

(RE)READING

Emmanuel Bove's *Bécon-les-Bruyères* (1927)

*les terrains incultes où [les bruyères]
poussaient...* (BB 3)

- 1 Emmanuel Bove's *Bécon-les-Bruyères* first appeared in the literary magazine *Europe* in May 1927, before its publication the following month with the Éditions Émile-Paul Frères in the collection "Portraits de la France". Born in 1898, Bove was by this point known as the author of two novels, *Mes Amis* (1924) and *Armand* (1927), as well as the novellas *Visite d'un soir* (1925), and *Le crime d'une nuit* (1926)¹.
- 2 Edited by Jean-Louis Vaudoyer and commissioned from writers such as François Mauriac, Pierre Mac Orlan, and Francis Jammes, the 34 volumes in the "Portraits de la France" series generally describe well-known towns and cities (Bordeaux, Marseille, Deauville) or regions (Basses-Pyrénées, Haute-Provence)². Like these other books, Bove's *Bécon-les-Bruyères* is produced in a high-quality limited edition, on vellum paper with an artistic frontispiece (in this case by Maurice Utrillo). Unlike them, it deals with a marginal locality situated on the northwestern outskirts of Paris, at the junction between Asnières and Courbevoie, which is barely a place at all: "Bécon-les-Bruyères existe à peine"³. Bove's choice of this site for his literary portrait of France may be due in part, as some have suggested, to his instinct for provocation⁴. Yet *Bécon-les-Bruyères* is not merely a satirical or derisive portrait of the nondescript *banlieue*. In 63 pages and seven short chapters, Bove develops a curious travel narrative that constantly tests the explorer's expectations against the challenge of the ordinary. To reread *Bécon-les-Bruyères* today is to discover a pioneering and idiosyncratic instance of literary fieldwork.

Name and (Non-)Place

- 3 The incongruity of Bécon-les-Bruyères derives in the first instance from the place name itself, which is at once "printanier" in its reference (BB 5) and "teinté de vulgarité", given its unfortunate syllabic resonance (BB 6). Bove begins his description of the town by commenting on the disjunction between the place and its evocation of a wild vegetation that has entirely vanished from view: "De même qu'il n'existe plus de bons enfants rue des Bons-Enfants, ni de lilas à la Closerie, ni de calvaire place du Calvaire, de même il ne fleurit plus de bruyères à Bécon-les-Bruyères" (BB 2). The phrase anticipates Georges Perec's injunction in *Espèces d'espaces*: "Se souvenir que si l'on disait Saint-Germain-des-Prés, c'est parce qu'il y avait des prés"⁵. Unlike these open fields transformed over centuries into urban space, however, the Bécon-des-Bruyères that exists in 1927 has a relatively short history, dating back only to the inauguration of the railway station in 1891. Alluding to the adventure novels of Jules Verne, Bove suggests that the place serves as an inevitable counterweight to the rapidly expanding horizons of the *fin-de-siècle* geographic imagination: "Il fallait à la possibilité

proche du tour du monde en quatre-vingts jours, aux horizons larges, aux villes tentaculaires, un contrepoids” (BB 9). Despite the disappearance of the eponymous *bruyères*, the town’s name carries the memory of an uncultivated moorland—the landscape of those “terrains incultes”, interrupted by the occasional factory chimney or wooden shack, which might still be remembered by those who saw the town’s creation in the previous century (BB 3). Bécon’s houses weigh on the dead heathers of the past like funerary monuments, occupying an uncertain terrain that might still be given back to nature (BB 4).

