their stories are good illustrations of how society labels people's behaviour in terms of norms and deviance. It 'educates' its members to follow certain patterns and norms and punishes those who do not conform, as is clear from several examples in the narratives.

In *La Tournante*, Brune has chosen to display an opposition between the parenting styles of two generations. Thus, through Hermann and Iris, Brune portrays a very open-minded and relaxed approach to raising children that is meant to be an attempt not to reproduce the very strict and conventional upbringing they both received and suffered from as children. This attitude towards a more relaxed parenting style matches the societal phenomenon that 'à chaque génération, l'éducation donnée est plus souple que l'éducation reçue'.⁴⁸ As well as providing an insight into this relaxed approach to raising children, Elisa Brune provides the readers with a credible context which has led to this choice, and thus creates a plausible background for her story.

Thus, Hermann was raised in a very strict way by a father 'fasciné par le peuple aryen, par les ambitions de la grande Allemagne, etc. Un vrai nazi quoi' (LT 131). He discovered this secret when he was fourteen and immediately left home, at the beginning of the sixties, 'complètement en révolte contre les idées et l'éducation de [s]es parents' (LT 131). As for Iris and her sister Céline, they too were brought up traditionally. Their father had a strong personality, and was eager to pass on his beliefs in 'culture classique, valeurs chrétiennes, obsession de l'effort, phobie de la veulerie et de la médiocrité' (LT 125).⁴⁹ So both parents in the novels were brought up strictly but, whilst they react against some aspects of their upbringing by being more relaxed in their parenting style, Brune shows how difficult it is for an

⁴⁷ Anthony Giddens, Mitchell Duneier and Richard P. Applebaum, *Essentials of Sociology* (New York: Norton, 2006), p. 134.

⁴⁸ Claudine Attias-Donfut, Nicole Lapierre and Martine Segalen, *Le nouvel esprit de famille* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2002), p. 30. Despite this tendency, one could also think that a very lax upbringing may well prompt a generation to be stricter with their own children but Elisa Brune has chosen not to adopt this angle in her novel.

⁴⁹ It is interesting to remark here that Marianne in *Un Homme est une rose* makes the same kind of comment about the way her father brought her up. She had to read *Phèdre* and *Andromaque* (HR 212) and was never allowed to watch films such as *La Boum* or read *Donald Duck*, *Le Club des Cinq* or listen to Petula Clark (HR 212).

individual to completely depart from their upbringing. Thus Iris quite clearly reproduces other family patterns she experienced as a child, such as her mother staying at home to raise the children and following her husband's decisions, as will be discussed in the next chapter. In doing so Brune emphasises what feminist approaches identify as the internalisation of male and female attitudes during childhood as a socialisation process in the family, which presents women in a position of subordination in the family sphere. This internalisation very often leads to women reproducing this pattern and through Iris's behaviour, Brune illustrates Nancy Friday's argument that '[it] takes more than a generation to change the lessons we learn from our mothers'.⁵⁰ In this case, through the character of Iris, Brune depicts how in spite of her rebellion in choosing a husband her father did not approve of, like many other women, she has been successfully 'socialised'.⁵¹

Thanks to the clues about the way Hermann and Iris were brought up, the reader is not surprised by their choice of parenting style and their pride in raising their children with very few restrictions. This is further visible in Hermann and Iris's reaction when about to hear the truth about their daughter's problem and her fear following her arrest. Hermann does not understand why Marion would be afraid – 'Peur? Ce serait bien la première fois. [Ils] ne l'[ont] jamais brusquée. Jamais.' (LT 35) – and why she would not confide in them if she had a problem as she had always talked to them 'librement. [Ils] ne [sont] pas du tout autoritaires. Au contraire, [ils se] montr[ent] toujours ouverts à la discussion' (LT 36). So the parents' story behind their choice of parenting style combined with such examples enable Elisa Brune to show how '[l]'éducation a glissé de la répression à la permission'⁵² and shed a positive light on the upbringing they chose for their children. It is thus no surprise that when they are advised to prevent Marion from calling her friends they are 'atterrés [...] obligés de jouer un rôle qu[']ils ne [voulai]ent pas jouer' (LT 104) and feel guilty for acting this way as they find 'odieux de vouloir surveiller la vie privée de [leurs] enfants' (LT 104). Through this reaction Elisa Brune reinforces the reasons behind her characters' choice of a different upbringing for their children which,

⁵⁰ Nancy Friday, *My Mother/My Self: The Daughter's Search for Identity* (London: Fontana, 1990 [1977]), p. 128.

⁵¹ Abbott and Wallace, *An Introduction to Sociology*, 2nd edn, op. cit., p. 140.

⁵² Quéré, *La Famille*, op. cit., p. 44.

nevertheless, does not work. Like most parents, Hermann and Iris think they are giving Marion and Thomas an ideal upbringing based on trust and freedom but Marion's situation proves them wrong. They fail to succeed where they thought they would do better than their parents, and through this Elisa Brune highlights that there is not necessarily an easy recipe for a good upbringing.⁵³

As well as demonstrating that any upbringing can fail, Elisa Brune's characters also exemplify the fact that what is perceived positively inside the household can be perceived negatively outside it. Indeed, the various elements of the characters' upbringing are revealed sporadically throughout the novel and the first views given about the role of parents come from characters outside the family that Elisa Brune uses to convey the tendency to judge solely on appearances. The views of these characters also enable the reader to go from an outside to an inside point of view and compare them and this is an interesting strategy in terms of triggering reader response. As a result Brune portrays some characters who, although they do not know the Dumeyne family, criticise the way they are bringing their children up anyhow, because it appears not to correspond to society's expectations. If the family does not fully fulfil its role of upbringing leading to social reproduction and socialisation described above, it is criticised and Brune reflects this tendency through the eyes of several narrators in *La Tournante*. As a matter of fact, when Marion is arrested for theft (as she hoped to be), the superintendent blames the parents' approach to upbringing for her crime more than Marion with this very stereotypical comment: 'Que font les parents, je vous le demande?' (LT 13). The victim of the theft shares this opinion of parental responsibility for children's upbringing since '[elle] avai[t] décidé de donner une leçon à cette petite conne – puisque ce ne sont plus les parents qui en donnent' and hits her 'pour bien lui faire comprendre [son] point de vue sur son éducation' (LT 17). Although what is ironic here – and what the policeman and the victim do not know – is that Marion's upbringing has not taught her to steal. She knows this is wrong and would not normally do it; it is in fact a 'cry for help'. Her upbringing has, though, 'encouraged' her to get involved in a situation

⁵³ Completing the picture of how parenting style has relaxed in some cases, Brune includes the credible view of the maternal grandmother on upbringing and how social reproduction has evolved over two generations. She talks about Marion asking her questions about sex and thinks about 'la honte qu'[elle] aurai[t] éprouvée à poser de telles questions à [sa] mère, et encore plus à [sa] grand-mère' (LT 162).

she can no longer handle (actually much more serious than theft). Nevertheless, both the policeman's comment and the victim's reaction provide effective illustrations of the way society criticises, rejects and punishes those who do not follow its conventions, or at least those who are perceived to have failed or not played their role adequately. In the case represented by Brune, though, the person being punished is Marion, not her parents. Elisa Brune is deliberately depicting these very stereotypical views as they serve her purpose, which is to suggest how, in contemporary society, either parents or school are blamed for a child's behaviour. This also encourages her readers to question whether this 'common accusation' is justified or if this is just an easy alternative to finding out who or what is truly the cause behind a child's behaviour. Here they do not question Marion's motives and, apart from the psychologist, nobody raises the possibility that it might be a cry for help.

As far as people who know the Dumeynes are concerned, close friends and acquaintances also describe Hermann and Iris as too relaxed, parents for whom 'les petits étaient sacrés [...], pouvaient tout faire. La punition n'existait pas' (LT 80). As a result the children were said to be 'turbulents et insolents' and 'tout le monde [...] dans leur dos [...] prédisait les pires catastrophes' (LT 80). Elisa Brune uses here another cliché about children growing up without much parental authority in her attempt to firmly link her story to a socio-cultural context most readers will recognise. She thus suggests how people doubt the effectiveness of what is unconventional even before it is shown to have 'failed' and to have led to more serious problems. So once more she plays on the idea of conventions and, between the lines, the reader may sense that she is arguing that, despite changes in society,

social expectations have altered very little. Parents who do not 'fit in' with the Parsonian notion of what 'the family' should look like and how its members ought to behave might find things very difficult, because the lifestyles he describes are still held up by many sectors of society as the 'ideal' and parents who do not follow these patterns are seen to threaten the idealized view of 'family stability'.⁵⁴

To sum up, Brune manages to demonstrate here how what is unconventional is considered by many in society as bound to fail, like for instance one of Hermann's colleagues in the narrative who blames him for the situation his daughter is in, since

⁵⁴ Gatrell, *Hard Labour*, op. cit., pp. 33-34.

he sent her to a 'bad' school and lived in a 'bad' area. In essence, the way Brune has her characters criticise the Dumeyne family in the narrative reflects society's tendency to criticise too quickly and judge the non-conformity described by Giddens, Duneier and Applebaum in the sociological definition quoted above. With this novel, Elisa Brune opposes on the one hand stereotypical social conceptions of how individuals ought to be and behave, and on the other characters behaving differently from the norm and getting criticised for it (Marion, Hermann). The use of multiple narrators with different and sometimes stereotypical views of a given situation (the policeman, the victim, the colleague) also serves this end as it allows Brune to represent a range of opinions. The intended reaction from her readership is probably to question the validity of the stereotypical points of view used in the novel. Unfortunately, and although it would still appear to be a good one, Elisa Brune's strategy is a double-edged sword since, whilst it may achieve her disguised aim, it may also have the opposite effect on the readers and lead them to think that what happens to Marion actually proves that society is right and her parents were wrong to raise her the way they did, which would also be a logical interpretation of the novel.

If Elisa Brune has criticism come from outside the family in *La Tournante*, she switches pattern and has it come from the inside in *Blanche cassé*, enabling her to work on the same theme from different points of view and give the reader a more complete picture of the issue she is dealing with. The views are not as numerous as in *La Tournante* since there is only one narrator, Bénédicte, and the way she and Clarisse are brought up is never questioned by characters outside the family unit. It is only, though strongly, criticised by the children themselves. Another difference between the two novels is that in *Blanche cassé*, Brune makes the 'mother' the one most in charge of making decisions related to upbringing whereas in *La Tournante*, it is Hermann. Similarly, the 'mother' is the main breadwinner in *Blanche cassé* and can be said to have the 'power of the purse'. Elisa Brune does not therefore build her two novels around the same family pattern, since the roles traditionally associated with husband as the breadwinner and wife as nurturer are not respected here. The character of the 'mother' not filling the traditional role of the nurturing mother staying at home with the children but being the main earner of the household can be

interpreted in the light of Betty Friedan's attack on Parsons and his contemporaries in *The Feminine Mystique*, 'accusing them of wishing to trap women into domestic roles in order to "keep the social structure as it is, which seems to be the functionalist's primary concern."'”⁵⁵ Therefore, the 'mother' is portrayed as not conforming to the traditional view of society and the family. She is a good model for her daughters in that she works, but whilst this can be perceived as positive and a sign of emancipation, it can also be seen as negative since, being 'plus femme que mère', she can be seen as failing as a mother, having chosen to favour her career over her family, as will be discussed in the next chapter. Brune once more fails to deliver a portrait of a fully successful woman.

In *Blanche cassé*, the upbringing policy Brune illustrates is the one that consists in treating both children equally. Bénédicte states that her parents 'préféraient ne pas distinguer la façon dont ils [les] traitaient. Hors l'écart scolaire, [elle] n'avai[t] aucun moyen de [se] sentir plus grande ou différente. [...] Tout ce qui s'appliquait à [elle] valait automatiquement pour [Clarisse]' (BC 8). Later on she further criticises her parents for consistently refusing 'de faire deux poids deux mesures' (BC 38) and to give her any privileges over Clarisse despite her being the eldest. This egalitarian treatment of the two children in the novel is actually typical of 'middle and upper income parents [who] are likely to promote egalitarian relationships within their families'.⁵⁶ In exposing Bénédicte's frustration at this egalitarian approach Elisa Brune acknowledges that she is aware siblings are keen to be seen as different from one another and is perhaps suggesting that since 'every child loves to have his or her moment in the sun'⁵⁷ they should be entitled to them. As far as the father is concerned, Brune portrays Jacques as distant and uninvolved in his daughters' upbringing. Bénédicte states that

jamais il ne s'intéressait vraiment à [leurs] soucis du moment, jamais il n'intervenait dans les débats en vue d'une décision à prendre. Pour les principes généraux il se rangeait à l'avis de [leur] mère, et pour les cas particuliers il répétait: - Mais c'est à toi de décider, ma chérie. Agis selon ton cœur. (BC 37)

⁵⁵ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 117.

⁵⁶ According to Erika Hoff-Ginsberg and Twila Tardiff, 'Socioeconomics Status and Parenting', in Marc Bornstein (ed.), *Handbook of Parenting*, 5 vols (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1995), II, pp. 161-88 (p. 165).

⁵⁷ Nancy Samalin, *Loving Each One Best: A Caring and Practical Approach to Raising Siblings* (New York: Bantman, 1996), p. 93.

This statement can be interpreted either as a lack of interest or a wish to leave them more freedom, just like Hermann in *La Tournante*. Despite Jacques' lack of involvement, the novel tends to point at the 'mother's' responsibility for what happens to Clarisse because she does not bring her daughters up in a conventional way. Therefore, the two plots enable Elisa Brune to explore and describe the different possibilities and issues when it comes to child-rearing and deliver a more complete, yet still partial, picture to the reader. Also, the view in the narrative that the 'mother' (especially the working mother) is to blame for the failure of the upbringing corresponds to one that is prevalent in society and this might be why Elisa Brune chooses to reflect it; that is not to say that she subscribes to that mother-blaming view but simply that she wants to present the readers with different scenarios and let them draw their own conclusions.⁵⁸

The upbringing thus represented in *Blanche cassé* involves a lot of freedom and no punishment for the children, as was the case in *La Tournante*, but for different reasons.⁵⁹ If the parenting style of Hermann and Iris was meant to contrast with the upbringing they received, the 'mother' is portrayed as more selfish and having aimed to keep a great deal of freedom for herself, since her strategy 'consistait à ne jamais intervenir dans [leurs] choix – sauf danger physique grave – en tablant sur l'éveil de [leur] propre jugement pour [se] détourner des chemins hasardeux ou inintéressants' (BC 38). They can choose the clothes they want to wear when still very young, do not have to tidy up their bedrooms and are even prescribed a contraceptive as soon as they have their first period, suggesting that the 'mother' is afraid 'puisque'elle ne voulait rien [leur] interdire, que [leur] liberté engendre des dangers qu[']elles ne saur[ai]ent pas évaluer' (BC 29). She is convinced it is better 'qu'elles fassent leurs expériences très vite [pour être] moins exposées à se tromper plus tard' (BC 29), a reference to her own experience. In the novel, the 'mother' is thus encouraging her daughters to experience sex when they might not have considered it at such a young age. It is true they are physically protected against unwanted pregnancy but they are not necessarily ready psychologically and, through this, Brune may have wished to

⁵⁸ The theme of mother-blaming is further explored in the section on parent-child relationships.

⁵⁹ Like the children in *La Tournante*, Bénédicte and Clarisse '[n]ont] jamais été punies, ou presque. Quand l'une [d']elles] faisait une bêtise, [la] mère lui expliquait ses responsabilités. Il fallait réparer dans la mesure du possible' (BC 9).

subtly raise the question of whether teenagers, incarnated by Bénédicte and Clarisse here, are responsible enough to use this type of freedom wisely.

Through Bénédicte however, Brune reveals how this parenting style may be interpreted by the children. Bénédicte is aware that her mother has thought her upbringing plan through, but also that it does not work – ‘sur l’éducation des enfants, elle avait des idées bien définies mais éprouvait du mal à les traduire en pratique. Idéalement, ses principes auraient dû suffire à faire [d’elles] des adultes’ (BC 11). She thus ends up frustrated and behaving at odds with what her daughters expect – ‘d’abord narquoise, puis amère, puis méprisante. Elle souffrait de [les] voir ruiner ses espoirs, tandis que de [leur] côté [elles] rêv[aient] d’une mère chaleureuse et bienveillante’ (BC 38). To sum up, Elisa Brune illustrates here a relationship between a woman for whom motherhood is not central and her daughters, who are aware that ‘alors qu’une mère “plus mère que femme” est là quand il faut [...] une mère “plus femme que mère” n’est jamais là quand on l’attend. Elle vient trop tôt ou trop tard – voire pas du tout.’⁶⁰ The scenario depicted here also emphasises the common issue of lack of communication within many families, which will be discussed in more depth below. So Elisa Brune here reveals the potential pitfalls of yet another parenting style as the upbringing designed by the ‘mother’ is depicted as clearly not working for her daughters.⁶¹

Elisa Brune, through the several child-rearing methods described in *La Tournante* and *Blanche cassé*, suggests not only that no family is perfect, but also that no upbringing method is totally effective and satisfying. Once again she is trying to give an idea of the variety that exists in society by presenting the reader with different cases – almost case studies – and different approaches to an issue. She makes it obvious that no family really fits the mould of the ideal family as defined by society and sociology. All in all, she gives a rather gloomy vision of family in her narratives, in line with her personal view that family is ‘une bande d’imposteurs

⁶⁰ Eliacheff and Heinich, *Mères-Filles*, op. cit., pp. 84-85.

⁶¹ In contrast with Bénédicte and Clarisse’s struggle to reproduce social expectations, Brune makes a brief allusion in the narrative to what those achieving social reproduction do: ‘Diplôme, situation, mariage, maison, enfant, la formule est limpide’ (BC 124). This example underlines how important it is for people to be seen to be fulfilling societal expectations and implementing the values considered as essential.

essayant de vous faire croire que vous n'êtes pas tout seul'.⁶² She demonstrates through her narratives that society uses family to reproduce its norms and judge its members, marginalising those who do not fit in, and preventing individual freedom, arguments which reflect closely the views of experts such as Laing, as was demonstrated earlier. Let us now turn our attention to the different types of relationships that exist between family members and how Elisa Brune represents them in *La Tournante* and *Blanche cassé*.

Family relationships

This part aims to explore how Elisa Brune's representations of the different types of family relationships highlight their significance and their possible impact on the rest of the family as well as how she uses them to illustrate some key issues commonly found in the family sphere.

Marital relationships

Since relationships between men and women in the novels will be closely analysed in chapter 5, we will only look here at how the couples' relationships affect or are affected by their children. This will make it possible to show how everything is connected within a household. According to Daniel Dagenais '[t]he love relationship between spouses was a basic given of the modern family. Without it, one could not found a family'.⁶³ This corresponds to the picture given at the beginning of both novels, when the couples appear at first glance to be happy. However, this impression of happiness does not last very long. When studying the novels in parallel, two different patterns appear in terms of the failure of the couples and what can be seen as the fall of their daughters.

In *La Tournante*, Iris and Hermann speak very highly of one another at the beginning of the narrative, suggesting to the reader that this is a united couple and a united family. Iris praises her husband for being 'l'homme le plus ouvert qu'[elle] connaisse. [...] qui voit toujours le bon côté des autres' (LT 23). As for Hermann, he describes Iris as 'la femme qui a illuminé pendant vingt-cinq ans chaque jour de [sa] vie et chacune de [ses] pensées' (LT 40). Brune thus portrays 'the ideal relationship,

⁶² Brune, *L'écrivain et la blessure*, op. cit.

⁶³ Daniel Dagenais, *The (Un)Making of the Modern Family* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008), p. 102.

[...] a communion with another human being where feelings come first and [one] cannot separate the giving and the taking'.⁶⁴ However, what happens to Marion triggers a change in the way Iris perceives her husband and her whole life. Mutual gratitude appears to be the reason why things worked so well for so many years and Iris realises that 'il suffit peut-être de voir les choses autrement pour que tout s'écroule. Peut-être n'est-il pas ou n'est-il plus [son] sauveur? Est-il devenu [son] bourreau? Peut-être est-ce lui qu'[elle] doi[t] fuir à présent?' (LT 150). For Iris, Hermann shifts from one extreme to the other, from saviour to tormentor as if no middle-ground were possible. Elisa Brune reflects the impact such a dramatic event can have on the family. The crisis with Marion is a way of bringing Iris to question her life, her role as a mother and her love relationship. Whereas most literature deals with the impact that parental conflict and separation can have on children and their behaviour, it seldom deals with the opposite situation. Brune illustrates that a family crisis, such as the one described in *La Tournante*, or the loss of a child for instance, puts even the strongest couple under so much stress that, very often, the relationship, however strong it appeared to be, does not survive. Elisa Brune uses appearances again to stress how people's behaviour is influenced by societal expectations. Hermann and Iris appear to be a strong couple in the first place so either this is just a façade and their relationship is weak underneath, although they never allow this to be seen, or the pressure of what happens to their daughter is just too extreme, even for them.

In *Blanche cassé*, the distance between husband and wife is noticeable from the start of the novel. Even though Brune gives very little information about their relationship, it is enough to show they are not happy together. For instance, 'pendant les longs voyages en voiture, [les] parents ne se parlaient presque pas' for '[le] père, sans doute, n'était pas assez heureux pour chanter' (BC 18). Contrary to Hermann and Iris, their relationship was not really chosen since they were forced by their families to marry because the 'mother' was pregnant, as will be analysed in chapter 5. This reveals that the parents' relationship has always been fragile and was only – barely – maintained for the sake of the children and keeping up appearances as

⁶⁴ Chris Belshaw and Michael Strutt, *Couples in Crisis: Facing Marital Breakdown* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1984), p. 42.

previously discussed. The ‘mother’ blames her parents for her choice and unhappiness, just as her daughter Clarisse will blame her. In addition, the parents do not hide their unhappiness from the children and according to Bénédicte, ‘l’expression directe du mépris renforçait soudain [leur] malaise, comme si de picotement il devenait blessure’ (BC 30). Brune herself characterised the marital relationship she aims to illustrate in *Blanche cassé* as one in which ‘on sauve les apparences mais s’installe alors une atmosphère funeste.’⁶⁵ This clearly indicates the pain and repercussions bad relationships may have on children and on parent-children relationships, as we will see. Noller and Callan’s *The Adolescent in the Family*, recognises that a

difficult situation for adolescents is [...] the conflicts between their parents. [...] They may even be blamed for the conflict between their parents and seen as the prime cause. Obviously these situations are much worse for adolescents where the parents’ marriage is clearly unhappy, and arguments between them occur regularly.⁶⁶

Brune therefore illustrates here the pattern whereby children can affect a couple’s relationship and this is definitely the case with Clarisse for, in spite of the fact that the ‘mother’ chose to become pregnant a second time, she has a very bad relationship with her younger daughter.⁶⁷ Thus, ‘chaque jour offrait matière, entre elles deux, à de nouvelles tensions qui se prolongeaient souvent en incompréhension entre [la] mère et [le] père’ (BC 25), reflecting the widespread idea that children are often at the centre of arguments in a family. Finally, the parents decide to separate when Bénédicte and Clarisse are seventeen and fifteen years old and to share their lives with their ‘new’ partners.

To summarise, in *La Tournante*, Brune illustrates how a couple can start falling apart as a result of what happens to their daughter and this is witnessed in parallel to or as part of the consequences of what happened to Marion, whose own fall drags her parents down. In *Blanche cassé* on the other hand it is not the fall of the couple that is witnessed by the readers but Clarisse’s; the parents failed as a couple a long time

⁶⁵ Marc Emile Baronheid, ‘Elisa Brune: “L’écriture c’est la liberté”’, *Weekend Le Vif/L’Express*, 13 October 2000, p. 146.

⁶⁶ Patricia Noller and Victor Callan, *The Adolescent in the Family* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 61.

⁶⁷ Since the first pregnancy was neither planned nor desired and led to them being ‘forced’ to marry, one can wonder why they had another child. It may have been a way of convincing themselves that everything was going well or of following the stereotypical idea that having a child and constituting the ‘average’ family of parents with two children would make their couple stronger.

ago and this may be understood as one of the factors that contributed to their daughter's fall. The two books thus work in opposition from the point of view of couple/daughter failure and this enables Elisa Brune to show how things are connected in a family and how events are closely linked to one another. Of course, the parents' relationship cannot be seen as the only reason for a child's problems but the novels are good illustrations of the way in which 'la famille est une entité dynamique dans laquelle la relation entre les conjoints et la relation entre les parents et les enfants sont interdépendantes'.⁶⁸ We will now turn our attention to the parent-child relationship which, according to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 'promises a tie which is more elemental, profound and durable than any other in society', in contrast with 'the love between men and women [that] has [...] proven vulnerable and prone to failure'.⁶⁹

Parent-child relationships

Elisa Brune makes the parent-child relationship central to both her novels and uses it to emphasise communication problems and conflicts as regular features of the relationship between the parents and their teenage children.⁷⁰ Through *La Tournante* she gives an idea of the potential disguised problems of communication behind the happy family façade and through *Blanche cassé* how in some cases communication is avoided because it all too often leads to arguments. In a sense, avoiding communication saves having to face problems, for as long as issues are kept secret, they do not really exist and parents and children in both narratives keep secrets from one another. Once again though, the novels present the reader with different patterns. In *La Tournante* the parent-child bond seems close despite the problems, whereas in *Blanche cassé* the family relationships are depicted as distant and cold.

⁶⁸ Monique Dubé, Danielle Julien, Donald Bouthillier, Élise Lebeau, Isabelle Bélanger and Manon Hamelin, 'La relation entre les conflits conjugaux, la satisfaction conjugale des mères et la qualité de la communication mère-adolescente', *Journal International de Psychologie*, 36, 5 (2001), 329-39 (p. 329).

⁶⁹ Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *The Normal Chaos of Love* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), p. 73.

⁷⁰ According to Collins and Repinski, 'conflicts are a normal and regular part of family-adolescent relationships'. W. Andrew Collins and Daniel J. Repinski, 'Relationships During Adolescence: Continuity and Change in Interpersonal Perspective', in Raymond Montemayor, Gerald R. Adams and Thomas P. Gullotta (eds.) *Personal Relationships During Adolescence* (London: Sage Publications, 1994), pp. 7-36 (p. 16).

With the parent-child relationship, Elisa Brune uses the same pattern as with the family structure: in *La Tournante* she first presents the characters' relationships in the best possible light before revealing the problems. Iris and Hermann are portrayed as parents who are as mistaken about the quality of their relationship with their children as they are about the stability of their own relationship. The narrative first presents Hermann and Iris as the proud parents of a perfect daughter, unable to imagine anything wrong with her. Iris tells the superintendent 'qu'en matière de problèmes il risquait d'être déçu. Marion incarne la réussite. Non seulement elle est bonne élève, mais dans sa classe, elle joue un peu les meneuses. Toutes ses amies l'envient et veulent l'imiter' (LT 21). In giving the parents a vision of their child as perfect, Brune's characters match what is witnessed in society, where

[...] every parent is encouraged to be proud of their children and their family. Being a responsible parent is a major part of the traditional male and female role, while being a good and successful parent is still central to the self-esteem of many adults. Therefore, when asked their attitudes about the amount of conflict in the family, parents may give more positive accounts than their adolescents because they have a greater emotional investment in their families.⁷¹

Here, Elisa Brune is playing with the cliché that most parents, believing their offspring to be perfect, do not actually know a great deal about what is going on in their lives. She also stresses the idea that, contrary to popular belief, it is not only 'problem' girls that get caught up in gang rapes in poor suburbs, as will be developed in chapter 5. As Maryse Jaspard explains:

[de] tous les crimes sexuels, les viols collectifs suscitent, à l'excès, émotions et frayeurs. Généralement associés aux jeunes de cités fustigées comme lieu de la "sauvagerie", ils sont en réalité perpétrés à l'encontre de femmes de tous âges, dans des espaces et des milieux des plus divers.⁷²

Like her parents, at the beginning of the novel, Marion insists she has a very good relationship with her family and wants to keep her situation secret in order not to upset them (just like Bénédicte in *Blanche cassé*): '[elle] ne voulai[t] vraiment pas leur infliger ça. Ils sont si cool avec [eux]' (LT 55). The happy family picture is further reinforced both from inside with her brother Thomas, who feels his parents are good to them, and from outside by the assessment of the psychologist, who

⁷¹ Noller and Callan, *The Adolescent in the Family*, op. cit., p. 30.

⁷² Jaspard, *Les violences contre les femmes*, op. cit., pp. 67-68.

stresses how trust within the family is ‘remarquable’ (LT 37), showing here that even with a high level of trust things can go wrong.

This vision of the parents’ good relationship with their children is further developed by Brune through the theme of communication: Hermann is satisfied they do not have any problems in that area and is adamant that Marion ‘n’aurait jamais passé sous silence un problème important’ (LT 10). It is as if he was aware of and agreed with studies that argue that

[p]oor communication is often the basis of conflict and a lack of closeness in families, especially when parents don’t value the opinions of their adolescents [and that] supportive communication is one factor that encourages better social and coping skills among adolescents. Supportive communication leads to more positive identities.⁷³

However, this does not seem to have worked with Marion and the news of her situation makes both her parents realise that communication with her is a problem and they then see how little they genuinely know about Marion’s life; leaving them wondering how she managed to experience all this ‘sans rien en laisser transparaître’ (LT 40). This conception from the parents of the novel that communication was not a problem aligns with Noller and Callan’s thesis that:

[i]n general, adolescents seem more negative about the communication in the family than do their parents. Adolescents report less openness and, sometimes, more problems than their parents [...] [There is] also [...] a tendency for adolescents to present a more negative view of the family than do their parents [...]. These differences in ratings between parents and adolescents are likely to be the result of two kinds of perceptual biases [...]: the parents’ needs to present the family in a good light, and the adolescents’ needs to develop a separate identity and to distance themselves from their parents and from the family.⁷⁴

Whilst Hermann understands that Marion wanted to discover sex even though she is quite young and he admires ‘son esprit d’indépendance et sa capacité de décision’ (LT 72), conversely, Iris feels deeply guilty and sees herself as a neglectful mother.⁷⁵ This difference in point of view between her two protagonists is in line with Sylvie Kerviel’s assessment that ‘pour les mères, le trouble est souvent plus fort

⁷³ Noller and Callan, *The Adolescent in the Family*, op. cit., p. 35.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 45.

⁷⁵ The topic of neglectful mothers in Elisa Brune’s work will not be closely analysed here but was the object of a conference paper we gave entitled ‘Maternal Neglect and its Impact in two Novels by Elisa Brune’, February 2007, Association for the Study of Modern and Contemporary France Postgraduate Study Day, University of Durham.

que pour les pères'⁷⁶ and enables Elisa Brune to underline the significant difference in perception of a given situation that can exist between a mother and a father. Thus Iris wonders

comment [elle a] pu côtoyer [sa] fille pendant six mois sans remarquer qu'il se passait quelque chose? Comment [elle a] pu être aussi peu sa mère qu'elle ait préféré fuir au lieu de se confier à [elle]? [...] En plus, [elle est] [...] attentive. [...] [Marion] n'était pas livrée à elle-même. [...]. Il y a tant de mots qui s'échangent dans une famille, et si peu qui servent à se parler. (LT 91)⁷⁷

This last sentence recalls once more the theme of communication as a background to the novel. Elisa Brune establishes here that meaningful communication is more complicated than it seems. Despite keeping up the appearance of an open relationship and being convinced they communicate well, there is actually a serious problem of dialogue which remains after Marion is found, as they do not dare 'aborder le centre épineux du mal qui [les] rongait' (LT 92), as also occurs in *Blanche cassé*. Brune also illustrates in *La Tournante* how sexuality remains the biggest taboo as far as communication within the family is concerned. Indeed, according to research,

there seems to be a general lack of sex-related communication in families, with mothers being primarily responsible for what communication about sex occurs, even with sons. [...] Parents and adolescents want to talk more about sex and human sexuality but do not know how to do it.⁷⁸

Consequently, in the narrative, Marion avoids discussing this aspect of her life with them and Hermann realises that 'il reste des barrières infranchissables' (LT 38).

While being permissive in their upbringing, Hermann and Iris forgot to communicate with their teenage daughter (like the mother in *Blanche cassé*) and this is what they do not seem to realise. It appears that, from a 'conservative' point of view, Marion's behaviour can be linked to her upbringing, as some sociological studies have found that

[h]aving permissive parents also increases the chances of adolescents being involved in sexual intercourse at an early age and of becoming teenage parents. Two factors are likely to be relevant here: the lack of parental supervision and permissive parents'

⁷⁶ Sylvie Kerviel, 'La vie sexuelle des adolescents échappe aux parents', *Le Monde*, 21 February 2010 <http://www.lemonde.fr/aujourd-hui/article/2010/02/20/la-vie-sexuelle-des-adolescents-echappe-aux-parents_1309070_3238.html> [accessed 23 February 2010].

⁷⁷ The fact that Brune has Iris characterising herself as 'attentive' corresponds to paedopsychiatrist Marcel Rufo's view that when it comes to teenage sexuality, 'le père fait comme s'il savait, sans chercher plus loin, alors que la mère est plus attentive à tous les signes'. Marcel Rufo quoted in Sylvie Kerviel, *ibid.*

⁷⁸ Noller and Callan, *The Adolescent in the Family*, op. cit., p. 46.

failure to discuss the issues with the adolescent, to inculcate standards and to point out the possible consequences of their behaviour.⁷⁹

Although Elisa Brune is not here deliberately creating characters who act according to the findings of sociological research, Marion nonetheless does correspond to theoretical models and, despite not passing any direct criticism, Elisa Brune might be suggesting here that a permissive education does not work any better than – or has different problems from – the strict upbringing Hermann and Iris received. It would thus appear that each generation and each type of upbringing has its own problems. Iris believes that Marion is old enough to lead her life the way she wants and that unlike Thomas ‘elle n’a plus besoin [d’eux]’ (LT 150), which may be perceived as a peculiar view since Marion is only fourteen. Although Iris is not trying to get rid of her mothering duties and genuinely wants her children to be free, this can be likened to the ‘mother’ in *Blanche cassé* who wants her daughters to grow up fast (by giving access very early to contraception for instance) in order to get rid of her ‘mothering’ responsibilities as quickly as possible. This vision however is consistent with Hermann and Iris’s upbringing policy based on freedom and, although it does not produce the intended result, aligns with findings that

[...] the main messages coming from the parent’s use of supportive and inductive techniques are [...] that the adolescent is competent and able to decide, that with encouragement he or she will behave appropriately and wisely. In addition these adolescents are likely to get the message they can be trusted and seek to do what is best.⁸⁰

The fact that Marion is used to dealing with things on her own – ‘[d]’habitude [elle se] débrouille toujours toute seule’ (LT 54) – reinforces the idea that the freedom the parents try to give their children unfortunately leads to a lack of communication and involvement in their lives, leaving Marion to her own devices, even if this is not the way she perceives it. Brune provides her reader with a rather negative account of the relationships which the Dumeyne parents and their children have with each other and the fact that she chooses to portray them in a negative light is in this instance again quite telling of her personal view of the institution of family, given that this aspect of the novel is one that she imagined and did not draw from the story she was told. Indeed, as explained in the previous chapter, to write this novel, Elisa Brune

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 131.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 59.

[est] partie surtout de ce que le père [lui] a dit et aussi de ce qu'il [lui] a dit de sa femme. [Elle] n'[a] pas demandé plus. [Elle a] pris ce qu'il [lui] a donné spontanément et puis [elle a] brodé pour compléter. Donc ce qui est le plus réel c'est le scénario proprement dit de ce qui s'est passé; ce qui est aussi très réel, c'est la personnalité du père parce que c'est à lui [qu'elle a] parlé puis le reste ça devient plus fictionnel puisqu'[elle n'a] pas rencontré les personnages et ils ont été inventés à partir d'un petit portrait qu'il [lui] avait fait.⁸¹

She could have chosen a different representation but decided not to in order to suggest that communication within families, especially between parents and teenagers, is a common issue. So even though Brune remains objective in the situations she describes, she has a role in what she chooses to describe and how she does it, and in this case she is deliberately portraying communication problems.

Some of Hermann's beliefs lead him to try and convince his daughter not to do things such as listening to rap music because of its violent message and exploitation of teenagers but she seldom agrees to be lectured and tells him he is 'un vieux con, un artiste de troisième zone' (LT 106-7). Marion here reacts like a typical teenager, and with such an example, Elisa Brune throws into relief the fact that, as is normal, relationships do not go that smoothly in the family contrary to what the parents pretend or maybe want to think. The situation Brune creates in the narrative is a good illustration that an

important issue is the adolescent's orientation to parents versus peers. [...] Adolescents are seen as either rebelling against the values and standards of their parents and being totally concerned with opinions of their peers, or submitting totally to the demands of their parents and not progressing towards independence.⁸²

Marion obviously rebels against her parents' values and feels distant from them, sensing that '[i]ls sont à des années-lumière du monde où [elle] vi[t]. Comment voulez-vous qu'[elle] leur explique ce dont ils n'ont pas idée?' (LT 22). This enables Elisa Brune to briefly express another common problem which often occurs in the parent-teenager relationship: the generation gap. Marion's view that her parents cannot understand her and that they are very distant from her in terms of the way they apprehend the world is a good illustration of this cliché. This distance is further expressed when she criticises them for not having a mobile phone, a microwave, a dishwasher or a new car, saying 'qu'ils vivaient en plein Moyen-âge et qu'elle n'osait pas inviter ses copines à la maison' (LT 83), exaggerating the situation, as

⁸¹ See my unpublished interview with Elisa Brune 27 August 2007. Appendix B, p. 256.

⁸² Noller and Callan, *The Adolescent in the Family*, op. cit., pp. 50-51.

some real teenagers would do, perceiving their parents as old-fashioned. As developed above, Marion's vision of her family is less positive than theirs and she even describes them as a little bit 'cucul la praline. Pas du tout dans leur époque [...] [vivant] dans leur bulle' (LT 158). Elisa Brune tackles here yet another common clichéd teenagers' complaint that parents are old-fashioned and unable to understand them. The use of this cliché enables Brune to reinforce the 'effet de réel' of the family relationships she is depicting here and that the reader is likely to know, enhancing the potential for reader response. This time again however, and although we would argue she is successful in this instance, the strategy Brune uses can cut both ways, as the use of the stereotype can end up reinforcing it rather than breaking or questioning it. All in all, from the perspective of the protagonists of *La Tournante*, no method of upbringing, whether strict or relaxed, seems to work better than another.

In *Blanche cassé*, as with the marital relationships, Brune never gives the reader the impression that the parent-child relationship is healthy, unlike in *La Tournante*. It is mainly based on material solidarity, while the sibling relationship is mainly based on affective solidarity. Solidarity is an important function of family and brings together 'instrumental' and 'expressive' roles according to Talcott Parsons.⁸³ According to Rick Peterson and Stephen Green, instrumental solidarity is 'concerned with provision of physical resources [...], decision-making and family management [while affective solidarity] exists to provide emotional support and encouragement to family members'.⁸⁴ The parent-children relationship is also very much dominated by the difficult mother-daughter relationship.⁸⁵ This relationship is made worse by the fact that the 'mother' Elisa Brune has chosen to portray could be described, as

⁸³ See Bilton et al., *Introductory Sociology*, op.cit., p. 233.

⁸⁴ Rick Peterson and Stephen Green, *Families First: Keys to Successful Family Functioning: Family Roles* (Publication number 360-093, 1999) <<http://www.ext.vt.edu/pubs/family/350-093/350-093.html>> [accessed 26 March 2006].

⁸⁵ Both the 'mother' and Iris match in theory the dominant representation of the mother who is 'heterosexual, at least middle-class, "white", able-bodied, neither too old or too young, born in the country where she resides, and not imprisoned, as well as having children to whom she gave birth and being married to the children's "white" father'. As defined by Paula J. Caplan in *The New Don't Blame Mother: Mending the Mother-Daughter Relationship* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. XXI.

previously stated and in Eliacheff and Heinich's terms, as 'plus femme que mère'.⁸⁶ If required to define their mother, Bénédicte and Clarisse could almost quote Belgian writer Françoise Mallet-Joris who said that 'l'essentiel de la vie de ma mère n'était évidemment pas d'être ma mère.'⁸⁷

The material aspect on which the parent-children relationship is mainly based is first and foremost visible in the narrative when the parents agree to pay for a small flat 'sous les combles d'un grand immeuble, non loin de chez [leur] mère' (BC 113) where their two daughters can live after Clarisse announces her pregnancy. This type of material support also ties in with the fact that according to research, '[f]or many teenage mothers, dependence on family for financial and emotional support is prolonged'⁸⁸ but in the narrative, although she does display solidarity, the 'mother' may do so simply in order to turn her daughters into adults as soon as possible: by financing the flat, she can thus be perceived as giving them physical independence while getting rid of the emotional side of her role. On top of that, and though it lengthens Bénédicte's financial dependence upon them, the parents agree to finance her higher education (BC 100) – as will be shown in chapter 4 – enabling her to go in the direction which is expected of her (contrary to Clarisse). This also allows the parents to fulfil their role of social reproduction by turning their daughter into an individual fit (in theory) to follow the conventions of modern society: qualifications, employment, family, etc. In this instance, Elisa Brune illustrates how parental material solidarity is meant to help to implement society's rules.