- 4 As a byproduct of the expanding and connected modern city, Bécon-les-Bruyères stands as the archetypical *banlieue*. Highlighting this logic of typification, Peter Handke’s 1984 German translation bears the subtitle, “eine Vorstadt”⁶. But the place is not only a periphery but also an interstice, a line traced between Asnières and Courbevoie. The train track both brings the town into being and bisects it into these two communes, which are united only by “un tunnel fétide” (BB 41). Even if the place name unites pre-existing neighborhoods, their combination produces a “lieu-dit” that lacks the usual grounding of such toponyms, in that it refers not to a traditionally attributed name or to a characteristic of the place but first and foremost to an administrative identity within a system of coordinates.
- 5 An approximately defined space lacking a clear geographical identity, Bove’s Bécon-les-Bruyères is also without distinguishing features. Adopting the narrative frame of a traveler arriving in a strange city, Bove develops an appropriately meandering description:

En s’éloignant de la gare, comme aucune enseigne, aucun signe ne rappelle l’endroit où l’on se trouve, on marche en se répétant : “Je suis cependant à Bécon-les-Bruyères.” Tout est normal. Alors que l’on s’attendait à quelque chose, les immeubles ont des murs et des cheminées, les rues des trottoirs, les gens que l’on rencontre les mêmes vêtements que ceux de la ville que l’on quitte. Rien de différent ne retient l’attention. (BB 11-12)

Both no-man’s-land and everyplace (since its buildings and streets fall within contemporary urban norms), Bécon-les-Bruyères confronts the traveler with the challenge of describing the nondescript. The place becomes uncanny in its very normality and lack of distinguishing features. Bove’s opening pages ironically capture this logic of sameness and strangeness by making the train ticket into a figure for the place: while the standard pre-purchased ticket to Bécon-les-Bruyères looks the same as a ticket to Marseille or to any other French city, it is only the “ticket de papier ordinaire,” provided on the train to the ticketless passenger, that seems appropriate for accessing such a non-destination (BB 2). This substitute ticket is made with ordinary paper, but has a “format inhabituel” that is emblematic of Bove’s insistence on the incongruity of the normal.

- 6 Topographically, Bécon-les-Bruyères is characterized in relentlessly negative terms: entangled with its neighboring communes, it lacks both borders (BB 6) and environs (BB 45). It is almost uncharted territory: the hand-drawn map that hangs in the real-estate agency does not exist in printed form (BB 37). The town’s only real center is the railway station, in front of which a traveling fair appears at unpredictable intervals, unconnected to any established holidays (BB 15-16). But its social life does not otherwise converge on any particular inn, café, or square

(BB 31); there is no town hall, hospital or a cemetery (BB 14)—although a nearby island does have a cemetery for dogs (BB 53). Bove does not mention any church. The visitor is left disoriented in the long, empty streets that lead nowhere in particular:

Quand une place enfin vous délivre de ces voies interminables et vous fait espérer un centre proche, elle est clôturée de murs et de palissades de chantiers. Aucune statue ne se dresse au milieu. Elle n'existe que parce qu'il faut ménager des espaces libres au cas où cette banlieue deviendrait aussi peuplée que Paris. (BB 33-34)

- 7 Bécon-les-Bruyères thus corresponds in some respects to Marc Augé's definition of the "non-place", which is epitomized by the anonymous space of the traveler⁷. The town owes its existence, after all, to the rail network whose connections produce periurban agglomerations. Bove's text, for its part, certainly prefigures Augé's project of proximate anthropology ("l'anthropologie du proche")⁸. However, Bove's Bécon does not yet belong to the moment of supermodernity that Augé analyzes in his study of non-places. Bécon-les-Bruyères, however empty it may seem, is still an inhabited place inscribed in history and in human relations. It was inhabited, we might point out, by the author himself: in 1926-1927, Bove lived on the Courbevoie side of the station, at 16 de la rue Madiraa⁹. This personal connection is in tension with Bove's organizing *topos* of the unfamiliar traveler. Bécon-les-Bruyères, personified at several moments in the text, even becomes an object of identification. Dominique Carlat thus reads Bove's description of this "banlieue moyenne" as a wry transposed self-portrait as much it is a portrait of France¹⁰. In the same vein, Claude Burgelin connects the incongruity of the place-name to Bove's own birth name—Bobovnikoff—and reads the text as an oblique interrogation of the troublesome relationship between names, origins, and referents¹¹. Commenting on the town's function as a refrain in jokes—for instance, "C'est un Parisien de Bécon-les-Bruyères" (BB 9)—Bove nevertheless insists that the place cannot be reduced to a pretext or a punchline¹²: "du moment que les choses existent, elles cessent d'être amusantes" (BB 10).

Seeing and Dwelling

- 8 Restored to its proper seriousness as a real human environment, Bécon-les-Bruyères confounds expectations. In this context, Bove's stance entails an anthropological gaze characterized by uncanny distance, but also by a generosity of attention to the place and its dwellers. Bove's enunciative position shifts within the text, largely maintaining the indefinite "on" but occasionally and strikingly shifting to "vous" or "je". The narrating subject also occupies a variable focal position, moving between the perspective of the outside observer (whose arrival in the city provides the opening premise), and that of the local resident, embedded in the everyday life of the town, who regards with suspicion the occasional taxi bearing a "voyager étrange" to an unknown destination (BB 20). The text's third section, for instance, reverses the initial direction of travel: instead of the traveler arriving in the *banlieue* from Paris, it describes the experience of the Béconnais inhabitants who commute to Paris via the Gare

Saint-Lazare (BB 21-22). The book's closing paragraph moves into the first person both to announce the narrator's definitive departure ("en m'éloignant aujourd'hui de Bécon-les-Bruyères pour toujours" (BB 63)), and to predict the future absorption of the town into the communes of Courbevoie and Asnières. The final sentence is a melancholy prolepsis evoking this future disappearance of the personified place: "Et je croirai longtemps qu'elle vit encore, comme quand je pense à tous ceux que j'ai connus, jusqu'au jour où j'apprendrai qu'elle n'est plus depuis des années" (BB 63). The place has become a familiar acquaintance.

- 9 In its ethnographic dimension, Bove's text describes local inhabitants who occupy an intermediate position between the roughness of Paris and the obliging manners of the countryside (BB 13). Dependent on the metropolis for supplies of food and goods (BB 19-20), they follow the passing fads and fashions of Paris with a slight delay (BB 15). The *banlieue's* proximity to the sounds and sights of the capital city is an obstacle to the usual intimacy and identifications of small-town life. Unlike the inhabitants of Bordeaux or Chamonix who are attached to their respective regional products, "les Béconnais, eux, ne se servent point du savon Y... fabriqué dans leur ville" (BB 24-25). Their children go to school elsewhere (BB 60). Oriented toward the Parisian center (even the sky leans toward Paris (BB 42)), the dwellers of Bécon nonetheless experience a discreet attachment to their hometown—a connection that is grounded in memory and habit, and above all in knowledge of the changing terrain:

La poésie que prête le temps aux choses près desquelles on a vécu et dont on ne saurait se libérer même si l'objet, des années plus tard, apparaît peu digne de soi, les souvenirs, de savoir comment était le terrain sur lequel une grande maison est bâtie, quel magasin précédait tel autre, ont fait naître dans le cœur des vieux Béconnais un amour qu'ils n'avouent pas, dont ils se défendent, mais qui perce aux jours des innovations et des décisions heureuses de la municipalité de Courbevoie. (BB 31)

To this Proustian evocation of the way in which memories inhere in even the most insignificant of objects, Bove brings a particular form of melancholy tinged with irony—an irony brought to bear, in this case, on the municipality's "happy" decisions. The residents' nostalgic resistance to change nonetheless remains muted, for the Béconnais take a generally indulgent view of measures developed by the public authorities. They are modern citizens whose lives are organized by the railway timetables, with each inhabitant knowing by heart the times of the first and last trains (BB 26). This dependence on the railway network and its schedules makes them aware of the challenges involved in even minor improvements to the regulation of everyday life (BB 27). Like soldiers, Bove notes, these commuters are "conscients du nombre" (BB 28), aware of the complexities of the bureaucratic organization of services required for a large population of commuters. In this context, the railway stations and trains define a "secteur des protections officielles" which is left behind as the inhabitants return to their homes—feeling alone and "déssemparés" (BB 31) in the moment of transition from public to private space, from the crowds of Paris and the railway station to the empty streets of the town.