If the parents readily agree to finance Bénédicte's studies, 'en revanche pour l'appartement, l'entretien de [sa] sœur et de l'enfant ils étaient beaucoup plus critiques. Ils ne pourraient pas jouer l'assistance publique pendant des années. [Sa] sœur devrait travailler' (BC 129). Thus, through the parents, 'comptant qu'elle devienne autonome dans les plus brefs délais' (BC 156), Brune illustrates how some parents put financial pressure on their children instead of supporting them if it seems the best way to help them. As Clarisse chooses to lead an unconventional life, the parents want to reduce their material and financial support in order to limit their

⁸⁶ See Eliacheff and Heinich, *Mères-Filles*, op. cit., pp. 71-105.

⁸⁷ Françoise Mallet-Joris, *La Double Confiance* (Paris: Plon, 2001) quoted in Eliacheff and Heinich, *ibid.*, p. 70.

⁸⁸ Susan Moore and Doreen Rosenthal, *Sexuality in Adolescence* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 158.

involvement and therefore their emotional solidarity with her. With this representation of the parents acting in such a way, Elisa Brune appears to have her characters display another existing practice in contemporary society for those who do not conform.

As far as the emotional bonds are concerned, the main feature of the parent-child relationship in *Blanche cassé* is that the mother and her teenage daughters, particularly Clarisse, do not get along.⁸⁹ We argue that this is linked not only to the ‘mother’s’ personality ‘plus femme que mère’ but also to her poor relationship with her husband and unhappiness in her marriage. Indeed, according to Monique Dubé’s research, there is a link between marital conflicts and mother-daughter relationships and we will use her findings to show how, through the confrontational relationships in this family, Brune effectively, though maybe not consciously, reflects a pattern also found in society. First, Clarisse turns out to be the only one who shows her emotions

dans cette famille où les émotions restaient contenues dans un domaine non défini mais parfaitement limité. [Le] père, affectueux, s’en tenait souvent au même type de démonstrations un peu convenues [...]. [La] mère [...] [leur] donnait une tape sur l’épaule plutôt qu’un baiser. (BC 14)

According to Dubé this distance could be explained by the fact that ‘les couples qui vivent de l’insatisfaction dans leur relation conjugale [...] manifestent moins de comportement d’approbation et de marques d’affection envers leurs enfants’.⁹⁰

Even though Clarisse and Bénédicte feel closer to their father, he is described as ‘inutile aussi bien qu’inoffensif’ (BC 37) and they feel that progressively ‘il s’effaçait du champ de [leurs] références’ (BC 37). With this growing distance between parents and children, Elisa Brune echoes the features of *La Tournante*. There is a lack of communication between the two generations who stop talking to

⁸⁹ The relationship between the ‘mother’ and Clarisse gets off to a bad start since Clarisse was born prematurely and therefore ‘[la] mère est restée sur la mauvaise impression d’avoir été bousculée dans son agenda. Déjà cette fille n’en faisait qu’à sa tête’ (BC 7). It is as if the ‘mother’ already wants to be in control of everything, expecting her baby to be born as planned, and as if Clarisse has already decided to annoy her mother. Indeed, the mother was not in control of her first pregnancy (unplanned) but thought she would be for the second (planned), but then control escaped her again as the baby arrived early.

⁹⁰ According to Mary A. Easterbrooks and Robert N. Embe, ‘Marital and parental-child relationships: The role of affect in the family system’, in Robert A. Hinde and Joan Stevenson-Hinde (eds.), *Relationships within Families: Mutual influences* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 83-103, quoted in Monique Dubé et al., ‘La relation entre les conflits conjugaux’, op. cit., p. 331.

one another as soon as they cease to understand each other's interests. As for the mother, she is portrayed as not often at home, invoking a heavy workload and long hours. However, as Bénédicte states, 'ce n'était pas pour [leur] déplaire car sa présence s'accompagnait toujours d'un certain malaise' since 'elle semblait insatisfaite [...] de [leur] père qu'elle tenait pour quantité négligeable, de [sa] sœur et [d'elle] qui ne [s']épanouiss[aient] pas comme le promettaient ses principes d'éducation [...] [mais][b]ien sûr, le dédain était réciproque' (BC 37). The relationship of the children with the 'mother' is distant due to the 'mother' escaping the family sphere as much as possible and not being supportive. This attitude is described in Dubé's research as she explains that 'il est possible que l'insatisfaction conjugale entraînée par la négativité de la communication conjugale amène les mères à être moins présentes à leur fille et à leurs demandes et à être plus négatives dans leurs échanges quotidiens.'⁹¹ Thus, Bénédicte and Clarisse find themselves quickly left to their own devices, further decreasing communication and increasing the lack of unity within the family sphere. It is possible that Brune may have wished to represent the 'mother' as so dedicated to her work because she feels like the women described by Arlie Hochschild who find

the workplace more relaxing than their home. [...] some working mothers [find] their return to the household stressful and exhausting, with meals to be cooked, chores to be undertaken while fractious children (and sometimes husbands) [demand] attention. Work, by comparison, offer[s] a more convivial environment where tasks [can] be tackled in order, success [is] easier to define and mothers [feel] a greater sense of control over their activities.⁹²

This attitude would thus confirm her identity as 'plus femme que mère' while making her behaviour credible for the readership.

Elisa Brune's main protagonists in the narrative are teenagers, and adolescence implies change. Thus

la démarche d'indépendance et d'autonomie initiée à cette période implique que les filles aient un point de vue plus critique de ce qui se passe à la maison [...] [et] les difficultés vécues par les parents pourraient rendre cette tâche conflictuelle et pourraient augmenter le niveau de confrontation entre la mère et la fille.⁹³

⁹¹ Dubé et al., *ibid.*, p. 331.

⁹² Arlie Hochschild, *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), p. 56, referred to in Gatrell, *Hard Labour*, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

⁹³ Dubé et al., 'La relation entre les conflits conjugaux', *op. cit.*, p. 336.

This finding in a psychological study matches the confrontational nature of the relationships between Clarisse and her mother in the narrative, for if ‘les différends réguliers suscités par les provocations de [Clarisse] ne tournaient pas au conflit ouvert [...] ils installaient un climat de dédain réciproque qui assombrissaient [...] toute la vie de famille.’ (BC 25). Just as in *La Tournante*, the ‘mother’ and Clarisse are living in two different worlds with no ties and their constant disagreements come from their refusal to accept each other’s way of life. In both novels Elisa Brune strongly insists on lack of communication as the root of other problems such as misunderstanding in families; she tries to show the implications of such a failure, using these two families as plausible examples for what she observes in society.

Bénédicte is aware of her distance from her mother and ‘[n’a jamais] pensé qu[’elle] pourrai[t] [se] confier à elle ou partager ses préoccupations’ (BC 63), supporting the idea that they cannot communicate. Nevertheless, ‘[elle] n’éprouve pas cette haine qui anime Clarisse’ but rather ‘[...] une tristesse résignée, un serrement de cœur à l’idée qu[’elles se] trouv[ent] si irrémédiablement éloignées’ (BC 63). She pictures the ‘mother’, Clarisse and herself ‘cherchant un interlocuteur dans le noir, désirant par-dessus tout être comprises, et jamais [elles] n’entend[ent] la voix de l’autre’ (BC 63), as if something prevents them from truly communicating and hurts them at the same time. A similar situation is described by Caplan who explains that ‘each becomes entrenched in her own agony about their relationship and finds it harder and harder to understand the other’s point of view and think of constructive ways they can be together’.⁹⁴ However, unlike *La Tournante* where some characters are unaware of the communication problem, all the characters in *Blanche cassé* acknowledge this flaw but do not manage or do not wish to correct it, enabling Elisa Brune to explore two different perspectives of the same issue.

If the ‘mother’s’ relationship with Bénédicte seems to improve slightly after the sisters move out, with Clarisse it never does. It only gets worse and moves from a mother-daughter disagreement to a mother-mother one.⁹⁵ Clarisse, becoming a mother herself, gives a new opportunity to her mother to criticise her because, if

⁹⁴ Caplan, *The New Don’t Blame Mother*, op. cit., p. 12.

⁹⁵ This corresponds to Beauvoir’s view that ‘c’est entre mère et fille que les conflits [...] prennent une forme exaspérée’. Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième sexe*, op. cit., II, p. 374.

Clarisse's way of bringing up her son is acceptable, then it means the 'mother's' own approach was not – although both approaches of course have flaws. This scenario enables Brune to push further her description of the relationships between mothers and daughters. So whilst the 'mother' accuses Clarisse of not being able to 'assumer son rôle de mère' (BC 289), which could 'compromettre l'avenir d'un enfant' (BC 289) because of her irresponsible behaviour, Clarisse claims that the 'mother' '[leur a] volé [leur] enfance avec [ses] idées débiles' (BC 259) and that '[elle] n'a jamais été une mère, [elle] es[t] une machine. C'est à [elle] qu'on aurait dû [l]'enlever' (BC 290). Clarisse exaggerates her description of her mother – just like Marion in *La Tournante* with her parents – and her point of view is neither objective nor balanced. However, through Clarisse's feelings towards her mother and her perception of her as some kind of monster, Elisa Brune manages to explore another common mother-daughter relationship issue that has been studied and explained by Paula Caplan who stresses that '[m]others are human; they do make mistakes, and sometimes the way they brought us up wasn't very good. Few mothers though are complete monsters. However, we easily believe they are monsters if we don't know how else to think about them'.⁹⁶

These two different ways of being a mother and this fierce opposition of ideas concerning the role of the mother allow Elisa Brune to suggest another possibility: just as there is no single type of family or upbringing, there is no single way of being a good mother. However, both mothers in *Blanche cassé* seem to meet only one aspect of the child's needs, either material or emotional and thus the reader is given an idea of what Elisa Brune is suggesting here: that a child needs both aspects in order to have a balanced life. They see clearly what is lacking in one another's mothering but forget to open their eyes to what is missing in their own – as Hermann and Iris are aware of the problem in the upbringing they received but not in the one they give their children. In essence, in trying to correct what she sees as her mother's failings, Clarisse creates new problems.

Finally, Clarisse is persuaded society does not understand her, and her mother in a sense represents society. Clarisse asserts she will be 'condamnée pour l'exemple, pour que chacun se rappelle exactement tout ce qu'une mère doit brandir de bons

⁹⁶ Ibid.

points si elle veut garder son titre' (BC 290). She blames society for what happens to her and her son but it is also true that she is very young, has quite extreme views and does not appear to accept any responsibility for what happens. She does not fit the mould required by society and according to Bénédicte 'les rangs de soldats ne se sont pas desserrés. Ils ne l'ont pas laissée passer' (BC 289), suggesting how, in some people's view, society deals with those who do not follow the rules it imposes on them. In that sense, Clarisse and Marion represent, like the central characters of some 19th-century realist novels, '[des] personnages qui refusent d'accepter les limites que la société impose au sujet, à sa nature et à l'étendue de ses désirs [et] deviennent les boucs émissaires de cette société'.⁹⁷ With Clarisse's example, and although her life choices are clearly not leading her anywhere, Elisa Brune underlines that 'ideals of family relationships have become enshrined in our legal, social, religious and economic systems which, in turn, reinforce the ideology and penalise or ostracise those who transgress it'.⁹⁸

To sum up, in terms of parent-children relationships, Elisa Brune uses these novels to explore different issues and does it in different ways. In *La Tournante*, she chooses to make the parents untraditional (even if conventional in other ways) whereas in *Blanche cassé* it is the daughter who behaves unconventionally. The parent-children relationship in *La Tournante* is not as good as it appears at first glance, for they do not communicate as well as they think they do. Marion is ashamed of her parents who do not perfectly fit the mould of society. In *Blanche cassé*, it is the opposite; the parents, and especially the 'mother', do not bring up their daughters conventionally either, but the 'mother' is a perfect citizen of modern society whereas her daughter refuses the mould and this is why their relationship is so bad. The two novels demonstrate the failure of both couples' upbringing approaches and Elisa Brune, possibly linking to her idea that the family is in any case a flawed institution, shows that there are lots of types of families, fathers and mothers, and all can potentially encounter problems. The parent-child relationship is

⁹⁷ Leo Bersani, 'Le réalisme et la peur du désir', in Genette and Todorov (eds.), *Littérature et réalité*, op. cit., pp. 47-80 (p. 70).

⁹⁸ Diana Gittens, 'What is the Family? Is it Universal?', in Linda MacDowell and Rosemary Pringle, *Defining Women: Social Institutions and Gender Divisions* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), p. 74.

not however the only determining relationship in a family, sibling relationships also need to be taken into account as they too play a major part in a child's development.

Sibling relationships

In both narratives, the relationships between Elisa Brune's main protagonists and their siblings correspond to different constitutive aspects of typical sibling relationships studied in psychology and sociology.⁹⁹ Marion and Thomas are good examples of the importance of sibling relationships in childhood and adolescence, whilst Bénédicte and Clarisse and Iris and Céline represent how 'for most women, the story of their individual trajectory [is] connected in some way to that of a sister'.¹⁰⁰

First of all, if we look at the youngest siblings, the concept of model is a noticeably important one in the relationships between Marion and Thomas. Marion fulfils her valuable role of 'big sister' perfectly well as, to Thomas, she is 'une aventurière', always exploring things first and telling him how they work and thus, 'partout où elle va [il] peu[t] aller' (LT 29). Consequently, the significant part Marion plays in Thomas's upbringing confirms Mauthner's thesis that '[o]lder siblings are often viewed as teachers and models to younger siblings and, as such, exert considerable influence'.¹⁰¹ Marion tests the limits and allows Thomas to weigh the pros and cons of different situations and, in doing so, Marion fits the assumption that elder children serve as effective teachers of a variety of skills from early childhood through to the middle years.¹⁰² The model given by the elder child is not necessarily the best but remains nevertheless very influential. By insisting on the strength of Marion and Thomas's bond, Elisa Brune exemplifies the way siblings can

⁹⁹ Both the families featured in the narratives have two children. Iris and Céline also have a brother mentioned only once (LT 128) and who does not seem to play a role in the relationship between the two sisters.

¹⁰⁰ Melanie L. Mauthner, *Sistering: Power and Change in Female Relationships* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), p. 6.

¹⁰¹ Brenda K. Bryant, 'Sibling Relationships in Middle Childhood', in Michael E. Lamb and Brian Sutton-Smith (eds.), *Sibling Relationships: Their Nature and Significance Across the Lifespan* (London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1982), p. 102.

¹⁰² According to Margarita Azmitia and Joanne Hesser, 'Why Siblings are Important Agents of Cognitive Development: A Comparison of Siblings and Peers', *Child Development*, 64 (1993), 430-44.

replace parents and, as Bank and Kahn explain, ‘attach themselves to each other, especially when there is some insufficiency in their parents’.¹⁰³

Interestingly, and probably in order to provide her readership with different representations of this type of relationship, Elisa Brune illustrates a different pattern in *Blanche cassé* when it comes to the relationships between sisters by reversing this traditional pattern and having the younger sister experience things first. In *Blanche cassé*, from an early age Bénédicte, although the eldest, feels she cannot be a model for her sister because Clarisse has a very strong personality and Bénédicte considers that ‘[elle] [s]’étai[t] lourdement trompée en venant la première, [elle] étai[t] maintenant empêtrée dans la confusion de rôles’ (BC 10). Bénédicte’s ‘traditional’ view that the eldest must be the model and experience things first in life makes her feel abnormal for not conforming to it. This feeling of abnormality in the role reversal between the older and the younger sister is further enhanced at adolescence, when Clarisse experiences her first kiss before her sister, making Bénédicte realise that ‘tout sembl[ait] signifier que dorénavant [elle] serai[t] sa petite sœur’ (BC 34). Similarly, after Basile’s birth, Bénédicte says that ‘[sa] petite sœur. [...] était tellement plus loin qu’[elle] dans la vie’ (BC 121). Elisa Brune suggests that the eldest does not necessarily have to be the model and that age is subjective and unrelated to maturity. Finally, the postcard Clarisse sends to Bénédicte before dying, starting with ‘Chère petite grande sœur’ (BC 304) is the final reminder of their role reversal. This is representative of the way Clarisse relates to Bénédicte and further illustrates that Clarisse has always lived as if she were the eldest – being born prematurely and then becoming a teenage mother as if she had to catch time up and, rushing through her short life. In *La Tournante*, Céline also sees Iris as her *small big* sister (Iris is six years older). Elisa Brune suggests here that the age gap disappears in adulthood and exemplifies the strong bond that often exists between sisters. It has indeed been observed that

sisters assume a unique and important role over the entire lifespan. In childhood, sisters are likely to have a caretaking role for younger siblings. In adulthood, relationships with

¹⁰³ Stephen P. Bank and Michael D. Kahn, *The Sibling Bond* (New York: BasicBooks, 1997 [1982]), p. 28.

sisters are stronger than those with brothers. Sisters play a major role in preserving family relationships and providing emotional support to their siblings.¹⁰⁴

Another aspect found in both novels is the loyalty shown to a close sibling. The origin of sibling closeness has been studied, and according to Ross and Milgram's research,

[t]he most powerful contributor to feelings of closeness between individual siblings [is] the framework of the family in which the siblings [grow] up. The sense of belonging to the family, and of being close to particular siblings, [is], for most subjects, permanently affected by experiences shared in childhood.¹⁰⁵

In *La Tournante* the sister/brother relationship is very strong and Thomas evidently knows much more than his parents about Marion's life as he is the only one, apart from Mélissa, who knows about Marion's involvement in gang rape. He keeps her secret and his silence is a sign of loyalty which, according to Bank and Kahn, is stronger than simple solidarity as it 'goes deeper, [...] has powerful emotional accompaniments and [...] refers to [...] "the willing and practical and thoroughgoing devotion of a person to a cause [...]" [...] it also requires tangible action and sacrifice'.¹⁰⁶ Thomas and Marion's relationship is also a good illustration of the tendency studied by Lamb in which

siblings commonly become primary confidantes and sources of emotional support in pre-adolescence, and these mutually important relationships usually persist well into adolescence and young adulthood. During adolescence, when parents and children often have difficulty communicating about emotionally laden issues such as sexuality and the use of recreational drugs, and friends of both sexes prove fickle and unpredictable, siblings provide the most reliable and consistently supportive relationships.¹⁰⁷

The second part of this statement matches equally well Clarisse's situation in *Blanche cassé* with regard to her lack of communication with her parents, as previously discussed. In addition, the theme of loyalty, coupled with that of solidarity, is even more salient in *Blanche cassé* as, when in trouble (apart from financial), Clarisse always turns to Bénédicte for help, never to her parents. Bénédicte is the only one who knows about the pregnancy for example – this trust is

¹⁰⁴ Victor G. Cicirelli, 'Sibling Influence Throughout the Lifespan', in Lamb and Sutton-Smith, *Sibling Relationships*, op. cit., p. 281. Referring to Lillian E. Troll, 'The Family in Later Life: A Decade Review', *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 33 (1971), 263-90.

¹⁰⁵ Helgo G. Ross and Joel I. Milgram, 'Important Variables in Adult Sibling Relationships: A Qualitative Study', in Lamb and Sutton-Smith, *Sibling Relationships*, op. cit., p. 228.

¹⁰⁶ Stephen Bank and Michael D. Kahn, 'Intense Sibling Loyalties', in Lamb and Sutton-Smith, *Sibling Relationships*, op. cit., p. 252.

¹⁰⁷ Michael E. Lamb, 'Sibling Relationships Across the Lifespan: An Overview and Introduction', in Lamb and Sutton-Smith, *Sibling Relationships*, op. cit., p. 5.

similar to that between Thomas and Marion.¹⁰⁸ Through the two novels, by stressing the importance of the sibling relationships, Elisa Brune illustrates the fact that it can be hard to turn to parents when problems arise, further underlining the idea that communication is often easier between siblings than between parents and children. Although significant in sibling relationships, Elisa Brune does not here explore the topic of sibling rivalry or siblings that do not get on and has chosen not to deal with this aspect so far in her novels. Given the negative portrayals of parents and her own view of the institution of family, she may have wished to highlight at least one positive type of family relationship.

Furthermore, loyalty means that whatever the circumstances most siblings help one another. Thus, in her distress, Iris does not consider getting support from anybody but Céline, a reaction matching studies which say that '[c]onsiderable evidence exists that most siblings feel close affectionally and provide [...] support to each other throughout the course of their adult lives'.¹⁰⁹ It is not surprising then that Brune chooses to have the character of Céline shelter and support Iris without openly judging the situation. 'Elle ne dit pas ce qu'il faut faire ou ne pas faire, et surtout pas ce qu'il aurait fallu faire. [...] elle vaque à ses occupations mais [Iris] sai[t] qu'[elle] peu[t] tout lui demander' (LT 90). Céline and Iris's relationship confirms that Elisa Brune portrays a family dynamic whereby relationships between some brothers and sisters can be stronger and longer-lasting than marriages (just as parent-child relationships can survive divorce) and can offer a shelter that few other relationships can provide.¹¹⁰ Similarly, when in trouble, Clarisse knows Bénédicte will never openly judge her. As a matter of fact, Bénédicte ends up being 'la seule oreille qui

¹⁰⁸ Bénédicte's loyalty goes further as, well aware of Clarisse's dangerous game, she already knows that 'si Yves se dérobait, [elle] ne refuserai[t] pas [...] d'être le père de l'enfant de [sa] sœur' (BC 105) as already discussed above with regard to the recomposed family. This idea of playing the role of the father represents both the material and emotional sides of the solidarity she is ready to offer Clarisse. Indeed, the father is traditionally seen as the breadwinner, provider of material support and, since Clarisse does not work, Bénédicte would readily do so to provide them with what they need. If Bénédicte's loyalty to and solidarity with Clarisse are obvious and know no boundaries (Bénédicte '[reste] celle à qui elle n'aurait jamais besoin de mentir, qui lui tiendrait encore la main en enfer' (BC 214)), Clarisse's support for her sister seems non-existent; solidarity is a one-way system between them, even though Clarisse enables Bénédicte to play an important part in her nephew's life and to feel needed.

¹⁰⁹ Cicirelli, 'Sibling Influence', op. cit., p. 273. According to Cicirelli in the same article, '[f]eelings of closeness towards siblings have been found to persist into old age as well', p. 274.

¹¹⁰ Mary Pipher, *The Shelter of Each Other: Rebuilding our Families* (New York: Ballantine, 1996) quoted on <<http://4familytherapy.com/page5/page0/page0.html>> [accessed 23 June 2010].

[...] reliait encore [Clarisse] aux vivants’, listening to ‘[...] les secrets les plus abominables’ (BC 272). In that respect, Bénédicte has the same approach towards Clarisse as Céline has towards Iris in *La Tournante* since she does not approve of her sister’s way of life but never allows herself to make any comment. Consequently, both novels portray a relationship between siblings where criticism seems abolished, and are good representations of the research suggesting that between siblings, ‘problems [can] be shared immediately and without embarrassment, [...] common values [are] shared, and [...] they [can] count on each other for honesty and understanding’.¹¹¹

Like most siblings Iris and Céline have always kept in touch despite getting older and living different lives. They see each other

chaque fois qu[’elles peuvent se] retrouver dans une brasserie à midi. C’est ainsi entre [elles]: peu de soirées arrosées entre amis, juste [elles deux], de semaine en semaine comme des cailloux sur le chemin, comme des nœuds le long d’une corde. Jamais encore [Iris] n’avai[t] eu à chercher refuge chez elle, mais cela aurait aussi bien pu être l’inverse. (LT 90)

Sisterhood is like a long path one shares with the other even if this path runs parallel to one’s main life. Iris and Céline have a good and intimate relationship into which no one else is admitted, and by exploring sistering Elisa Brune echoes Mauthner’s view that ‘it is a widespread female tie which forms a central part of women’s experiences of family life. These experiences suggest that, from girlhood to womanhood, sistering can be supportive, and nurturing as well as beset by conflict and tensions’¹¹² (as the relationship between Clarisse and Bénédicte portrays). If Céline cannot solve Iris’s problem, her support for her sister is another illustration that

[i]n middle age, siblings are seen as a source of help in time of crisis [...], caring for children, sharing household responsibilities [...]. Most important, they provide a sense of companionship and support to each other when there is a crisis or serious family problem.¹¹³

The relationship between Céline and Iris is also a good example of the fact that ‘the sibling relationship has periods of quiescence and periods of intense activity,

¹¹¹ Bank and Kahn, ‘Intense Sibling Loyalties’, op. cit., p. 255. Emphasis in the original.

¹¹² Mauthner, *Sistering*, op. cit., p. 3.

¹¹³ Cicirelli, ‘Sibling Influence’, op. cit., p. 278, referring to Lillian E. Troll, *Early and Middle Adulthood* (Monterey: Brooks/Cole, 1975).

depending upon where individuals are in the life cycle'.¹¹⁴ So although sibling relationships are not without their problems, as visible in *Blanche cassé*, through these representations of strong sibling relationships Elisa Brune shows the potential importance of siblings in one's life and that 'siblings are, for better or worse, each other's ultimate fellow travellers. Whether their bonds are comfortable or uncomfortable, or a little of both, they are co-voyagers in a world without many enduring reference points'.¹¹⁵

To sum up, sibling relationships are significant in both novels and are exclusive relationships. Characters seem closer to their siblings than to their partners or their parents, as if these relationships were incompatible – for instance Bénédicte and boyfriend Francis separate because of Clarisse. Elisa Brune, through Bénédicte and Clarisse's painful relationship, through Thomas and Marion's closeness and through Iris and Céline's solidarity, emphasises the strength and importance of sibling bonds and how '[t]he relationship between siblings begins with birth and ends only with the death of one of the siblings. It is unique among human relationships by virtue of its very duration'.¹¹⁶ Bonds between sisters in particular appear to be the strongest and longest-lasting and the author amply illustrates this in the two novels studied, stressing that sibling relationships are as important as mothering relationships. According to Mauthner, '[l]ike mothering and daughtering, sistering is characterised by caring, power relationships and elements of friendship [...] sistering is as fundamental as mothering and daughtering in the construction of feminine subjectivity'.¹¹⁷

In this chapter we have shown how Elisa Brune's narratives, *Blanche cassé* and *La Tournante*, provide a detailed and faithful, though still partial reflection of the different family patterns found in Western societies such as France and Belgium as well as an insight into their various problems. Whilst not having used academic studies as a basis for her novels, Elisa Brune depicts a variety of behaviours and issues regularly encountered in families and extensively studied by sociology and

¹¹⁴ Bank and Kahn, *The Sibling Bond*, op. cit., p. 16.

¹¹⁵ Bank and Kahn, *The Sibling Bond*, op.cit., p. xvii.

¹¹⁶ Cicirelli, 'Sibling Influence', op. cit., p. 268.

¹¹⁷ Mauthner, *Sistering*, op. cit., p. 171.

psychology, supporting our argument that her novels mostly aim to represent some of contemporary society's features, individuals and problems. It has to be said that her portrayal of families focuses almost exclusively on their negative aspects and like other contemporary women writers, Brune can be perceived as setting out to 'anatomise the damage families inflict on their members'.¹¹⁸ Family is indeed a painful subject for the author herself who, as already indicated, 'a toujours eu l'impression que la famille était une horrible blague, une bande d'imposteurs essayant de vous faire croire que vous n'êtes pas tout seul.'¹¹⁹ Although there is no outright judgement, Brune's view is clear and these two novels can be understood as a criticism of the concept of family that Elisa Brune considers to be a mirage. Tellingly Brune has not recreated her own family in her novels and, despite her refusal of autobiography per se, she is apparently being influenced by her own experience. Thus, the pessimistic portrait she paints of family in both books is certainly as much influenced by her own vision as by her desire to give a plausible account of the various situations and real stories she has chosen to fictionalise. However biased her views may be, in tackling some common issues encountered by many families, Brune is effectively 'holding up a mirror to nature'¹²⁰ for, as Eliacheff and Heinich say, 'la fiction a le pouvoir de révéler, comme sous un verre grossissant, la logique profonde des situations'.¹²¹ In so doing, her work may trigger reflection for the reader or lead to change, for as she puts it herself, in her books, '[elle] s'empare de ces souffrances, dans l'espoir peut-être de leur tordre le cou.'¹²² Once again though, her partial (in both senses of the word) portrayals are reflections of genuine difficulties encountered by families and the individuals who compose them.

In addition, the families portrayed by Elisa Brune in the two novels are good illustrations of how individuals are raised to conform to society's norms and how those not conforming are perceived. Her characters also provide a good insight into the different kinds of relationships within a family and how they can impact on one another. Furthermore, their stories exemplify both norms and deviances whilst giving

¹¹⁸ Jordan, *Contemporary French Women's Writing*, op. cit., p. 49.

¹¹⁹ Brune, *L'écrivain et la blessure*, op. cit.

¹²⁰ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III. 2. 21-22 (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969 [1603]), p. 65.

¹²¹ Eliacheff and Heinich, *Mères-Filles*, op. cit., p. 49.

¹²² Brune, *L'écrivain et la blessure*, op. cit.

the reader some idea of the changes in mores and parenting styles that have occurred over recent generations, each wishing to do better than and differently from the one before them. Just like those of Marie N'Diaye or Catherine Cusset, Brune's novels 'sont parfois très cruels à cet égard, et aiment à mettre en évidence les nœuds de perversités qui animent les relations familiales'.¹²³ Brune's use of clichés and stereotypes underlining how people tend to judge others in society, although not always critical, enables her to give her readership a closely observed portrait of what family is (or can be) at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century, and also gives her the opportunity to show that things have evolved and are still evolving between different generations who do not share the same opinions.

To sum up, Elisa Brune is very much aware that family remains a cornerstone of society but it seems that her vision, in the two novels, also matches that of Beck and Beck-Gersheim who argue in *The Normal Chaos of Love* that society has become focused on the individual and his/her lifestyle choices, so that

it is no longer possible to pronounce in some binding way what family, marriage, parenthood, sexuality or love mean, what they should be or could be; rather they vary in substance, expectations, norms and morality from individual to individual and from relationship to relationship.¹²⁴

If family sometimes fails to socialise individuals, education remains another institution through which society attempts to do so and which has undergone major evolution throughout the 20th century, especially as far as women are concerned, as we will now discuss.

¹²³ Viart and Vercier, *La littérature française au présent*, op. cit., p. 232. See for example Marie N'Diaye, *Rosie Carpe* (Paris: Minuit, 2001); Catherine Cusset, *La Haine de la famille* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001). Interestingly, both these novels were published in 2001 like *La Tournante*, and just a year after *Blanche cassé*.

¹²⁴ Beck and Beck-Gersheim, *The Normal Chaos of Love*, op. cit., p. 5.

Chapter 4

Women, Education and Work

Having addressed the theme of family and its function of reproducing societal patterns through children's upbringing, it makes sense to now turn our attention to the theme of education since, as stressed in *Nouvelles Questions Féministes*, 'les institutions scolaires et de formation prennent activement part, notamment avec la famille et la culture, à la construction d'individus répondant aux rôles sexués traditionnels'.¹ It is a theme which can be found in several of Brune's novels, and through which she represents a more historical aspect of society. Women are the main characters in *Blanche cassé* and *La Tournante* and figure amongst the main characters in *Relations d'incertitude*, in which Elisa Brune deals – among more prominent themes – with education and how it shapes women's lives.

In these novels, Elisa Brune represents three generations of women with different experiences and perceptions of education, due to the social context in which they live. In this chapter, we aim to show how, through the women of the narratives and their educational trajectories, Elisa Brune reflects the evolution of the history of women's access to education in France and Belgium from the beginning of the 20th century onwards.² The use of historical context and details about women and education will help to demonstrate that Elisa Brune is credibly portraying another aspect of society. The setting of the novels is either France or Belgium and given Elisa Brune's own experiences and influences, our historical overview will concentrate on the history of education in these two countries.

In France, prior to and up until the middle of the 19th century, it was not thought necessary to educate women – 'la question qui se posait [était]: faut-il éduquer les filles et si oui, pourquoi?'³ Although some evolution slowly took place at this time (mainly among the upper classes), the objective remained primarily to

¹ Farinaz Fassa, Helene Fueger, Nadia Lamamra, Martine Chaponnière and Edmée Ollagnier, 'Education et formation: enjeux de genres', *Nouvelles Questions Féministes*, 29, 2 (2010), 4-16 (p. 4).

² If we consider the three generations of women we are interested in, we know that Rachel in *Relations d'incertitude* was born in 1910 (RI 343) and can deduce that the grandmother in *La Tournante* was probably born in the 1930s. The 'mother', Iris and Céline were probably born in the 1950s or 1960s. As for Marion, Clarisse and Bénédicte they are likely to belong to the 1980s' generation, probably the latter part of it.

³ Corinne Chaponnière and Martine Chaponnière, *La mixité des hommes et des femmes* (Gollion: Infolio éditions, 2006), p. 73.

prepare girls ‘à leur fonction d’épouse et de mère’.⁴ By 1867, women were still only to be educated to become ‘les compagnes intellectuelles de leur mari’⁵ and this remained the main aim of girls’ education despite several laws being passed. Thus, by the end of the 19th century, and in spite of the law which made the French public education system free, compulsory and secular in 1882, nothing much had changed, since women, although more educated, still ended up ‘sous la dépendance de leur mari’.⁶

The situation and views regarding women’s education were quite similar in Belgium at that time despite figures such as Zoé Gatti de Gamond (1806-1854) and her daughter Isabelle (1839-1905),⁷ who fought for girls’ education and created several schools for them,⁸ or the Brussels’ ‘Conseil central de salubrité publique’ which declared itself in favour of compulsory education in 1842.⁹ In 1850 the state created and financed primary schools for boys but provided nothing for girls, whose education relied on religious bodies or private schools. Nevertheless, whatever their social origins, all Belgian girls, like their French counterparts, were prepared for their ‘missions domestiques’.¹⁰ At the time, although a law did grant women access to university in 1876, until 1884 no course prepared them for higher education.¹¹ As in France, feminists – Victoire Cappe amongst others – defended the idea that education was essential if women were to become autonomous. From the beginning of the 20th century, famous figures such as Marie Parent were already in favour of co-

⁴ Michelle Zancarini-Fournel, *Histoire des femmes en France: XIX^e et XX^e siècles* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2005), p. 100.

⁵ According to Jules Simon, philosopher and future minister of ‘Instruction publique’, in a speech in 1867 quoted in Thierry Blöss and Alain Frickey, *La Femme dans la société française* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1994), p. 27.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁷ Van Rokeghem et al., *Des Femmes dans l’Histoire en Belgique*, op. cit., pp. 14, 30. Zoé Gatti de Gamond was already amongst those convinced that equality for women could only be achieved if they reached the same level of development as men. She also created a ‘newspaper’ entitled *L’éducation de la femme* in 1862. See Marie-Thérèse Coenen, *De l’égalité à la parité. Le difficile accès des femmes à la citoyenneté* (Brussels: Labor, 1999), p. 26. For more information on Zoé and Isabelle Gatti de Gamond see Eliane Gubin and Valérie Piette, *Isabelle Gatti de Gamond (1839-1905): la passion d’enseigner* (Brussels: GIEF/ULB, 2004).

⁸ The first ‘école laïque moyenne’ for girls was opened in 1864. See Dominique Grootraers (ed.), *Histoire de l’enseignement en Belgique* (Brussels: CRISP, 1998), p. 395.

⁹ Van Rokeghem et al., *Des Femmes dans l’Histoire en Belgique*, op. cit., p. 16.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 32. See also Grootraers, *Histoire de l’enseignement en Belgique*, op. cit., pp. 397-98.

¹¹ The University of Brussels opened its doors to women in 1880, followed in 1882 by the University of Liège – which enrolled the first female student in Pharmacy – and the University of Gand in 1883 according to Coenen, *De l’égalité à la parité*, op. cit., p. 28.

education¹² and others such as Marthe Boël fought for right of entry to higher education so women could gain access to all types of work and be paid the same as men.¹³

In order to show how Elisa Brune manages to provide her readership with an overview of the history of women's access to education and employment in France and Belgium throughout the 20th century, we will analyse the situation of the various female characters depicted by Brune in her narratives. Our study will be chronological, starting with the eldest generation of women, before analysing the situation of mature women and finally that of the youngest generation found in four of Brune's novels.

The grandmother and Rachel

The eldest women in Brune's work are found in *La Tournante*, in which Marion's grandmother gives her views a few times in the narrative, and in *Relations d'incertitude*, in which Edgar/d gives details about his mother Rachel and her unconventional life. Despite very different trajectories, these two characters convey the same type of views regarding the importance of education. Although not central to either narrative, Rachel and the grandmother are worth commenting upon as, put in perspective with the other younger female characters from the novels, they provide the reader with two very different examples of women's education. The character of the grandmother, whose name we do not know, reinforcing the limitations of her role, exemplifies the case of many women born during the first half of the 20th century who followed the moral customs, rules and demands of patriarchal society, while Rachel illustrates a more unconventional trajectory in terms of education and choices for her life.

¹² For more details on co-education see Corinne and Martine Chaponnière, *La mixité*, op. cit., pp. 73-95.

¹³ For more details about the history of education in Belgium see Grootraers, *Histoire de l'enseignement en Belgique*, op. cit., and Van Rokeghem et al., *Des Femmes dans l'Histoire en Belgique*, op. cit., pp. 12-89. While aware of the conflicts between 'catholiques et laïques' we will not address the issue of education and the churches in Belgium since Brune is not interested in this topic and seldom mentions it in her work. Moreover, it is not clear which system – 'officiel' or 'libre' – the characters in the novels were educated in and therefore we cannot prove their choices have been influenced by one or the other. For more information about the two systems see Grootaers, *Histoire de l'enseignement en Belgique*, op. cit., pp. 463-535.

Through these two protagonists and their very different lives, Brune is representing the first half of the 20th century, when access to education for girls was still poor. In France, on the eve of the First World War, 35,000 girls were attending secondary school compared with 69,200 boys. Girls and boys studied the same subjects but inequalities remained. By 1930 there were 50,000 girls compared with 100,000 boys in secondary schools and this difference only decreased significantly after the Second World War.¹⁴ In Belgium, school programmes for children aged 12-14 from 1922 offered three options for boys (agriculture, industry or business) but only one for girls: ‘l’orientation ménagère’.¹⁵ In France, the ‘public *Lycées* did not prepare their female students for the *baccalauréat* until 1924 – and at all levels of education gender stereotypes continued’.¹⁶ Even between the two World Wars, women were still considered as ‘reine[s] du foyer’ and education was thought to prepare them for their natural destiny.¹⁷ In short, expectations regarding academic performance for girls were quite low as they were not meant to be independent or qualified to work. As Christine Bard puts it, ‘elles sont préparées dès l’enfance à privilégier les relations familiales’¹⁸ and the character of the grandmother from *La Tournante* embodies this well. Although she is depicted as regretting it in a way, she explains she stopped everything (work and leisure activities) when she married, in order to dedicate herself entirely to her family. Thus, in the novel, she talks about the choices she had to make as a young woman:

[Marion] m’interrogeait souvent aussi sur ma vie de jeune fille et de jeune femme, me demandait pourquoi j’avais arrêté de travailler, arrêté de suivre des cours de chant, si je ferais encore la même chose aujourd’hui. [...]. Elle n’imagine pas vraiment les regrets qui peuvent se cacher derrière une bonne humeur de grand-mère [...]. D’ailleurs, je ne regrette aucune des minutes que j’ai consacrées à ma famille. Mais j’aurais voulu en avoir d’autres, tout simplement. Je n’assomme pas Marion avec tout ça. J’explique que, à mon époque, il fallait choisir, nécessairement. (LT 162-63)

¹⁴ Figures from Zancarini-Fournel, *Histoire des femmes en France*, op. cit., p. 106.

¹⁵ Eliane Gubin, Leen Van Molle and An Lavens (eds.), *Garçon ou fille...un destin pour la vie? Belgique, 1830-2000* (Brussels: AVG-CARHIF, 2009), p. 42.

¹⁶ Rebecca Rogers, ‘Learning to be good girls and women: Education, training and schools’ in Deborah Simonton (ed.), *The Routledge History of Women in Europe since 1700* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), pp. 93-133 (p. 117). For more details on women’s access to the *baccalauréat* see Évelyne Héry, ‘Quand le baccalauréat devient mixte’, *Clio*, 18 (2003), 70-90.