Time, Territory, and Transformation

10 This combination of interconnectedness and isolation shapes a portrait of a place and a population that are fraught with contradictions. Bécon-les-Bruyères is an offshoot of the capital city, at the heart of an information network (“c’est dans les gares que les journaux du soir arrivent d’abord” (BB 29)); but it is also a separate space of calm regularity, protected from outside political turmoil. It is a site of solitude and separation, governed by a growing demand for private property, but also a potential space of communal fraternity—in the unlikely event that the need for community of goods and interests should ever arise (BB 44). The town is composed primarily of fenced-off plots—these are its “terrains”—whether occupied, under construction, or for sale: “Tout est clôturé, même les terrains les plus vagues” (BB 46). But for Bove’s narrator-*flâneur* the place is curiously desolate, with its “rues désertes” and empty houses (“vides comme les casernes à l’heure de l’exercice” (BB 60)). Compared to absent soldiers, its commuting workers are often elsewhere. The town’s pre-divided territory of residential plots anticipates a future population that has still to arrive from the overflowing capital, even if possibilities for future extension are limited by Bécon’s geographical location, hemmed in between other communes.

11 Bécon-les-Bruyères is at once an outgrowth of contemporary urban modernity and a remnant of times gone by. Thus, a few minutes’ walk from the railway station, the aging banks of the Seine recall another era: “Elles sont du temps des guinguettes, des parties de canot et des fritures” (BB 48). But this semi-rural setting does not amount to a picturesque pastoral scene. The river carries carcasses of dead dogs and unidentified detritus (BB 49), its barges are loaded with scrap metal (BB 51), and its banks bear the traces of military installations from World War I—such as the broken and twisted remains of an artillery battery (BB 54). The legacy of the war is visible in the landscape even as industry has transformed its weapons into plowshares:

Sur l’autre rive, l’usine Hotchkiss éveille des souvenirs de mitrailleuses, et de cet après-guerre où les industriels, afin d’utiliser leur matériel, modifiaient si peu de chose à leurs fraiseuses et à leurs tours pour qu’ils fissent, au lieu d’obus et de canons, des automobiles et des machines agricoles. (BB 50)

The setting sun disappears from view behind the stones of human constructions, rather than sinking into the river’s waters: “on est trop près de Paris” (BB 55).

12 Too close to Paris, the *banlieue* of Bove’s portrait is not the province. It occupies a different zone of marginality that does not seem immediately suited to a place in literary history. The outsider who seeks insight into the frustrations and desires of provincial life finds only quiet streets, muted affects, and absent events:

Dans le calme de la matinée, on n’imagine aucune femme encore couchée avec son amant, aucun collectionneur comptant ses timbres, aucune maîtresse de maison préparant une réception, aucune amoureuse faisant sa toilette, aucun pauvre recevant une lettre lui annonçant la fortune. (BB 60)

This is to say that we are apparently far from Balzac's scenes from provincial life, or from the Yonville of Emma Bovary—although perhaps this judgment can be attributed to the limitations of the traveler's point of view. In any case, the streets of Bécon-les-Bruyères seem recalcitrant to the literary imagination, refusing to lend themselves easily to the charms of the novelistic. Nothing happens, all is peaceful and regular; "les criminels ne sont jamais béconnais" (BB 60).