¹⁷ Christine Bard, *Les Femmes dans la société française au 20^e siècle* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2003), p. 34.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

Although she did choose in a way, this comment is telling as far as the situation of the women from the same generation as the grandmother goes. The social expectation is reinforced in the last sentence by the use of ‘il fallait choisir’ and of the adverb ‘nécessairement’ in apposition at the end. The grandmother can be perceived both as a mouthpiece for and a stereotype of women for whom, typically, getting married was synonymous with the end of their studies, leisure and employment when possible, in order to fully dedicate themselves to having children, bringing them up and doing the housework. It would appear that her role in procreation precluded any further study, as if the two were not compatible; it also stresses that choices had to be made at that time, reinforcing the view society had of the incompatibility between career and family.¹⁹ It is likely the grandmother married around the time of the Depression, during which women were strongly encouraged not to work in order to limit unemployment amongst men. This is of course on top of the traditional view amongst the middle classes that a woman should not work if at all possible.²⁰

The grandmother obviously seems to suffer from having had to make choices since she uses the word ‘regrets’ and thus expresses a certain feeling of loss that may be shared by women of her generation who would have liked to take their education further or carry on working but were not able to do so because of patriarchal traditions and pressures that required them to be good housewives and mothers. The fact that financial necessity is not mentioned as a reason for the grandmother to carry on working would suggest she belongs at least to the middle/upper middle class. Obviously, women from the lower classes always worked and had no other choice, which reinforces the fact that, in this instance again, Elisa Brune’s characters mostly

¹⁹ We do not know the type of paid work the grandmother had before getting married but what she says confirms the historical trend. According to statistics, 77% of women born between 1917 and 1924 worked before the age of 35; 81% of working-class women and 69% of upper/middle-class women were in paid employment. This increased access to work is both a consequence of women getting access to secondary and sometimes higher education and other – often economic – circumstances including necessity, such the disappearance of the dowry. Bard, *Les Femmes dans la société française au 20^e siècle*, op. cit., p. 75.

²⁰ As in France, in Belgium, from the mid-1920s, some feminist movements and Christian groups, such as *Le mouvement ouvrier chrétien*, were also increasingly opposed to women working and in 1934, a law aimed at limiting the number of married women allowed to work in industries was even passed, as explained in Denise Keymolen and Marie-Thérèse Coenen, *Pas à pas, l’histoire de l’émancipation de la femme en Belgique* (Brussels: Cabinet du secrétaire d’Etat à l’Emancipation sociale, 1991), pp. 64, 68.

reflect a white middle/upper class background. Brune illustrates here how the traditional pattern pushed women to become educators and models without having been given the opportunity to complete or polish their own education.²¹ It was not considered appropriate for women to carry on working after they got married as a woman going out to work was associated with the idea that the husband did not earn enough to provide alone for his family's needs – a view shared by women as well as men.

Nevertheless the point of view conveyed by the grandmother in the novel corresponds to Lindsay German's assessment of marriage as the end of freedom for women: 'at marriage, the wife gives into control of her husband both her labour power and her capacity to procreate in exchange for subsistence for a definite period, for life'.²² Yet the grandmother still got married and agreed at the time to cease all her other activities, as it was the 'normal' thing to do for a middle-class woman at the time, and only with time and changes in women's status is she now able to analyse her situation differently. Brune here stresses another historical reality: being single for a woman at that time – and still sometimes nowadays as will be explored below – was seen as abnormal, further encouraging women to follow social expectation in entering the institution of marriage. This has also been commented upon by Louise Weiss, the famous journalist, who explained that when she got married in 1934 things became much easier for her since 'la société de l'époque ne tolérait pas les femmes seules'.²³ This negative view of single women is also conveyed in the novel by the grandfather who does not like his daughter Céline still being single and exemplifies the fact that from this generation, 'rares sont les parents qui parviennent à considérer leur fille célibataire et seule, même parfaitement autonome, comme une

²¹ Beauvoir also highlighted this issue in *Le Deuxième sexe*: 'Il y a une quantité de femmes à qui les mœurs, la tradition refusent encore l'éducation [...] les activités qui sont le privilège des hommes et à qui, cependant, on met sans scrupule des enfants dans les bras [...] on les empêche de vivre; par compensation, on leur permet de jouer avec des jouets de chair et d'os.' Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième sexe*, op. cit., II, p. 382.

²² Lindsay German, 'Sex, Class and Socialism', in Stevi Jackson et al., *Women's Studies: A Reader* (London: Pearson Education Limited, 1993), p. 144.

²³ Louise Weiss quoted in Christine Bard, *Les Femmes dans la société française au 20^e siècle*, op. cit., p. 39. This is also stressed by Erika Flahault who explains that at the time 'le sort des femmes seules est malheureux, non parce qu'elles sont exclues du mariage, regardé comme seule situation compatible avec leur nature féminine, mais bien parce que la société dans son ensemble et l'éducation qu'elles ont reçue les excluent de la vie sociale'. Erika Flahault, *Une vie à soi: Nouvelles formes de solitudes au féminin* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2009), p. 60.

adulte à part entière'.²⁴ This shows that even nowadays single women or women living alone are still at risk of being perceived by some as strange exceptions, a point which will be developed in our next part.

In short, through this brief portrayal of the grandmother in *La Tournante*, Elisa Brune epitomises the traditional trajectory of some French women at that time. Rachel's path and education are contrasted in comparison and this gives Brune the opportunity to illustrate the case of a woman from the same generation but with a totally different direction.

Rachel's journey is indeed totally at odds with the one analysed above since, in her case, education and learning are lifelong. Even though Elisa Brune did not primarily choose to portray the education and career of Rachel, she had to include biographical details about Edgar/d Gunzig's mother in *Relations d'incertitude*, which enabled her to provide her reader with another example of women's educational and professional trajectory from the same era as the grandmother. The details related to Rachel's life can therefore only reinforce the verisimilitude of the narrative since she is a real person, as discussed in chapter 2.²⁵

According to the details provided by Edgar/d in the novel, Rachel did not have many opportunities to receive what we may call a conventional education but nonetheless regularly learned new skills and is characterised as 'une intellectuelle, cultivée et réfléchie' (RI 475). Although the action of the book is set in Belgium, Rachel was born in Poland in 1910 (RI 343) and was thus first educated in that country. During her childhood in Poland 'l'école, qui n'était pas obligatoire, se donnait soit en russe soit en polonais' and 'tous les partis politiques étaient interdits' (RI 343). Rachel is said to discover political organisations – in which she will take an active role throughout her life – at the age of thirteen or fourteen. Her participation in various political battles can also be considered as part of her education and development since most of her choices in life are politically motivated. So with

²⁴ Flahault, *ibid.*, p. 12.

²⁵ Elisa Brune explains that 'pour Edgar/d [...] il fallait que ce soit sa vie à lui donc là tout est vrai, en tout cas dans les faits', in my unpublished interview with Elisa Brune on 27 August 2007. Appendix B, p. 259. As already noted in chapter 2, Brune said to Lise Thiry, 'tout ce qui se rapporte au passé d'Edgar, de Rachel, de Jacques, de Diane, est rigoureusement vrai...pour autant que ce qu'Edgar m'a raconté soit vrai!', in Thiry and Brune, 'Les incertitudes du roman', *op. cit.*, p. 17.

Rachel, Elisa Brune provides the reader with a glimpse of Polish history and maybe too with the reason why Rachel, as a woman, has been so eager to learn throughout her life. Indeed, in Poland,

access to education was considered to be the most important issue for women activists [...] in the nineteenth century as well as during the period between the two world wars in the twentieth century. They fought for and gained entry for women into first primary and secondary, and later higher, education.²⁶

Rachel's trajectory then takes her to Belgium when she fled Poland's 'misère et [...] antisémitisme, virulent' (RI 343) with her family in the 1920s.²⁷ By the time she arrived in Belgium in 1927, she was already too old to attend school which at the time was only compulsory till the age of fourteen.²⁸ As a consequence, upon her arrival in Belgium – at a time of massive Polish emigration to France and Belgium – Rachel has to work and 'obtient un emploi comme ouvrière dans une usine de cigarettes' (RI 344). This first experience of employment however, only makes her more eager to get involved in politics since 'la vie de la classe prolétarienne ne fait que renforcer ses convictions: elle est sûre [...] que son avenir se trouve dans la lutte sociale' (RI 344). It is worth noting here that Rachel's political views were probably fuelled then by the fact that political and union activities were intense at the time.²⁹ However, Rachel also has other 'ambitions [et] [...] ne veut pas rester toute sa vie ouvrière exploitée. Elle rêve en secret d'étudier la médecine mais ses parents n'ont pas les moyens d'un tel investissement' (RI 344). In this sense, Rachel is symbolic of those women who are intelligent and highly motivated to study but are often prevented from doing so by prejudice or lack of money. Although brought up in a traditional Jewish family – 'le père aussi pieux que la mère est généreuse, ils ne reconnaissent rien de leur éducation mesurée dans cette fille fouguese et entière' (RI 345) – Rachel clearly does not follow the orthodox Jewish religious principles according to which '[w]omen are discouraged from pursuing higher education or

²⁶ Jill M. Bystydzienski, 'Poland', in Lynn Walter (ed.), *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Women's Issues Worldwide: Europe* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2003), pp. 481-510 (p. 482).

²⁷ 'In 1921 Poland's highly diverse Jewish population numbered about 2.2 million, of whom well over four-fifths used Yiddish as their mother tongue. [...] the anti-Semitism [...] only increased among many young Jews the attraction of communism and Zionism'. Jerzy Lukowski and Hubert Zawadzki, *A Concise History of Poland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 205-08. This is reflected in Rachel's life for by the age of fourteen she was already in touch with Socialist and Zionist organisations in Poland (RI 343).

²⁸ Van Rokeghem et al., *Des Femmes dans l'Histoire en Belgique*, op. cit., p. 113.

²⁹ According to Van Rokeghem et al., *ibid.*, p. 135.

religious pursuits, but this seems to be primarily because women who engage in such pursuits might neglect their primary duties as wives and mothers'.³⁰ As a matter of fact, Rachel could be perceived as a good example of those women despised by many at the time because, according to *Le Soir*, '[elles] se mue[nt] en "intellectuelles", mépris[ant] les "humbles tâches domestiques" et concurren[çant] les garçons sur le marché du travail'.³¹ This is therefore another effective illustration of the perception of women who, contrary to the grandmother in *La Tournante*, did not follow social expectations.

When Rachel finally got access to higher education, she chose to study Pharmacy rather than Medicine as it is a shorter course (RI 350). This is borne out by what we know about historical developments, since in Belgium, 'depuis 1890, les femmes ne peuvent exercer que la médecine et la pharmacie: elles se dirigent donc en majorité vers ces études'.³² She came first in her year, demonstrating at the same time her ambition, ability and her hard work but stereotypically, she may well have been perceived at the time as being like other successful female students, that is to say as 'hard working' and 'careful'³³ rather than naturally gifted, a stereotype that is still encountered by some female students nowadays. So despite Rachel's trajectory being mainly unconventional, she appears to have fitted into some educational trends at the time. Later on in life, Rachel perfectly masters no less than eight foreign languages learnt during her numerous travels and political battles. She speaks

le polonais et le yiddish, les langues de son enfance, le russe et l'allemand, appris à l'école, le français, langue de ses études en Belgique, l'hébreu, appris en Palestine, et l'espagnol, acquis à la guerre. [...] Et l'anglais s'y ajouta par la suite. (RI 368)

This emphasises once more Rachel's intellectual abilities and contradicts further the stereotype that women are intellectually inferior to men. This quotation also highlights the fact that Rachel, probably unlike many women at that time, travelled a

³⁰ Tracey Rich, 'The Role of Women', *Judaism 101* <<http://www.jewfaq.org/women.htm>> [accessed 16 December 2009].

³¹ *Le Soir*, 6 September 1932, quoted in Eliane Gubin et al., *Garçon ou fille*, op. cit., p. 44. In 1931, a bill suggested that education should become compulsory until 16, with two years for girls during which they would only study 'économie domestique', *ibid.*, p. 45.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 52. It is interesting to note that, in France, when universities opened their doors to women, it was initially mainly women from eastern European countries such as Russia, Poland and Romania who enrolled. The same phenomenon is likely to have taken place in Belgium, coinciding with Rachel's educational trajectory. See Zancarini-Fournel, *Histoire des femmes en France*, op. cit., p. 108.

³³ Jane Prince, 'Women, Education and Work', in Jackson et al., *Women's Studies*, op. cit., p. 135.

lot, and it is worth stressing that if she was able to benefit from a lifelong education in a sense, it was because, while being married – three times but twice for convenience – she never really lived with a man, leaving her more freedom to accomplish what(ever) she wanted.³⁴ This, as in the case of the grandmother, actually reinforces the idea that marriage brings restrictions to women’s lives except if they manage to live differently. In addition, her circumstances as a Jewish widow mean that Rachel is ‘indépendante de tout pouvoir masculin, capable de contrôler sa propriété et son travail’,³⁵ which may explain why she managed to keep so much freedom throughout her life.

Nevertheless, despite her intelligence, Rachel appears to be ‘une femme modeste’ as expected from a woman and as will be explored further in the next chapter. Furthermore, in contrast with her personal life which she led as she wished, throughout her lifelong devotion to the Communist party we are told that, ‘loin de conduire la révolution elle se contentait d’obéir aux ordres, d’exécuter des missions, de remplir le rôle qu’on attendait d’elle. [...] Rachel était une cheville ouvrière. [...] Rachel avait obéi, obéi et encore obéi’ (RI 338-39). While at odds with her personality, this behaviour corresponds not only to the female stereotype of women being expected to do as they are told but also reflects the reality of women being relegated to ‘les tâches subalternes: pendant que les hommes monopolisent la parole et le pouvoir décisionnel’ when it comes to politics and power.³⁶ With this example, Elisa Brune illustrates how, despite qualities and abilities, women are often kept in the ranks of those who execute orders and do not figure amongst those who decide. Whether housewives or involved in professional and political life, women are given a precise role they must not stray away from. Indeed, when women had to work at that time, they were pushed towards jobs associated with

la ‘nature’ féminine. Enseigner, soigner, assister, tels sont d’abord les rôles dévolus à la mère de famille. Les formations qui y conduisent pourront mener à l’exercice d’une profession socialement considérée ou être utilisées dans le cadre domestique. Exaltant des vertus socialement construites comme féminines, véritable ‘maternité symbolique’,

³⁴ Her husband, Jacques, was a Jewish Communist resistant who was often abroad. He was arrested by the Germans during the Second World War and was executed in Mauthausen in 1942 (RI 39, 185 and 405), as already touched upon in chapter 2.

³⁵ Pauline Bebe, *Isha: Dictionnaire des femmes et du judaïsme* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2001), p. 405.

³⁶ Julie De Dardel, *Révolution sexuelle et Mouvement de Libération des Femmes à Genève (1970-1977)* (Lausanne: Antipodes, 2007), p. 46.

ces fonctions consacrent l'existence d'un univers féminin à part et contribuent à délimiter les domaines légitimes de la professionnalisation des femmes.³⁷

Rachel's roles within the Communist party throughout her life as a chemist during the Spanish Civil War (RI 355), person in charge of getting the food supply and mail from the nearby village during her time in a refugee camp (RI 369) or selling clothes and accessories from the American army to finance the Communist Party (RI 404) confirm this trend.

These two women, with such different destinies in terms of education, do not seem to be fulfilled by their situation in the end; in the case of the grandmother because she had to sacrifice her 'previous life' to a family and in the case of Rachel because despite freedom and education she never managed to settle completely and establish a more conventional life for herself and her son.³⁸ There is however no further indication of the extent to which both characters suffer from the choices they made.³⁹ The two narratives therefore provide the reader with two very different trajectories, reflecting what happened to women historically, with on the one hand the grandmother epitomising the traditional experience of most women until the middle of the 20th century, for whom getting married implied not only changing status but also entering a role, in most cases, very much restricted to the domestic sphere. On the other hand, Rachel's trajectory is clearly unconventional given the freedom she benefited from at the time and the fact that she escaped a traditional female destiny in a way. However, it remains nonetheless more or less stereotypical in terms of the choices she made with regard to her higher education and the typically female, subordinate roles she was given in the different causes she got involved in. Thus, in these two accounts, Elisa Brune describes two female figures from the first part of the 20th century through which the reader can obtain some

³⁷ Françoise Battagliola, *Histoire du travail des femmes* (Paris: La Découverte, 2008 [2000]), p. 66. Erika Flahault also develops a similar argument in *Une vie à soi*, op. cit.

³⁸ Rachel's political views and way of life – torn between motherhood and politics – are similar to those of Isabelle Blume and Alice Degeer-Adère who were both actively involved in the Socialist/Communist parties and participated against fascism in Europe – notably in Spain like Rachel from 1937 in the 'brigades communistes' (RI 188). For more information see Van Rokeghem et al., *Des Femmes dans l'Histoire en Belgique*, op. cit., pp. 135, 137. This allows us here again to show that the grandmother epitomises the most conventional trend and it also demonstrates that Rachel's case, although rare, was not unique.

³⁹ We know that Rachel never showed her feelings to her family even when suffering. However, according to her son, 'elle devait souffrir, car je me souviens des cris atroces qu'elle poussait la nuit, quand elle était en proie à un cauchemar' (RI 189).

information about the education women received and/or their reaction to it as well as the choices that were available to them at the time, choices that were different from the ones the next generation of women had, as we will now demonstrate.

Mature women

Mature women are represented by Céline and Iris in *La Tournante* and by the ‘mother’ in *Blanche cassé* through whom Elisa Brune exemplifies three typical situations for women with regard to career and family. These three characters also illustrate the educational trends of the 1960s and 1970s. They were part of what was called in France the ‘explosion scolaire’ from the 1950s’ baby boom, when attending school in France and Belgium became ‘un phénomène de masse’ with figures going from one million in 1950 to three million pupils attending French secondary schools in 1960.⁴⁰ In 1971 girls were more numerous than boys in secondary education and, according to statistics, outnumbered boys in universities from 1975 in France. In Belgium, according to the statistics of the Secrétariat d’Etat à l’Emancipation Sociale, the percentage of 20-year-old Belgian women still in education – and therefore very likely in higher education – increased from 6.88% in 1960 to 12.96% in 1970 and 27.04% in 1980; the figures for 23-year-old women increased from 1.08% in 1960 to 2.09% in 1970 and 4.44% in 1980.⁴¹ During this era, also known in France as the ‘Trente Glorieuses’ (1945-1973), there was a strong belief in education as a factor of ‘mobilité sociale’ especially for girls and members of the working class.⁴² However, many sources also stress that ‘la féminisation de l’enseignement est d’abord passée par les couches supérieures’,⁴³ allowing us to deduce (along with the jobs they do) that the three women from *La Tournante* and *Blanche cassé* are probably from at least a middle-class background.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Blöss and Frickey, *La Femme dans la société française*, op. cit., pp. 46-47.

⁴¹ For France, see the statistics in Christian Baudelot and Roger Establet, *Allez les filles!* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), p. 12. Figures for Belgium from Ouardia Derriche et al., *L’école au féminin* (Brussels: Université des Femmes, 1991), p. 7.

⁴² According to Zancarini-Fournel, *Histoire des femmes en France*, op. cit., p. 110. This belief is reflected in the discourse of the ‘mother’ in *Blanche cassé* when trying to convince Clarisse of the importance of education and diplomas (BC 56-57), as we will show in the next part.

⁴³ Blöss and Frickey, *La Femme dans la société française*, op. cit., p. 50. See also John Bartier, ‘Un siècle d’enseignement féminin. Le lycée royal Gatti de Gamond et sa fondatrice’, in Guy Cambier (ed.), *Laïcité et franc-maçonnerie* (Brussels: ULB, 1981), pp. 162-65.

⁴⁴ In the case of Iris and Céline, the fact that their father was educated enough to be able to teach them Greek would also suggest he came from a rather well-off family.

As would have been the case, the three female characters had more options than their mothers when it came to their careers because they had more choices in terms of education. According to Amy Wharton, from the beginning of the 1970s ‘women’s entrance into the professions was made possible in part by legal challenges to sex discrimination in education’ but also thanks to a ‘changing cultural milieu and its growing support for women’s education and employment’.⁴⁵ However, if coeducational schools (from 1963 in France and 1970 in Belgium) were theoretically supposed to allow girls to finally reach equality in terms of education, with equal access to qualifications, in reality, according to most sources, through the 1980s, ‘il y a persistance des inégalités sexuées dans les orientations et les formations [...] La progression de la scolarisation des filles n’a pas effacé les inégalités entre hommes et femmes, filles et garçons, y compris à l’école’,⁴⁶ as the gender division in the choice of speciality for the Baccalaureate in France or the CESS (Certificat d’Enseignement Secondaire Supérieur) in Belgium and subjects at university shows. The reasons behind these choices are varied (male domination in the working environment, awareness of competition and refusal to over-invest in a career) but it seems that in the 1980s the influence of gendered stereotypes was still very strong and ‘[relevait] autant des familles que de l’école’.⁴⁷

As a result, Brune’s choice of studies and career for her female characters in the two narratives is credible. All three women went to university and their chosen courses – philosophy (reputedly a difficult subject), languages and psychology – suggest they chose stereotypical female subjects (with the possible exception of philosophy), emphasising again, as already noted, the fact that a minority of women choose scientific studies. Indeed women are statistically more numerous in the study of humanities (‘disciplines littéraires’) and ‘dans toutes les universités européennes, les femmes prédominent dans les sections de langues, de lettres, de pédagogie, de psychologie, alors que les sciences et les mathématiques restent l’apanage des

⁴⁵ Amy S. Wharton, *The Sociology of Gender: An Introduction to Theory and Research* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p. 92.

⁴⁶ Zancarini-Fournel, *Histoire des femmes en France*, op. cit., p. 110. In Belgium in 1979 and 1980 ‘deux commissions pour l’égalité des chances entre filles et garçons dans l’enseignement sont créées au sein des ministères francophone et néerlandophone de l’éducation nationale’ and in 1985, the position of ‘secrétaire d’état à l’émancipation sociale’ was created, aiming to ‘assurer l’accompagnement et l’intégration normale et équilibrée des femmes dans la société’ according to Keymolen and Coenen, *Pas à pas*, op. cit., pp. 106, 121.

⁴⁷ Zancarini-Fournel, *Histoire des femmes en France*, op. cit., p. 111.

hommes'.⁴⁸ For instance, in 1987-1988, girls chose 'lettres, langues et sciences humaines, [...] les écoles artistiques (59%), les carrières sociales (74%) et sanitaires (85%)',⁴⁹ showing clearly that academic achievement was still 'gendered'. It also appears that women, like those of the previous generation who worked, 'occupent des positions très concentrées dans certains emplois et certaines branches' and that

[...] l'influence du milieu familial d'origine sur l'insertion professionnelle des jeunes femmes [...] s'évalue également par la prise en compte de l'éducation reçue au sein de la famille. Un ensemble d'études ont souligné que ce qui se joue à travers l'éducation spécifique donnée aux enfants, selon qu'ils sont filles ou garçons, ce sont deux rapports à l'avenir bien différenciés qui renvoient à des places et des fonctions bien particulières pour les hommes et les femmes. [Les filles] étant plutôt préposées à assurer l'avenir démographique de la famille, ceci par le mariage plus que par une activité économique.⁵⁰

This quotation highlights the importance of family influence and upbringing in the choices made in the field of education, reinforcing the link between the two institutions in socialising and gendering individuals. To a certain extent this comment also suggests that Shulamith Firestone's thesis that 'the cultural institutions [...] maintain and reinforce the biological family (especially [...] the nuclear family)'⁵¹ was still valid in the 1980s.

While belonging to the same generation, these three women nonetheless express different views of education and thus give Brune the opportunity to illustrate different recognisable and credible patterns in terms of choice between career and family. Thus, if Iris and Céline have more choices than their mother, they react differently to the strict education and upbringing they received, in particular from their father. Céline, while taking the opportunity to study for a PhD, rebels against her parents' attempts to influence her private life while Iris submits to them. Céline thus exemplifies the generation of women who 'revendique le droit [...] de préférer la carrière professionnelle à la carrière familiale'.⁵² Despite the evolution of mentalities, educated women like Céline remain at the same time admired and

⁴⁸ Rose-Marie Lagrave, 'Explosion scolaire et désillusion sociale', in Duby and Perrot, *Histoire des Femmes en Occident*, op. cit., v, pp. 601-06 (p. 602).

⁴⁹ Bard, *Les Femmes dans la société française au 20^e siècle*, op. cit., p. 240.

⁵⁰ Blöss and Frickey, *La Femme dans la société française*, op. cit., pp. 76-77.

⁵¹ Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971), p.14.

⁵² Flahault, *Une vie à soi*, op. cit., p. 67. Céline can also be seen as a good example of women who, 'sans repousser avec dégoût la maternité, sont trop absorbées par [...] une carrière pour lui faire une place dans leur existence'. Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième sexe*, op. cit., II, p. 341.

feared. On the one hand, they are admired as they represent emancipation and achievement – both intellectual and professional – proof that women are as able as men. This admiration is well expressed by Iris who stresses:

J'ai toujours beaucoup admiré Céline pour sa force de caractère, son équilibre et sa capacité de travail. Après un trajet sans fautes, elle est devenue maître de conférences [...] Elle a eu les félicitations du jury. C'est une tête [...] elle a toujours été brillante, mais sans faire de bruit ni écraser personne. (LT 90)⁵³

Nevertheless, on the other hand, a woman like Céline is also feared, for she is both educated and single and therefore not under the authority of a man, as discussed earlier with respect to Rachel who, despite having married, lived alone for most of her life.⁵⁴ Céline can be perceived as a 'solitariste', that is 'une femme qui a choisi de vivre seule parce qu'elle en a les moyens culturels et financiers'.⁵⁵ Although Brune's positive portrayal of Céline conveys the view that 'la femme non liée peut concilier accomplissement sexuel, indépendance économique et juridique, et légitimité morale, donc inclusion dans un réseau de sociabilité', it remains the case that for a woman, 'plus elle a de talent, plus elle effraie'.⁵⁶ In addition, she matches the stereotype associated with women who have a career – especially in teaching – and remain single but are reputed to be too clever and frightening for men.⁵⁷ These two stereotypical views have notably been explored by historians such as Yvonne Knibiehler who stresses that '[I] opinion vouait les femmes professeurs à une vie de célibat studieuse: le haut niveau de leur savoir, l'exercice assidu de leurs facultés mentales étaient réputés inconciliables avec les qualités qu'on attendait d'une épouse

⁵³ It is interesting to note that, just like Rachel, Céline remains discreet and modest – two very feminine traits – despite her successful career. Céline is single and although she comes across as happy with her situation, one explanation for her not being married may be the higher education path she chose. Indeed, if embarking on long university courses does not preclude entering a romantic relationship, it appears that there is 'un arbitrage entre les exigences scolaires et celles de la sexualité, au profit des premières: s'engager dans des relations sexuelles prend du temps et demande une disponibilité psychologique que n'ont pas forcément ceux qui entament des études difficiles'. Michel Bozon and Osmo Kontula, 'Initiation sexuelle et genre: comparaison des évolutions de douze pays européens', *Population*, 6 (1997), 1367-1400 (p. 1384).

⁵⁴ Beauvoir too explained that 'le célibat – sauf aux cas exceptionnels où il revêt un caractère sacré – [...] ravale [la jeune fille] au rang de parasite et de paria', in *Le Deuxième sexe*, op. cit., II, p. 221.

⁵⁵ Flahault, *Une vie à soi*, op. cit., p. 69.

⁵⁶ Heinich, *Etats de Femmes*, op. cit., pp. 304, 305.

⁵⁷ In 1985, women represented 29% of teachers in universities in Belgium according to Yolande Mendes da Costa and Anne Morelli (eds.), *Femmes, libertés, laïcité* (Brussels: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1989), p. 57.

et d'une mère'.⁵⁸ Teaching, throughout history, appears as one of the acceptable jobs for educated women as it is clearly in line with the traditional roles of women, just like nursing. As for men being 'scared' of intellectual women, we can refer again to Knibiehler's autobiography. Indeed, when preparing the *Agrégation* in 1945, she was told: 'tu ne pourras pas te marier...les hommes n'aiment pas les femmes trop savantes'.⁵⁹ Although Knibiehler's anecdote refers to an era prior to the one Céline lives in, Céline demonstrates the continuing existence of such a view. Moreover, she epitomises the fact that being single or living alone – whether by choice or not – is still seen as abnormal in contemporary society, so many years after the example of Louise Weiss. This is well demonstrated by Erika Flahault who concludes that beyond 'simple traditionnalisme [il y a] plus profondément une hostilité à voir la femme devenir une personne libre'.⁶⁰

Following up on this idea that a woman is still seen as incomplete if not fulfilling her 'natural destiny' of wife and mother, Iris and Céline's father appears to share the view that a woman, while being educated, needs to remain under the control of a man. He gives his two daughters a classical education on top of the one they receive at school – having them read and translate Sophocles for instance (LT 125) – but this polished education is not meant to make them anything other than '[de] futures femmes au foyer' and 'des épouses cultivées' (LT 28), in line with the educational policies mentioned in the introduction to this chapter. For this reason, Céline's father cannot bear the idea that his daughter is single and 'aujourd'hui encore, à la seule idée que Céline ne s'est jamais mariée et a connu plusieurs hommes, il bout de rage' (LT 162). If the father's strategy does not work with Céline, it proves very effective with Iris, who, despite choosing an unconventional husband, is representative of women who chose family over their career.

Indeed, in Iris's case, even though her father is said to dislike her husband, the classical pattern was followed (LT 162) since Iris moved from paternal authority to that of her husband. This can be linked to our previous chapter on family and its role

⁵⁸ Yvonne Knibiehler, *Qui gardera les enfants? Mémoires d'une féministe iconoclaste* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2007), p. 55. See also Marlaine Cacouault-Bitaud 'Professorat et célibat' in *Professeurs...mais femmes: Carrières et vies privées des enseignantes du secondaire au XX^e siècle* (Paris: La Découverte, 2007), pp. 33-70.

⁵⁹ Knibiehler, *Qui gardera les enfants?*, op. cit., p. 54.

⁶⁰ Erika Flahault, 'La triste image des femmes seules', in Christine Bard (ed.), *Un siècle d'antiféminisme* (Paris: Fayard, 1999), pp. 379-400 (p. 398).

in the keeping of social patterns through upbringing, complementing school education. Brune therefore not only has Iris follow the rule perfectly but also, as a well ‘trained’ wife, ‘[elle a] pris le pli d’écouter’ (LT 126) and despite specific interests (LT 127) and a job as a translator – though working from home, reinforcing the fact that she remains somehow trapped in the private sphere –, she remains confined to her family life and does not fulfil herself or go back to studying as she would like to (LT 127). Indeed, Iris is described as

se content[ant] de faire des traductions publicitaires [...] alors qu’elle aimerait cent fois mieux la traduction littéraire, pour laquelle elle est douée en plus. Seulement, c’est plus difficile à trouver [...] et ma sœur s’habitue tout doucement à l’idée que la médiocrité sera plus qu’un passage obligé. (LT 128)

Through Iris, Brune reflects perfectly how ‘lorsqu’il y a couple, la carrière de l’homme est presque toujours privilégiée tandis que la femme s’efforce de concilier ses fonctions ménagères, maternelles, conjugales et professionnelles’.⁶¹ If Iris tolerates the situation, she obviously suffers from not being able to do what she would really enjoy.⁶² With her feeling of ‘médiocrité’ Iris can be seen as a mouthpiece for many women who chose to dedicate themselves mainly to their family while secretly wishing they had a more high-powered career. Iris can thus appear as a more modern version of her own mother, since despite working, she does so from home. On another level, the character of Céline can also be perceived as a representative for feminist militants in her criticism of Iris’s attitude. According to her ‘nous avons tellement plus de liberté que nos mères, c’est presque un devoir – ne serait-ce que par respect pour elles – d’en faire bon usage’ (LT 128). Céline makes a fair point here that women’s rights have evolved over generations; she also knows that men must not be given the opportunity to take back the freedoms that some women fought so hard to obtain. This is one of the rare instances in her work in which Brune expresses through one of her characters feminist consciousness. So while enjoying more freedom than the previous generation, neither sister is portrayed as having it all. One has the family, the other the career, through which Brune might

⁶¹ Flahault, *Une vie à soi*, op. cit., p. 15.

⁶² See Céline Pigalle, *Femmes au travail: de qui se moque-t-on?* (Issy-les-Moulineaux: Prat Editions, 2000) which illustrates how women trying to combine a career and a family often end up giving up their career given the lack of support available.

be suggesting that women cannot succeed in every area of their lives, maybe because life becomes more complex once we have more freedom and more choices.

Finally, for the ‘mother’ in *Blanche cassé*, education is a form of freedom and through this character, Brune illustrates the case of women trying to combine a successful career and a family. The ‘mother’ can thus be seen as exemplifying the trend started in the 1970s during which, according to Knibiehler, there was a ‘changement radical: la maternité n’est plus au centre de l’identité féminine’.⁶³ In the narrative, the ‘mother’, is a psychologist based in a company, which suggests she studied for quite a long time. She was promoted head of Human Resources quite young when her elder daughter Bénédicte entered primary school (BC 11), reflecting the fact that a woman can nowadays get access to higher positions. However, the novel does not provide any information on the way in which she managed to get this position and we can speculate that she may have been promoted on condition that her job came first and her family second.⁶⁴ According to Bénédicte, her mother

[...] était habituée à compter moins sur son charme que sur son intelligence pour obtenir quelque victoire que ce fût. [...] Elle avait décidé que le domaine social et politique serait le cadre de ses préoccupations fondamentales, le reste valant à peine d’être mentionné. Elle trouvait dans le travail l’occasion d’exprimer activement ses théories sur l’épanouissement des individus (BC 20).

This description shows again that women are perceived as hardworking but also that the ‘mother’ is ambitious and enjoys her work. It has to be noted here that the negative portrayal of the ‘mother’ throughout the novel may be linked to the negative perception of ambitious women. Even nowadays, as Elisabeth Badinter puts it, ‘dire de quelqu’un qu’il est ambitieux n’est pas vraiment un compliment! Et lorsque l’on parle d’une ambitieuse, c’est encore pire [...] il faut admettre que “l’ambition féminine” est, pour le sens commun, pire que pire’.⁶⁵ In addition, the social and political interests of the ‘mother’ can be linked to those of Rachel in the sense that they both put their social battles and/or personal preferences before the upbringing of their children. Indeed Bénédicte seems to think that her mother is better at being a good employee than a mother since, as already noted in chapter 3, ‘[s]ur l’éducation

⁶³ Yvonne Knibiehler, *La Révolution maternelle depuis 1945* (Paris: Librairie académique Perrin, 1997), p. 288.

⁶⁴ See a similar example in Céline Pigalle’s study where a newly promoted mother was told “‘enfant ou pas”, elle devra [...] être disponible, très disponible”, Pigalle, *Femmes au travail*, op. cit., p. 57.

⁶⁵ François Busnel, ‘Elisabeth Badinter: “Les femmes retournent à la maison. Pourquoi?”’, *Lire*, May 2006, pp. 94-99 (p. 96).

des enfants, elle avait des idées bien définies mais éprouvait du mal à les traduire en pratique. [...] L'obligation de mettre la main à la pâte [...] semblait comme un inconvénient [...] dans le déroulement de sa théorie' (BC 11). In short, education and a professional status have allowed her to be totally emancipated, even from her family life, thus incarnating at the same time professional achievement and failure as a parent.

Through the 'mother', Brune reflects how for women considered 'plus femmes que mères' passion, whether for a man, a social status or a profession, is paramount.⁶⁶ This is where the 'mother' is different from Iris and Céline. Indeed, Iris tries to balance a very low-key career with her family and, even though she feels trapped within the family sphere, she cannot bear the idea of reducing her involvement in it. As for Céline, even though she would like a family, she refuses to give up her liberty by marrying and prefers to devote her time to her career,⁶⁷ whereas the 'mother', despite having a family, almost regrets having done so and seems to do everything she can to avoid her children via her job. However, from another point of view, the 'mother' can also be seen as epitomising the 'feminist concerns about difficulties of marrying public involvement in the world of work with attending for the care of children'.⁶⁸

All in all, none of the women therefore seems satisfied with the choices they have made. These three fictional characters exemplify well the difficult choices women are indeed confronted with when having to choose between studies, career and family or when attempting to combine them. Furthermore, Elisa Brune, through the representation of these three possible choices for women, gives us a rather negative picture of women's lives even though they had more opportunities than their mothers. She herself belongs to this generation of women and must therefore have a good insight into the different situations she describes in the three narratives

⁶⁶ Eliacheff and Heinich explain that for these women, '[qu']il s'agisse d'un homme, d'un statut social, d'une profession ou d'une vocation, la passion a un statut particulier: elle est l'"essentiel", le lieu d'expression de toutes leurs émotions'. Eliacheff and Heinich, *Mères-Filles*, op. cit., p. 70.

⁶⁷ Céline's choice appears to be the one Elisa Brune has made for herself. She explains that to her 'une femme qui a vraiment des centres d'intérêts et des activités dans le monde ou dans la société, c'est un peu antinomique avec la fonction de mère parce que qu'est-ce qu'un enfant sinon quelque chose qui vous oblige à vous intéresser rien qu'à lui! Honnêtement, je trouve que c'est un problème difficile à résoudre et moi je l'ai résolu en n'ayant pas d'enfant. Ça marche bien'. See my unpublished interview with Elisa Brune on 27 August 2007. Appendix B, p. 266.

⁶⁸ Featherstone, *Family Life and Family Support*, op. cit., p. 49

given her own experience and the choices she has made herself. Furthermore, Brune's depiction of these women confronted with different choices confirms Eliacheff and Heinich's view that '[on voit] dans les romans, et dans l'insistance avec laquelle beaucoup d'entre eux déclinent à leur façon les mêmes schèmes, la mise en forme imaginaire de configurations symboliques et de situations réelles affectant plus particulièrement les femmes'.⁶⁹ Despite portraying women who do not manage to or do not wish to combine a career and a family, Brune does not touch at all on society's lack of structure and policies to help women to fulfil themselves both in the private and public spheres of their lives. Once more she presents the reader with an issue but with no potential solution as it seems that all the responsibility for 'making it work' rests with the women and that it is their fault if it does not. Thus, if Brune's work reflects well how 'working women [are] living in two worlds with different priorities – the world of work and the world of home',⁷⁰ she fails to provide arguments in favour of solutions that would 'seek to reconcile these priorities'.⁷¹

The daughters

Through the youngest generation represented in her novels Elisa Brune describes yet again a range of views and behaviours which reflect contemporary society, since education's usefulness is perceived in very different ways by the young characters. Education and often higher education now seem to have become compulsory to find work. From the beginning of the 1990s, in Belgium, the CESS had little or no value on the job market as it is not a professional qualification, just like the baccalaureate in France, even if both remain compulsory to access higher education.⁷² This extension of studies

constitue sans doute la composante la plus remarquable des transformations de la jeunesse. Elle résulte d'une forte demande d'éducation de la part des familles, mais également d'une plus grande exigence de diplômes, pour pallier les difficultés croissantes d'entrée sur le marché du travail.⁷³

⁶⁹ Heinich, *Etats de Femmes*, op. cit., p. 343.

⁷⁰ Melissa Benn, *Madonna and Child: Towards a New Politics of Motherhood* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1998), quoted in Featherstone, *Family Life and Family Support*, op. cit., p. 49.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² According to Derriche et al., *L'école au féminin*, op. cit., p. 11.

⁷³ Blöss and Frickey, *La Femme dans la société française*, op. cit., p. 47.

This aspect is effectively represented by the emphasis the ‘mother’ puts on obtaining diplomas in *Blanche cassé*. It also appears that, nowadays, women’s choices in terms of education are made with the idea that ‘l’engagement dans l’activité professionnelle [est] évident’,⁷⁴ contrary to the two previous generations studied in both countries. Indeed, even though ‘la condition de la femme est objectivement en recul, les filles continuent de témoigner objectivement à la fois d’une demande de formation et d’une volonté d’assumer une activité professionnelle’.⁷⁵ However, the point made earlier about the gender ‘specificity’ of certain subjects in the 1970s and 1980s still seems to have been valid in the first part of the 1990s – both in France and Belgium.⁷⁶ Even if the numbers of women studying scientific subjects at university in France had increased (36% of students in science) and they represented a third of students in ‘classes préparatoires aux grandes écoles scientifiques’⁷⁷ in 2001, only 23% of students in ‘écoles d’ingénieurs’ were female, which highlights again the fact that ‘le monde des sciences s’est construit comme un monde sans femmes’.⁷⁸

To begin with, in *La Tournante*, Marion and her friends find education boring and ridiculous.⁷⁹ Marion’s best friend stresses that ‘au lycée on s’ennuie à crever. [...] On parle aussi [...] de l’ennui à la maison, enfin bref, vivement qu’on soit adulte’ (LT 33-34). This shows how education seems a burden and also reflects the tendency of teenagers to believe that everything is better and simpler when you are an adult. They cannot wait to finish school, unlike the women of the previous

⁷⁴ Claire Aubin and Hélène Gisserot, *Les Femmes en France: 1985-1995. Rapport établi par la France en vue de la 4^{ème} conférence mondiale sur les femmes* (Paris: La documentation française, 1994), p. 31.