- 13 This does not mean, however, that the dull reality of the place banishes all imagination from Bove's narrative. On the contrary, the descriptions frequently veer off into fictional territory, wandering from reality to possibility and bringing together observation and projection. These moments often take the form of hypothetical scenarios. When the occasional unknown stranger crosses Bécon in a taxi, the narrator reviews possibilities ranging from the banal to the melodramatic: "un parent mort ; un rendez-vous d'affaires ; cinq minutes de retard faisant manquer un héritage; un attentat projeté ; une fuite après un vol" (BB 20). Or Bove imagines future transformations of the space, such as a communal utopia forming in the face of national social upheaval:

Mais en supposant que la révolution éclatât dans le reste de la France et que Bécon-les-Bruyères fût isolé, il apparaîtrait tout de suite qu'une grande fraternité unirait tous les habitants, qu'ils formeraient aussitôt des ligues, des groupements de défense, qu'ils mettraient, jusqu'au retour des temps meilleurs, leurs biens en commun. (BB 44)

The focalization of this paragraph is ambiguous: the point of view might be attributed either to the narrator or to the anonymous "Béconnais" of the previous paragraph, who calms his anxieties with reflections on the town's probable immunity to historical disaster (BB 43). The inhabitant's belief in Bécon's splendid isolation is no doubt illusory. However, here and throughout the book, Bove's tone remains difficult to define; never reducible to derision, it hovers between irony and affection for a place that itself resists qualification¹³.

Fragile Terrains

- 14 Hailed by Peter Handke as Bove's masterwork¹⁴, *Bécon-les-Bruyères* nevertheless stands apart in the author's body of writing. As an occasional text written in a nonfictional mode, it sits somewhat uneasily with the perception of Bove as primarily representative of the *roman populaire* of the interwar period¹⁵. The reappraisal and republication of Bove's works that began in 1977¹⁶, remedying the period of neglect that followed his death in 1945, initially focused solely on his fiction. However, *Bécon-les-Bruyères* was included in the collected edition of Bove's novels published in 1999, was published separately in an illustrated edition in 2009, and appeared in the Folio collection in 2017¹⁷. Traditional conceptions of what constitutes literature doubtless play a role in this sequence of events. But perhaps it is only in the twenty-first century that this apparently unclassifiable text can claim its rightful place within the literary field, as a work of experimental prose that can be reassessed in the light of Georges Perec's attention to the infra-ordinary¹⁸ or acknowledged as a pioneering work of documentary literature¹⁹.

- 15 Taking up this recent line of reception, I would argue that rereading *Bécon-les-Bruyères* today invites us to rethink the genealogy of “fieldwork literatures”—that is, to trace the origins of contemporary practices back beyond the 1990s and to identify a longer-standing impulse toward investigation and documentary observation, which surfaces at earlier moments in literary history. Nevertheless, while Bove’s text can rightly be cast as a forerunner of twenty-first-century documentary experiments, we should not forget its specific historical situation. With its fenced-off plots of land and its *pavillons*, the *banlieue* of the interwar period has not yet become the built-up urbanized landscape of later years. Its spaces are distinct from the layered historical sites explored by François Maspero and Anaïk Frantz in *Les Passagers du Roissy-Express* (1990), the organized uniformity of the new city of Cergy-Pontoise in Annie Ernaux’s *Journal du dehors* (1993), or the social diversity of Jean Rolin’s liminal peripheries in *Zones* (1995). But this point reveals a key virtue of such transhistorical comparisons, which is precisely to allow us to situate and historicize different kinds of urban margins, and to acknowledge the singularity of each terrain.
- 16 Emmanuel Bove is acutely aware of this historicity of places, even if the slow pace of change in Bécon-les-Bruyères can give the impression of immobility. The narrator’s departure reveals the precariousness of this “ville aussi fragile qu’un être vivant” (*BB* 63), and it is the future disappearance of the town that has the final word. Bound up with mortality, this melancholy sense of transience is at the core of the text. Rather than showing us a “non-place” or evoking a space of pure negativity, Bove draws our attention to the transformation of terrains, and to the fragility of the various “fields” that we inhabit, pass through, and leave behind.

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NOTES

- 1 Emmanuel Bove, *Mes amis*, Paris, Ferenczi et fils, 1924 ; *Visite d’un soir*, Paris, Émile-Paul frères, 1925, <Les cahiers du mois> ; *Le crime d’une nuit*, Paris, Fayard, 1926 <Les œuvres libres>; *Armand*, Paris, Émile-Paul frères, 1927. Bove had also written popular novels under the name Emmanuel Valois.
- 2 For instance, the collection includes *Bordeaux* by François Mauriac (no. 2, 1926), *Brest* by Pierre Mac Orlan (no. 8, 1926), and *Basses-Pyrénées* by Francis Jammes (no. 9, 1926).
- 3 Emmanuel Bove, *Bécon-les-Bruyères*, Paris, Émile-Paul Frères, 1927, <Portrait de la France>, p. 5; henceforth cited as *BB*.
- 4 Sophie Coste and Dominique Carlat, Présentation, *Lire Bove*, Coste and Carlat, eds., Lyon, Presses universitaires de Lyon, 2003, <Lire>, p. 10. Coste and Carlat’s volume, while emphasizing Bove’s idiosyncratic realism and his sense of detail, focuses primarily on Bove’s novels.
- 5 Georges Perec, *Espèces d’espaces*, Paris, Galilée, 1974, p. 120.
- 6 Emmanuel Bove, *Bécon-les Bruyères: eine Vorstadt*, Peter Handke, trans., Frankfurt, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1984.
- 7 Marc Augé, *Non-lieux: introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*, Paris, Seuil, 1992, p. 110. On Bove and the non-place see also Clément Froehlicher, “Creuser l’espace : Emmanuel Bove, romancier des non-lieux”, *Revista da Universidade de Aveiro*, no. 2, 2013/14, p. 119-136.
- 8 Augé, *op. cit.*, p. 15.
- 9 Raymond Cousse and Jean-Luc Bitton, *Emmanuel Bove, la vie comme une ombre*, preface by Peter Handke, Paris, Le Castor Astral, 1994, p. 114.
- 10 Dominique Carlat, Postface, *Lire Bove, op. cit.*, p. 283.

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- ¹¹ Claude Burgelin, “Un autoportrait: Bécon-les-Bruyères”, *Europe*, no. 895-896, 2003, p. 98.
- ¹² Jokes about Bécon-les-Bruyères involve class distinction, bound up with judgments of taste directed against the suburban architecture of the first half of the twentieth century. In *La condition humaine* (1933), Malraux places Chang-Kai-Shek’s police offices in “une simple villa construite vers 1920: style Bécon-les-Bruyères.” André Malraux, *La condition humaine*, Paris, Gallimard, 1972, <Folio>, p. 263.
- ¹³ On the tone of *Bécon-les-Bruyères* see also Burgelin, art. cit., p. 99.
- ¹⁴ Raymond Cousse and Jean-Luc Bitton, *Emmanuel Bove*, op. cit., p. 123.
- ¹⁵ On Bove’s association with the interwar *roman populaire* see for example Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life : Theories and Practices From Surrealism to the Present*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 122.
- ¹⁶ Marie-Thérèse Eychart, “La lumière sombre d’Emmanuel Bove”, *Europe*, no. 895-896, 2003, p. 3-4.
- ¹⁷ Emmanuel Bove, *Romans*, Jean-Luc Bitton, ed., Paris, Flammarion, 1999; Bove, *Bécon-les-Bruyères*, postface de Jean-Luc Bitton, drawings by S.P. Millot, Paris, Éditions Cent pages, 2009 and 2015, <Cosaques>; Bove, *Bécon-les-Bruyères*, followed by *Le retour de l’enfant*, Paris, Gallimard, 2017, <Folio>. *Bécon-les-Bruyères* was also republished in the 2003 special issue of *Europe* on Bove: *Europe*, no. 895-896, 2003, p. 75–97.
- ¹⁸ Claude Burgelin, art. cit., p. 98–110.
- ¹⁹ See Amaury da Cunha, “Bécon-les-Bruyères d’Emmanuel Bove : un monde à sa porte”, *Le Monde*, 2 July 2009, https://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2009/07/02/becon-les-bruyeres-d-emmanuel-bove_1214244_3260.html.