⁷⁵ Derriche et al., *L’école au féminin*, op. cit., p. 9.

⁷⁶ According to Derriche et al., ‘la démocratisation de l’enseignement et l’ouverture de toutes les sections et options aux deux sexes n’ont pas fondamentalement changé la répartition des sexes dans les différents domaines de savoir. Les filles continuent de préférer les sciences dites “douces” et les formations professionnelles traditionnellement féminines’. Also, ‘les mentalités auxquelles on attribue les choix traditionnels des jeunes filles correspondent parfaitement aux déterminations socio-économiques de notre société’, Derriche et al., *L’école au féminin*, op. cit., pp. 17, 19.

⁷⁷ Aubin and Gisserot, *Les Femmes en France: 1985-1995*, op. cit., pp. 30-31.

⁷⁸ Françoise Héritier, *Masculin/Féminin II: Dissoudre la hiérarchie* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2002), pp. 178-79. Héritier explains that ‘les filles sont en général minoritaires dans les disciplines de sciences de la matière, dans les écoles d’ingénieurs elles représentent seulement 23% des effectifs en 2001 en France. Cette sous-représentation tient, selon Catherine Marry, au fait que “le monde des sciences s’est construit comme un monde sans femmes”; avec des interdits explicites “légitimés par un discours sur l’infériorité intellectuelle des femmes”, discours dont nous avons souligné la prégnance encore actuelle dans les stéréotypes mentaux et qui entraînent chez les filles une sous-estimation de leurs propres capacités ainsi que le bridage de leurs ambitions’.

⁷⁹ A view which would probably not have been shared by women of older generations even at the same age, as education was seen by them as an important opportunity.

generations who often did not have any other choice but to stop studying quite young in order to work or to get married when many would have liked to carry on.

If the teenage characters in *La Tournante* are in a hurry to finish school, they do not reject it as Clarisse does in *Blanche cassé*, through whom Elisa Brune illustrates another type of reaction to education. Indeed, Clarisse really does not understand what education can do for her. Like the teenagers of *La Tournante* she is bored in class (BC 39) – a tendency often witnessed in secondary schools – and since she never studies, her marks plummet, so much so that even cheating becomes difficult (BC 51). Worried about her results and aware of the demands and expectations of society, her parents try to convince her of the importance of education for her future:

Tu ne veux pas travailler, c'est ton choix, c'est ton problème. Mais [...] un jour, tu devras voler de tes propres ailes et tu n'auras que les moyens que tu t'es donnés. Réfléchis convenablement. C'est maintenant que ton avenir se joue. (BC 56)

The parental view expressed here is therefore different from the traditional one that the women from the previous generations experienced when the parents were more often in favour of their daughter(s) not pursuing their studies too far so as not to move away from their 'natural destiny'. Brune shows here that, nowadays, parents tend to push their children to go as far as they can in education in order to guarantee the best possible career and that some children like Clarisse refuse this opportunity. Thus, her only answer is that she has 'parfaitement [...] réfléchi et [...] refuse de travailler [...] [de] sacrifier des années dans la course aux diplômes, pour sacrifier ensuite sa vie à son boulot' (BC 56). It seems she refuses the knowledge she is offered and that was so important in the eyes of the previous generations of women. The use of 'refuse' and 'sacrifier' twice reflects well how life in Western societies is shaped around constraints and that if one refuses to adhere to society's rules and demands, it will show no mercy, as Clarisse's story proves. Her mother knows very well that '[sans] aucun diplôme [...] le nombre de possibilités sera terriblement limité. Emplois non qualifiés, serveuse, caissière, femme de ménage. Le diplôme, ça [n']oblige pas à faire carrière, ça [...] donne simplement le choix' (BC 56-57). Elisa Brune, through the mother's comments, stresses yet another aspect of contemporary society: the near obligation to have diplomas in order to be able to find a job.

Moreover, the list of jobs she gives as examples are considered typically female ones. For according to Margaret Maruani,

[à] l'autre extrémité de l'échelle sociale, [...] les femmes se retrouvent cantonnées dans le salariat d'exécution, dans ces métiers typiquement féminins du secteur tertiaire! Vendeuses, caissières, aides ménagères..., souvent à temps partiel et pour beaucoup en situation de sous-emploi. En France aujourd'hui, les 3 millions de personnes qui travaillent pour un salaire mensuel inférieur au smic sont, à 80 %, des femmes.⁸⁰

At the same time, Clarisse's reaction to school can be seen as a reaction against her mother who has sacrificed her personal life to her career, giving her daughters a bad image of ambitious women unable to achieve success in both the public and private sphere. This image is obviously negative and may be interpreted as a weakness in Brune's representation of the 'mother' as it is the case that some women in society achieve a certain degree of success both in their career and family – even if it remains quite difficult. So Brune does not reflect the fact that some women do achieve a degree of success in both areas. This negative image of the woman who cannot be successful on every front may stem for her personal view on the institution of family that we analysed in the previous chapter.

Clarisse then attends the 'Académie de danse' for a year or so, during which everyone believes she is finally 'engagée sur le bon chemin' (BC 60). However, Clarisse is told she has dishonoured the school by dancing in the street (BC 95-97) and while pretending everything is normal, she deliberately fails – 'ignorant les avertissements, imperméable aux remontrances' (BC 103) – and secretly prepares an alternative plan: having a baby (BC 98-99). Clarisse, in her reaction, reflects the tendency of some girls (more often from working-class backgrounds than middle-class ones like Clarisse) in case of failure in school, to go towards "[...] un abandon complet de toute visée professionnelle, et le repli avec résignation sur un projet d'avenir dominé par la famille" et la vie domestique⁸¹ which would tend to confirm

⁸⁰ Margaret Maruani, 'Les femmes travaillent beaucoup plus que les hommes...', *Sciences Humaines*, special issue 4, 'Femmes, combats et débats', November-December 2005 <http://www.scienceshumaines.com/-0a--les-femmes-travaillent-beaucoup-plus-que-les-hommes---0a_fr_14382.html> [accessed 11 March 2010].

⁸¹ Marie Duru-Bellat, *L'école des filles* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1990), p. 190. Also, according to Moore and Rosenthal, 'the research shows unequivocally that teenage mothers drop out of school earlier and are less likely to go on to college or university than older mothers. [...] [It has been] noted that some of the characteristics of teenage school dropouts (such as being impulsive, lacking long-term goals, and coming from unhappy families) are similar to those which lead to becoming unmarried adolescent mothers. [...] Most studies show that teenage mothers are less likely than older mothers to find stable and well-paid employment'. Moore and Rosenthal, *Sexuality in Adolescence*, op. cit., pp. 157-59.

once more the widespread tendency for women to lack of self-esteem. With this choice, Clarisse also does what was previously considered ‘normal’ for a woman and by having her character rejecting the opportunity to study, Brune illustrates the fact that the educational demands of contemporary society do not satisfy some women of the young generation. The character of Clarisse may be seen as an example of young women – even teenagers in her case – seeking shelter and a better life in the procreation that most women of the previous generations were keen, if not to escape, at least to control, since ‘[...] women throughout history before the advent of birth control were at the continual mercy of their biology – menstruation, menopause, and “female ills”’.⁸² Just as rejecting studying seems to go against contemporary tendencies, Clarisse’s idea that motherhood is the solution seems like a sort of ‘flashback’. In that, the character of Clarisse may be seen as exemplifying a trend amongst some young women who seem to reject what feminists of the second wave fought for and in that sense reflects the general impression that feminism and its achievements are losing ground.⁸³

Bénédicte is a complete contrast to Clarisse, for she considers studying to be the only thing she might achieve in her life and ‘étudi[e] consciencieusement [ses] cours’ (BC 51). She represents a tendency for some women to take the opportunity to study with no real enthusiasm or awareness of their privilege. After her baccalaureate, she does not show any specific ambition (BC 95-96), a characteristic that allows us to compare her to Iris and her feeling of being mediocre. Following her mother’s advice, Bénédicte enters a school of management (like Brune herself),⁸⁴ as she considers studying to be ‘le meilleur moyen de [s’]occuper’ (BC 100) and even confesses that she ‘[se] réfugi[e] dans le travail’ (BC 105). She is therefore not looking for a future by choosing this type of studies but merely for a way to keep busy, an idea which is reinforced by the use of the verb ‘se réfugier’. Besides, she recognises that she does not enjoy the classes that much but knows that ‘s’il y [a] un accomplissement dans [sa] vie, il ser[a] intellectuel’ (BC 101). The fact that she does

⁸² Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, op. cit., p. 9.

⁸³ See Josyane Savigneau’s interview with Elisabeth Badinter, *Le Monde*, 13 February 2010, p. 19.

⁸⁴ As confirmed in Brune’s interview with Hugues Henry, ‘Elisa Brune, à livre ouvert (ou presque)’, op. cit., pp. 32-33. It is also worth mentioning that the number of women massively increased in ‘écoles de commerce et de gestion (47%)’ according to Aubin and Gisserot, *Les Femmes en France: 1985-1995*, op. cit. p. 31.

not even consider the possibility of accomplishing anything other than through academic study and chooses to limit herself – like Clarisse in a sense – instead of trying to achieve on every front could be seen as a social awareness that women generally struggle to reach success in every area of their lives, as she has witnessed at home and as Elisa Brune seems to confirm in her representations.

It is obvious then that for Bénédicte, education is an ‘easy’ option, a shelter, like motherhood for her sister. If she studies, she does not have to find anything else to do with her life and spare time. So this choice does not come across as very positive either, as for Bénédicte education is less a form of freedom leading to greater autonomy than a pretext to fill the void in her life. However, this shelter is threatened by Clarisse as the more she gets into trouble, the harder it is for Bénédicte to study (BC 202), and she even has to resit part of her third year (BC 210). Despite her education, after graduating, Bénédicte struggles for a while to find work, a situation through which Elisa Brune has the opportunity to portray another reality: the fact that it is harder for women to find employment even when they have equivalent or even better qualifications than men. As underlined by Corinne and Martine Chaponnière, women’s ‘avantage scolaire non seulement ne se traduit pas sur le marché du travail, mais il s’inverse même’.⁸⁵ Through Bénédicte, Elisa Brune effectively reflects the problem for young women of finding a first job matching their qualifications. Indeed, with equivalent diplomas, young women have more difficulty finding a job than young men.⁸⁶ After education, her career enables Bénédicte to ‘[s’]immerger dans le travail’ (BC 286-87) but without any passion, while giving her ‘un statut dans la famille’ (BC 295) which fulfils expectations. Bénédicte chooses to study and then to dedicate herself to her career but this does not bring her any sense of fulfillment. Brune may be suggesting here that despite following the path society suggests for an individual, education and career alone, like motherhood alone, are not enough to make one feel complete; but it also seems from the novel that combining them is impossible too, as if women cannot ‘square the circle’ because none of the options is ideal. In *Blanche cassé*, it seems that since the ‘mother’ tried to combine both a career and a family without being successful in both, her daughters each choose one and completely reject the other, refusing to reproduce the model they

⁸⁵ Corinne and Martine Chaponnière, *La mixité*, op. cit., p. 85.

⁸⁶ According to Aubin and Gisserot, *Les Femmes en France: 1985-1995*, op. cit., p. 58.

witnessed at home. This would tend to suggest that Brune here is once more conveying the idea that women cannot be successful on every front, an issue that does not seem to arise for men.

Through the youngest generation depicted in her work, Elisa Brune shows women in various situations with different approaches to education and careers, as well as showing the consequences of choice in some cases. All in all however, education appears to this generation more as a compulsory step, a shelter or an option no better or worse than any other but not as a real opportunity or a form of liberty, as was the case for women of the previous generations who did not seem to feel as negatively as them when they were young. The girls of the younger generation clearly do not realise how lucky they are to be given this opportunity and seem to fail to recognise what has been gained in the past by women fighting for the right to education.

With these three narratives and three generations of women, Elisa Brune paints varied and often contrasting portraits of women while reflecting on how women's access to education and careers – as well as their perception of them – has evolved throughout the 20th century. It is obvious that each generation has not had the same choices to make in the same circumstances when it comes to education and work and the three novels reflect the choices, desires and expectations of women belonging to different generations.⁸⁷ In exploring this theme, Elisa Brune has a similar approach to other contemporary writers who through their work conduct a sort of 'anthropologie sociale de l'homme contemporain, où se croisent des réflexions sur notre génération et sur celles qui l'ont immédiatement précédée'.⁸⁸ Her novels show that education seems to have gone from something very much wished for to something possible, even ordinary to become finally something more or less compulsory for the young generation wishing to have any chance of a professional career. Thus, what the grandmother and Rachel see as a sign of freedom and emancipation – even though studying was far from being considered a priority for women of this generation – has

⁸⁷ Elisa Brune's characters also tend to prove that for women, throughout the period studied, school carried on its function of 'reproduction des inégalités sociales'. Derriche et al., *L'école au féminin*, op. cit., p. 5.

⁸⁸ Viart and Vercier, *La littérature française au présent*, op. cit., p. 280.

almost become synonymous with boredom, even a prison, for the youngest generation. The ‘mother’, Iris and Céline had more choice and the generation of their children even more in theory. The girls of the three generations are all presented as successful in their studies – if they choose to be. However, if studying was not vital in the case of the first two generations in order to become a housewife or work in a low qualified position, this option has become increasingly difficult for the third generation of women discussed and Clarisse, in choosing motherhood, is disapproved of for behaving in a way that would have been acceptable for earlier generations. Thus, it is important to remember that even if women have been

les grandes bénéficiaires de la démocratisation des études, [...] l’ouverture des formations a aussi été une manière de faire face aux demandes toujours plus importantes de main-d’œuvre qualifiée par l’industrie et les services. Les mutations conduisant à une meilleure formation des filles ne sont donc pas seulement intervenues en réponse aux mobilisations des femmes ou pour propager un idéal égalitaire et méritocratique.⁸⁹

Reading Elisa Brune’s narratives, the reader may be left with the impression that things are still rather challenging for women when it comes to education, career and family. Unfortunately, the veracity of her portrayals is only too well confirmed by different sociological studies and statistics quoted throughout this chapter. However, in this instance again, it may be perceived as problematic that a woman writer clearly demonstrating awareness of such a societal issue through the characters she presents to the reader, does not wish to be involved by expressing an opinion of any kind which might contribute to change. However, this objectivity in her writing can be linked yet again to her work as a scientific journalist – just giving facts, observations – and also to her wish not to patronise her readership. Thus, she explains that

introduire le jugement ou même l’opinion de l’auteur, je trouve ça paternaliste et c’est bien la dernière chose que je souhaite faire. C’est encore une volonté de donner les rênes au lecteur. Il a des faits, il a des personnages et qu’il en tire les leçons qu’il doit en tirer.⁹⁰

Although a clearer position from Brune could be wished for and her refusal to take any stance criticised, we would argue that in simply presenting her readership with the – on the whole rather negative and stereotypical – facts of these female characters’ lives, she is nonetheless contributing to the debate over women’s education and careers. By looking at the different characters, not only does the reader

⁸⁹ Fassa et al., ‘Education et formation: enjeux de genres’, op. cit., p. 6.

⁹⁰ See my unpublished interview with Elisa Brune on 27 August 2007. Appendix B, p. 269.

acquire an historical overview of the evolution of women's access to education and the public sphere, but also comes to realise that many things remain to be achieved in these areas to truly reach gender equality. The use of stereotypes in this case allows Brune to present readers not with exceptions but rather with what still tends to be the rule. Although the use of stereotypical characters and situations comes across as lacking originality and as being an easy option, it is nonetheless the best way to put the reader in touch with the reality s/he knows and of reminding her/him of what still needs to be changed and achieved.⁹¹

To summarise, Elisa Brune describes various women in different situations, reinforcing the idea that the choices women have to make in the area of education are never simple. The three narratives therefore appear to be faithful – though negative – portrayals of the evolution of women's condition and access to education. They can be viewed as both sociological and historical works since they bring to the fore women's fight for education and their desire to choose their lives and future. Although she positions herself as an observer, we would argue that by exploring themes such as those studied in this chapter, she still contributes to the ongoing debates on women's education and position in contemporary Western society even if she only reports facts without passing any judgement. In addition to family and education, the relationships between men and women are also central to Brune's novels and from women's point of view, these often appear to be painful. Our next chapter analyses these relationships, taking into account the impact upon them of family influences, upbringing and education.

⁹¹ See Dani Cavallaro, *French Feminist Theory* (London: Continuum, 2003), p. 107.

Chapter 5

Sexuality and Intimate Relationships

Just as some of Brune's novels provide the readership with representations of certain aspects of contemporary society, *La Tournante*, *Blanche cassé*, *La Tentation d'Edouard* and *Un Homme est une rose* enable her to portray various types of relationships between men and women. In these four novels, the reader encounters a range of possible intimate relationships (consensual or otherwise): whilst the epistolary novels exemplify consensual 'badinage' leading to casual sex between grown-ups, written in a light tone sprinkled with touches of humour, *La Tournante* deals with the difficult topic of teenage sexuality and gang rape and *Blanche cassé* follows the highs and mainly lows of two teenage sisters' 'éducation sentimentale'. By exploring such a wide range of possible sexual interactions, Elisa Brune paints yet another series of social portraits which strongly evoke contemporary Western society.

The similarity between the intimate relationships witnessed in some contemporary narratives and the ones observable in daily life has led François Flahaut to conclude that:

Toute fiction qui met en scène des relations entre un homme et une femme nous montre par là même quelque chose de non fictionnel puisque nous avons affaire à ces relations dans la vie réelle. L'expérience que nous faisons de ces relations implique la représentation que nous en avons, notamment la représentation de ce que doit être un homme et de ce que doit être une femme; les représentations qui donnent aux personnages de fiction leurs traits valeureux ne peuvent donc pas être tout à fait étrangères aux représentations qui ont cours dans la vie réelle.¹

This chapter will look at how some types of relationships between men and women, and sexuality in contemporary society, are effectively represented in the four narratives through the characters, their behaviour and the use of stereotypes. The aim once again is to demonstrate that Elisa Brune is primarily looking at giving her readership a snapshot of reality, or at least those stereotypes that people commonly believe to correspond to reality. Although stereotypes are not an accurate representation of reality, they can be important, since these

beliefs about men and women have a reality and power of their own. Gender stereotypes control us by providing prescriptions for behavior; they guide our interactions by telling

¹ Flahaut, 'Récits de fiction et représentations partagées', op. cit., p. 44.

us how we ought to behave to be socially acceptable members of our sex. Stereotypes are reinforced by sanctions for deviating from sex role requirements (social rejection, discrimination).²

In short, Elisa Brune's characters deliver an illustration of certain societal trends and behaviours as well as stereotypical behaviours and views commonly held as true. She gives her reader a straightforward representation of what she observes around her and does not explicitly challenge it, once again avoiding adopting an openly critical stance on society and aiming to witness rather than judge. It is up to readers to reflect on the issues and behaviours they encounter in the narratives, which in turn may generate a reader response and possibly even lead to a change in society, as already explored in previous chapters.³

In order to study different types of relationships between men and women, this chapter, like the previous one, is organised around the different generations to which the protagonists belong, since these narratives, while illustrating the evolution of women's access to education and employment, also provide representations of the way sexuality and intimate relationships have evolved in the second part of the 20th century, with the lowering of the average age of first intercourse, the decrease in the importance of marriage and commitment, the increasing number of casual sexual relationships and significant changes in teenage sexuality.

Representations of married couples

This chapter will not explore in depth the relationships of the parents in *La Tournante* and *Blanche cassé* as they are not the main focus of the narratives and are more linked to family interaction than to sexuality. However, if these two family novels, analysed in chapter 3, illustrate that family relationships are difficult, the parental couples enable Brune to represent two different ways in which some women may get into a relationship and marriage. Indeed, Iris and Hermann in *La Tournante* and the original parental couple composed of the 'mother' and Jacques in *Blanche cassé* are examples of why many couples in the 1970s and early 1980s still decided to get married (or were pressured to) and the fact that many young women moved from their parents' to their husband's care without any period of freedom in between.

² Elizabeth Aries, *Men and Women in Interaction: Reconsidering the Differences* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 17-18.

³ For more details on reader response, see Gill Rye, *Reading for Change*, op. cit.

Statistically, ‘among French women born in 1964-68 three quarters had entered a union by the age of 24: 60 per cent as cohabitees, and 16 per cent had married without prior cohabitation’.⁴ Getting into a serious relationship and marrying young was (and still is for some women) seen as a way of ‘running away’ from strict parenting, in the hope or expectation that the marital relationship would be better. Thus, Iris stopped her studies earlier than she would have wished to, as explained in chapter 4, exemplifying the fact that for some young women leaving education to ‘commencer leur sexualité adulte sans tarder est un moyen [...] d’accéder rapidement à une relation conjugale stable et à une vie adulte en dehors de leur famille’.⁵ Indeed, Céline suspects Iris did just that and was looking for a husband who would replace her father, ‘quelqu’un qui sait ce qu’il faut faire et qu’elle peut suivre sans se poser de questions’ (LT 125), suggesting that she needs a masculine figure to direct her life.

Another common reason for young women to get married was if they fell pregnant, since the parents would often force the couple to do so to avoid bringing ‘dishonour’ on the family.⁶ This is precisely what happened to the parental couple in *Blanche cassé* as we saw in chapter 3. The parents probably got married in the mid-to late-1970s, a period during which, in parallel to ‘l’élévation du niveau d’éducation des femmes, et l’augmentation rapide de leur taux d’activité professionnelle’ stressed in the previous chapter, a lowering of the average ages of first intercourse and marriage was observed, with an increase in premarital conception and post-marital births.⁷ Indeed, ‘dans la période de baisse conjointe de l’âge du premier rapport et de l’âge au mariage, on observe dans presque tous les pays une augmentation des conceptions pré-nuptiales, dans la mesure où le niveau de pratique contraceptive n’est pas encore très élevé’.⁸ It is worth noting here that even though Elisa Brune does not explicitly set the story of *Blanche cassé* in Belgium, her set of socio-cultural references is Belgian. It is therefore not surprising that, in the novel, the parents

⁴ Göran Therborn, *Between Sex and Power* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 198.

⁵ Bozon and Kontula, ‘Initiation sexuelle et genre’, op. cit., p. 1384.

⁶ While this is still the case in some cultures or in some families, this tendency is not as widespread nowadays.

⁷ Bozon and Kontula, ‘Initiation sexuelle et genre’, op. cit., p. 1368.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 1377-78. According to the same source, this phase is followed by one of ‘divergence de l’initiation sexuelle et du mariage’, with a decrease in the number of marriages and an increase in children born out of wedlock. See also Michel Bozon, *Sociologie de la sexualité*, 2nd edn. (Paris: Armand Colin, 2009 [Nathan, 2002]), p. 51.

forced the couple to get married, as the country – maybe because of the influence of the Catholic Church – was among the least permissive in Europe when it came to sexual mores during the second half of the 20th century.⁹ What happens to the couple in the narrative would therefore have been quite a plausible situation at the time and Bénédicte explains that

[...] ma mère avait été obligée de se marier parce que mon père l'avait mise enceinte à vingt-deux ans. Ses parents [...] ne voulaient pas entendre parler de relations sexuelles avant le mariage et encore moins de moyens contraceptifs. Un soir, elle avait pris le risque, et toute la suite de sa vie s'en était retrouvée déterminée, pour ne pas dire gâchée. (BC 111)¹⁰

The 'mother' had to marry Jacques but 'si [ses] parents [l]'avaient laissée un peu plus libre de flirter, [elle] jure qu['elle] n'aurai[t] pas épousé le premier venu' (BC 29), showing how at the time only 'une petit minorité [de femmes] [avait] le temps et la possibilité de connaître la même liberté théorique [que les hommes] avant la première union'.¹¹ As a consequence it is evident that in both instances, the reasons behind the unions of the two couples, while being understandable, are also a weak basis for a relationship.

In addition, the break-up or separation of both parental couples are a realistic illustration of how nowadays men and women regard sexual and emotional fulfilment as paramount. If they cease to experience fulfilment within their 'intimate relationships', men and women often move on and search for new intimacy with another partner. Sociologist Anthony Giddens asserts that this model of serial monogamy, which he describes as the 'pure relationship', is becoming more commonplace than the idea of a lifetime partnership.¹² This tendency has also been observed by Jean-Claude Kaufmann who explains that partners place increasingly high demands on their relationships and that 'dès la fin des années soixante, les unions [...] deviennent assez soudainement, davantage soumises aux caprices du

⁹ Bozon and Kontula, 'Initiation sexuelle et genre', op. cit., p. 1379. The Netherlands, Switzerland and West Germany are also named among the least permissive countries, as opposed to the Scandinavian countries. As stated in Chapter 1, approximately 75% of the Belgian population is Catholic.

¹⁰ The 'mother' being forced to get married and presumably to keep the child clearly affected her. This corresponds to Beauvoir's assessment that 'grossesse et maternité seront vécues de manière très différente selon qu'elles se déroulent dans la révolte, la résignation, la satisfaction, l'enthousiasme'. Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième sexe*, op. cit., II, p. 339.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 1390. See also Nathalie Bajos and Michel Bozon (eds.), *Enquête sur la sexualité en France. Pratiques, genre et santé* (Paris: La Découverte, 2008), pp. 119-21.

¹² As explained in Gatrell, *Hard Labour*: op. cit., p. 38.

sentiment'.¹³ Thus, in portraying these two couples that rushed (or were rushed) into marriage for what were common reasons at the time, as well as their eventual break-up, Elisa Brune is representing situations which occurred frequently and is once again reflecting an aspect of social reality to which her readers can relate. As previously stated, the main focus of *Blanche cassé* and *La Tournante* is the representation of some teenagers' lives, and sexuality is central to the teenage girls Brune has chosen to portray in her two narratives.

Representations of teenage relationships

Blanche cassé and *La Tournante* explore adolescence as the period of sexual discoveries through the characters of Clarisse, Bénédicte and Marion but instead of representing how 'most girls pass into adulthood still unsure of their sexual identity and with a romantic, passive and dependent orientation towards erotic activity',¹⁴ Elisa Brune portrays most of her young female characters acting the opposite way. Just like most teenagers however, Clarisse and Marion do not stay in long-term relationships and it appears that for most young characters love relationships are primarily physical, with sexuality clearly central to their love stories. With these representations of emerging teenage sexuality, Elisa Brune illustrates how, in the words of sociologist Michel Bozon, 'la sexualité juvénile est devenue un temps à part, socialement accepté'¹⁵ and she is therefore dealing here with a topic that is at the heart of teenagers' concerns. Unfortunately, the teenage girls in both novels have almost exclusively negative experiences with men. Bénédicte never finds anyone who really suits her and is the victim of rape by incest, Clarisse's life can be summed up as a long 'valse des partenaires' (BC 55) and Marion, if sexually precocious and keen on sexual adventures, ends up trapped in weekly gang rapes. Through these specific, gloomy portrayals – based on actual stories and people – Elisa Brune addresses issues faced by some teenagers discovering their sexuality.

Let us start by analysing the love life of Bénédicte. Despite being the eldest, Bénédicte has her first sexual experiences much later than Clarisse and only forces

¹³ Jean-Claude Kaufmann, *La sociologie du couple* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1993), p. 31.

¹⁴ Stevi Jackson, 'The Social Construction of Female Sexuality', in Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott (eds), *Feminism and Sexuality: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p. 72.

¹⁵ Bozon, *Sociologie de la sexualité*, op. cit., p. 52.

herself to have those in order to feel ‘normal’. This behaviour is representative of the influence of peer pressure and demonstrates how it can determine sexual activity. Elisa Brune illustrates here how, for some teenagers, entering a relationship is mainly a means of feeling and being perceived as ‘normal’ rather than something really desired. Indeed, as far as the ‘temps du flirt’ for teenagers is concerned, it is less ‘réglé par les prescriptions de la société des adultes que par des normes et des modèles de conduite élaborés entre pairs. Dans tous les cas, l’influence des expériences sexuelles des amis de même sexe est forte sur le passage à l’acte des individus’.¹⁶ Thus, Bénédicte agrees to have her first kiss with a boy whom she pitied, ‘au physique ingrat’ (BC 52), simply so that she could ‘inscrire [son] premier flirt au compteur’ (BC 52), showing how desperate she was to attract boys and feel she had fulfilled her allotted role. This wish to be ‘normal’ means that aged seventeen, ‘[sa] virginité [lui] pesait comme une malédiction’ (BC 64) and therefore she decides to try and have sex with a boy whom she liked ‘pas follement, mais suffisamment’ (BC 68). This follows the line of argument that describes the first act of sexual intercourse as ‘une transgression conformiste’.¹⁷ In addition, this apparent need for young women to believe themselves in love in order to consent to have sex for the first time – contrary to young men – has been observed by Michel Bozon who explains that ‘en France [...] la majorité des femmes de toutes les générations, quel que soit leur âge au premier rapport, se disent [...] amoureuses de leur premier partenaire’.¹⁸ When the couple fails to have sex, Bénédicte is then convinced she is ‘une handicapée du sexe’ (BC 70) whilst in fact the failure is only due to their inexperience. The use of a term that denotes disability is a clear indicator of how sexual relationships are codified and how not managing to follow what they perceive as the ‘conventional’ patterns leaves an idea of abnormality.

If Elisa Brune portrays what her readership might characterise as normal teenage behaviour, that is to say the trials and errors of a teenager’s love life, in keeping Bénédicte’s reaction to and endurance of her stepfather’s sexual abuse very close to the experience of most actual victims, she once again mimics reality: Bénédicte follows the pattern of behaviour of most of these victims by remaining

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 48.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Bozon and Kontula, ‘Initiation sexuelle et genre’, op. cit., p. 1388.

silent and hoping it will stop. Indeed, Bénédicte and René enable Elisa Brune to represent the problem of sexual abuse within the family and bring to the attention of the reader an issue far too often hidden and taboo. René himself is a representation of multiple sexual deviances – visiting young prostitutes and rape by ‘incest’ – as we have already said in chapter 3. Bénédicte, being shy and withdrawn, makes a perfect target for René, who progressively and over two years takes advantage of her and her silence, progressing from touching her breast while watching TV while her mother is asleep on the other sofa (BC 84), to kissing her (BC 101) and finally raping her (BC 127).¹⁹ Bénédicte, instead of speaking about this major issue, keeps it to herself (partly because of her mother as explained in chapter 3), feels ashamed and even seems to find excuses for him at one point (BC 91). Even though she feels ‘salie’ (BC 101) and distressed, she decides to carry on acting as normally as possible, ‘ainsi, peut-être, que la plupart des gens font’ (BC 103). This last quotation is representative of how ‘the fear of judgement [causes] many victims to hide their painful experiences from their loved ones so that their feelings [remain] festering inside them’.²⁰ Scared and ashamed, just like many victims of repeated rape, Bénédicte decides to consider ‘les séances que René [lui] imposait comme de simples corvées, pas plus graves que d’aller chez le dentiste ou aux examens’ (BC 142-43) and considers her secret as ‘pas racontable’ (BC 143). Even later on in the narrative when she is in a stable relationship with Francis, a love ‘tiède et réfléchi’ (BC 201), she keeps her secret and carries on suffering René’s assaults while wondering why she ‘[s’est] laissée violer pendant des années par un type [qu’elle] détestai[t]’ (BC 188). As already explained in chapter 3,

There is evidence that most sexual molestation is committed by someone known to the victim and, in fact, many of these cases involve incest, or rape by a known and trusted adult. [...] Incest is often much harder to deal with than sexual abuse by a stranger outside the home. [...] Abuse by a stranger involves one incident; incest usually involves many incidents over a long period of time, and is shrouded in secrecy. Victims feel they have no one to turn to and fear they may not be believed – a fear that is often

¹⁹ Bénédicte loses her virginity with René, which has consequences on the rest of her love life; according to Bozon and Kontula, ‘l’entrée dans la sexualité avec un partenaire est toujours considérée comme un moment décisif de la biographie individuelle et de la construction de soi’, in Bozon and Kontula, ‘Initiation sexuelle et genre’, op. cit., p. 1368.

²⁰ Sandra Butler, *Conspiracy of Silence: The Trauma of Incest* (Volcano: Volcano Press, 1996), p. 7. See also Sophie Perrin, ‘L’inceste: Consistance du silence. France - 20^e-21^e siècles’, *Dossiers d’études*, 139 (2011), pp. 87-140. <[http://www.caf.fr/web/WebCnaf.nsf/090ba6646193ccc8c125684f005898f3/6dcbc77f6aa21c2ac125788e0023bbf5/\\$FILE/Dossier%20139%20-%20L'inceste.pdf](http://www.caf.fr/web/WebCnaf.nsf/090ba6646193ccc8c125684f005898f3/6dcbc77f6aa21c2ac125788e0023bbf5/$FILE/Dossier%20139%20-%20L'inceste.pdf)> [accessed 23 June 2011].

justified. They believe that they will cause family break-up or be rejected by other family members. In the case of sexual abuse by a parent, victims may feel betrayed by their non-abusing parent, who may be perceived to be powerless as a protector, or even colluding in the abuse. [...] The clinical literature suggests that sexual abuse in childhood is associated with both negative short-term outcomes such as guilt and anxiety, and long-term effects including drugs and alcohol abuse, somatic problems, depression and suicide attempts.²¹

Through *Bénédicte*, Elisa Brune illustrates a typical case of repeated abuse and the typical reaction of the victim. *Bénédicte*'s serious ongoing problems with stress and depression and her suicide attempt later in the book further reflect most victims' potential problems as outlined by Moore and Rosenthal. If Brune portrays rape by incest and its consequences for victims through the character of *Bénédicte*, as well as the way in which some teenagers struggle with the opposite sex and sexuality, she portrays her younger sister in a very different way. As a matter of fact, *Clarisse* represents a very different type of young women when it comes to relationships with men, as sixteen partners can be accounted for in the novel, from her first kiss when she is 12 to her death at 24. While *Bénédicte* seems to spend most of her life avoiding men once René starts molesting her, *Clarisse* is attracted to them (especially bad ones) like a magnet.

The gradual lowering of the average age of first sexual intercourse noted from the 1950s onwards has continued, with more and more under-15s having sexual intercourse from the 1990s, and by 2002 the average age was 17.²² *Clarisse*, along with Marion in *La Tournante*, are good illustrations of this trend and are to be viewed as 'très précoces' for they were under 15 when they lost their virginity.²³ Elisa Brune, in portraying *Clarisse* rushing into her first relationships, is thus portraying a social trend that concerns a minority of teenage girls. At the same time,

²¹ Moore and Rosenthal, *Sexuality in Adolescence*, op. cit., pp. 181-82.

²² 'Selon l'enquête HBSC (Health Behaviour in School-aged Children [...]), pour l'ensemble des élèves de 15 à 18 ans en 2002, 44% des jeunes ont déjà eu une relation sexuelle complète. L'âge moyen lors du premier rapport sexuel se situe vers 17 ans. Ces résultats sont restés relativement stables entre 1990 et 2002. Par contre, parmi les adolescentes sexuellement actives, le pourcentage de jeunes ayant eu une relation sexuelle précoce (avant 14 ans) a augmenté de 2,1% à 13,5% entre 1990 et 2002', in Isabelle Aujoulat, France Libion and Brigitte Rose, 'Les grossesses chez les adolescentes: Analyse des facteurs intervenant dans la survenue et leur issue', study realised for the Cabinet de la Ministre de l'Enfance, de l'Aide à la Jeunesse et de la Santé de la Communauté française de Belgique and the Cabinet de la Ministre de la Santé, de l'Action sociale et de l'Egalité des Chances de la Région wallonne (Brussels, October 2007), p. 6 <<http://www.uclouvain.be/cps/ucl/doc/reso/documents/grossesseadosynth.pdf>> [accessed 12 May 2011]. See also Bajos and Bozon, *Enquête sur la sexualité*, op. cit., p. 123.

²³ Bozon and Kontula, 'Initiation sexuelle et genre', op. cit., p. 1381.

she conveys the way in which Clarisse – and by extension girls who behave in the same way – are perceived by boys and society. Thus, when aged 13, Clarisse tries to have sex with her first boyfriend (aged 15) he advises her to ‘apprendre à rester à sa place. Une fille qui saute sur un mec, c’est une traînée’ (BC 79). This reaction epitomises how sexuality is socially constructed through the process of learning to fit in and how the roles are codified, that is to say that stereotypically, the boy is the one who should take the initiative. Thus, by showing how Clarisse is learning to behave, Elisa Brune exemplifies the enduring nature of this stereotype and how even nowadays a girl ‘has nothing to gain and her “reputation” to lose if she is too sexually active’.²⁴ This tendency to label girls according to sexual behaviour has also been described by Sue Lees who notes that ‘those who express overt sexuality too soon or too often are “sluts” or “molls”; those who are perceived as unattractive or not interested enough in sex are “dogs” or some similar insulting epithet’.²⁵ It is therefore evident that Elisa Brune is aware of and keen to demonstrate how on the one hand ‘a young girl’s sexual behaviour is a significant contributor to her reputation, in a negative, hostile way’ but also how ‘by contrast, that of her male counterpart is determined by a variety of factors – his sporting prowess or his school performance, among others. If a young boy is sexually active, his reputation is likely to be enhanced rather than diminished’,²⁶ as is the case for boys like Rachid in *La Tournante* for instance, as will be shown later in this chapter.

On another level it is interesting to note that Clarisse’s lovers are consistently older than her, including, importantly, her first lover. This trend is not new and continues to exist, as according to a 2001 study, about 35% of 15 year-old girls have a boyfriend over 18 and it seems that ‘les disparités d’âge entre les partenaires à l’entrée dans la sexualité soient, en partie, un effet de la volonté d’une partie des filles qui s’adressent à des garçons sensiblement plus âgés qu’elles’.²⁷ One of the

²⁴ Stevi Jackson, ‘The Social Construction of Female Sexuality’, in Jackson and Scott (eds), *Feminism and Sexuality*, op. cit., p. 72.

²⁵ Sue Lees, ‘Learning to love: Sexual Reputation, Morality and the Social Control of Girls’, in Maureen Cain (ed.), *Growing up Good: Policing the Behaviour of Girls in Europe* (London: Sage, 1989), pp. 19-26 (p. 19).

²⁶ Moore and Rosenthal, *Sexuality in Adolescence*, op. cit., p. 83.

²⁷ Nathalie Bajos and Sandrine Durand, ‘Etude pour la France’, in *Comportements Sexuels et Reproductifs des Adolescents. Comparaison entre Pays Développés*, Occasional Report n° 9 (November 2001), p. 12. <http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/france_teen_fr.pdf> [accessed 16 May 2011]. See also Bajos and Bozon, *Enquête sur la sexualité*, op. cit., p. 127.

explanations for this tendency, also displayed by Marion in *La Tournante*, is that young women are keen to avoid inexperienced sexual partners at this stage of their lives. Clarisse's most significant relationship, since it will lead to her pregnancy and the birth of her son Basile, is with a much older partner, Yves, who is 40 (as discussed in chapter 3). So Elisa Brune here again reflects what is commonly observed in female teenagers' behaviour when it comes to their choice of partners but she goes further and makes Clarisse's case more extreme and arguably unlikely in having her enter a relationship with Yves, a point to which we will return below.

At the time, Clarisse is 15 and 'malgré la différence d'âge, crut bien avoir trouvé l'homme de sa vie' (BC 81), with whom she has many plans, including having children against Yves' wishes. She stops taking the contraceptive pill, falls pregnant and 'n'était que maternité en puissance' (BC 103).²⁸ She keeps her pregnancy a secret to give him a surprise and is convinced he will change his mind when he is told, but he does not and ends the relationship since he had made it very clear all along that 'il serait toujours son amant si elle voulait, mais jamais le père de ses enfants' (BC 94). Adolescents who give birth are rare – 10 per thousand women aged 15-19 in Belgium and 11 per thousand in France in 2007 – so in representing this in *Blanche cassé*, Elisa Brune is portraying a minority experience, one that most teenagers do not become familiar with.²⁹ Through Clarisse's decision to become pregnant though, as already touched upon in chapter 3, Elisa Brune is able to represent the minority of teenagers who see maternity as a good option, as an 'escape' – just as some try to escape their family through early matrimony. On the one hand, since Clarisse 'ne voyait plus de direction précise' (BC 106) for her future, she feels saved by the perspective of becoming a mother: 'l'idée de l'enfant était venue la sauver' (BC 106). This attitude is in line with Myriam Somner's analysis that maternity to some teenagers is perceived as a 'moyen de valorisation, une façon de donner un sens à leur vie dans une société où l'adolescence s'étire et dans laquelle

²⁸ As mentioned in chapter 3, the 'mother' has the pill prescribed for Clarisse and Bénédicte as soon as possible to make sure they do not become pregnant should they choose to start having intercourse, an access to contraception which she apparently did not have. Elisa Brune may wish to illustrate here that parents cannot plan for every single possibility and that in doing exactly the opposite of what happened to them, they may create other problems.

²⁹ According to comparative figures for teenage pregnancies in European countries produced by Barnardo's Scotland, *Index of Wellbeing for Children in Scotland*, July 2007, p. 17 <http://www.barnardos.org.uk/wellbeing_for_children_in_scotland.pdf> [accessed 25 August 2011].

elle n'a ni fonction sociale, ni statut. C'est l'enfant surinvesti qui est censé réparer les nombreux échecs et blessures'.³⁰ On the other hand this also illustrates the strategy adopted by some girls of falling pregnant to keep their current partner, which produces the opposite effect in Clarisse's case. Indeed, during a study on teenage pregnancies some

soignants interrogés ont parfois évoqué la survenue d'une grossesse chez une adolescente comme moyen pour "garder son partenaire". Dans de nombreux cas, le partenaire ne serait pas impliqué dans cette décision de future maternité, si bien qu'un certain nombre [...] fuiraient à l'annonce de la grossesse.³¹

However, although in some countries like Belgium, Germany and Norway, 'on peut penser que la précocité sexuelle est liée en ce cas à la priorité accordée à une carrière conjugale et familiale plutôt qu'une carrière professionnelle' as explained in chapter 4, it appears that socially Clarisse – from a white middle-class background – does not fit all the usual characteristics of the teenage mother.³² Another factor that is different in the case of Clarisse is that Yves is much older and already has children. He is not interested in 'starting again' and Clarisse is not as aware of this as she might be. Clarisse may thus appear unrealistic and her decision may seem childish to the reader. Nevertheless, she could also have been 'abandoned' by a much younger man, so we can question Brune's reasons here for making Yves an older man since in as much as it is a more unusual scenario, it is also a less credible one given the age gap and the issue of the legal age of consent. Although it enables Brune to represent another 'extreme' type of intimate relationship, it nonetheless contrasts with the rest of the novel that appears generally plausible.³³ Furthermore, it is also interesting that Elisa Brune presents Yves positively and yet he is sleeping with a 15-year-old, which legally is considered as corruption of a minor. In short, although Clarisse is consenting to the relationship, he is obviously keen on much younger women, just like René in a sense.

Despite the responsibilities that come with motherhood as described in chapter 3, Clarisse does not really change her way of life and carries on burning the candle at

³⁰ Myriam Somner, 'Faire un enfant est-ce fonder une famille?' in Hedwige Peemans-Poullet (ed.), *Familles... attachantes?* (Brussels: Université des Femmes, 2005), p. 161.

³¹ Aujoulat et al., 'Les grossesses chez les adolescentes', op. cit., p. 9.

³² Bozon and Kontula, 'Initiation sexuelle et genre', op. cit., p. 1384.

³³ This could be connected to the fact that Brune has merged three different stories to write this novel, leading potentially to incoherence. See my unpublished interview with Elisa Brune on 27 August 2007. Appendix B, p. 256.

both ends, and from then on has multiple partners to whom she does not get emotionally attached (BC 133-40). These episodes can be seen as offering the reader a display of more or less deviant sexual behaviours. It is interesting that Clarisse wants to share the stories of her sexual experiences with Bénédicte as this apparently mirrors the attitude of 27% of French women, who like to have someone to talk to about their sexuality – a feature also important in *La Tentation d'Edouard*.³⁴ This representation of deviant male sexual behaviours enables Elisa Brune to portray a variety of male characters in just one narrative, leaving the reader with the idea that men are, in the words of Swiss writer Alice Rivaz, 'une race étrangère'.³⁵ Women are thus portrayed merely as victims in the narrative, not as deviant for accepting men's behaviour. Amongst Clarisse's lovers, Elisa Brune has chosen to depict men with ridiculous or scary fantasies: a young and brilliant politician who enjoys being humiliated in bed (BC 168); a perfect stranger 'fana de la sodomie' (BC 210); an ugly speech therapist who sees her once a week as if she were a patient and takes pleasure in simply looking at her (BC 219-24) and she even gets raped at one point (BC 225-6).³⁶ Summarising her experiences with men, Clarisse declares 'en [avoir] [...] vu de toutes sortes. Des sados. Des masos. Des fétichistes. Du caoutchouc. De la dentelle. Des impuissants. Des homos. Des réglos. Elle dit qu'elle n'arrive jamais au bout de ses surprises' (BC 243). Clarisse further comments that

la différence n'est pas si grande entre une queue qu'on veut et une queue qu'on ne veut pas. Le conjoint qu'on accepte les soirs où on voudrait dormir. Le type qui fonce uniquement parce qu'on a bu. Celui qui promet de l'argent, de la gloire, un coup de pouce, la liberté. Toutes ces queues qui demandent, prennent, exigent, sans même nous laisser le temps de désirer. Tous ces types qui comptent sur la faiblesse, l'espoir, la générosité. Ils gagnent toujours. Ils jouissent comme on éternue. Ils sont dans la préhistoire du sexe. (BC 230)

Brune/Clarisse, through this comment, can be perceived as voicing some women's perception of men's use of power and domination to lure them into relationships. Brune suggests that things do not seem to have evolved that much in terms of

³⁴ Bajos and Durand, 'Etude pour la France', op. cit., p. 14. In *La Tentation d'Edouard*, Geneviève, Daphné and Rebecca regularly share anecdotes about their sex lives.

³⁵ Alice Rivaz, *La paix des ruches* (Lausanne: Editions de l'Age d'Homme, 1984 [1947]), p. 85.

³⁶ Clarisse's reaction to being raped is surprising as she states that 'ce n'est pas agréable, mais on en meurt pas. C'est comme tout le reste' (BC 226). Unlike Bénédicte who never shares with anyone her experience of rape and her ordeal, and the girls from *La Tournante* who have to keep their secret, Clarisse does not seem to mind talking about it and does not even seem to be affected by it. Brune thus illustrates different reactions to rape and the fact that women are not all the same.

equality when it comes to sexuality, with the use of the word 'préhistoire'. Overall, if the picture of men and male behaviour which Elisa Brune presents to the reader is varied, it is also consistently negative throughout the narrative. This portrayal of male sexuality combined with Clarisse's acceptance of their deviances could almost make a reader think that there is some truth in the view that 'female sexuality is marked as naturally masochistic, narcissistic and passive; male sexuality is inscribed as naturally aggressive, sadistic and active'.³⁷ As for women, they are portrayed as silent and accepting victims of male deviance and domination, leading us to argue that again, Elisa Brune gives her female characters no opportunity to break away from the stereotypes, and only seems to reinforce them, even though it may be unintentional. Indeed, even though she is keen to remain an 'observer' presenting her readers with things 'the way they are' according to her perception, she is failing to contribute to the solution by missing the opportunity to portray women who, in the end, overcome their problems and find themselves in a stable, happy relationship – which would also reflect 'reality'.

Eventually, Clarisse decides she wants to enter a relationship again with 'quelqu'un de stable, n'importe qui de pas trop méchant' (BC 240) and gives herself four options (an engineer, a doctor, a soldier and a drug addict) only to pick the worst of them, that is to say the addict who does not meet her criteria, knowing perfectly well that 'il ne ferait pas ses quatre volontés, ne serait pas commode ni dévoué, pourrait même devenir violent, serait par définition fauché et capable de lui extorquer le peu qu'elle possédait' (BC 246). This man, Fred, will turn her into a prostitute – even though this is never explicitly stated – to earn the money he needs to buy his drugs. Elisa Brune here depicts another common situation in which some women find themselves (willingly or unwillingly). Even though Clarisse 'ne se sentait pas souillée le moins du monde. Au contraire, elle était fière de la combine. Plus besoin de demander de l'argent à [sa] mère' (BC 277), the pattern adopted by the couple is typical of the 'rôles sociaux liés au sexe'.³⁸ According to a European study, more women than men tend to enter a relationship with partners who have an addiction, as

³⁷ Anne Cranny-Francis, Wendy Waring, Pam Stavropoulos, Joan Kirkby, *Gender Studies: Terms and Debates* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 7.

³⁸ Like the generation of the 'mother' and Iris, Clarisse escapes from her parents thanks to men but only to end up with something worse.

men are looking for someone – preferably ‘clean’ at the start – who will financially take care of them. In this type of relationship, the woman is usually the one in charge of earning money, very often through prostitution, but the man controls the money earned and the drugs bought with it.³⁹ The relationship Elisa Brune chooses to depict here is clearly based on male domination and female subordination (BC 281), as is often the case in this kind of relationship in reality. In short, throughout her life, Clarisse supposedly wants to be free and not fall into the traditional patterns of relationships, exemplifying how Brune’s characters are keen to ‘renoncer aux sentiers balisés’ and how ‘au confort des solutions préfabriquées, ils préfèrent l’expérimentation, la découverte de modes de vie alternatifs’,⁴⁰ but she still ends up being controlled by and submissive to a man.

Through the various experiences of Bénédicté and Clarisse depicted in *Blanche cassé*, Elisa Brune paints a gloomy portrayal of men (and women) as there is barely anything positive to be said about them throughout the entire narrative. With this novel, she attempts to show the many different ways men can treat women badly as well as some ways they use to assert power and domination over women. Unlike in *La Tournante*, she has chosen to have only two central characters, and mainly one enduring the numerous acts of violence and deviance she illustrates in her novel. These multiple experiences finally lead Clarisse to conclude towards the end of the narrative, maybe as a mouthpiece for Elisa Brune and many other women, that ‘on a tort de croire que tout arrivera par les hommes. Ils sont plus tordus les uns que les autres, et pas mieux armés que nous’ (BC 291). If some aspects of the narrative do mirror actual teenage sexual trends and the social construction of female sexuality, some very gloomy aspects of the two main protagonists’ lives provide a view of specific cases rather than an accurate view of average teenage relationships. The interest in doing this for Elisa Brune may have been to draw attention to a different type of teenage relationship rather than the usual ones which would have presented less interest for the readership and left readers with an impression of déjà vu. Nevertheless, the representations of young women’s relationships with the opposite

³⁹ Conseil de l’Europe, *Les femmes et les drogues: Actes du Séminaire organisé par le groupe de coopération en matière de lutte contre l’abus et le trafic illicite des stupéfiants* (Strasbourg: Editions du Conseil de l’Europe, 1995), p. 28.

⁴⁰ Dambroise, ‘Elisa Brune’, op. cit., p. 30.

sex in *Blanche cassé* are pessimistic and, even though Brune portrays unusual cases of teenage sexuality, she does not manage to completely avoid the sex role stereotypes.

Finally, let us now focus on Marion, for whom relationships with men mainly revolve around rape. With this extreme case, Brune reports on another possible aspect of teenage sexuality. Although collective rapes represent a minority of cases in teenage sexual relationships, they are nonetheless a reality and a plausible outcome for some teenage girls who agree to have intercourse with an initial partner. Like Clarisse, Marion is a precocious teenager who wants to grow up fast and who finds boys of her own age either immature (LT 37) or boring, even though she regularly has intercourse with them (LT 94). She is interested in ‘des séances de sexe avec des partenaires chevronnés’ (LT 54) and in agreeing to take part in a ‘tournante’ with her friend Mélissa, she thinks she is getting access to sex with multiple grown-up, experienced partners (LT 41), which would enable her to become a sex expert not an ‘experte en viol’ (LT 55).⁴¹ In looking for older and experienced partners, Marion also fits the profile of young women described above. Marion is therefore lured by the prospect of discovering more about sex but is nonetheless the victim of a trap set by Rachid, for whom setting up the ‘tournante’ was the only way to get what he sought. Indeed, Marion had always refused to go out with him and, according to him, is ‘farouche avec personne sauf avec [lui]’ (LT 145). The ‘tournante’ is nothing more than a hunting strategy to catch the prey he targets, especially since Rachid considers that there are two kinds of women: the ones you respect and the ones you rape because that is what they ‘deserve’. Indeed, according to a study, the confused view of relationships and female sexuality that some young men have often leads them to see sexually liberated teenage girls as fair game for exploitation or even rape. In a survey conducted in Australia for instance (and proving this is a worldwide phenomenon), 14 per cent of boys declared that a girl who had had intercourse with

⁴¹ Even though Marion and Mélissa first agreed, they subsequently had no choice but to comply. In this context it is worth keeping in mind the words of Susan Brownmiller and her feminist analysis of rape and resistance, which indicates that ‘eventual compliance [is] no indication of tacit “consent.”’ Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1975), p. 385. See also Anne-Marie Barone and Christian Schiess, ‘Viol: quand une femme dit non, c’est non!’, *L’émilie*, February 2007, p. 14; Nicole-Claude Mathieu ‘Quand céder n’est pas consentir’, in Nicole-Claude Mathieu (ed.), *L’Arraînement des femmes. Essais en anthropologie des sexes*. (Paris: Editions de l’Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales, 1985), 169-245.

other boys was a permissible target for rape.⁴² The headmistress of Marion's school echoes the connection between hunting language and male attitudes to women when she says that the rapists will 'recruter de nouvelles proies' (LT 60). The association of choosing and pursuing a girl or woman (that is to say seducing in general rather than simply coercing) with hunting and eating food also occurs in *La Tentation d'Edouard* and *Un Homme est une rose* but of course is not new, having also been employed by writers such as Samuel Richardson in his *Clarissa* for instance.

In representing the issue of gang rape – which was very topical in France in 2001 and 2002 with *La Tournante* being first published in 2001 – Elisa Brune once more limits herself to the illustration of a specific case.⁴³ Interestingly she does not focus on gang rapes committed in the suburbs on girls from the suburbs, which were the centre of media attention at the time, but chooses to represent a case that is different. In adopting this approach, Elisa Brune illustrates that, as Françoise Héritier comments, gang rapes 'ne sont pas seulement le fait de banlieues défavorisées' and is thus avoiding an obvious stereotype for which she may have been criticised.⁴⁴ In the novel, Marion's aunt, Céline, stresses this difference by explaining what the 'tournantes de banlieues' (LT 98) are and contrasting them with Marion's case, which was more 'une variante adaptée au milieu urbain' (LT 97). Wherever gang rape takes place, the victims are targeted for similar reasons: they are either legitimate 'punishment' for girls in the suburbs seen as displaying their 'faible niveau de moralité' (LT 98) by going out with boys, or revenge on girls like Marion, who refuse to go out with someone – 'seulement un moyen qu'il a trouvé pour essayer de la baiser quand même' (LT 113). This last quotation is in line with Diana

⁴² Moore and Rosenthal, *Sexuality in Adolescence*, op. cit., pp. 178-79.

⁴³ Laurent Mucchielli, 'Recherche sur les viols collectifs: données judiciaires et analyse sociologique', *Questions Pénales*, 18 (January 2005), 1-4 (p. 1). In the French press, 'alors que de 1990 à 2000, les viols collectifs n'avaient occasionné qu'un volume de 1 à 7 titres [...], en 2001 l'expression "viols collectifs" ainsi que celle, nouvelle, de "tournantes", apparaissent au total à 50 reprises. Le phénomène recule en 2002 avec 32 occurrences, puis seulement 23 en 2003, et il disparaît quasiment en 2004'. Still according to Mucchielli, 'ce n'est pas un fait divers dramatique mais un film (*La Squale*) qui constitue l'élément déclencheur [de cette panique médiatique et] la très forte médiatisation d'un livre témoignage (*Dans l'enfer des tournantes*, de Samira Bellil) et d'un nouveau mouvement politique (*Ni putes ni soumises*)'. Laurent Mucchielli, 'L'éphémère question des viols collectifs en France (2000-2002): étude d'une panique morale', *Logos* 26, 14 (2007), 9-30 (p. 10).

⁴⁴ Françoise Héritier, *Masculin/Féminin II*, op. cit., p. 323. Christine Delphy makes a similar comment: 'en dehors des banlieues aussi on viole; comme on viole, en France, depuis des siècles, sans avoir attendu l'immigration maghrébine pour apprendre à le faire, et à dire après que c'était la faute de la violée'. Christine Delphy, *Un Universalisme si particulier: Féminisme et exception française (1980-2010)* (Paris: Syllepse, 2010), p. 237.

Scully's view that for men, 'when a woman says no, rape is the suitable method of conquering the "offending" object'.⁴⁵ In both cases there is an element of domination and violence and in every case too 'la préméditation est constante'.⁴⁶ Where Brune's illustration of men's violence is interesting is that her narrative strategy using several narrators enables her to present readers with the points of view of, on the one hand, victims and their families and on the other rapists.

The accounts from Marion and Mélissa regarding the violence, added to their remarks on the sexual act, correspond to accounts of actual rape victims described in studies. Thus, from Marion and Mélissa's point of view, violence is unnecessary, especially since they consented to the 'tournante' in the first place: as Mélissa remarks, 'au début, on était bien disposées, on voulait juste s'amuser avec le sexe. Qui les a obligés à transformer ça en torture?' (LT 142). In the same way, Marion explains that they became increasingly violent and 'ne se contentaient plus de tirer leur coup. Ils devenaient mauvais. Ils voulaient m'humilier. [...] Bref, ça devenait de plus en plus sordide et insupportable. [...] il leur fallait plus de sensations fortes' (LT 118). This account of violence is in line with some victims' testimonies. One anonymous girl in a 'banlieue' reported that people do not 'see the humiliation, the hours on end, the boys queuing up, the blows, the spitting, the objects, the insults, the times you faint from pain'.⁴⁷ Furthermore, once Marion disappears they increase their violence towards Mélissa – even though they know she does not have any information about Marion's whereabouts – for instance by strangling her with a scarf and burning her with a cigarette until she faints, before raping her (LT 141). These descriptions are similar to those included in studies about the additional humiliation and violence which feature particularly in gang rapes and which are used as a form of amusement for the group of rapists. Women report that they

felt that the laughing, taunting and added humiliations were part of the whole assault, that it acted as 'an extra' for the rapists that they were able to make their friends laugh and increased humiliation of the woman added to their feelings of power and control.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Diana Scully, *Understanding Sexual Violence: A Study of Convicted Rapists* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990), p. 144.

⁴⁶ Héritier, *Masculin/Féminin II*, op. cit., p. 323.

⁴⁷ Anonymous testimony from a banlieue forum quoted in Rose George, 'Revolt against the Rapists', *The Guardian Weekend*, 5 April 2003, p. 32.

⁴⁸ Cathy Roberts, *Women and Rape* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), p. 75.

Mélissa finally concludes at one point that ‘c’est un truc de mecs, je suppose, la domination, la violence, et carrément même le sadisme. On dirait qu’ils ne peuvent pas prendre leur pied sans ça’ (LT 142); a comment which echoes that of Clarisse in *Blanche cassé* referred to above and which contributes to making the vision teenage girls have of men and their need for domination consistent (and consistently negative) throughout both novels. The character of Mélissa enables Brune to illustrate how domination and violence appear necessary to these men, which has led some women in turn to believe that ‘sexual violence is used by men as a way of securing and maintaining the relations of male dominance and female subordination, which are central to the patriarchal social order’.⁴⁹

In contrast to this, Rachid and the other rapists’ views and violent behaviour enable Elisa Brune to illustrate the linkage of power, violence and sexuality in the male sexual script and how ‘men’s gender power is ultimately backed by force, that force is used when power is in jeopardy. Hence sexual violence is the outcome of men’s power as men and women’s resistance to it’.⁵⁰ Indeed, from the point of view of those perpetrating the rapes, the violence is both part of the fun and a matter of pride. Rachid declares that ‘baiser, ça doit ressembler à buter sinon, c’est chiant [...] mais entendre une salope qui gémit de douleur et entrer bien à fond dedans, ça c’est le plan certifié pour se sentir grand’ (LT 146), illustrating how sexual violence and rape are seen by some men as the “perfect” combination to prove masculinity: it is aggressive, it is sexual, and it involves dominance over and denigration of a woman’.⁵¹

The discourse of the boys who take part in the ‘tournante’ also mirrors the social significance of the act of group rape for some young men and how rape combined with exacerbated violence towards women can be seen as ‘cool’. Indeed, some studies have found that

the peer social environment also plays a big role in males’ sexually aggressive behaviors. All-male groups that emphasize stereotypical conceptions of masculinity – dominance, competition, heterosexual activity, group loyalty – also tend to hold attitudes that encourage rape. Fraternities, male athletic teams, and male juvenile

⁴⁹ Marianne Hester, Liz Kelly and Jill Radford, *Women, Violence and Male Power: Feminist Activism, Research and Practice* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1996), p. 65.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁵¹ Susan A. Basow, *Gender: Stereotypes and Roles*, 3rd edn (Pacific Grove: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 1992 [1980]), p. 316.

delinquent groups tend to support the view that women are sexual objects, sex is a matter of dominance/submission, and coercion. [...] Gang rapes in particular appear to be a way for young men to bond with each other, to forge ties of 'brotherhood' on women's bodies.⁵²

It is thus evident that rape is also more a form of assertion of power over women for these men than simply sex. In addition, if 'the act of group rape forges an alliance among men against the female victim',⁵³ men do not fail to boast about it and according to some protagonists in the narrative, the boys involved talk about their 'exploits' (LT 95), 'se montent la tête les uns les autres [...] se la jouent au plus immonde, comme si c'était un concours' (LT 141). Such views were stated by interviewees spoken to by journalists from *Le Monde*, with comments such as 'pour les garçons, participer à une tournante, c'est comme s'ils avaient gagné la Coupe du monde. On dirait une espèce de concours entre eux'.⁵⁴ Whilst gang rapes are 'proof [...] of male bonding [...] and proof of a desire to humiliate the victim *beyond* the act of rape through the process of anonymous mass assault',⁵⁵ there is also a significant element of power and domination in this crime as already stated. Indeed collective rapes and the female victims enable the initiator of the 'tournante' to

obtenir ou conserver une position privilégiée [...]. Sa responsabilité s'exerce auprès des hommes (il doit les satisfaire), elle est nulle lorsqu'il s'agit de la femme (elle doit obéir). Dans les deux cas il instaure un rapport de domination: domination symbolique auprès des autres membres du milieu, domination physique et psychologique pour contraindre la femme. Il est pour les uns chef charismatique et pour la femme sujet violent.⁵⁶

Thus there is a need for domination both within the group and over women who, as previously stated, are viewed by Rachid in only two ways. They are either virgins or whores and being categorised as the latter seems to be enough to justify a display of male power and domination through repeated rape and violence towards them. According to some studies on rape

The power factor appears obvious in the dynamic of gang rape, and the anger component may also be evident in some assaults. This is especially true where the

⁵² Ibid., p. 319.

⁵³ Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, op. cit., p. 188.

⁵⁴ Héritier, *Masculin/Féminin II*, op. cit., p. 326, quoting an article from Frédéric Chambon in *Le Monde*, 24 April 2001, no page number available.

⁵⁵ Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, op. cit., p. 187.

⁵⁶ La Maison des Femmes de Paris, 'Une définition du phénomène: tournante', p. 1 <<http://maisondesfemmes.free.fr/revue/violences/viol/def.tournante.htm>> [accessed 31 May 2005]. Leila explains that her brother was 'le premier qui avait eu le droit de [prendre Marion] [...]. Il était le chef du groupe puisque c'était lui qui avait eu l'idée' (LT 111).

offenders tend to view women as virgins or whores and believe that females, once they experience sex, are prone to become whores. As a result, in some gang rapes each offender in turn becomes more aggressive than his predecessor and forces more degradation on the victim, in part to prove his toughness to his cohort, but also because she is having sex with all the men in the gang. The fact that she is submitting under duress seems irrelevant. The fact that she is submitting sexually to a number of men confirms the offender's view of her as a whore, and whores are legitimate targets for abuse and mistreatment. They are to be punished for their sexuality, and sex becomes the punishment.⁵⁷

However, although Elisa Brune has managed to avoid the stereotype of the 'tournante de banlieue' that attracted the most media attention,⁵⁸ the fact that according to one protagonist, Benoît, the only goal of Rachid and his peers is 'de pilonner autant de nanas que possible, de préférence cent pour cent françaises. Ça doit être une sorte de revanche sur la société qui les brime' (LT 95), leads us to argue that she is reinforcing another stereotype: that of racially-motivated rape. In depicting a Muslim as instigator of the collective rape, Brune tackles a type of collective rape that has not been widely mediatised in France and does not appear to be the most common, yet the pattern she uses for her plot, with 'Arab' boys raping white French girls bears some similarities to one of the widespread myths in the USA that 'most rapes are performed by Black men on White women' even though '75% of reported rapes are intraracial with White male offenders and White female victims the most common pairing'.⁵⁹ Indeed, in many American studies on rape, a link has been perceived between race and rape, even though

inter-racial rape is not common [and] women are more likely to be raped by men known to them [and] of the same colour. Yet the fear of other races is strong, and the white male fear of the sexual strength of black maleness adds to this fear of differentness for white women.⁶⁰

Thus, instead of portraying rape as a form of violence against women unrelated to ethnicity, as an extreme yet typical manifestation of sexism in which all women are seen as objects 'disponibles au gré du groupe des hommes',⁶¹ Brune has some of her

⁵⁷ A. Nicholas Groth, *Men who Rape: The Psychology of the Offender* (New York: Plenum Press, 1981 [1979]), p. 114.

⁵⁸ See notably, Anonymous, 'L'humiliation des filles', *L'Express*, 21 June 2001 <http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/societe/l-humiliation-des-filles_490400.html?p=4> [accessed 10 June 2011].

⁵⁹ Basow, *Gender: Stereotypes and Roles*, op. cit., p. 316.

⁶⁰ Roberts, *Women and Rape*, op. cit., p. 26. Also, Brune in portraying an Arab rapist does not help 'le débat sur "les tournantes" qui permet de faire reposer sur une catégorie d'hommes – les jeunes Arabes – le problème des violences et des viols collectifs'. Delphy, *Un Universalisme si particulier*, op. cit., p. 192.

⁶¹ Jaspard, *Les violences contre les femmes*, op. cit., p. 68.

male characters follow the stereotype of the inter-racial rape. This might be in order to put the emphasis on a different type of gang rape from the ones mostly described in the press and reinforce the idea that rape is a multifaceted issue that cannot be reduced to one scenario. The views expressed by some of the male characters in the narrative that all French girls are 'easy lays' have been observed amongst teenagers. As one teenage boy put it crudely during a family planning class, 'French girls are for fucking and Arab girls are for marrying'.⁶² Therefore, Rachid and his fellow rapists are seen by other boys such as Benoît (LT 95) as having a political motive for raping French girls, as if they were in a political conflict with France where 'rape is used in a racist attack, because women are vulnerable and because sexual violence is a specific and effective form of humiliation or expression of contempt'.⁶³ Indeed, during conflicts 'rape is committed by victorious troops against women on the defeated side, or as a considered act of aggression during the process of fighting. Either way, rape is designed to humiliate and degrade the opposition, the opposing men, that is, for the attack is on male property', which again reinforces the idea that rape is about power rather than about sex.⁶⁴

Furthermore, Rachid states that in his culture 'c'est pas demain la veille qu'on va arrêter un type parce qu'il a réglé son compte à une traînée [...] Et les autres meufs, elles restent chez elles, comme ça personne les agresse et le problème est réglé' (LT 147).⁶⁵ Through this statement by the young rapist, Elisa Brune illustrates the only two choices girls both in the suburbs and elsewhere have with regard to freedom. To be considered 'good girls', they have to study at home, look after the men, and never go out. Conversely if they behave like French girls by wearing make-up, dressing in a more overtly feminine way and going out, then they get a reputation which is irreversible, are considered 'sluts' and become a target for collective rape.⁶⁶ In short, women are expected either not consent at all or consent to everything. This is confirmed in Brune's narrative by Céline, who stresses that nowadays girls have to face the 'terrorisme de la réputation' (LT 174-5) in a society where 'les notions de

⁶² Anonymous teenager quoted in Rose George, 'Revolt against the Rapists', op. cit., p. 31.

⁶³ Roberts, *Women and Rape*, op. cit., p. 27.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 26.

⁶⁵ Rachid's belief that what he is doing is legitimate is further demonstrated when he states: 'y a quand même pas intérêt à se retrouver en taule pour des histoires de femelles' (LT 147), also representative of how little value is given to women with the use of the word 'femelles'.

⁶⁶ As explained in Rose George, 'Revolt against the Rapists', op. cit., p. 32.

réputation et de déshonneur sont redevenues des déterminants majeurs pour le statut des femmes’ (LT 98). This issue of reputation is further represented in *La Tournante* with the example of Samira, a young Muslim that Rachid and his friends judged was behaving badly and decided to punish through a ‘tournante’, saying ‘même si c’est une fille de chez nous, on va pas la ménager, ça fera une bonne leçon pour les autres’ (LT 147).⁶⁷

All in all, rapists use violence and humiliation both for pleasure and power but also to make sure the victims remain silent, since ‘ce type d’organisation est basé sur la loi du silence, un système de répression violente et la difficulté pour la victime de s’extraire du milieu’.⁶⁸ As a consequence, a girl like Mélissa involved in a ‘tournante’ feels ‘coincée comme un rat. Si [elle] y allai[t], ils [la] violeraient encore, si [elle] n’y allai[t] pas ils [la] tortureraient, et si [elle] portai[t] plainte, ils [la] tueraient’ (LT 142). Many articles highlight the fact that most girls do not dare to speak, not only because they feel so ashamed but also ‘for fear of reprisals – apartments burned down, threats to younger sisters’.⁶⁹ These reprisals are similar to those experienced by the Dumeyne family after Marion did not show up for her weekly ‘tournante’. The rapists ransacked her family’s flat and had previously threatened to hurt her little brother, Thomas (LT 53-55).

So even if the girls know their rapists, they are too scared to report them and this aspect, which is typical of victims of gang rape (as well as of other rapes), is explained by the psychologist in the narrative:

Les filles sont ligotées, beaucoup plus soucieuses de pouvoir continuer à vivre dans un milieu qui restera le même que de s’en remettre à une hypothétique justice et de passer par des procédures infernales. Porter plainte, pour elles, c’est aussi inimaginable que de convoquer Dieu ou les extraterrestres. Cette attitude est à la fois terrible et compréhensible. Et on ne peut pas violer la victime une fois de plus en l’obligeant à porter plainte. C’est plutôt en amont qu’il faut travailler, du côté de la justice et de la prévention. (LT 152)

Even when the victims dare to speak out and name the rapists, they remain likely to be blamed for what happened to them and also to face reprisals – as illustrated in the articles from *Le Monde* and *L’Humanité* discussed in chapter 2 and which help

⁶⁷ This last example reflects the reality Samira Bellil describes in her novel *Dans l’Enfer des tournantes* in which she explains how women are the guardians of honour and have to remain virgins until they marry. Samira Bellil, *Dans l’enfer des tournantes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003).

⁶⁸ La Maison des Femmes de Paris, ‘Une définition du phénomène: tournante’, op. cit., p. 2.

⁶⁹ Rose George, ‘Revolt against the Rapists’, op. cit., p. 31.

convey the ‘effet de réel’ in the narrative. Knowing that ‘ils sont capables de leur faire la peau’ (LT 96) and aware of the shame they would feel (LT 98), many victims, from the narrative and in reality, do not even expect justice to help them. Elisa Brune manages to illustrate clearly the omertà the victims have imposed on them.

If with *La Tournante* and *Blanche cassé* the reader witnesses violence and power in the relationships between men and women and how, in the words of Marianne Hester, some ‘have come to see male sexual violence as one of the defining characteristics of patriarchal societies [...] [serving] as a means of reinforcing women’s role as subordinate to men’,⁷⁰ the following analysis of adult relationships will show that if the violence here is not necessarily as overt, the men appear to be equally attached to the notions of power and domination.

Representations of casual adult relationships

Another type of heterosexual relationship explored by Elisa Brune is between adult, single men and women who are keen to explore the possibility of sexual relationships with a new partner. There are several differences here with *La Tournante* and *Blanche cassé* as the encounters are between (usually) consenting adults and the style is much lighter. Although both narratives contain a fair amount of humour and can be read simply as pure entertainment, they nonetheless provide the reader with plausible representations of types of relationships between men and women in contemporary society and at the same time tackle several concerns at the core of intimate relationships. It is worth noting here that *La Tentation d’Edouard* and *Un Homme est une rose*, like *La Tournante* and *Blanche cassé*, work as a pair in that Elisa Brune, although dealing with the same theme and writing in both cases in the epistolary genre, apparently wanted to have the opportunity to depict two sorts of men. She explains that if she enjoyed portraying Edouard ‘d’une façon idyllique’ it was ‘malheureusement pas réaliste du tout’, which is why she decided to write *Un Homme est une rose* as a ‘contrepartie en [s]’inspirant cette fois plutôt de mecs que je connais’, which suggests another link between Brune’s work and reality.⁷¹ In spite of the differences, Brune explores in both narratives topics such as power, domination

⁷⁰ Hester, Kelly and Radford, *Women, Violence and Male Power*, op. cit., pp. 77-78.

⁷¹ See my unpublished interview with Elisa Brune on 27 August 2007. Appendix B, pp. 255-56.

and women's lack of confidence and she describes the seduction strategies used by the protagonists. As usual with her novels, she is describing situations rather than suggesting answers to the issues she presents to the reader, or at least not any political or collective ones.

First of all, as Susan Basow puts it, 'the cultural norm [is] for men to dominate and for women to submit, combined with sexual scripts that require men to be sexually aggressive and women to appear sexually disinterested'.⁷² As a consequence the concept of power obviously has to be taken into account when looking at the relationships between men and women. Defining the concept of power is complex as it can be applied to many aspects of society, such as class, race or sexuality; many of these are not present in Elisa Brune's work and therefore we will only look at this concept in terms of its link to domination of a group over another, of men over women to be precise. These stereotyped expectations and norms deriving from the combined influences of upbringing and education were notably highlighted by Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics*: 'Should one regard sex in humans as a drive, it is still necessary to point out that the enormous area of our lives, both in early "socialization" and in adult experience, labelled "sexual behaviour," is almost entirely the product of learning'.⁷³ As a consequence it is no surprise that 'heterosexual dating relationships are heavily structured by gender role norms and stereotypes'⁷⁴ and although there are several theories about male domination and power in society (psychodynamic, social learning, cognitive-developmental or gender schema theories), one can also link the following sociological explanation for males' need for power to the behaviour of Brune's protagonists:

Men's access to positive conceptions of an active, pleasure-seeking, embodied, masculine sexuality, put particular pressures on them to become 'real men'... [which] implies the exercise of power over women, whether or not this is recognised, acknowledged or desired by an individual man.⁷⁵

However, before asserting one's power, one has to gain it (although stereotypically some will see men as being 'born with' more power over women). This often implies using a strategy and the following pages will explore the strategies, language and

⁷² Basow, *Gender: Stereotypes and Roles*, op. cit., p. 318.

⁷³ Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (London: Virago, 1977), p. 32.

⁷⁴ Basow, *Gender: Stereotypes and Roles*, op. cit., p. 218.

⁷⁵ Janet Holland, Caroline Ramazanoglu, Sue Sharpe and Rachel Thomson, *The Male in the Head: Young People, Heterosexuality and Power* (London: Tufnell Press, 1998), p. 10.

images linked to domination and submission used by the protagonists to attempt to gain, assert and sometimes lose power during the seduction game leading to intimate relationships. In *La Tentation d'Edouard* and *Un Homme est une rose*, both men have to find seduction strategies in order to attract Geneviève and Marianne, who resist. As Michel Laxenaire puts it,

la séduction se situe [...] sur une courbe qui va de la frustration à la violence. [...] Séduire, c'est remplacer la violence par une force oblique destinée à leurrer l'adversaire tout en gardant le même but, celui de la satisfaction sexuelle. Dans la mesure où elle est un leurre sur ce but, la séduction demande une stratégie qui varie avec les époques et avec les individus: un peu d'hypocrisie, une petite dose de mensonge, beaucoup d'éloquence, une façon bien adroite de se mettre en valeur, une grande disponibilité et de la générosité. [...] Elle demande aussi de la langueur, de la dévotion, des larmes, des aveux de faiblesse, feints ou réels, des confessions, vraies ou fausses, et, somme toute, une stratégie d'approche qui s'apparente à la parade et au masque.⁷⁶

This is a good summary of Edouard and Michel's seduction strategies, since they use in turn courtesy, attack, guilt and pity to try and force Geneviève and Marianne to meet them. In contrast to men's scenarios of attack, women adopt defensive strategies in a sort of trench warfare. In both books, for the two men, just as was the case for Valmont in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, 'la stratégie fait l'essentiel de la séduction'⁷⁷ and the speed with which their strategies take effect reflects the different styles of the narratives, that is the traditional epistolary versus the faster e-pistolary style. Michel in *Un Homme est une rose* therefore manages to meet Marianne much more quickly than Edouard but he still has to adopt several similar strategies to achieve his goal.

In the case of Edouard, it is noticeable that, in trying to seduce Geneviève, he uses at first a very courteous style with lots of images and invitations to share things, claiming to be serious about his commitment (LTE 17), wanting to take his time to seduce her by working hard at it (LTE 11) and clearly aiming to reassure her – 'je vous dis ça pour d'emblée créer un climat de confiance' (LTE 21); 'rassurez-vous' (LTE 64).⁷⁸ This corresponds to the first step of the 'amour courtois' model in which

⁷⁶ Michel Laxenaire, 'La séduction en littérature', *Dialogue*, 164 (2004), 3-12 (pp. 10-11). See also Jean-François Marmion, 'Les secrets de la séduction', *Sciences Humaines*, 217, July 2010, pp. 36-51.

⁷⁷ Laxenaire, 'La séduction en littérature', op. cit., p. 8.

⁷⁸ This clearly contrasts with the references to war and domination that come later in the narrative and that we will discuss below.

the man pretends to ‘s’incliner, de s’abaisser’.⁷⁹ Michel too tries to create a climate of trust at first and whilst he does not know anything about Marianne except for her work (like Edouard with Geneviève), his first strategy is to try and make her trust him by flattering her about her article (HR 10), being curious and asking a lot of questions about her (HR 12-13), and by taking advantage of her positive reaction to keep the e-mail exchange going. In doing so, both male characters act according to the Marquise de Merteuil’s advice that in a letter ‘vous devez moins chercher à lui dire ce que vous pensez que ce qui lui plaît davantage’.⁸⁰

In addition, both men foreground their intellectual abilities, showing their need for intellectual domination and enabling Elisa Brune to represent how showing off knowledge and intellectual abilities is part of what is socially accepted for men in society and one of their familiar techniques for dominating. Although Michel’s status as an academic is known from the start of the novel (HR 17), he boasts about his latest publication being ‘un bon investissement’ (HR 13) and justifies its quality by warning Marianne it is a complex book which starts with ‘des considérations théoriques générales arides’ (HR 20). As for Edouard, he introduces himself by stating his profession in a rather high-flown style – ‘Scrutateur de l’âme. A l’université’ (LTE 22) – and he leaves indications here and there of what he is good at and what he does or does not know as if he were leaving clues for a treasure hunt. These behaviours are representative of how men are often eager to display their intellectual abilities and knowledge when seducing a woman. Indeed, Jean-Claude Kaufmann comments that during the seduction process ‘les hommes mettent en avant leur profession et leurs capitaux économiques, les femmes leur aspect physique et secondairement leurs compétences relationnelles’.⁸¹ So in this respect, the behaviour of the two male characters corresponds closely to well-known male stereotypes. Edouard’s attitude can also be interpreted as a reference by Brune to the literary tradition of courtly love, in which the knight has to deserve the love of the lady he seeks to win.⁸² The way the seduction game evolves between Geneviève and

⁷⁹ Georges Duby, ‘Le modèle courtois’, in Duby and Perrot, *Histoire des femmes en Occident*, op. cit., II, pp. 323-42 (p. 324).

⁸⁰ Laclos, *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, Letter CV, op. cit., p. 347.

⁸¹ Kaufmann, *La sociologie du couple*, op. cit., p. 11.

⁸² *La Tentation d’Edouard* not only enables Elisa Brune to rework the epistolary genre but also the courtly love tradition since the way Edouard and Geneviève behave matches more or less the different

Edouard and what he has to do to finally meet her also puts us in mind of the 17th-century trajectory of the 'Carte de Tendre' in which

la séduction amoureuse [...] était inscrite en termes de géographie et, dans ce jeu de société d'un nouveau genre, le séducteur était obligé, pour accéder aux faveurs de la Dame, de parcourir un itinéraire symbolique compliqué allant du village de 'Tendre sur estime' à celui de 'Tendre sur passion' en passant par les hameaux de la 'Sincérité', de la 'Générosité', en évitant surtout les écueils du 'Lac d'indifférence' et de la 'Mer de l'oubli'. À chaque étape de cet itinéraire symbolique correspondait une récompense attribuée par la Dame: anneau, baiser, nudité. Quant au don final, il était repoussé dans un lointain brumeux.⁸³

In other words Edouard has to find the best way to trick Geneviève into loving him in order to win the seduction game and starts with 'genteel', polite strategies. If the game of seduction between the protagonists of *La Tentation d'Edouard* can appear a little old-fashioned at the beginning, the courteous approach remains a feature of contemporary courtship and this is therefore the path he pursues.

Indeed, when Edouard and Michel realise their first strategy has not worked and the women want to avoid meeting them, they become more aggressive in their approach, with a more provocative tone, again in line with what might be considered stereotypical male behaviour. Thus Michel tells Marianne: 'cependant, si vous vouliez bien arrêter de prendre la pose avec vos "nous sommes au-dessus du gouffre", ce serait bien gentil à vous, ça m'éviterait d'avoir à considérer que j'ai affaire à une jeune prétentieuse' (HR 29-30) or even more aggressive: 'Vous êtes chiante, putain!' (HR 43). Edouard meanwhile tells Geneviève that 'avec les coriaces de votre espèce, il faut passer à la méthode musclée' (LTE 69) and blames her for his behaviour, stressing that her attitude is 'insultante, sectaire et irrationnelle' (LTE 197). These reactions are consistent with conclusions from research on power-related behaviours that 'males compared to females tend to be somewhat more aggressive, dominant, competitive and non-conforming'.⁸⁴ This aggressivity by both male characters echoes that of men in *Blanche cassé* and *La Tournante* and is another

stages of courtly love as defined by Barbara Wertheim Tuchman: 'The chivalric love affair moved from worship through declaration of passionate devotion, virtuous rejection by the lady, renewed wooing with oaths of eternal fealty, moans of approaching death from unsatisfied desire, heroic deeds of valor which won the lady's heart by prowess, consummation of the secret love, followed by endless adventures and subterfuges to a tragic denouement'. Barbara Wertheim Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: the Calamitous 14th Century* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1979), p. 67.

⁸³ Laxenaire, 'La séduction en littérature', op.cit., p. 8.

⁸⁴ Basow, *Gender: Stereotypes and Roles*, op. cit., p. 77.

representation in Brune's narratives of what is expected of males in society. In addition, as stressed by Kate Millett,

[...] expectations the culture cherishes about his gender identity encourage the young male to develop aggressive impulses, and the female to thwart her own or turn them inward. The result is that the male tends to have aggression reinforced in his behaviour [...]. The same process of reinforcement is evident in producing the chief 'feminine' virtue of passivity. [...] In contemporary terminology, the basic division of temperamental traits is marshalled along the line of 'aggression is male' and 'passivity is female.' [...] If aggressiveness is the trait of the master class, docility must be the corresponding trait of a subject group.⁸⁵

On another level, Edouard stresses that it is Geneviève's 'travail qui [l'] a séduit [...] et qui [l'] oblige à [la] séduire en retour' (LTE 24-25) and adds that she cannot tease the world with her art exhibition and then refuse the 'consequences' attached to it. So he seems to consider that by engaging in a public activity, she should expect to be targeted and become an easy prey. This attitude mirrors what may be labelled as a 'common' male tendency to hold women responsible or guilty for the actions of men. As Andrea Parrot explains, a woman asking a man out for a date or being assertive 'may be interpreted by men as justification for rape' – as was the case for Clarisse in *Blanche cassé*.⁸⁶ Here Elisa Brune illustrates how even in the 21st century it can still be problematic to be a provocative female artist – be it in art or literature – since such artists are still often perceived as making themselves 'available' – 'une femme qui photographie les hommes, rien de tel pour éveiller des pulsions' (LTE 33).⁸⁷ Brune herself, the author of works on sex and eroticism, may have encountered such attitudes and may be trying to present, through Edouard, the way female artists are

⁸⁵ Millett, *Sexual Politics*, op. cit., pp. 31-32. The typical female behaviour Millett talks about in this quotation is mainly evident in Brune's narrative through the female characters' lack of confidence as will be analysed later on in this chapter. It also reminds us of *Blanche cassé* and of Bénédicte and Clarisse's passive acquiescence to male 'deviance'.

⁸⁶ Andrea Parrot, *Coping with Date Rape and Acquaintance Rape* (New York: Rosen Publishing, 1999), p. 63.

⁸⁷ It is interesting to note that Elisa Brune chose to make Geneviève an artist who photographs the male body since the female body has more traditionally been the subject of photography or painting often 'by male artists with a male audience in mind', in Sarah Gamble (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, op. cit., p. 285. Feminist artists, like Judy Chicago for instance, attempted to reclaim the objectified female body in art, by drawing, painting or photographing it differently, sometimes even in a grotesque way or through deliberate attempts to show 'unshowable' parts of the body (Cf. the exhibition *Images of Men* held at the ICA in 1980, *ibid.* p. 118. See also <<http://www.judychicago.com/>> [accessed 04 August 2009]). It is possible that Elisa Brune, through Geneviève taking pictures of males, nude for some projects, is attempting to give women the opportunity to 'turn the tables'. See Fiona Carson, 'Feminism and the body', *ibid.* pp. 119-28.

all too often considered in contemporary society.⁸⁸ Through Edouard's comments, Elisa Brune illustrates the (un)acceptability of female interest in all things sexual for some individuals and how women with a public role still take a risk nowadays to a certain extent.⁸⁹

Finally, since strategies one and two fail to get Geneviève to reply and Marianne to agree to a meeting, Edouard and Michel switch to strategy three hoping to make them react by triggering their sense of guilt (also one of the traditional stages of courtly love) and attracting their pity. Thus, on the one hand, Michel plays the pity card, arguing for instance that he is like 'Elephant Man' (HR 25), that 'on s'épouvante de [s]on cynisme, de [s]a grossièreté, de [s]a méchanceté aussi' (HR 25) and adds later that he is aware she may refuse to meet him because of his 'côté sale type' (HR 30). On the other hand, Edouard wonders what to do 'pour parvenir à la démuseler' since he feels like 'une épave, un puits d'affliction, un héros précipité dans les ténèbres' (LTE 75). The threat goes even further: 'Venez à moi ou il faudra me ranimer. Qui sait si vous arriverez à temps. Mon sort repose entre vos mains, la chose est dite. Vous ne voudriez tout de même pas vous transformer en bourreau?' (LTE 198). The allusion to the woman as a torturer is yet another reference to courtly love and these last few examples show how Edouard tries to manipulate Geneviève to make her feel guilty, which works since she eventually replies despite knowing that he is playing 'la comédie du désespoir pour arriver à ses fins' (LTE 199). Brune here represents the common stereotypical perception in society that women are predictable, inclined to feel guilty and that it is a good way of forcing them to give in. As Shulamith Firestone stresses, '[i]t is dangerous to feel sorry for one's oppressor – women are especially prone to this failing'.⁹⁰ Thus, Edouard can

⁸⁸ See notably *Alors heureuse...croient-ils! La vie sexuelle des femmes normales*, op. cit.; *Le secret des femmes: Voyage au cœur du plaisir et de la jouissance*, op. cit. In a recent interview during the 'Foire du livre' 2011 in Brussels, which was entitled 'Le monde appartient aux femmes', Elisa Brune explains her interest in female sexuality and the different approaches she has used so far to tackle the topic. She explained: 'Récemment j'ai travaillé sur la sexualité des femmes sous l'angle scientifique [mais] d'abord je l'avais traité dans des romans donc je me suis toujours intéressée à la sexualité et au plaisir des femmes; je l'ai illustrée d'abord puis j'ai un peu enquêté et j'ai fait un livre moitié narratif moitié scientifique et maintenant je vais vraiment du côté scientifique pour enfin percer le secret du plaisir féminin'. 'Foire du Livre de Bruxelles: rencontre avec Elisa Brune' <http://mp3searchy.com/mp3_download/7q-8WgrgpyQ/Foire+du+Livre+de+Bruxelles+%3A+rencontre+avec+Elisa+Brune+-+Essentielle.be.html> [accessed 20 May 2011].

⁸⁹ See Geneviève Fraisse, *Muse de la Raison: Démocratie et exclusion des femmes en France* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995) which explores the topic of women and the public sphere.

⁹⁰ Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, op. cit., p. 153.

victoriously declare: ‘Vous voyez que j’ai fini par trouver le déclic qui vous a fait trébucher, c’est la sollicitude. [...] Là où toutes les flatteries et les supplications ont échoué, la perspective d’une bêtise notoire vous lance à mon secours’ (LTE 81).

However, despite the fact that Edouard manages to trick Geneviève into entering the epistolary game – and can be seen as having gained power – and that Michel keeps Marianne answering his messages on a more or less regular basis, neither of them is initially able to achieve their final aim which is to meet the women. Therefore, Edouard switches strategy yet again while using further tricks and lies to get to meet Geneviève, such as pretending to be somebody else (LTE 293) or sending his best friend to a meeting in his place, suspecting Geneviève would do the same thing (LTE 266).⁹¹ The use of these tricks and of swapped identities serve as yet another reference to familiar literary devices and, of course, ‘stealth and trickery and wiles [are] standard items in the seducer’s arsenal’.⁹² Since she is not as easy to catch as he expected – she is not single, contrary to what her artistic work led him to think – he has to be shrewd enough to catch her without getting caught himself. Once he has understood that Geneviève will not agree to meet him, he ends up forcing her to meet him in a club where she is spending the evening with her friend and boasts that ‘finalement [il a] obtenu [un rendez-vous] sans [sa] permission, pour [lui] prouver que ce n’était pas difficile’ (LTE 341), which is an obvious statement of domination. As for Michel, after a month without corresponding, he writes again to let Marianne know about a conference on impotence he would like her to take part in (HR 74) since he knows she needs the money and will not refuse the job. The fact that he offers her a job gives him power over her and it is also interesting to note that even though Michel uses a work-related excuse to get back in touch, the topic Marianne is asked to work on is linked to sexuality.⁹³

⁹¹ From the moment Daphné takes Geneviève’s place and Lionel takes Edouard’s for meetings the different strategies become less relevant – since Geneviève and Edouard are no longer the main actors in a sense – and they will therefore not be analysed.

⁹² Jane Miller, *Seductions: Studies in Reading and Culture* (London: Virago, 1990), p. 21.

⁹³ Sexuality is a subject in which Michel has a personal interest since he himself suffers from impotence, as Marianne discovers later in the narrative (HR 147-55) and if he offers her a job, this may be because, being impotent, he can only assert his dominance on the professional level. It is interesting to note here that Marianne later on in the novel links men’s need for domination with their fear of impotence: ‘Toute l’histoire de la domination masculine doit s’enraciner quelque part par-là. La rage de nous savoir libres de cela. [...] Mais si loin que puissent aller les garanties cadennassées par l’ordre social le plus machiste soit-il, il reste quand même, au cœur de cet ordre, LE doute

To summarise, Edouard and Michel do not hesitate to test different strategies in turn to achieve their goal but given the resistance they face from Geneviève and Marianne, they end up with no choice but to impose their presence on them. This corresponds to the active way of seducing defined by Michel Laxenaire, that is ‘quand une personne cherche à s’imposer à une autre par des moyens qui vont de la manipulation violente à la persuasion douce [...]. La manière active est qualifiée de virile’.⁹⁴ In that sense Edouard is clearly in a position of power since he ‘venait bel et bien de remporter son pari’ (LTE 343) while Michel eventually manages to meet Marianne thanks to the conference he manages to get her to take part in. In short, both male protagonists first try to meet the female characters more or less subtly but end up simply forcing them. This lack of consent and the men’s lack of consideration throughout the seduction process for the women’s wish not to meet can be compared to the lack of consent found in rape. Indeed, according to Jane Miller, if ‘a seduction is something other than a rape, it may also be thought of as a deflected or renamed rape, a rape annulled by an ambiguous assertion of consent’.⁹⁵ For seduction is an act that one person ‘imposes’ on another and ends with the eventual compliance of the targeted person. It is interesting to note that Michel in *Un Homme est une rose*, although he uses similar strategies to Edouard’s, usually appears more aggressive towards Marianne and actually, through Michel, the reader is reminded somewhat of Laclos’s character Valmont, ‘le plus roué, le plus efficace, le plus dominateur [et] odieux’, thus reinforcing further the intertextual character of the novel.⁹⁶

The different seduction strategies Elisa Brune exposes through her male protagonists’ behaviour can therefore be considered as plausible for readers, as they have either been widely observed and analysed in studies on gender roles or correspond to some common stereotypes held as ‘true’ by some in contemporary Western societies. Michel and Edouard appear to be dominant males, looking/hunting for a woman and in doing so they illustrate how nowadays, as in the Middle Ages with courtly love, the aim of seduction remains unchanged and ‘comme

irréductible. Que tout leur soit dû n’empêche pas que rien ne soit acquis. Il faut encore et toujours refaire la preuve de sa virilité’ (HR 168).

⁹⁴ Laxenaire, ‘La séduction en littérature’, op. cit., p. 3.

⁹⁵ Miller, *Seductions*, op. cit., p. 21.

⁹⁶ Pierre Lepape, *Le pays de la littérature* (Paris: Seuil, 2003), p. 350.

à la chasse, gagner, c'était saisir la proie'.⁹⁷ In addition, Michel and Edouard, just like René in *Blanche cassé* or Rachid and his friends in *La Tournante*, also display stereotypical male behaviour in line with that described in some studies about gender stereotypes, which state that

sexually speaking, the traditional sex role stereotype is for the man to be the 'hunter' and initiator of sexual activity, the one with the more powerful and demanding sex drive, the strong one, the powerful figure of the relationship. The traditional woman plays her role through being pleasant, cooperative, placating, flirtatious, and attending to her appearance and the pleasure of the male, while retaining a respectable ladylike demeanour in public – 'a lady in the kitchen and a whore in the bedroom'.⁹⁸

It is evident therefore that men in the four narratives analysed here, see themselves in a position of power in their relationships with women and expect women to behave according to the above description. Now that we have outlined the main framework of both men's seduction strategies, let us turn our attention to the way gender expectations and domination are interwoven into their strategy through the language, images and themes used by the characters to either assert their power, dominate or resist submission. In this instance, it is evident that Elisa Brune has used several ways of giving her readers a sense of déjà vu or 'déjà entendu' (lexical field, images, intertextual references), reinforcing and fleshing out the stereotypical basis of power relationships her two narratives are built around.

First of all, since 'la séduction [...] c'est l'art de la parole et des préliminaires', it is only logical that language is the primary area where it is possible to decipher this dichotomy of domination/submission which appears intrinsic to relationships between women and men since 'tensions and conflicts [...] characterise many women's relations with a male and heterosexual culture'.⁹⁹ These conflicts have already been portrayed by Brune in *La Tournante* and *Blanche cassé* and this is thus a consistent theme in her work, albeit in a more playful tone here. In addition, according to Roland Barthes, 'la langue (le vocabulaire) a posé depuis longtemps l'équivalence de l'amour et de la guerre: dans les deux cas, il s'agit de *conquérir*, de *ravir*, de *capturer* etc'. and the language used during the seduction process conveys a

⁹⁷ Duby, 'Le modèle courtois', op. cit., p. 324.

⁹⁸ Moore and Rosenthal, *Sexuality in Adolescence*, op. cit., pp. 82-83.

⁹⁹ Laxenaire, 'La séduction en littérature', op. cit., p. 5; Miller, *Seductions*, op. cit., p. 73.

codified message when mimicking the spontaneity of desire.¹⁰⁰ Both novels are good illustrations of this balance between convention and spontaneity, while not failing to indeed represent relationships and the seduction process as something complicated, implying a battle and therefore the need for one to win and dominate the other. This aspect of the seduction process has been highlighted in studies which concluded that ‘seduction alludes simultaneously to notions of conquest and of captivation, while relying absolutely on expressions of consent or acquiescence.’¹⁰¹ Brune’s portrayal can once again be considered as a plausible representation of what is happening in contemporary society in terms of the format adopted for relationships between men and women. She uses lexical field and references to war and domination/submission to demonstrate how the characters perceive the relationship and their attitude when dealing with the opposite sex.¹⁰² For instance, after sending a letter to Edouard, Geneviève feels ‘allégée du souci de se draper dans sa vertu et de dresser une citadelle imprenable devant l’adversaire’ (LTE 106). When deciding how to proceed she organises a ‘conseil de guerre’ (LTE 169) with her two best friends and subsequently realises that Edouard ‘ne livrait qu’un bastion à la fois’ (LTE 372); Edouard on the other hand says he has no ‘plan de bataille’ (LTE 64). At the end of the novel, when she finally agrees in a sense to being dominated by Edouard, ‘elle posa son front sur l’épaule d’Edouard, en signe de reddition’ (LTE 360).¹⁰³ According to Jane Miller, ‘surrender [...] is intrinsic to the act of seduction. [...] The role of the seduced, of the deceived, of the misled, is to confirm the seduction, even to celebrate its success. Stealth and trickery and wiles [...] are bizarrely redeemed by the consent they have been shown to elicit’.¹⁰⁴ Although it might be thought that notions of seduction being equated with war and hunting are now outmoded, Brune’s use of the lexical field of war and the findings of various studies on the topic of seduction suggest that these are still relevant references nowadays.

¹⁰⁰ Barthes, ‘Le ravissement’ and ‘L’entretien’, *Fragments d’un discours amoureux*, op. cit., III, p. 527, 633. Italics in the original.

¹⁰¹ Miller, *Seductions*, op. cit., p. 21.

¹⁰² Martine Fournier explains how “conquête”, “proie”, “armes”, [la] séduction [...] est [...] généralement associée à tout un vocabulaire guerrier”. Martine Fournier, ‘Rituels, stratégies, fantasmes’, in Marmion, ‘Les secrets de la séduction’, op. cit., p. 39.

¹⁰³ Similarly Marianne would like at some point to ‘sentir sa force, son poids, un ordre ou n’importe quoi s’exercer sur [elle], qui permette d’abdiquer de la tête pour mieux jouir du corps’ (HR 181).

¹⁰⁴ Miller, *Seductions*, op. cit., p. 21.

Edouard is then described as ‘directif’ and when he tells her, ‘laissez-vous faire’, Geneviève confesses to the reader that ‘elle aimait cet ordre’ (LTE 362). This last quotation suggests a masochistic tendency on the part of Geneviève who seems to enjoy being submissive.¹⁰⁵ Although Elisa Brune illustrates here the fact that some women enjoy this form of sexuality, she does it through observations that may also, as in *La Tournante* and *Blanche cassé*, reinforce the stereotype that women in general want to be submissive in intimate relationships, a message which can be problematic since, in Sandra Bartky’s words, ‘to participate willingly in this mode of sexuality is thus to collude in women’s subordination’.¹⁰⁶ In *Un Homme est une rose*, Marianne describes seduction as a carefully planned assault – obviously implying the need to dominate the other – stating for instance: ‘je monte au créneau avec toutes les armes disponibles’ (HR 219). She feels on a ‘mission’ (HR 224) and takes ‘une résolution de départ à la guerre’ (HR 228), using an ‘implacable dispositif’ (HR 228). In turn she describes Michel’s actions as ‘une opération commando digne du génie militaire: court-circuiter les défenses périphériques, frapper au cœur et occuper l’endroit stratégique sans discussions’ (HR 240). Finally, Marianne describes Michel and herself as ‘le conquérant et la conquise’ (HR 241), a clear admission of her submission. It is interesting though that at this stage of the novel, although Marianne is the one that initiated ‘intercourse’ and thus acted as ‘la conquérante’ she is still characterised as ‘la conquise’. The fact that Elisa Brune represents Marianne this way suggests that once more, and as for Geneviève, she is simply unquestioningly reproducing stereotypes when, in this instance, she could have presented a dominant woman and easily broken a stereotypical conception. In doing so, Elisa Brune reinforces the idea that women are conditioned to behave in a submissive way, as is suggested by Silvia Ricci Lempen: ‘Depuis des millénaires, dans leur socialisation, les petites filles apprennent qu’elles sont les proies, alors que les hommes sont des

¹⁰⁵ Marianne at the end of *Un Homme est une rose* has to endure some sadism from Michel and although she does not derive any sexual gratification from being physically and verbally abused by Michel, she is too taken by surprise to react and remains passive, invoking once more the way she has been brought up (HR 253-55). Interestingly, the term ‘masochism’ originated from a novel by a male author in which women dominated and men enjoyed being humiliated. See Leopold von Sader Masoch, *La Vénus à la fourrure* (Paris: Le Cercle, 2008 [1870]).

¹⁰⁶ Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 48.

chasseurs. Elles intériorisent que ce ne sont pas elles qui mènent le jeu'.¹⁰⁷ In addition, in representing Marianne as the 'conquise' Brune seems to imply that she can only be seen as such because she was the prey (emphasising the lack of options), the single woman, hunted by Michel in the first place. As Stevi Jackson comments, 'a woman who is not visibly under the protection of a man can be regarded as fair sexual game'.¹⁰⁸ It is worth noting that war-related vocabulary is also used in *Blanche cassé* to describe Clarisse's approach to men: Clarisse '[repart] sur le sentier de la guerre et [n'est] pas longue à trouver l'oiseau suivant' (BC 145) or 'le matin, elle enfile son sourire et part à la guerre' (BC 185 and 181). But she is seen as a predator, regularly changing prey in the office (BC 196), contrary to Bénédicte who is hunted by René. Through these contrasting behaviours of the female characters in the four narratives, it is evident that when women act like men, like predators instead of prey in looking for partners, they are automatically labelled as 'easy' and as behaving in an unacceptable way. In short, Brune's characters all display either dominating or submissive behaviour and remain 'dans la perspective de la lutte, ou de la guerre' as if they refused

cette sorte de trêve miraculeuse où la domination semble dominée ou, mieux, annulée, et la violence virile apaisée (les femmes, on l'a maintes fois établi, civilisent en dépouillant les rapports sociaux de leur grossièreté et de leur brutalité), [et où] c'en est fini de la vision masculine, toujours cynégétique ou guerrière, des rapports entre les sexes; fini du même coup les stratégies de domination qui visent à attacher, à enchaîner, à soumettre, à abaisser ou à asservir en suscitant des inquiétudes, des incertitudes, des attentes, des frustrations, des blessures, des humiliations, réintroduisant ainsi la dissymétrie d'un échange inégal.¹⁰⁹

Brune's male and female protagonists in the two novels specifically display stereotypical dominant or submissive behaviour. Edouard for instance can be presented from the start as a hunter as he makes the first move, initiates the hunt/tracking down after picking up his prey, by writing to Geneviève telling her about his desire to meet her following the exhibition which apparently made him fall in love with her. Furthermore, while pretending to be 'soumis' and wishing to 'offrir [s]on corps, le soumettre à la bénédiction photographique' (LTE 7) – which can

¹⁰⁷ Silvia Ricci Lempen, 'Les petites filles apprennent qu'elles sont les proies', in Rinny Gremaud, 'Tu veux ou tu veux pas', *Le Temps*, 26 March 2011, p. 41.

¹⁰⁸ Stevi Jackson, 'Theorizing Heterosexuality: Gender, Power and Pleasure', *Strathclyde Papers on Sociology and Policy*, 2 (1994), p. 12.

¹⁰⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *La Domination masculine* (Paris: Seuil, 1998), p. 149.

appear as another, more acceptable motivation to meet her –, he is actually looking, in another reference to courtly love, to win her over. For he claims he wants to ‘[s’]improvis[er] troubadour pour [l’]apprivoiser. [...] A la fin, il faudra bien que [sa] curiosité l’emporte’ (LTE 132), clearly showing he is aware of her – some would say stereotypically feminine – weakness and of how he will manage to get what he wants, as previously explained. His need for domination is further expressed by some comments which could lead us to think that he may also be interested in physically dominating his partner as for example when he mentions the ‘jour béni où je pourrai vous couvrir de baisers sauvages en vous tenant fermement les poignets dans le dos (pour éviter la gifle / parce que je suis macho / parce que vous aimez la force – biffez la mention inutile)’ (LTE 164).

Thus it appears that in the two epistolary novels men want to dominate and the women portrayed by Elisa Brune generally let them, somehow illustrating how ‘heterosexual love finds an erotic expression through male dominance and female submission’.¹¹⁰ Even though Brune depicts plausible situations here, they omit certain aspects of ‘reality’ that she might have chosen to reflect, as her portrayal overlooks women who do not submit to domination. Brune says she is interested in sexuality, as is evident from her latest publications on the topic of female sexuality and pleasure, but she nonetheless only provides her readership with a limited representation of women’s behaviour in relationships throughout her novels since all her female characters appear submissive and unconfident, as we will discuss below.¹¹¹

In *Un Homme est une rose*, Michel’s need for domination is clearly outlined through his reaction following Marianne’s visit to his flat when he grumpily declares that for things to work between them she would have to ‘avant toute chose apprendre la docilité’ (HR 58) and later on he insists again ‘...si tu veux, en vraie chienne, venir démontrer ton impudeur et ta docilité, alors viens, je t’attends: tu auras ta niche, tu auras ton os. Sinon bonne route’ (HR 59). This quotation exemplifies well how, in the words of Colette Guillaumin, for some men

the essential thing in the relationship between a man and a woman is *physical usage*.
Physical usage expressed here in its most reduced, most succinct form – sexual usage.

¹¹⁰ Susan Griffin, ‘Rape: the all American crime’, *Ramparts*, 10, 3 (1971), 2-8 (p. 3).

¹¹¹ See note 86 for details of her recent publications.

[...] It is not sexuality which is in question here, not 'sex'; it is simply usage. It is not 'desire'; it is simply control, as in rape.¹¹²

Just as in the case of rape, control, and therefore power, appear to be at the core of men's approach to relationships with women. So Marianne's only choice, like Marion in *La Tournante*, is to be submissive or not to be involved, as if she had asked for anything other than publication advice in the first place.¹¹³ Therefore she just answers: 'non merci, je n'ai plus faim. [...] je préférerais quand vous commentiez Latour et Stengers. Mais vous m'avez obligée à vous suivre sur un terrain spongieux [...] Et voilà. [...] l'horreur d'être confrontée à un mec qui a déjà parlé de cul avant de laisser parler la nature' (HR 59-61).¹¹⁴

In addition to having her characters display dominant or submissive attitudes, Brune has them discuss and comment on the issue of domination in both narratives and in both instances the use of intertextual references to the topic (discussed in chapter 2) reinforces the 'effet de réel' of the situations depicted in the novels. Thus the following example in which Geneviève – maybe as a mouthpiece for women – contrasts two sides of humanity with regard to submission, allows Elisa Brune to show how women are well aware of the dichotomy when it comes to relationships:

D'un côté, ceux que la cruauté excite, à quelque degré que ce soit, et qui ont besoin de la douleur pour enflammer leur plaisir. De l'autre, ceux que la cruauté inhibe, que n'importe quelle violence, même verbale, détache du registre érotique tel un paquet qui tombe du train. Nécessité ou impossibilité, il n'y a que deux statuts pour les fantasmes de soumission (LTE 207).¹¹⁵

¹¹² Colette Guillaumin, *The Practice of Power and Belief in Nature. Part I: The Appropriation of Women*, in *Feminist Issues*, 1(2), (1981), 3-28, in Sarah Franklin (ed.), *The Sociology of Gender* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 1996), pp. 206-07. Translated by Linda Murgatroyd.

¹¹³ The erotic scene in *Un Homme est une rose* during which Marianne gives a fellatio to Michel – and although he somehow forces her – is reminiscent of that described by Suzanne Lilar in *La Confession anonyme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983). As Jeannine Paque comments 'la fellation [que] l'héroïne fait à son amant dans un taxi est d'une discrétion absolue en même temps qu'elle se hisse au sommet des évocations érotiques éminemment suggestives'. Jeannine Paque, 'Dire l'érotisme: une pratique rare et exquise', *Le Carnet et les Instants*, 162, 1 June-30 September 2010, pp. 2-12 (p. 6).

¹¹⁴ Another element which clearly outlines the domination/submission dichotomy between the characters in *Un Homme est une rose* is the fact that Michel uses the 'tu' form to address Marianne while she continues to use the polite 'vous' form, as already mentioned in chapter 2.

¹¹⁵ To contrast with this kind of submission, she also talks about Auguste Rodin's sculpture *La Promise*: 'Ce n'est pas une manœuvre de séduction mais une offrande. On dépose cette fragilité totale seulement aux pieds de qui ne voudra jamais en profiter. Même pas soumission symbolique, mais hommage à la noblesse de l'autre. Offrir sa gorge [...]. Mais lui offrir sa nuque, c'est dire que la confiance a pu s'élever au-dessus de l'instinct de conservation. La violence est abolie jusque dans ses fondements' (LTE 208-09).

In *Un Homme est une rose* Michel reminds Marianne that they are in a situation in which ‘un homme s’adresse à une femme’ and that ‘nous vivons dans une société de consommation: le sexe est une denrée qui se consomme comme une autre’ (HR 30), making here an explicit comment about what some men expect from a woman, that is to consume her like any other available product, or food as previously mentioned, in society. Elisa Brune here illustrates how some consider that ‘the impulse to subordinate and humiliate women, [...] is probably a generic aspect of male psychology’.¹¹⁶ However, women are also consumers in contemporary society and despite increased equality between men and women in many areas, it seems that women still do not have as many choices or at least not the same kinds of choice as men and therefore, if they follow the norms and expectations imposed on them by society, their freedom in certain domains – notably when it comes to sexuality – remains more limited than for men. Although women fought for and have managed to achieve greater sexual freedom, they are still too easily categorised according to their sexual behaviour, leading us to share Sylvia Walby’s opinion that despite change, ‘the sexual double standard is still alive and well’ as we previously discussed with regard to Geneviève having ‘exposed’ herself and the limited solutions available to girls in the suburbs.¹¹⁷ Indeed, and as was the case for Clarisse too, ‘[y]oung women who are sexually active are condemned by males as “slags”; those who are not are seen as “drags”. On the other hand, males with many sexual conquests are admired for their supposed virility’.¹¹⁸ Indeed, we agree with Diane Richardson and many feminist writers that:

[...] gender is culturally determined and that we become differently gendered through socialization into gender roles, or as it was often termed then ‘sex roles’. Sex role theory, drawing on the principles of social learning theory, claimed that through various learning processes (for example observation, imitation, modelling, differential reinforcement) and agencies of socialization (for example parents, teachers, peers, the media) children learn the social meanings, values, norms and expectations associated with ‘being a girl’ or ‘being a boy’ and thereby learn to develop ways of behaving and personality characteristics considered appropriate (or not) for being a woman or a man. Gender is here defined as the learning of a culturally and historically specific social role associated with women or men and used to describe a person’s identity as masculine or

¹¹⁶ Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997 [1993]), p. 121.

¹¹⁷ Sylvia Walby, *Theorising Patriarchy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), quoted in Holborn and Haralambos, *Sociology, Themes and Perspectives*, op. cit., p. 117.

¹¹⁸ Holborn and Haralambos, *ibid.*, p. 117. See also Robin R. Milhausen and Edward S. Herold, ‘Does the Sexual Double Standard Still Exist? Perceptions of University Women’, *Journal of Sex Research*, 36, 4, (1999), 361-68.

feminine. [...] However, feminist theories of gender [...] are not interested in simply describing how girls and boys grow up differently and become gendered, but how a key aspect of that difference is understanding that girls and boys, women and men have different social status and value. This focus on gender inequality was on how gender role expectations [...] were limiting girls in myriad of ways as they grew up, especially in terms of their educational aspirations and the types of jobs they might end up doing.¹¹⁹

In other words, Brune's female characters come full circle as they act as expected by society and according to their upbringing and education, illustrating how 'where women have been educated beyond a certain age they will have been educated into their culture's expectations and conventions of order, coherence, consistency, logic: into hierarchical levels of argument and into specialised disciplinary tradition of spoken and written discourse', proving that 'la séduction est un jeu à deux personnages, mais les règles sont fixées par la culture et la civilisation'.¹²⁰

Another way in which Elisa Brune illustrates how men try to assert and impose their power over women in the two novels is through the use of scenarios, implying that Edouard and Michel dictate what they want and therefore control the situation. Both males invite the women to come and visit – even stay in – their flat while they are away (LTE 141 & HR 45). Edouard asks Geneviève to leave him 'cinquante-cinq post-it jaune vif avec [ses] commentaires' (LTE 142), which she does. In *Un Homme est une rose* Marianne too leaves post-its everywhere (as well as her thong) but this is her initiative, which annoys Michel, who accuses her of not keeping her promises: 'tu apportes tes ficelles [...] mais j'attendais tes fentes' (HR 54) and thinks this is 'une attitude d'emmerdeuse' to have left 'un peu partout des Post-it comme des crottes de lapin' (HR 57), demonstrating that he cannot stand the fact that she has taken control of the situation and made a decision he had not anticipated.¹²¹ Through these scenarios the men are seen to want to control the relationship – or at least define the direction it takes – enabling Brune to show how the one who decides is the one who has power. These examples are effective illustrations of heterosexual instrumentalism to which power and control are central. Indeed,

¹¹⁹ Diane Richardson and Victoria Robinson (eds.), *Introducing Gender and Women's Studies*, 3rd edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 9-10.

¹²⁰ Miller, *Seductions*, op. cit., p. 25; Laxenaire, 'La séduction en littérature', op. cit., p. 11.

¹²¹ Marianne proposed two scenarios to Michel too (HR 41). He agrees with one of them, which is for her to attend one of his lectures (HR 44) but then asks for her to come to his flat and wait for him naked in his bed (HR 45). Therefore he manages to get her to follow his scenario in the end but she obviously alters it.

heterosexual instrumentalism refers to the behaviours which reflect and sustain the expectations that all heterosexuality is to be practiced with explicit requirements of dominance and subordination. The immediate goal is the exertion of power and control by the dominant actor over the subordinate actor: accomplished by force, coercion or consent (implied or otherwise). The ultimate goal of such behaviour is the maintenance of pre-existing gender inequalities.¹²²

It is thus acceptable when women act submissively and do as they are told as Geneviève does, but conversely it is perceived as problematic, not to say unacceptable, when the actor who is supposed to be submissive takes control, even if only partially, as Marianne does by altering Michel's scenario. The use of the same scenario in both novels with different outcomes is a way of emphasising men's need for domination and of the link between power and decision-making, with, in this instance again, men taking initiative and being in control. So once again Elisa Brune has her characters act according to social expectations with men leading and women passively following.

If Elisa Brune illustrates how men are keen to dominate women, she also portrays how women attempt to resist by voicing their opinions and their views on masculine hegemony – but fail to act accordingly. Thus, Geneviève contests Edouard's attitude of domination and highlights her awareness of his behaviour by saying: 'Comment fixer par décret que nous allons nous aimer parce que vous l'avez décidé? Présomption typiquement masculine' (LTE 90) or later, 'que diriez-vous si je vous embrigadais sans discuter dans mes propres règles du jeu, en vous assurant que vous les supporterez très bien, un point c'est tout?' (LTE 178). Similarly, Marianne puts up some resistance to meeting Michel and insists she is happy to talk about 'la séduction, voire le sexe, mais dans un heureux détachement théorique' (HR 27) and also asks: 'N'avez-vous jamais eu d'autres rapports avec les femmes que de séduction? [...] je connais [...] de très grandes amitiés avec des hommes que je n'ai pas aimés. Relations plus sincères et satisfaisantes, certainement, qu'avec des amants' (HR 32).¹²³ In portraying men pushing to get what they seek (therefore

¹²² Steven P. Schacht and Patricia H. Atchinson, 'Heterosexual Instrumentalism: Past and Future Directions', in Sue Wilkinson and Celia Kitzinger (eds.), *Heterosexuality: A Feminism and Psychology Reader* (London: Sage, 1993), pp. 120-36 (p. 122).

¹²³ However, she also dares to tease him a few lines later by confessing she now thinks about him when going to bed (HR 33) or saying: 'Je vous adore [...] parce que vous avez le culot de fabriquer un machin inconnu avec une partenaire inconnue' (HR 51) or when she ends an e-mail with: '[...] j'en ai assez de bavarder avec vous alors que je peux prendre mon pied en vous lisant. Permettez-moi donc de vous tromper avec vous-même [...]' (HR 21). This attitude contrasts with her desire not to push the

ending up dominating) and women attempting to resist their assaults but in the end giving in (and being seen as submissive), Elisa Brune illustrates how relationships are a battlefield where power and domination are disputed and how in the end ‘males want more than they get [...] [whilst] females get more than they want’.¹²⁴ On this occasion, she delivers yet another traditional – but not necessarily true – view of relationships between men and women and once again does not appear to question this situation.

Through Geneviève and Marianne, Elisa Brune portrays how some women in contemporary society, while aware of the issue of domination and masculine hegemony and despite being opposed to it, still end up giving in and let themselves be dominated by men. Indeed, Marianne’s comments throughout *Un Homme est une rose* remind the reader regularly of unfair male domination throughout history, but she does not act according to her views. For instance, she mentions at one point ‘ces ordures de mâles qui s’obstinent à vouloir faire la loi, quel que soit l’état d’avancement de la civilisation. Siècle après siècle. Ça continue’ (HR 144). This example is one amongst many in which Elisa Brune is using her characters to convey a view shared by many women about men and the way some of them keep treating women as inferior in contemporary society. Thus, Brune not only represents here a common problem for some women who lack the confidence to act according to their opinions when it comes to dealing with the opposite sex, but also reflects a divide in some of them between knowledge (theory) and behaviour (practice), exemplifying that theoretical knowledge does not always lead to consistent behaviour. This example shows too that if feminism has brought emancipation to women, it has also contributed to the evolution of men’s behaviour and expectations towards women, since according to Marianne: ‘rançon de l’émancipation féminine: il ne suffit plus d’être gentille et décorative, il faut rivaliser d’esprit et d’inventivité avec des créatures qui ont disposé de siècles entiers pour se roder’ (HR 197). All in all, Marianne can be seen as a mouthpiece for a certain type of women who hold opinions which do not translate into actions. While her character may appear

relationship further in the first part of the novel but also reinforces the idea that she is only confident when it comes to a theoretical and on-line relationship.

¹²⁴ Marita P. McCabe & John K. Collins, *Dating, Relating and Sex* (Sydney: Horowitz Graham, 1990), p. 117.

inconsistent to the reader, it is also a representation of a tendency noted amongst some women and a useful device to represent the difficulty some women have saying ‘no’ – ‘je me connais, [...] je ne sais pas dire non’ (HR 62). Although Marianne appears to be strong and independent on the surface (femme libérée), the fact that she is unable to say ‘no’ and agrees to do things ‘à contrecœur’ (HR 91) for fear that ‘l’aplomb va encore [lui] manquer’ (HR 147) suggests that beyond the divide between knowledge and behaviour, Elisa Brune also portrays here the common female stereotype of wanting to please. Marianne is a believable reflection of what some women are like: critical of men in private but unable to be openly critical to them. In addition, this docility on Marianne’s part is a good illustration of sexuality as a social construct instilled through discipline, since ‘depuis leur naissance, les femmes sont entraînées à plaire et, surtout, à ne pas déplaire’.¹²⁵ Several times in the narrative Marianne states that this is the way she has been brought up: ‘je crains que ma mère ne m’ait élevée comme ça. On ne drague pas un mec. On ne s’impose pas’ (HR 249). This attitude reflects what Foucault has called ‘disciplinary power’ which ‘allows an understanding of how women may be persuaded into apparent complicity in the process of our own subjugation, through the regulation and normalization of our subjectivities and behaviours’.¹²⁶ Thus, it would appear that through Marianne, Elisa Brune highlights the fact that women are educated, brought up and disciplined to please but her portrayal of them as always ready to act as expected and her failure to offer any strong, consistent female opposition suggests she has not carefully thought through some aspects of her female characters. To sum up, Geneviève and Marianne, like Elisa Brune, are products of feminism and have benefited from its gains without necessarily considering themselves as feminists, hence the lack of consistency in their behaviour.¹²⁷ Indeed, they have some ideas and their vocabulary

¹²⁵ Micheline Carrier, *La Danse macabre: violence et pornographie* (Sillery: Apostrophe, 1984), p. 46.

¹²⁶ Nicola Gavey, ‘Technologies and Effects of Heterosexual Coercion’, in Wilkinson and Kitzinger, op. cit., pp. 93-119 (pp. 95-96). Gavey refers mainly to Michel Foucault’s *Histoire de la sexualité*, 3 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1976-1984), I.

¹²⁷ Another example of the divide between knowledge and practice can be found in *La Tentation d’Edouard* in which the female characters are described as follows but do not necessarily act accordingly: ‘Il faut dire qu’en dignes filles de soixante-huit, Geneviève, Daphné et Rebecca posaient sur la gent masculine un regard sans concession mais chargé de gourmandise, deux qualités qui n’avaient jamais été à la portée de leurs aïeules. Elles savouraient avec bonheur la possibilité de contempler les hommes comme les fruits appétissants d’un jardin où elles déambulaient librement, tendant la main quand bon leur semblait. Plus de fatalité, plus de soumission, plus d’autonomie, elles

(‘ordures’, ‘créatures’ etc.) suggests they have an opinion on men and the issue of domination but they do not have the confidence to act on them. Perhaps Elisa Brune would have done better to create one strong female character as a ‘mouthpiece’ for feminist ideas, rather than occasionally including these ideas in the words of Geneviève and Marianne but then having them fail to act on them. Geneviève and Marianne have to reflect women pleasing and saying ‘yes’ but also are meant to echo more assertive women which comes across as a contradiction. Where Elisa Brune’s portrayal is also questionable is that once the characters meet in both novels, the male characters are in total control and neither female character seems able to deny the men what they want, suggesting once again women’s inability to say ‘no’ and reinforcing further the stereotype instead of breaking away from it by having women resisting from start to finish (or taking control) which would also be a way of reflecting ‘reality’.

On another level, Elisa Brune portrays women who, behind the façade, are lacking in confidence, both personally and professionally and this is visible in the way they perceive themselves. This is also linked to their failure to assert themselves and this feature of their personality is consistent with the fact that ‘textbooks on the psychology of women tend to confirm the everyday observation that women are in general less assertive than men, have lower self-esteem, less overall confidence, and poorer self-concepts’.¹²⁸ In addition, one reason why women generally have lower self-confidence than men ‘may be their differential reinforcement history: males may be rewarded for being confident, while females may be rewarded for being modest. Related to this possibility is another one: that expressing low confidence is more acceptable for females than males’.¹²⁹ Thus, Geneviève describes herself as ‘prudente, timide, et par moments peureuse’ (LTE 42), acknowledges her ‘timidité excessive’ (LTE 108), feels ‘effarouchée’ by Edouard’s frankness (LTE 43) and ‘pour tout dire, [...] craignait de ne pas se montrer à la hauteur’ (LTE 42) while Marianne confesses to being ‘consensuelle et timorée’ (HR 181), ‘molle et

appartenait à la toute première génération qui étrennait le sexe fort’ (LTE 100). Brune could have chosen to pursue this aspect of equality and freedom in the novel but has chosen to represent more stereotypical types of relationships.

¹²⁸ Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*, op. cit., p. 88. One of the textbooks Bartky refers to is Margaret W. Matlin, *The Psychology of Women* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1987), pp. 129-32.

¹²⁹ Basow, *Gender: Stereotypes and Roles*, op. cit., p. 176.

perméable de partout' (HR 110). It has to be said that, while the female characters describe themselves in these terms, their tone in the novels, at least during the epistolary parts, does not correspond to these features of low self-confidence. So it may very well be that Elisa Brune has both her characters describe themselves this way because this is what is expected, even if their behaviour belies their words, or it is yet again a lack of consistency on Brune's part when creating her female characters as mentioned before. Nevertheless, another possible factor to explain this lack of confidence/timidity on women's part may again be the patriarchal education and upbringing through which, as argued by materialist feminists such as Monique Wittig and Christine Delphy,

[w]omen are forced to behave in ways that are seen as natural, and this has resulted in the creation of two discrete biological sexes, but this variation falsifies the reality of human variation – the wide variety of sexual characteristics – because an over-gendered society has evolved. Society is structured around the belief that there are two polar opposite sexes, male and female.¹³⁰

Therefore, we argue that both narratives are good illustrations of how both education and upbringing still nowadays shape women to be unconfident, leading them to be submissive for fear of not being good enough and/or of being – wrongly – judged. Professionally too Brune's female characters are unsure of their abilities. Thus, Geneviève believes that Edouard mistakenly perceives her as

une artiste d'envergure [...] elle se sentait toute petite et à peine moins égarée que lorsqu'elle avait quinze ans [...] elle avait toujours très peur de l'excès de confiance qui la conduirait peut-être un jour à asséner des évidences en les prenant pour des révélations. (LTE 58-59)

As for Marianne, she is also full of doubts when it comes to her professional abilities, stating 'je n'ai pas de hauteur, je vis à ras de terre' (HR 91)¹³¹ and does not hesitate to acknowledge her inferior intellectual abilities compared to those of Michel whom she sees as 'une version réussie du même moi que moi. Un autre moi' (HR 196). Through Marianne and Geneviève, Elisa Brune therefore represents women's stereotypical lack of personal and professional self-confidence, or at least women who know they are expected to put themselves down and do so, and contrasts their behaviour with her male characters, who put their professional

¹³⁰ Abbott and Wallace, *An Introduction to Sociology*, 2nd edn, op. cit., p. 39.

¹³¹ This feature of low self-esteem in female characters is also displayed in other novels such as *Blanche cassé* in which Bénédicte lacks confidence in every domain or in *Relations d'incertitude* in which Hélène also finds it hard to believe in her abilities.

abilities forward in their strategies and stereotypically do not want women to be cleverer than them.¹³²

To summarise, viewed from the outside and through their letters and e-mails, Geneviève and Marianne appear to be confident women with established successful or promising careers. In the workplace they seem to be breaking the mould and appear not to correspond to the stereotypes commonly associated with gender. However, behind the public façade and apparent confidence, the reader discovers two women who feel rather unsure of themselves. So once again Elisa Brune fails to portray strong women who manage to resist and achieve their goals in full confidence and instead of providing the reader with a story of empowerment, she sticks to a stereotypical portrayal. Even though Brune provides her readership with a certain representation of female behaviours, it is easy to notice the limits of her vision of reality since these characters do not seem to be able to go beyond the stereotypical behaviours and expectations instilled through education and upbringing. Her representation appears only to correspond to, and not go further than, the state of affairs described by Françoise Héritier, according to whom,

en tant qu'êtres humains, quelles que soient notre époque et notre société, nous sommes mus par des représentations extrêmement prégnantes, transmises de génération en génération, et qui fonctionnent toutes seules, sans qu'il soit nécessaire de les mobiliser de façon consciente à chacun de nos actes, à chacune de nos pensées. Si des femmes, dans les pays où elles ont acquis des droits de quasi-égalité, ressentent la discrimination morale et doutent parfois elles-mêmes de leur légitimité, de leur droit intrinsèque à être à la place qu'elles occupent, comme le montrent les études menées auprès de femmes 'arrivées', c'est aussi parce que, inconsciemment et malgré leur statut objectif, elles partagent depuis leur naissance et leur éducation enfantine le sentiment que seuls les hommes sont, authentiquement et de droit naturel, les maîtres du monde. Ce sont des représentations archaïques qu'il convient de faire changer, mais qu'il est si difficile et si long de mouvoir. Il ne s'agit donc pas de blocages culturels à proprement parler ou alors il s'agit bien d'une culture partagée par l'humanité toute entière.¹³³

Therefore, Elisa Brune here continues to describe some aspects of what she witnesses in contemporary society but fails once more to give a representation of women

¹³² Throughout Brune's novels women/girls of each generation suffer from a lack of confidence. According to Catherine Marry, '[I]e souci de plaire aux garçons et de ne pas entrer en compétition avec eux renforcerait la tendance des filles à se sous-estimer, à se montrer moins ambitieuses et plus soucieuses de leur apparence physique'. Therefore, by applying low self-esteem and lack of confidence to her female characters, Elisa Brune reflects yet another societal reality she has observed but does not question. Catherine Marry, 'Genre et politiques scolaires: les paradoxes de la mixité' in Christine Bard, Christian Baudelot and Janine Mossuz-Lavau, *Quand les Femmes s'en mêlent: Genre et Pouvoir* (Paris: La Martinière, 2004), pp. 324-48 (p. 333).

¹³³ Héritier, *Masculin/Féminin II*, op. cit., pp. 187-88.

successfully opposing these stereotypes, which could potentially contribute to the necessary changes described by Héritier. Bearing in mind that Elisa Brune does not consider herself a feminist writer but rather a product of feminism, it would appear that she does not consider the impact of the image she gives of women in her narratives since her characters seem to mainly correspond to the notion of ‘doing gender’, that is to say men and women corresponding to stereotypes and doing what is expected from them, what they have been taught to do.¹³⁴ All in all she uses stereotypes but does not seem willing to get beyond them and if they could be seen as a practical device when describing the relationships between men and women, their use can also prove to be a hindrance in some instances since Brune, in not being openly critical of them, may thus end up being viewed as an ‘accomplice’.

Throughout this chapter we have shown how Brune’s four narratives provide a plausible, yet partial and most often negative representation of some types of relationship between men and women in contemporary Western societies. Looking at the different generations and types of relationships in the novels and comparing them with sociological data has enabled us to show how intimate relationships have evolved over the last sixty years and how ‘d’une définition institutionnelle du couple, on est passé à une définition intersubjective, plaçant la relation sexuelle sur le devant de la scène’.¹³⁵ In addition, from the analysis of teenagers’ and adults’ casual relationships it is also evident that certain themes such as confidence, power and domination recur at all stages of women’s lives and that for men of all generations it seems that

‘Getting sex’ is important [...]; less important is how sex is obtained. Although finding a willing female partner is one way of obtaining sex, the use of some persuasion or coercion to obtain sex may be even more satisfying to some males since such sexual circumstances demonstrate dominance and achievement.¹³⁶

In short, Elisa Brune gives the reader different – yet easily recognisable – representations of the way domination and power are closely intertwined in the seduction process and in the relationships between men and women.

¹³⁴ Stewart R. Clegg and Mark Haugaard (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Power* (London: Sage, 2009).

¹³⁵ Bozon, *Sociologie de la sexualité*, op. cit., p. 34.

¹³⁶ Basow, *Gender: Stereotypes and Roles*, op. cit., p. 318.

Furthermore, whilst Brune was interested in representing less traditional forms of sexuality with her teenage characters in *La Tournante* and *Blanche cassé*, her portrayals nonetheless highlight the importance of peer pressure, social expectations and perceptions of given behaviours for today's teenage girls. In *La Tentation d'Edouard* and *Un Homme est une rose*, the four characters' behaviour with regard to power, domination and submission let us see that both men indeed follow the conventional pattern hunting for and domination of women and both women, although trying to, do not manage to resist them in the end – indeed they even enjoy being dominated, as if this is a 'normal' state of affairs.¹³⁷ Although these two narratives are 'pure' fiction giving a limited view of such relationships, they nonetheless draw on some aspects of contemporary societies, giving the reader another snapshot of reality, in which many males still appear keen on dominating and holding power whilst women either present only theoretical resistance or cannot resist at all.

Throughout these four novels, Elisa Brune chooses to portray stereotypical characters – men who 'hunt' and dominate through seduction or coercion and women who resist but always end up submitting – possibly because such stereotypes are easily recognisable and are a useful shorthand for depicting what many in society see as 'gendered' sexual roles. However, given her avowed interest in the theme of female sexuality, attested throughout most of her novels and her willingness to provoke, also visible in her works of popular science on the topic, we can question why she does not get beyond these stereotypes by creating, for example, women who control sexual relationships, manage to say 'no' or even men who enjoy masochistic sex and being submissive to their partner. Thus, whilst her work gives readers a snapshot of the reality of some social and sexual interactions, it is once more representative only of part of what is happening in contemporary society and can therefore be deemed subjective and selective. Even in *La Tentation d'Edouard* and *Un Homme est un rose* in which the tone is lighter, Brune's representation of relationships between men and women is rather bleak. It is regrettable that she does not attempt to present more positive aspects of this topic, such as women in control

¹³⁷ This pattern of resistance followed by eventual submission is reminiscent of Katharina in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* who was described as a wild animal at the beginning of the play but was tamed and turned into a model wife by Petruchio.

and confident in both their personal and professional lives or men not behaving according to stereotypes. Her portrayals leave readers rather unsure of any real progress for women in contemporary society and tend to indicate that there is still much to do to achieve gender equality, which may be a valid conclusion but she is not contributing to progress by reinforcing stereotypes rather than questioning them.

Conclusion

This thesis has aimed to contribute to the field of Francophone studies by providing the first academic study devoted to the novels of Elisa Brune and it has made it possible to delineate and analyse the characteristics of her fiction writing so far. Our analysis has shown that, despite being Belgian, like most of her fellow citizens, Elisa Brune is not strongly attached to her Belgian roots and identity issues are not of interest to her. Although she engages with some contemporary debates, her work does not address that of national identity and in that she is representative of the 'identité faible' described by Jean-Luc Outers.¹ Thus, in most of her novels she does not specifically portray Belgium but rather depicts the European Francophone socio-cultural environment she is familiar with. This lack of a sense of 'belgitude' or concern for questions of identity is corroborated by the fact that she publishes in Paris for purely practical reasons and would appear to have no interest in defending the notion of a 'Francophone Belgian' literature.

Given the topics tackled by Brune in her early novels and her choice to centre most of her narratives around female characters and issues (rape, divorce, teenage pregnancy etc.) or battles (access to education and work), it might be tempting to label her a feminist author, but, as has clearly emerged from our study, when compared to genuinely feminist writers with a social conscience, Elisa Brune's standpoint can appear a little limited. In this she resembles many women writers of her generation, who do not explicitly identify with feminism; indeed Brune has declared 'je suis simplement le produit du féminisme',² and has obviously benefited from its gains rather than being (or feeling the need to be) an activist. This, combined with her lack of interest in the notion of 'Belgian literature' and her unwillingness to foreground her nationality, reinforces her clear individualistic standpoint and her lack of political commitment. Again, like many other contemporary writers, she does not identify with any groups or tendencies and indeed seems keen not to be labelled.

This refusal to commit to a clearly stated point of view links also to her eagerness to remain as objective as possible in her novels, whatever the theme she is dealing with. This desire for an almost 'scientific' distance is equally reflected in the

¹ Outers, 'Une identité faible', op. cit., p. 1.

² See my unpublished interview with Elisa Brune on 27 August 2007. Appendix B, p. 248.

fact that although her work necessarily draws from her own experiences as well as other people's, she has very pointedly rejected autobiographical readings of her novels and distanced herself from the 'autofiction' school of writing. This strong desire to keep 'herself' out of her narratives is of course connected to her wish not to be 'judgemental', to remain as distanced and objective as possible and avoid giving readers all the answers. She is aware her texts can affect her readers and appears to have decided that the less she writes about herself and the more objective she remains, the more likely her novels are to trigger reader response, since readers will be required to think about the questions being posed and actively discover for themselves the meaning of her narratives. In short, distance, neutrality, objectivity and a desire to be non-judgemental are all key to Brune's writing, resulting in her prose appearing on occasions a little unengaged, even uncritical. This emerges for example in her frequent failure to introduce into her narratives characters who might be in a position to question certain prejudices and stereotypes.

In terms of style, several characteristics have become clear, a major one being that Brune enjoys mixing genres (fiction and science, biography and science etc.) and sometimes reinventing them, as in the case of her epistolary novels, a tendency that we can perhaps label as 'genre bending'. So whilst being part of literary traditions and apparently eager to establish herself within them, Brune is not restricted by traditional boundaries and is keen to explore new approaches and combinations in her novels, resulting in the wide variety of styles in her writing, both literary and journalistic. We have established that style is not Elisa Brune's strong point, but her themes are strong and sometimes controversial and provide her with material for exploring socio-cultural reality, another important characteristic of her work. In addition, our analysis has shown how some of her novels can be perceived as sociological documents or case studies looking at a specific part of society. Brune provides her readers with socio-cultural portraits and can thus be seen as an 'observer and reporter' of contemporary French and/or Belgian society, tying in with her desire to transmit knowledge through her writing, whether scientific, sociological or historical as well as, we argue, to trigger reflection on the part of her readership.

Establishing a connection with her readership and verisimilitude in her narratives are therefore paramount in Brune's texts and in order to convey an 'effet

de réel' throughout her work she has used a range of devices which our study has discussed. Intertextuality, real events or real people all figure largely and help to highlight the true-to-life nature of her narratives, as do references to places, historical events and to herself (always in a disguised way). As a result, Elisa Brune can indeed be seen as a writer eager to 'parcourir les différentes franges de la société, à la rencontre de l'humain en général'.³ Moreover, the fact that her narratives have been characterised as 'attachants, dans leur manière de réfléchir les idées et les émotions que nous partageons tous'⁴ is yet another indication that Brune's novels provide effective representations of contemporary society and of its members.

However, her treatment of the hard-hitting topics she chooses to tackle in some of her work is not always as interesting or ground-breaking as it might be. It may be that she is not necessarily interested in – or capable of – genuinely original and controversial depictions of them, as this would arguably require a more engaged representation of a given topic. As we have argued in our study, a more thought-provoking or unusual approach could on some occasions have enhanced the impact of her novels, especially when dealing with the kind of issues she represents (women juggling family and career, single mothers etc.). Of course she is not a theoretician, not even, by her own admission, a feminist, and yet it is difficult not to be struck by the gap between the potentially controversial nature of the topics she chooses to address and her sometimes rather ordinary treatment of them. Indeed, the views she depicts are often not very radical, on occasions rather stereotypical, as we have stressed throughout our analysis.

Thus, despite Elisa Brune's wish to be objective (fitting her almost journalistic and scientific writing), her writing clearly gives a partial portrayal of contemporary societies and remains to some extent subjective, as her characters tend to be white, middle-class, educated heterosexuals like herself (there are for example no homosexual parents or non-white main characters) and the stereotypes she uses are not always questioned within her narratives. Our analysis has demonstrated that instead of departing from stereotypes and exposing behaviour that could for example provide the reader with a picture of empowerment when it comes to the female characters of her novels, Brune often simply reproduces stereotypes, reinforces

³ Dambroise, 'Elisa Brune', op. cit., p. 30.

⁴ Ibid.

conservative standpoints, and does not strongly contest certain prejudices. As a result, in her narratives, educated women fail to assert themselves and denounce male harassment (*La Tentation d'Edouard* and *Un Homme est une rose*), single mothers fail as parents (*La Tournante*), her only non-white character is a rapist (*La Tournante*), women in research are invisible or abnormal (*Petite révision du ciel* and *Les Jupiters chauds*) and women in high-powered jobs necessarily fail as mothers (*Blanche cassé*). Of course such figures exist in contemporary society, but so do less obvious ones whose representation could potentially influence her readership even more.

As we have sometimes suggested, in claiming to simply be an objective 'observer and reporter' of what she witnesses in society and in using many stereotyped behaviours for her characters, it can be claimed that although Elisa Brune is effectively depicting the problem, she is failing to contribute to the 'solution'. Some would indeed argue that if she is going to tackle serious issues, she should have serious solutions to offer or at least a more thought-provoking analysis of them. Brune's strategic choice of commercially 'savvy' issues has certainly proven popular, even if her depictions sometimes remain somewhat superficial and uncritical. In spite of such criticisms, we would contend that simply evoking certain topics and bringing them to the fore through novels is contributing to the public debate on them, as in the case of *La Tournante* for instance.

In addition, whatever the weaknesses of Brune's treatment of these themes, explored from different angles, as our study has demonstrated, they do in fact anchor her novels very solidly in a specific socio-cultural context and it is this portrayal of a range of aspects of societies in contemporary Western Europe that is one of the most interesting characteristics of her work. In our view, it is in her 'social portraits' (families, couples and the problems they face) that Elisa Brune has made a contribution to Francophone literature and through her reflection of aspects of 20th/21st-century Europe that she can be considered a significant writer. Indeed, when looking back at the late 20th and early 21st centuries, it is possible to imagine that Brune's representations of the family, education and relationships between men and women may well provide useful indicators of what was happening in some societies at that time, and her work can thus be considered to play a valuable sociological role.

Since her last novel, published in 2005, *Un Homme est une rose*, Elisa Brune seems to have increasingly devoted herself to the field of scientific popularisation, as is suggested by her last few publications, mainly in the genre of the essay.⁵ It would therefore seem that her aim to represent reality fits better with journalistic and essay writing than with fiction writing, although this move could also be linked to her style, which is not highly literary and might be more suited to journalism and popularisation. If she publishes no more novels, this present analysis will serve as a study of a distinct chunk of Elisa Brune's production, but if she does return to fiction writing at some point, it will be interesting to see if she continues in a similar stylistic and thematic vein, or adopts a different approach. For, there may be a continuation (following this interruption) or the emergence of distinct styles and themes at different points in her career. But from what we have seen so far, we can expect her to continue to choose potentially provocative, commercially attractive topics and to continue to be distanced from autobiography, identity issues and 'political' involvement, at least in her fictions, which are, of course, the focus of this study. We can also expect her to continue to work at penetrating the French market, an objective which, despite publishing in Paris, she has not yet entirely achieved with her fiction writing.⁶ It will be equally interesting to continue to reflect on the potential impact – positive or negative – that the representations Brune creates in her novels can have on her readership and on the strengths and weaknesses of her writing.

Given the range of her interests, this study inevitably provides an incomplete picture of the work of Elisa Brune but this variety and the unpredictability about what she might do next certainly make her an unusual yet significant Belgian writer worthy of critical study. Her latest publication, *La Mort dans l'âme: Tango avec Cioran* is an essay that moves away from scientific popularisation, female sexuality

⁵ *Alors heureuse...croient-ils! la vie sexuelle des femmes normales*, op. cit.; *Bonnes nouvelles des étoiles* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2009); *Le secret des femmes, voyage au cœur du plaisir et de la jouissance*, op. cit.

⁶ Although no selling figures are available and despite the fact that Brune publishes in Paris, from experience, it is easier to find Brune's texts in Belgium than in France and the bulk of critical work on her output is Belgian, suggesting she is not as popular in France (yet?) as other Belgian writers such as Amélie Nothomb. This also suggests that publishing in France is not necessarily the complete answer when it comes to penetrating the French market.

and potentially commercial topics.⁷ It combines elements that are recognisable from her previous work, such as the use of fragments (sometimes so short they could be seen as aphorisms), a style which is not very sophisticated, and a return to themes such as family and motherhood. Above all though, it explores yet another combination of genres, that of fragmentary essay, (auto)biography and philosophy and here, Elisa Brune ‘à travers ce récit littéraire et philosophique, [...] livre une expérience beaucoup plus personnelle’, suggesting that she has, unusually, been willing to include herself in one of her publications.⁸ In contrast to earlier writing, this most recent essay focuses very closely on the theme of death (including the deaths both of her grandmother and of Cioran) and explores in greater details the reasons why she writes, something she has not so far done.⁹ Such previously unexplored themes indicate that Elisa Brune is continuing to evolve as a writer and it will be extremely interesting to see who the audience for this work will be and whether this ‘fragmentary essay’ will be well received by those who have followed her progress thus far. Given the range of works Brune has already produced, and the firmly established characteristics that we have defined for her writing, critics will wonder if this represents in some way a new direction for this Belgian Parisian and whether she will, with this most recent essay, attract the critical attention and recognition that she seeks.

⁷ *La Mort dans l'âme: Tango avec Cioran* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2011). This text is not entirely new however and parts of it appear to date from the mid-1990s. Extracts from the first chapter were already available from the ‘inédits’ section on Elisa Brune’s website under the title ‘Le sourire de Cioran’. See <<http://www.elisabrune.com/sourire>> [accessed 17 September 2011].

⁸ See Odile Jacob’s website <http://www.odilejacob.fr/0207/3021/Mort-dans-l_ame.html#3021> [accessed 15 September 2011].

⁹ Elisa Brune briefly evoked this in my unpublished interview with her; see Appendix B, p. 251.

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Appendix A

Synopses of the Novels of Elisa Brune

Petite révision du ciel

The main character of the novel is 30 year-old Vincent, who realises he does not like his life anymore and gives up his work and relationship to take a year out and start afresh. Amongst scientific considerations, Vincent observes society, enjoys his life as someone who no longer fits the norm and starts a relationship with a woman named Sophie before finding his new career path.

Blanche cassé

This novel deals with the life story of two sisters named Bénédicte and Clarisse from childhood to adulthood, focussing on their education, love life and various troubles. The sisters are very different from one another with Bénédicte, the eldest, not being very pretty having very low self-esteem and investing her energy in her education, as opposed to Clarisse, beautiful, more interested in men and love than in school and living a decadent life.

La Tournante

This narrative looks at the situation of 14 year-old Marion Dumeyne, who was regularly gang raped and tried to escape. When the truth about her ordeal is revealed, various protagonists, including the rapists, give their views on her situation, her upbringing and the issue of gang rapes.

Les Jupiters chauds

This is the sequel to *Petite révision du ciel* which, alongside lengthier sections on science, follows Vincent through his studies in astrophysics, his journeys across the world to observe planets as well as his love life with new partner Sophie.

La Tentation d'Edouard

This epistolary novel centres around Edouard trying to seduce photographer Geneviève, with whom he fell in love through visiting one of her exhibitions.

Geneviève is already in a relationship and tries to resist Edouard's efforts to seduce her and the narrative shows on the one hand Edouard's strategy and on the other Geneviève's resistance.

Relations d'incertitude

This novel retraces the life and work of Belgian scientist Edgar/d Gunzig with the help of scientific journalist Hélène. It is both a novel of scientific popularisation and a biography of the scientist. The narrative takes the reader through 20th-century European history and various countries where Edgar/d followed his mother or was imprisoned, while also showing how science always helped the scientist to survive difficult situations.

Un Homme est une rose

This narrative is Brune's second attempt at the epistolary novel, with a modern take on the genre since here the characters' exchanges are based on e-mails rather than letters. In this novel, Michel tries to seduce Marianne and the narrative exposes the strategy he uses to trick her into meeting him despite her resistance, followed by a description of their encounter and brief relationship.

Appendix B
Interview with Elisa Brune
Brussels – 27 August 2007

Caroline Verdier: Pourquoi utiliser un nom de plume? Avez-vous besoin de vous distancer?

Elisa Brune: Ce sont des raisons assez anecdotiques, ce n'est pas une optique par rapport à l'écriture, c'est que à l'époque où j'ai publié pour la première fois, j'étais en thèse moi-même, je préparais ma thèse en gestion de l'environnement et donc j'allais devoir défendre publiquement devant un public mais surtout un jury composé de gens dont je ne voulais pas [que mes écrits] puissent interférer dans leur jugement sur mon travail. C'était dans une université située dans le sud de la Belgique qui est un milieu bien-pensant assez conservateur et comme je venais de sortir *Fissures*, je préférais faire une cassure absolue entre ces deux activités, donc j'ai mis mon livre sous pseudonyme et puis évidemment plus moyen de changer. De toute façon, c'est un joli pseudonyme. [...]

CV: Donc Elisa, c'est pour Elisa...?

EB: Non, j'ai commencé par Brune, parce que je connaissais un tout petit peu le symbolisme des couleurs et le brun, étant un mélange des trois couleurs fondamentales, symbolise l'équilibre et la maturité. Je me suis dit que c'était un beau symbole puis j'ai cherché un prénom qui sonnait bien et voilà.

CV: Vous êtes écrivain ou écrivaine?

EB: Je n'ai aucune opinion là-dessus. C'est un débat qui ne m'intéresse pas. J'écris, c'est tout. Et donc pas la peine de se casser la nénette, donc pour moi écrivain ça suffit.

CV: Mais écrivaine ça vous choque pas?

EB: Ça ne me choque pas non, mais je trouve que c'est une pirouette inutile.

CV: Certains critiques vous décrivent comme 'très féministe'; comment réagissez-vous à cette étiquette?

EB: Première nouvelle!! Non, je ne suis certainement pas militante sur ce front-là, je suis simplement le produit du féminisme, de celles qui ont vraiment trempé leurs

chemises pour revendiquer des droits et des égalités dans tous les domaines et moi j'en jouis tout simplement. Je n'ai jamais dû me battre, jamais.

CV: Mais quand on lit *La Tournante*, on peut peut-être en déduire que vous êtes d'accord avec le féminisme et que vous êtes féministe sans être militante.

EB: Oui bien sûr, non seulement je suis le produit mais je suis le produit *heureux* de ce combat bien évidemment et je remercie toutes les femmes qui m'ont précédée tous les soirs en me couchant, parce que vraiment j'en profite beaucoup; je suis consciente de cette évolution, ce qui fait que quand on est née en 1966, on n'a plus à se poser de questions sur ce qu'on peut obtenir, pas obtenir par rapport à son statut de femme. Si j'étais née en 1950, déjà ça aurait été différent, et en 1930 n'en parlons pas.

CV: Donc ça vous gêne pas trop qu'on vous labellise féministe au travers de votre écriture?

EB: Ça ne me dérange pas, non, mais il ne faudrait pas croire que je participe à des revendications ou à des combats encore aujourd'hui. Ici je pense que ce n'est pas franchement nécessaire. Bien sûr dans le reste du monde il y a encore pas mal de chemin à faire. [...]

CV: Quelle place tiennent votre nationalité et votre pays dans votre écriture?

EB: Aucune. Aucune revendiquée. Elle en tient bien sûr une dans la coloration peut-être de mes propos ou de mon style ou que sais-je. On ne peut pas faire semblant d'être né nulle part.

CV: En effet, vos romans ne sont pas nécessairement estampillés 'Belgique' et vos éditeurs sont en France, je voulais savoir si vous vouliez faire ressortir votre identité belge.

EB: Pas pour l'instant, Dieu sait si ça viendra un jour, mais je suis née en Belgique et très contente de l'être, mais ça ne m'engage pas à en parler. [...]

CV: Comment obtenir certains manuscrits tels que *Du sexe masculin considéré comme un organe*?

EB: Ce texte n'a pas été publié donc ça n'est pas étonnant que vous ne l'ayez pas trouvé. Il y a tout un petit imbroglio. Résumons. J'avais pris un engagement chez Hors Commerce pour publier ce texte, mais c'était en 1995. Ils n'ont pas pu le sortir, parce qu'en 1996, j'ai changé d'avis à cause du fait que *Petite révision du Ciel* était

accepté chez Ramsay et je voulais beaucoup plus miser sur ce roman que j'estimais littéraire, plutôt que sur un texte qui était fait de comique sur les apprentissages sexuels depuis l'adolescence ou même l'enfance jusqu'à la maîtrise de sa vie sexuelle et c'était plus un sujet grand public mais en même temps ça se positionnait ailleurs je dirais. Comme début de carrière littéraire ça me semblait dangereux. Je voulais pas être qualifiée 'madame sexe' et donc je leur ai demandé de ne pas le publier, en tout cas pas à ce moment-là, et puis c'est resté comme ça dans un no man's land et puis ils ne m'ont plus donné de nouvelles, donc ce manuscrit est en quelque sorte au frigo. J'envisage de le publier un jour, puisque maintenant j'ai un parcours qui me permet de pouvoir sortir une fantaisie, quelque chose qui peut paraître moins sérieux. [...]

CV: Vous dites dans l'entretien que vous avez accordé au journal de la SBS (Solvay Business School): 'Il se peut que j'aie des enfants et que j'y trouve un grand épanouissement...' le subjonctif est-il à entendre sous une forme présente ou future?

EB: Alors, c'était une pirouette pour ne pas répondre à la question du journaliste, pas parce que j'ai quelque chose à cacher; je n'ai pas d'enfants, mais je n'aimais pas la façon dont il a introduit cette question. Je crois que c'était au tout début de l'entretien et je crois que ça m'a un peu choquée et c'est peut-être une des rares manifestations de mon féminisme latent. Ça m'a choquée qu'il me demande ça à brûle pourpoint comme ça, pour me caser 'mère' ou 'pas mère' parce que j'étais intimement persuadée que si j'avais été un homme il n'aurait pas posé cette question-là dans les trois premières minutes, peut-être plus tard éventuellement et encore; on ne définit pas un homme par son statut marital ou parental, une femme oui. Alors ça, ça m'a énervée.

CV: Il aurait abordé l'entretien différemment si vous aviez répondu positivement?

EB: Ce n'est pas impossible. Ce qui m'a dérangée d'abord c'est sa façon et puis parce que justement c'était un article très grand public comme ça bien entendu... d'anciens étudiants qui plus est... de mon université... et j'ai trouvé ça en fait tout à fait déplacé... il vient m'interviewer comme écrivain, qu'est-ce qu'on s'en fout de savoir si j'ai des enfants ou pas; ça n'a rien à voir.

CV: C'est intéressant car en lisant *La Tournante* notamment, où vous décrivez en détail les réactions et sentiments maternels d'Iris, je me demandais s'il était possible de les rendre d'une façon si réaliste sans être mère.

EB: C'est une question qui se posait à ce moment-là, évidemment, je crois que c'est le seul livre où je fais parler une mère. J'ai d'autres manuscrits non publiés où j'ai exploré aussi cette fibre-là, et il m'a semblé dans les deux cas que ça ne me posait pas de problèmes de me projeter dans cette situation. J'ai vécu le rapport mère-fille en tant que fille, c'est la première chose. J'ai côtoyé le rapport mère-fille autour de moi, ma sœur, des amis... je crois que j'en sais assez pour simuler la situation. Maintenant effectivement je ne sais pas ce que c'est que d'être mère. [...]

CV: Je m'intéresse particulièrement au côté social et sociologique de votre écriture. [...] Dans *L'écrivain et la blessure* – qui semble très autobiographique – vous dites que 'l'envie d'écrire a surgi en ultime réflexe de survie'. Il semble aussi à travers certains de vos romans que vous vouliez aider la société à prendre conscience de certains problèmes, l'aider à s'améliorer (notamment en reflétant de dures réalités comme dans *Blanche cassé* ou *La Tournante*) et panser ses plaies tout en pansant vos plaies à vous. Je voulais savoir si le processus de guérison fonctionnait.

EB: Oui, pour ce qui est de guérir, je pense que j'ai trouvé une bonne thérapie.

CV: Est-ce que la thérapie fonctionne aussi pour la société?

EB: Je ne pense pas que l'écrivain puisse avoir un rôle social global; je pense qu'il peut agir sur des lecteurs individuels, éventuellement infléchir ou exceptionnellement transformer leur vision du monde. En réalité, je pense qu'il n'y a que par là qu'on change vraiment les mentalités, mais c'est à très long terme. C'est en travaillant individu par individu que se fait le travail de l'éducation, de l'enseignement; mais qui n'est pas relayé suffisamment par un travail sur la pensée. On forme le cerveau dans cette société, avec essentiellement du gavage de connaissance et très peu avec un travail sur l'outil, sur le cerveau lui-même. Alors c'est vrai que si j'écris c'est en partie pour me sortir de problèmes existentiels, mais l'autre partie sur laquelle je lâcherai pas c'est pour faire du bien à certains lecteurs; quand je dis du bien c'est les aider à refléchir sur certains problèmes qui se posent à eux et ça peut être des choses assez diversifiées, comme un viol collectif, ça c'est tout à fait typé, comme une relation sœur-sœur difficile, comme une relation amoureuse ou sexuelle qui pose des

questions; autrement dit je ne peux pas concevoir d'écrire un livre de simple délassement ou de simples plaisirs.

CV: Il faut qu'il y ait un but dans votre écriture...

EB: Oui, il faut qu'il y ait une possibilité de transformation en lisant, d'ailleurs en tant que lectrice, je ne peux pas rester dans un livre qui ne m'apporte rien en termes de pensée ou d'idée ou d'information; ça c'est le plus bas niveau. Je préfère les livres qui font réfléchir et, à écrire, les livres qui vous transforment. Ça c'est mon idéal.

CV: Toujours dans cette idée de thérapie, puisque vous avez utilisé le mot, quel type d'écriture est la plus thérapeutique, romanesque ou journalistique?

EB: J'hésite vraiment et mon cœur balance tout le temps. Quand j'ai fait du scientifique, je reviens à la fiction, quand j'ai fait de la fiction je reviens au scientifique. Donc, ça peut être complémentaire. Disons que la fiction permet de travailler des problèmes psychologiques qui ne sont pas du tout accessibles par l'écriture scientifique, mais l'écriture scientifique rend le monde plus compréhensible, plus appréhendable et, pour moi, c'est à peu près la seule chose qu'on puisse faire de valable dans l'existence, pour autant qu'on ait un psychisme qui n'est pas englué dans des problèmes psychologiques, donc une fois qu'on a un esprit assez solide pour tenir le coup face à l'angoisse, on peut augmenter le champ du réel et l'explorer, donc c'est deux choses nécessaires et complémentaires [...]

CV: Je m'intéresse au féminisme et quand j'ai lu la définition du *consciousness-raising novel*, j'ai pensé au parcours d'Iris qui évolue de ce confinement familial vers une femme plus forte qui a envie d'aller de l'avant. On pourrait presque voir dans *La Tournante* une sorte de version moderne de ce genre, pas forcément celle que l'on trouve dans la deuxième vague de féminisme, mais une version 'personnelle' qui donne au lecteur l'opportunité de se découvrir.

EB: C'est une version générale, ceci dit le terme conviendrait fort bien car s'il y a une thèse centrale dans ma démarche, c'est qu'on est trop vite amenés à vivre sans conscience. La mécanique sociale fait qu'on est invités à s'endormir et à fonctionner en pilote automatique. Ça, c'est à peu près la trame de l'existence de 80% de la population qui vit sur des schémas circulaires...

CV: ...ceux de l'éducation...

EB: ... ceux de l'éducation certainement, et du formatage économique encore plus. L'organisation du travail est telle qu'on ne peut même plus réfléchir autrement que dans la perspective d'un travail salarié, régulier. La stabilité est portée au pinacle au point que c'est naturel et personne n'imagine de claquer la porte.

CV: Sauf que quand ils le font, comme dans le cas de Clarisse, ça se passe mal.

EB: Effectivement, ce type de comportement est sanctionné. Alors je ne dis pas qu'il faut ruer dans les brancards, je dis qu'il faut essayer de ne pas s'endormir. C'est le minimum qu'on puisse espérer, lutter contre l'engourdissement. Dans tous mes livres, il y a quelqu'un qui essaie de rester éveillé et la démarche fondatrice est dans *Petite révision du ciel*, où j'ai mis en scène un homme pour ne pas trop me projeter dedans mais en même temps c'est mon double, c'est sûr.

CV: Comme dans son acte d'abandonner le travail en entreprise?

EB: Oui, j'ai rendu ma démission. D'abord j'ai essayé de faire de la recherche. J'ai fait une thèse et je pensais éventuellement continuer là-dedans et puis ça ne s'est pas présenté. J'étais aussi un peu déçue de comment ça fonctionne. Et par contre l'écriture avait pris une importance plus grande que la recherche, et j'ai décidé de miser là-dessus. C'était un peu un saut dans le vide, que j'ai fait d'ailleurs après Vincent, le héros de *Petite révision du ciel*: je l'ai écrit avant de faire ce qu'il a fait. C'était une sorte de répétition, parce que le roman est sorti en 1999 et j'étais toujours en contrat de thèse, ce qui fait que j'étais quand même dans une coquille, un cadre défini. Ça me démangeait en effet de sauter du train, comme lui a fait, donc c'est un fantasme que j'ai mis sur papier et que j'ai suivi après, et qui en même temps est une sorte de modèle pour tous ceux qui liraient ce texte et qui se reconnaîtraient dans un notoire mal-être, dans un inconfort, de se plier à des rythmes et des procédures qui sont dictés de l'extérieur.

CV: C'est l'idée qu'on rentre dans le moule, donc tout le monde pense qu'on est normal, alors qu'on ne s'y sent pas bien en fait, on se sent à l'étroit?

EB: Le plus extraordinaire dans ce système, c'est qu'on n'est pas nécessairement malheureux. Il y a des gens qui sont malheureux parce qu'ils sont dans des boulots vraiment dégradants ou qui ne les intéressent pas. Prenons quelqu'un qui est employé, comme Vincent dans sa compagnie d'assurance. Il n'est pas malheureux, mais il lui manque quelque chose et il se rend compte après l'avoir fait que c'était un

manque d'être éveillé, le manque d'être vivant...il rentrait gentiment dans une mécanique qui est faite pour ça d'ailleurs.

CV: Alors pourquoi avoir choisi un personnage masculin? Vous pensiez que si vous aviez choisi une femme, cela aurait été trop proche de vous ou peut-être que cela aurait été reçu différemment?

EB: Je n'ai pas trop réfléchi à la conception, j'ai réfléchi à la production, au plaisir que ce serait de faire cet exercice...Je pense que c'est une caractéristique de ma personnalité que d'être curieuse ou ouverte à toutes les expériences possibles et imaginables. Cette expérience-là évidemment n'est pas réalisable, de me transformer en homme, sauf si je l'écris. Dans la vie réelle je fais beaucoup de choses qui se présentent, même si ce n'est pas apparemment logique par rapport à mon parcours. Ce qui est nouveau m'attire par définition, donc je vais faire du saut à l'élastique, je vais faire du trekking dans l'Himalaya, pas parce que j'adore ça mais parce qu'il y a plein de choses que je n'ai jamais faites. Donc l'écriture, c'est un peu ça aussi. A chaque livre il faut que je fasse une expérience nouvelle, que je me projette dans quelque chose d'inconnu. Dans ce premier roman, le plus inconnu était d'être un homme.

CV: Vous dites qu'à chaque roman, il faut quelque chose de différent, mais j'ai l'impression que vos romans marchent par paires. Par exemple, *Blanche cassé* et *La Tournante* forment une très bonne paire, deux romans familiaux qui touchent de près aux relations frères-sœurs et parents-enfants; *La Tentation d'Edouard* et *Un Homme est une rose* qui traitent des relations de couple... Est-ce qu'on peut y voir une prolongation de la thématique, de l'expérience à un niveau différent, de façon peut-être inconsciente?

EB: Il y a une proximité de l'univers, dans ce sens qu'on réfléchit à la féminité dans les deux cas, au parcours d'une femme très jeune. Oui, il y a des points de consonance dans ces deux-là, mais ils ne font pas partie d'un projet. C'est venu par hasard, puisque le sujet de *La Tournante* est donné par témoignages. Tandis que *Petite révision du ciel* et *Les Jupiters chauds*, c'est un souhait de prolonger une histoire inachevée, puisque j'ai pris tellement de plaisir à décrire l'errance, le flottement de ce personnage que je ne l'avais amené nulle part et donc il y avait une

sorte de manque, de frustration qui s'est résolue quand j'ai trouvé le sujet de sa nouvelle vie et donc j'ai écrit *Les Jupiters chauds*.

CV: Le sujet de sa nouvelle vie et de la vôtre? Est-ce que c'est lié aussi?

EB: Je ne sais plus quand j'ai écrit ça. Pas vraiment encore. J'ai écrit *Les Jupiters chauds* au moment où j'ai quitté le bord de la piscine quand j'ai décidé de vivre de ma plume. Donc je n'avais plus aucun salaire ou aucune bourse, j'étais en chute libre et j'ai pris un an pour écrire *Les Jupiters chauds*. Alors c'est vrai que l'univers scientifique de ce livre était pour moi un peu prémonitoire puisque j'allais devenir journaliste scientifique mais je ne l'étais pas du tout à ce moment-là. C'est en faisant *Les Jupiters chauds* que je le suis devenue puisque toutes ces enquêtes chez les astronomes ça m'a plongée là-dedans. Donc autrement dit, avec ce livre pour la première fois c'est la fiction qui a changé ma vie et ce n'est pas ma vie qui a déterminé une fiction.

CV: Donc en fait il y a quelque part un inversement puisqu'avec *Petite révision du ciel* vous vous êtes projetée dans l'écriture et pour la continuité de la fiction, c'est la fiction qui a modifié votre existence.

EB: Tout à fait, c'est Vincent qui m'a conduite à publier des articles d'astronomie. C'est magnifique comme bouquin. Et alors il reste encore une paire, c'est *La Tentation d'Edouard* et *Un Homme est une rose*. Là effectivement il y a une sorte de retour sur le même thème. Evidemment ça commence tout à fait de la même façon. Deux inconnus, des lettres ou des messages... Mais là aussi j'étais dans une sorte de moque parce que j'avais pris un pied incroyable à décrire Edouard d'une façon idyllique et malheureusement pas réaliste du tout. Pour moi c'était une sorte de fantasme de nouveau qui ne se référait à rien. C'est peut-être le livre le moins autobiographique de tous parce que j'ai tout créé.

CV: Contrairement à *Blanche cassé* et *La Tournante* il semble y avoir moins d'injection de votre part.

EB: Oui c'est une bulle, c'est beaucoup plus léger, c'était une récréation, c'était ludique comme tout. Et après j'ai eu tant de retours positifs sur ce livre de femmes qui ne rêvent que de rencontrer Edouard et des hommes qui veulent s'inspirer d'Edouard. Malheureusement la réalité n'est pas comme ça du tout et j'ai eu cette

envie de donner un peu la contrepartie en m'inspirant cette fois plutôt de mecs que je connais.

CV: Dans *L'écrivain et la blessure* on apprend que l'inspiration pour *Blanche cassé* et *La Tournante* est tirée d'histoires vraies que l'on vous a racontées. Est-ce le cas pour la plupart de vos romans?

EB: Non dans chaque livre, le réel a un statut différent il me semble. *La Tournante* c'est peut-être le plus réaliste de tous puisque tous les faits de base m'ont été donnés par une personne qui a vécu ça. Donc moi, j'ai simplement transformé en texte littéraire, en multipliant les points de vue. Je me suis écartée assez peu, même très peu des faits. Par contre il y a pas mal de discours qui tournent autour ou qui font référence à un passé qui là peut être très imaginaire parce que je n'ai pas enquêté précisément sur les parents, la vie des deux parents, ni sur la fille d'ailleurs, je n'ai jamais rencontré cette fille. Je ne voulais pas m'immiscer dans cette histoire.

CV: Et qu'en est-il des réactions des parents, Hermann et Iris? C'est aussi de la fiction?

EB: Je suis partie surtout de ce que le père m'a dit et aussi de ce qu'il m'a dit de sa femme. Je n'ai pas demandé plus. J'ai pris ce qu'il m'a donné spontanément et puis j'ai brodé pour compléter. Donc ce qui est le plus réel c'est le scénario proprement dit de ce qui s'est passé; ce qui est aussi très réel, c'est la personnalité du père parce que c'est à lui que j'ai parlé puis le reste ça devient plus fictionnel puisque je n'ai pas rencontré les personnages et ils ont été inventés à partir d'un petit portrait qu'il m'avait fait. Alors après dans *Blanche cassé*, j'ai pris des histoires vraies mais de trois personnes différentes.

CV: Pourtant on a vraiment l'impression que ce n'est qu'une seule histoire comme dans le cas de *La Tournante*.

EB: Non, mais en fait le défi c'était de rendre la chose homogène. C'est une conjonction qui fait qu'ayant connu ou rencontré trois personnes de type étoile filante, j'ai voulu faire la quintessence de l'étoile filante qui concentre un peu les trois exemples mais donc il y a des choses qui ne pourraient sans doute pas aller ensemble, enfin je n'en sais rien. Disons que j'ai trois sources d'inspiration mais ce n'est pas une histoire vraie. Et alors après il n'y a plus d'histoire vraie dans mes romans, il n'y a que des bribes comme ça, des petits souvenirs par ci ou je suis

témoin d'un truc et je vais le mettre dans le roman le jour même. C'est de l'autobiographie par fragment.

CV: Mis à part pour *Petite révision du ciel* où c'est une autobiographie...

EB: ...Fantasmée dans le futur. On pourrait dire aujourd'hui que c'est une autobiographie mais ça ne l'est devenu qu'après. Encore que je n'ai jamais fait exactement ça. Ce scénario n'est pas 100% vrai pour moi (changer d'appart...), j'ai juste cessé d'appartenir à une institution économique. Le concept du changement de vie, oui, et surtout de cette charnière où on flotte un peu et on se demande ce que l'on va faire. C'est surtout se rendre disponible à des impressions et des événements qui normalement ne nous atteignent pas parce qu'on a des œillères et en même temps on est obligé de vivre avec des œillères pour fonctionner. Si on était poreux comme des éponges on serait incapable de mener une journée à bien, c'est évident. Mais on va trop loin je trouve dans cette fermeture. Mais en tout cas il faut être capable par moment de reprendre cette porosité. Typiquement c'est souvent pendant les vacances.

CV: Mais alors avez-vous l'impression maintenant que vous avez fait cette coupure, cette transition, que votre nouvelle vie vous permet justement de rester 'éponge'? Est-ce que ça ne vous oblige pas à vous renfermer dans un système avec des œillères?

EB: Beaucoup moins puisque je suis indépendante. Je prends les boulots qui m'intéressent, j'ai un pouvoir sur le contenu de ce que je fais. Et puis ça change tout le temps et ça m'amène à m'intéresser et à m'intégrer dans des bulles chaque fois très différentes sur le contenu et sur les gens et donc par cette diversité et ce rythme rapide j'ai l'impression de rester très en éveil et en alerte, beaucoup plus que dans une formule traditionnelle.

CV: Vincent dans un sens remet des œillères.

EB: Oui, exactement. Vincent il se trompe.

CV: Il se met à fond dans la recherche, le doctorat...Il change radicalement de vie mais quelque part il reprend le même chemin.

EB: Sauf que là il est habité par la passion, ce qui n'était pas le cas dans sa première vie. Et c'est un mode d'existence qui existe et qui, je crois, est nécessaire pour nous

donner de grandes œuvres scientifiques ou artistiques ou philosophiques. Ce sont des gens qui deviennent obsédés par un truc qui est leur truc.

CV: Donc ce ne sont plus les œillères de la société mais celles de la passion?

EB: Voilà et à choisir c'est déjà beaucoup beaucoup mieux parce qu'il y a cette énergie intérieure qui bouillonne et qui fait qu'on est toujours en alerte mais sur le champ qu'on a choisi donc ce sont des gens très actifs, très éveillés, c'est typiquement les gens que je fréquente en tant que scientifique ou artiste, ce sont des gens passionnants mais assez monomaniaques. Ce sont des gens un peu difficiles à vivre pour leur entourage par exemple mais il n'empêche que ce sont eux qui font avancer les choses. C'est un Einstein typiquement. Il ne voyait pas ce qu'il y avait sur la table à côté de lui, il ne voyait pas sa femme mais il a découvert des trucs extraordinaires. Donc ça c'est un profil que j'admire et que je respecte, qui n'est pas le mien et qui n'est pas celui que je propose à mes lecteurs mais néanmoins ce sont des profils fascinants.

CV: Certains de vos personnages féminins semblent avoir des points communs avec vous. Je veux notamment parler d'Hélène Anciaux la journaliste de *Relations d'incertitude* qui choisit l'école de journalisme par amour.

EB: Oui c'est en effet un clin d'œil à un certain passé. De nouveau ce sont des points communs qui sont plutôt factuels. Hélène, c'est une fabrication qui est destinée à faire écho et miroir au physicien. J'ai décidé que ça ne serait pas moi du fait de ce que je suis, ou plutôt de ce que j'étais au moment de l'écriture. J'étais quelqu'un de trop compétent pour être intéressant par rapport à Edgar/d. J'étais déjà journaliste scientifique confirmée. Il fallait quelqu'un de beaucoup plus naïf à la fois sur le plan des compétences scientifiques mais aussi sur son chemin de vie puisque Edgar/d avait un bagage monstrueux qu'il tirait derrière lui, je voulais qu'il rencontre une fille qui n'était pas encore formée dans sa tête pour faire un contraste intéressant et pour qu'elle apprenne beaucoup. C'est le profil profond d'Hélène. Alors c'est vrai que j'ai pu lui injecter des choses qui viennent de ma vie parce qu'elle n'est peut-être pas loin de ce que j'étais à 20 ans. Mais je ne me suis pas trop posé la question.

CV: Le livre étant une biographie assez fidèle d'Edgar Gunzig je me demandais à quel point la biographie d'Hélène serait proche de la vôtre.

EB: Je ne me suis rien imposé là-dessus puisque j'ai pris cette option d'un personnage de fiction. Vraiment je ne serais plus capable de dire la quantité d'anecdotes réelles que je lui ai attribuées. Je n'avais aucune contrainte là-dessus donc autant dire n'importe quoi que des souvenirs réels. La seule contrainte c'était pour Edgar/d. Lui, il fallait que ce soit sa vie à lui donc là tout est vrai, en tout cas dans les faits. Donc il y a vraiment deux niveaux. Il y a le récit de vie d'Edgar/d qui est conforme et il y a la mise en scène romanesque qui peut tout permettre, d'une part sur la biographie d'Hélène et d'autre part sur les rapports entre les deux. Nous ne nous sommes pas du tout rencontrés ni n'avons travaillé comme je le décris. Tout comme pour Thomas Gunzig qui n'est pas du tout comédien d'ailleurs. Je me suis amusée à le triturer puisqu'il m'a dit de faire ce que je voulais. Je lui avais demandé la permission et il m'a dit que je pouvais le mettre dans un roman mais alors brode comme tu veux mais il ne voulait pas que ce soit réaliste. [...]

CV: Et donc aussi dans *L'unité de la connaissance* on a une journaliste. Est-ce que là c'est vraiment vous?

EB: Oui là, c'est un livre totalement autobiographique. Il ne s'agit pas de moi mais le personnage qui est dans *L'unité de la connaissance* c'est Elisa Brune au naturel puisqu'en effet ça remonte à l'époque où je n'étais pas encore journaliste et où avec ce colloque-là qui a suivi de très près *Les Jupiters chauds* j'ai mis le pied dans cet univers. Mais là je n'avais pas besoin d'affabuler puisque le sujet du livre c'est autre chose.

CV: Mais c'est un personnage qui revient souvent...

EB: C'est surtout parce que c'est un personnage qui est le bon filon narratif pour investiguer un milieu ou un personnage qui lui est campé comme expert ou comme maître; c'est toujours une façon d'entrer dans l'enquête. Puisque en fait dans les romans psychologiques comme dans les essais de science, c'est une enquête que je mène pour savoir ce qu'est l'astrophysique ou pour savoir qui est ce personnage. Peu importe mais pour mener une enquête il faut une enquêtrice ou un enquêteur et le journaliste ou la chercheuse c'est typiquement la bonne ficelle.

CV: Comment choisissez-vous les prénoms de vos personnages? Il y a une certaine consonance religieuse de certains prénoms (Clarisse, Bénédicte, Thomas...) Est-ce volontaire?

EB: C'est vrai? Oh mon Dieu! A priori il n'y a jamais d'intention précise. Le seul peut-être c'est Vincent parce que 20 et 100 sont des nombres et qu'il est mathématicien mais c'est un bête clin d'œil, il n'y a pas de profondeur là-dedans. Clarisse c'est parce que c'est lumineux c'est tout. Elle rayonne.

CV: Et de la même façon, comment le titre pour *Blanche cassé* vous est-il venu? C'est un titre grammaticalement bancal...on pense au blanc cassé...

EB: Je n'ai pas construit ça avec une intention. Tout simplement, on avait du mal à trouver un titre pour ce roman-là. J'en avais un dont l'éditeur ne voulait pas donc ils m'en ont demandé d'autres, j'ai proposé dix titres et aucun ne leur plaisait, vingt titres...je n'en pouvais plus. Ce 'Blanche cassé' il était dans la dernière liste que je leur ai envoyée, sans doute la 3^{ème} ou la 4^{ème} et il m'était venu dans une sorte de flash comme ça parce que j'ai dû voir l'expression blanc cassé quelque part sur un pot de peinture ou je ne sais quoi ou dans un texte et que j'ai fait l'assimilation avec cette héroïne à cause du blanc et aussi à cause du cassé parce qu'elle est à la fois lumineuse et elle se casse la figure...comme c'est une femme qui s'appelle Clarisse et que je la voyais blanche et je me suis dit que si on pouvait mettre l'expression blanc cassé au féminin on pourrait avoir la tentation de dire 'blanche cassée' comme réflexe premier. Pour une fois les éditeurs étaient tous d'accord que c'était intrigant et intéressant à la fois. Les titres de livre c'est toujours compliqué.

CV: Y a-t-il un lien entre *La Tentation d'Edouard* et *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*?

EB: Non, il n'y a un lien qu'avec la tentation au sens premier du terme donc me mettant dans la peau de cette Geneviève qui est harcelée par un homme séduisant, le thème principal de son évolution à elle c'était qu'elle voudrait bien mais qu'elle ne pouvait pas. Le thème a été exploité certainement dans un contexte religieux mais ça je m'en contrefiche. S'il y a bien un domaine que je n'ai pas envie d'explorer et qui ne m'intéresse pas c'est le religieux.

CV: La fin des romans est généralement soudaine, brève et laisse le lecteur face à tous les scénarios possibles pour la suite de l'histoire. Est-ce volontaire, un cachet d'Elisa Brune?

EB: Sans doute, sans être totalement intentionnel et conscient mais quelque chose que j'affectionne dans la narration en général c'est qu'on ne s'étende pas sur les conclusions et les explications. Il n'y a rien de pire qu'un roman où tout s'explique.

Donc c'est sans doute un cachet puisque je ne veux ni expliquer ni fermer le scénario.

CV: Cette fin ouverte est ce qui vous a permis notamment de créer *Les Jupiters chauds*.

EB: Exactement mais ce n'était pas du tout cela que je visais. Je ne voudrais pas dire que je n'imaginai pas que je pourrais écrire une suite puisque justement la fin était ouverte mais je n'avais pas le projet de le faire. C'est venu plus tard et effectivement ça a pu se faire parce que le flux était ouvert. En fait, la position de principe d'un roman qui se clôture complètement, d'une part c'est un certain confort, on a été habitué à des histoires où tout se résout du type 'et ils furent heureux et eurent beaucoup d'enfants'; ça c'est le *pattern* qui nous a été imprimé mais il est un petit peu naïf et primaire. D'une part parce que la vie n'est pas comme ça, aucune boucle ne se boucle avant la mort. D'autre part parce que sur le plan narratif et littéraire il n'est satisfaisant que dans un premier temps. Dans les histoires et les contes de fée ça marche mais plus tard on a envie de plus de complexité, d'un peu plus d'ouverture et en tant que consommatrice de fiction, je ne supporte pas les fins fermées et je ne supporte pas non plus les fins en queue de poisson. Il faut trouver un juste milieu où on a résolu certains fils et dénoué certains nœuds mais où on n'a pas tout re-bétonné.

CV: Ça laisse aussi une certaine liberté au lecteur qui peut continuer à se poser des questions...

EB: Oui ça lui laisse la liberté de reprendre le flambeau en imaginant la suite parce que fermer la fin c'est effectivement le prendre pour un benêt comme si on lui donnait la dernière béquée jusqu'au dessert pour qu'il puisse ensuite aller dormir. Je suis très opposée à toute démarche de 'spoon-feeding'. Il faut donner à manger d'une façon qui entretient l'appétit et qui l'ouvre davantage plutôt que de rassasier et l'idéal dans un livre c'est d'amener le lecteur à vivre plus, c'est donc de le projeter dans un avenir et sûrement pas de lui fermer la porte au nez en disant 'voilà c'est terminé on n'en parle plus'. Cependant je tiens à ce que certaines choses soient résolues et elles le sont. Dans *La Tentation d'Edouard* par exemple le grand suspense est de savoir s'ils vont se rencontrer, s'ils vont se plaire et cette boucle-là est bouclée alors après, par contre, savoir si les choses se développent c'est une autre question.

CV: Toujours dans *L'écrivain et la blessure*, Margot déclare qu'elle 'a toujours eu l'impression que la famille était une horrible blague, une bande d'imposteurs essayant de vous faire croire que vous n'êtes pas tout seul'. Est-ce que la famille est quelque chose d'important pour Elisa Brune?

EB: Non, dans le sens où justement ce n'est pas un élément structurant de ma vie d'adulte. C'est un contexte de ma vie d'adulte. Malheureusement pour un enfant la famille est toujours un élément structurant. C'est nécessaire mais c'est souvent douloureux. Personnellement je ne connais personne qui n'ait pas à un degré ou un autre souffert de l'ambiance familiale ou des conséquences du fait de vivre en vase clos. Pour moi la famille est en fait une prison, c'est comme ça que je l'ai vécue et que je le vois partout; la famille est une prison volontaire.

CV: Les relations parents-enfants sont souvent difficiles dans vos romans et vous faites des portraits de familles cinglants de réalité. Faites-vous beaucoup de recherche pour parvenir à ce degré de réalisme ou est-ce juste l'expérience?

EB: Il ne faut pas beaucoup de recherche pour voir des familles à l'œuvre. Il suffit de se trouver en vacances sur une terrasse pendant les vacances scolaires et vous avez des échantillons à profusion de tous les dysfonctionnements familiaux typiques donc ma recherche souvent ne va pas plus loin que d'ouvrir les yeux et les oreilles. La famille c'est le machin le plus public, la famille est à l'œuvre sous vos yeux dans la rue, chez des amis... donc si on parle de son expérience fondatrice qui est celle de sa propre famille et qu'on y ajoute tout ce que l'on voit dans les famille satellites proches et puis dans la rue, il y a plus qu'assez d'informations.

CV: Les frères et sœurs ont des relations souvent très fortes dans vos écrits (Iris/Céline, Thomas/Marion, Bénédicte/Clarisse)...Toujours dans l'entretien au journal de SBS, on lit que vous êtes 'le dernier rejeton'. Est-il possible de savoir combien de frères et sœurs vous avez? Quelle est l'importance de la relation entre frères/sœurs?

EB: J'ai un frère et une sœur. Dans un premier temps la relation frère/sœur fait partie de cette prison familiale dans le contexte de l'enfance. A l'âge adulte ça devient autre chose et en ce qui me concerne cela ne dépend que de la personnalité du frère ou de la sœur. Je veux dire par là que pour moi la proximité se base sur les affinités et jamais sur les relations de sang. En ce qui me concerne, mais ce n'est que mon

exemple, mon frère est tel que je n'ai pas de relation avec lui, ma sœur est telle que j'ai une relation proche avec elle et avec les cousins je raisonne de la même façon. Donc le lien génétique n'a pas de poids pour moi.

CV: Donc par exemple la proximité entre Céline et Iris dans *La Tournante* ne représente pas forcément un certain vécu?

EB: Non c'est surtout une part d'observation, j'ai vu des relations comme ça.

CV: Donc c'est plus du journalisme que du vécu?

EB: Oui.

CV: Les relations hommes/femmes ne semblent jamais 100% positives...

EB: Ce n'est pas seulement la réalité de la relation homme/femme, c'est la réalité de n'importe quelle relation. On ne peut pas être au beau fixe tout le temps donc je ne pense pas que je qualifie la relation homme/femme de cette façon-là mais toute relation. Par ailleurs, il y a sans doute d'autres choses plus spécifiques aux relations hommes/femmes qui apparaissent dans mes livres.

CV: Les thèmes de la séduction, du corps et la beauté/laideur tiennent une place assez importante dans vos œuvres. Est-ce qu'on peut y voir un reflet et une critique de la société qui a trop tendance à juger sur ces critères?

EB: Oui c'est certainement un reflet de ça mais ce n'est pas nécessairement une critique au sens où il faudrait faire abstraction d'eux parce qu'on ne peut pas faire abstraction d'eux. Notamment les déterminants physiologiques, physiques ne sont pas du tout solubles dans aucune démarche culturelle ni intellectuelle et donc j'en traite comme d'une réalité de base, pas comme une critique sociale.

CV: Donc contrairement à certains thèmes où vous faites une critique sociale comme dans *La Tournante* par exemple...

EB: Oui là où il y a un grave problème et qu'il faut que ça change...

CV: ...vous ne visez pas à changer les choses dans le concept beauté/laideur?

EB: Pas du tout. Je pense que c'est inamovible. Nous sommes tellement définis par notre corps, pas seulement au niveau de la beauté ou de la laideur d'ailleurs. Comment un corps peut-il percevoir le monde? C'est très différent selon qu'on est en pleine santé ou malade, qu'on a de bons yeux ou de mauvais yeux... Tout ça c'est l'être. Je pense que le corps détermine la personne et donc la vision du monde est nécessairement très très influencée par la façon dont on est reçu dans le monde.

CV: Donc vous posez en quelque sorte une limite; vous avez conscience de la limite de ce que vous pouvez changer chez vos lecteurs?

EB: Sur ce plan-là certainement, oui.

CV: Le sexe dans vos romans est généralement assez cru puisqu'on passe parfois dans un registre (très) érotique comme vous le soulignez dans l'interview avec le SBS. Pourquoi? Est-ce nécessaire, est-ce par jeu?

EB: Je crois qu'il y a plusieurs facteurs là-dedans. D'une part, comme je le disais, je suis le produit du féminisme, c'est-à-dire que je ne m'encombre pas de tabous et de pudeur apprise. Mais, par ailleurs rien ne m'oblige à faire cela non plus. C'est une démarche ludique; il y a un goût là-dedans qui s'exprime, un goût pour l'appétit de nouveau. En fait l'appétit est une sensation directrice je dirais. Que ce soit pour aborder les sciences ou pour aborder la relation de couple, j'aime à la fois décortiquer et à la fois provoquer chez le lecteur cette exaltation du désir et en ce qui concerne le désir au sens propre c'est-à-dire sexuel, je pense qu'il faut jouer avec un curseur. L'érotisme peut être torride sans scènes explicites mais ça a été plus exploré que de décrire des scènes explicites qui ne soient pas de la pornographique, ou de la littérature qu'on appelle érotique mais qui est uniquement centrée là-dessus et où il n'y a plus d'envergure romanesque. Donc moi je voudrais, enfin je l'ai fait à chaque fois que j'ai pu, injecter de l'érotisme sans censure dans des livres qui ne sont pas des livres d'érotisme et ça, c'est par simple souci de franchise, de réalisme; une vie de couple ne s'arrête pas au bord de la couette comme on nous le montre dans la plupart des films même encore aujourd'hui. Il y a là une sorte d'hypocrisie tout à fait désuète.

CV: Donc c'est en quelque sorte un refus du cliché?

EB: Oui, tout comme je ne veux pas voir une fin à la 'ils se marièrent et eurent beaucoup d'enfants', je ne veux pas voir une scène de sexe qui s'arrête à 'et ils basculèrent dans le lit'. Parce que, quand même, ce qui fait qu'un couple peut perdurer ou non c'est la matérialité du rapport érotique. Ça peut se passer très très mal comme ça peut se passer très bien et ce sont des choses très concrètes et très différentes d'un couple à l'autre ou d'un partenaire à l'autre et je trouve que l'on a pas du tout développé, exposé ce paysage énorme.

CV: Donc on retrouve encore ce souci de dépeindre la réalité du 'paysage social'?

EB: Oui, oui.

CV: On se situe peut-être encore ici à la limite de votre écriture journalistique? D'une certaine façon tout en écrivant une fiction, la réalité est trop importante pour être ignorée.

EB: Oui je vous donne une fiction et je ne veux pas que le sexe soit escamoté comme quelque chose qu'on fait ou qu'on ne fait pas, point. En général on n'en sait pas plus alors que tout l'enjeu est de savoir comment ça va se faire! Et Dieu si ça pèse et si ça influe sur la suite des événements, donc arrêtons de mettre un étouffoir autour de cet épisode concret. Décrivons-le, analysons-le parce que s'il y a une chose que j'ai remarquée en écrivant *Du sexe masculin comme un organe* c'est comment on est seul et démuné devant la découverte d'abord et l'amélioration ensuite de ces pratiques sexuelles. En fait, pour faire une parenthèse là-dessus, j'ai écrit ce recueil à partir d'expériences que j'ai glanées chez des ami-e-s et puis plus loin et qui démontrent à quel point on fait des erreurs monstrueuses, à quel point on reste longtemps dans des mystères et des questions irrésolus parce que, non seulement dans les romans mais aussi dans la vie courante on n'en parle pas, même avec les ami-e-s les plus proches. J'ai remarqué ça parce qu'après j'ai été plus loin au moment où j'ai fait cette démarche et je me suis rendu compte que jusque-là on avait passé notre vie à parler de mecs mais sans jamais parler de la longueur du sexe ou de l'odeur qu'il a... Avec mes meilleures confidentes, jamais on avait creusé jusque-là.

CV: Donc ces confidences assez poussées entre copines c'est un petit peu ce que vous illustrez avec Daphné et Geneviève dans *La Tentation d'Edouard*?

EB: Exactement, dans ce livre-là j'ai mis en scène cette façon d'aller un peu plus loin dans la connivence et la complicité entre femmes, qui n'est pas fréquente en réalité. Moi je ne l'ai eue qu'après avoir volontairement ouvert la question et alors j'ai découvert des choses absolument phénoménales. D'où l'idée d'en faire une collection d'essais.

CV: Vous aviez déjà abordé un petit peu ce sujet avec *En voiture Simone*.

EB: Oui, effectivement, *En voiture Simone* est une sorte de résumé. C'est tiré du manuscrit non publié.

CV: Les femmes/mères les plus ambitieuses telles que la mère dans *Blanche cassé* ou encore Rachel dans *Relations d'incertitude* semblent être critiquées soit par la

société, soit par leur entourage. Essayez-vous de casser ces clichés en les dénonçant dans vos romans?

EB: C'est certainement ce que je pense même si je ne l'ai pas travaillé très consciemment dans mes personnages mais ça a dû passer.

CV: [...] Peut-on y voir un message (féministe) que la femme doit faire ce qu'elle veut sans être critiquée par exemple...

EB: Oui sans doute. C'est-à-dire que je n'ai pas vraiment conscience à quel point la critique sociale est visible dans l'entourage de ces personnages. Je ne me souviens pas d'avoir écrit l'avis des autres sur elles mais en vous entendant évoquer les quatre cas de rapport mère/fille ou fils c'est vrai que la majorité, si ce n'est toutes, sont des femmes qui ne mettent pas leur enfant au centre de leur vie et sans que je l'aie fait consciemment, ça traduit manifestement ce que j'en pense, c'est qu'une femme n'est pas faite pour être mère par définition, pas du tout.

CV: Donc le fait que ce genre de perspective féministe soit appliqué à votre écriture ne vous gêne pas?

EB: Non non et je pousserai plus loin. Pour moi, une femme qui a vraiment des centres d'intérêts et des activités dans le monde ou dans la société, c'est un peu antinomique avec la fonction de mère parce que qu'est-ce qu'un enfant sinon quelque chose qui vous oblige à vous intéresser rien qu'à lui! Honnêtement, je trouve que c'est un problème difficile à résoudre et moi je l'ai résolu en n'ayant pas d'enfant. Ça marche bien. Par ailleurs, je conçois tout à fait que certaines femmes ne veulent pas sacrifier l'enfant à ce point-là mais qu'elles veulent quand même aussi accéder à un statut professionnel ou autre. Alors cela devient des arbitrages. J'ai plein d'amies qui se partagent et qui y arrivent avec plus ou moins de succès mais c'est vrai que dans tous les cas ce sont des femmes qui ne sont plus centrées sur l'enfant uniquement et je crois que cela vaut mieux pour tout le monde y compris pour l'enfant dans une certaine mesure. Les enfants qui ont été le seul centre d'intérêt de leur mère c'est catastrophique. La mauvaise mère je ne la qualifie pas comme cela.

CV: Vos héroïnes manquent souvent de confiance en elles et veulent surtout faire plaisir (sens du sacrifice – presque religieux). Essayez-vous de refléter un trait de société? Les femmes se sacrifient et les hommes profitent?

EB: Oui, disons qu'il y a une fragilité commune à toutes ces femmes et qui je pense est peut-être due au fait que le féminisme n'est pas encore assez vieux, enfin surtout les victoires du féminisme ne sont pas encore vieilles pour qu'un certain complexe d'infériorité ait disparu.

CV: Est-ce quelque chose que vous ressentez vous-même dans le domaine scientifique?

EB: Oui. D'abord il y a beaucoup moins de femmes chercheuses que d'hommes; celles qui le sont, dans pas mal de cas doivent concilier avec la vie de famille, ce qui les empêche d'être aussi performantes que les hommes au niveau du nombre de publications etc. Plus insidieusement encore que cela, je remarque souvent, mais vraiment souvent, que dans n'importe quel colloque, débat, réunion ou même discussion de café les femmes se positionnent en retrait. Elles – tout comme Marianne ou Hélène – sont éduquées, elles sont modernes, elles sont tout ce que l'on veut mais elles ne gueulent pas aussi fort que les hommes.

CV: Donc c'est quelque chose qui doit changer?

EB: Je ne sais pas. A priori, j'aurais envie de dire oui. Il n'y a pas de raison que l'on se mette toujours dans l'ombre des hommes mais j'ai tendance à croire que cela n'est pas anodin comme résultat dans la relation de séduction ou alors c'est ça qui devrait évoluer mais là on est loin du compte. C'est une chose que j'essaie un peu de décortiquer dans *Un Homme est une rose* parce que Michel est un homme *homme* donc macho, Marianne est une femme en retrait et pourtant déjà on voit qu'il y a un problème dans les performances sexuelles du monsieur et problème qui n'aurait pas eu lieu si elle avait été secrétaire. C'est ma thèse. Je veux dire par là que les femmes qui acquièrent du statut acquièrent un pouvoir d'intimidation parce qu'elles ont de quoi penser et donc l'homme se demande: 'qu'est-ce qu'elle va penser?'. C'est tout con mais c'est très très effectif. Je ne peux pas encore transformer ça en réalité chiffrée...encore que...Justement pour *Un Homme est une rose* j'ai travaillé sur les questions de Viagra etc. et donc j'ai eu sous la main des enquêtes sur les problèmes sexuels et je crois que je l'explique dans le livre, plus le statut professionnel de la femme est élevé, plus il y a de problèmes d'impuissance. C'est très ennuyeux donc il faudrait trouver un système de fonctionnement où la puissance virile résiste à la puissance féminine.

CV: Donc on en revient au fait que c'est la femme qui se sacrifie parce qu'elle veut faire plaisir, comme certaines de vos héroïnes.

EB: Comme les femmes l'ont toujours fait en réalité. C'est le schéma classique et ça vient de tellement loin qu'on n'est pas prêt d'en sortir. Et donc, ce que j'observe moi, c'est que même lorsque les femmes d'aujourd'hui ont acquis une indépendance totale et une jugeote égale à celles des mecs, elles sont obligées de jouer un jeu différent au moment de la séduction sinon ça ne va pas marcher. C'est drôle à voir, des femmes très indépendantes, très fortes qui retombent un peu dans le rôle de la midinette lorsqu'il s'agit des premiers échanges, qu'il faut ferrer le poisson, il ne faut pas lui faire peur. Donc ce n'est pas forcément volontaire, c'est presque animal, inconscient.

CV: La photographie est un thème qui revient plusieurs fois dans vos textes (*La Tentation d'Edouard*, *La Tournante*, 'Filature bruxelloise'). Hermann était-il photographe en réalité?

EB: Le père de la fille que j'ai rencontré ne l'était pas, non ça c'est de la fiction.

CV: C'est un art que vous pratiquez vous-même?

EB: Tout à fait en dilettante mais oui j'aime beaucoup prendre des photos, j'ai eu une époque où je faisais des travaux un peu artistiques avec des contraintes ou des thématiques mais je n'ai pas vraiment persévéré là-dedans. En revanche je reste très sensible au thème de l'image, du cadrage, de la composition j'aime tout autant la peinture d'ailleurs que j'ai aussi pratiquée parce que c'est un langage plus simple que la vie elle-même puisque c'est juste un arrêt sur image et qui permet plus facilement d'organiser, d'interpréter le monde que le flux continu et la complexité du mouvement. C'est un peu comme revenir en arrière du point de vue vocabulaire, de quitter la grammaire et d'aller voir le mot et c'est reposant d'une certaine façon. Bref, toute cette problématique m'intéresse beaucoup.

CV: Est-ce que c'est pour cela que vous avez fait de Geneviève une photographe?

EB: Oui, ou on peut reprendre le thème du fantasme; c'est une des vies que j'aurais aimé avoir; une autre ça aurait d'être peintre, une autre peut-être d'être comédienne...

CV: Donc dans vos œuvres on peut voir autant de détails autobiographiques que de fantasmes, autant de projections que de vécu?

EB: C'est-à-dire que, comme dans le cas de Vincent sans doute, je projette, en allant beaucoup plus loin, une démarche que je pratique à titre embryonnaire dans ma vie parce que ma vie est faite de plein d'embryons, c'est comme ça que je suis heureuse, sauf pour l'écriture où là je vais au bout mais l'embryon de photo devient une photographe, l'embryon de peinture deviendra un peintre etc. Et donc d'une certaine façon je parle souvent de choses que je connais mais un tout petit peu.

CV: Peut-on voir en vous à travers votre œuvre une photographie de la société? En effet page 47 dans *La Tentation d'Edouard* on peut lire 'L'écrivain invente un monde, quand le photographe choisit seulement sa manière de dévoiler ce qui est'. Elisa Brune, écrivain photographe. Vous n'inventez pas un monde mais photographiez la réalité sous un certain angle pour la dévoiler au mieux au lecteur.

EB: Oui, j'accepte tout à fait cette vision. Deux commentaires peut-être. Un, la métaphore de la photo pourrait aussi bien être celle de la peinture parce que dans les deux cas il y a le réel qui sert de base et il y a le regard de l'artiste qui transforme, qui cadre, qui refait le monde. Un exemple pragmatique ce serait la Provence vue par Van Gogh c'est une autre Provence mais c'est quand même la Provence. Il y a la réalité et il y a la vision de l'artiste, le style de l'artiste, la patte de l'artiste, peu importe mais c'est une co-création: le monde tel qu'il s'est créé et la création de l'artiste qui s'imprime par-dessus. Donc photo ou peinture c'est assez similaire en réalité. Maintenant je crois que c'est un parallèle qu'on peut faire dans beaucoup d'œuvres d'écrivains puisque assez rares sont ceux finalement qui partent loin de la réalité. Il y a la science-fiction d'une part, il y a peut-être les romans policiers fabriqués de toute pièce, et encore...

CV: Dans vos romans vous présentez les problèmes mais vous ne donnez pas les solutions, vous ne jugez pas...

EB: C'est dans la même mouvance que la fin bouclée. Introduire le jugement ou même l'opinion de l'auteur, je trouve ça paternaliste et c'est bien la dernière chose que je souhaite faire. C'est encore une volonté de donner les rênes au lecteur. Il a des faits, il a des personnages et qu'il en tire les leçons qu'il doit en tirer. Même pour *La Tournante* j'ai évité de prendre position. Il est difficile de ne pas prendre position mais le problème est que si on prend position on a déjà perdu le combat que l'on voudrait mener; parce que quand on prend position on est lu que par ceux qui ont la

même position. C'est le problème de tous les militantismes d'ailleurs. Mon propos et mon défi c'était d'arriver à comprendre la position du violeur et éventuellement de ses copains...de comprendre en quoi pour lui c'était justifié de faire ça vu qu'il n'en a pas honte donc il faut que ça s'explique, ce n'est pas si simple.

CV: Pourquoi ne donner la parole à Marion que deux fois dans le récit?

EB: Marion ne peut pas dire grand-chose. Elle est trop jeune pour avoir une vision sociale du problème, elle n'a pas de recul et en plus elle est ligotée par les peurs etc. donc elle n'est pas la mieux qualifiée pour analyser la situation. Tout ce qu'on veut savoir d'elle c'est pourquoi elle a fait un pas vers ça et pourquoi elle ne peut pas en revenir, quel est son monde mental qui fait qu'elle est prisonnière. Mais au-delà de ça on ne peut rien apprendre de plus par elle.

CV: La relation homme/femme apparaît là encore sous un jour assez négatif...

EB: Evidemment, là c'est tout ce que les féministes ont gagné qui est bafoué et piétiné donc c'est terrifiant. Pour moi le point le plus mystérieux de l'affaire c'était justement de justifier le point de vue de l'agresseur parce que, comme dans d'autres problématiques aussi, on a toujours tendance à stigmatiser le criminel comme une espèce de monstre sans moralité aucune. Pas du tout, ça se passe dans une moralité très précise et il faut bien comprendre que quand on est imprégné de cette morale-là il est non seulement pas grave mais même valorisant de punir une femme qui ne se 'conduit pas bien'. C'est très moral. Il est important de voir comment ça fonctionne et d'essayer de presque y adhérer c'est-à-dire de se couler dedans pour peut-être être mieux armé après pour combattre ça mais être seulement dans le ressentiment ou le jugement c'est rester dans le camp de l'autre morale.

CV: Si on passe au thème de la souffrance. Est-elle nécessaire à la vie, au procédé d'écriture pour vous? N'essayez-vous pas d'apaiser les douleurs de la société par votre écriture?

EB: C'est une question qui revient souvent dans le discours des écrivains. Il faut voir où on la place. En ce qui me concerne je n'ai jamais vécu l'écriture elle-même comme une souffrance, au contraire c'est un plaisir et parfois une libération. Mais de toute façon on ne peut rien généraliser sur la démarche d'écriture. Si certains souffrent une mort pour sortir deux pages je trouve qu'ils devraient changer de métier mais c'est leur problème. En revanche, je pense qu'effectivement on n'aurait

pas le désir et le motif d'écrire si on n'avait pas un mal-être quelque part. Par ailleurs je pense que le mal-être est la transition nécessaire de l'homme ou alors il faut baigner dans une foi inébranlable, qu'elle soit religieuse ou politique ou Dieu sait quoi qui fait qu'on est inondé de sens mais moi qui suis imperméable à ce genre de convictions la condition humaine est la souffrance tout simplement.

CV: Est-ce trop fort de voir la souffrance comme moteur d'écriture ou motif?

EB: Oui mais ceci dit, ce n'est pas un motif qui me convient et chacun réagit différemment à son mal-être existentiel. Il y a toutes sortes de formes de créativité qui sont, à mon avis, autant de façons de se soigner, que ce soit les différentes disciplines artistiques ou scientifiques, parce que c'est une forme aussi d'expression.

CV: A propos de *Réminiscences*, pourquoi se retrouve-t-il dans un recueil publié en 2005, *Amour j'écris ton nom*, et dans le recueil pour Jacques Dubois publié en 1998?

EB: Simplement parce que les gens qui faisaient le recueil *Amour j'écris ton nom* m'ont demandé un texte pour une bonne œuvre et je n'ai pas eu envie de m'embêter. Même pour des formats comme cela, je ne me lance pas dans une création s'il n'y a aucun paiement à la clé, c'est du pur bénévolat.

CV: En ce qui concerne les éditeurs, est-ce volontaire de vous faire publier à Paris?

EB: Oui c'était tout à fait volontaire. Il est inutile de se faire publier en Belgique si on veut être sur le marché puisque les éditeurs belges ne sont presque pas diffusés du tout. Les libraires ont déjà trop avec la production française donc ils ne prennent pas la production belge donc ça réduit le marché terriblement. La conséquence c'est qu'il n'y a quasiment pas d'éditeurs littéraires en Belgique ou ils sont minuscules.

CV: Est-ce que vous m'autorisez à citer des éléments de cet entretien dans le cadre de ma thèse de doctorat?

EB: Oui bien sûr. La seule chose que je ne souhaite pas vraiment répandre c'est mon vrai nom.