Hallucinatory Figures: Some examples from Michel Tournier’s Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique and its translation Friday by Norman Denny

Anna-Louise Milne
The object of analysis of this present volume is one of deceptive clarity, and part of what gives it this deceptive clarity is undoubtedly its singular form: la figure de style. This singular form makes an implicit claim to self-evidence, as if a figure of speech were always a stable unit that can be detached whole from a text. It is in keeping with the strong tendency in translation studies to approach the text as a composite of linguistic features, rather than a singular whole. The following article aims, however, to approach the problems posed by figures of speech for translators from a more general or abstract point of view by examining how rhetorical effects might escape the stabilising structures of grammar. Instead of defining what is and what is not a trope, we will explore the figural dimension of a text by focusing on the places where the distinction between sign and trope becomes slippery, generating the possibility of different, contradictory readings. The collapse of this distinction disrupts the text’s descriptive system, and it is how this disruption impacts on the translation that we will consider here in an analysis of Norman Denny’s translation of Michel Tournier’s acclaimed novel Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique. The focus of this article thus shifts the problems raised by the figure of speech for translation away from issues of relative equivalency, compensation and degrees of estrangement, all of which depend on a confident assessment of how figures function in both source and target languages, towards the question of whether a translation, inasmuch as it is first and foremost a reading of the source text and thus a confrontation with its slipperiness, generates the same possibility for disruption, that is the same experience of “figuration.”
In order to circumscribe the domain of figuration we will consider here, I propose to
distinguish it from two other descriptive strategies that are not tropes, although they
may be structured like tropes. The two strategies in question are anthropomorphism and
animacy, and lying between them, in an “in-between” that is fraught with indeterminacy,
is the figure of personification or prosopopeia. All three concepts refer to the ascription
of animate or human characteristics to an inanimate concept or object. Yet they all
produce quite different textual effects, requiring a variety of approaches from the
translator.

Anthropomorphism does not merely describe an abstract substance or an object as if it
were human; it invests the non-human with human features. For example, while an
expression such as the sun shone its goodwill down on the fields, remains metaphorical, the
worshipping of the sun as a human subject, endowed with volition, perhaps even with
human failings, constitutes anthropomorphism. Contrary to the example of the sun's
goodwill, where the concept of the sun remains open to varying human and non-human
characterisations, anthropomorphism closes down the possibility of tropological
transformations by attributing an essence to the object. It is no longer a description but a
proper name, as in Ovid’s Metamorphosis where a disposition culminates in a name like
Narcissus (De Man, 1984 : 241). This culmination in a proper name inevitably reduces the
range of translation possibilities, which would appear to make the task of the translator
in this context quite straightforward.

In contrast, descriptive structures that associate inanimate subjects with “animate” verbs
and yet do not transform the subject into an animate being offer a much broader range of
translation possibilities. We will refer to structures of this type, which have been
analysed first by Jacqueline Guillemin-Flescher, then by Hélène Chuquet and Michel
Paillard as being more frequent in French than in English, as examples of animacy. Like
anthropomorphic structures, they bear the form of a trope, yet they are not tropes since
the inanimate subject continues to signify literally despite the fact that it is attributed an
“animate” verb, that is, one characterised by an implication of volition or intention,
features which are normally reserved to human subjects. As an example of such a
structure Chuquet and Paillard offer the following sentence from Le Clézio: des obstacles,
des animaux, des lampadaires venaient à moi au cours de ma marche (Chuquet and Paillard,
1987: 142). There is no sense in this sentence, according to Chuquet and Paillard, that the
obstacles and lamp-posts are acting in a self-propelled manner, or with what we can call
“agency.” Indeed, they offer as a translation: “As I walked, I kept meeting obstacles,
animals, lamp-posts.” This puts the human agent in the subject-position, a strategy they
recommend when translating from French into English since it corresponds to their
thesis that English prefers to organise sentence structure around the human agent.

Reversing subject/object positions in the sentence is only one of the strategies they
propose, however, for dealing with animacy when moving from French into English. The
other is passivation, involving the use of the passive voice or a predication of being. One
example of passivation they offer is the following: La pause déjeuner... ferme encore bien des
portes au public, translated as “Many places are still closed to the public... because of the
lunch break.” (Chuquet and Paillard, 1987: 142). In both French and English here the
human subject’s decision to shut up shop for lunch is left unsaid. In Chuquet and
Paillard’s analysis the only agency communicated in the sentence appears in the
“caractère pseudo-agentif” of the pause déjeuner, which they suggest effacing by means of
the passive formulation. One could argue that the emphatic quality of the verb fermer
makes the metonymical association between *pause déjeuner* and the human being who needs to eat stronger in the French. But if we were worried by this loss, we would no doubt merely adopt Chuquet and Paillard’s first strategy for dealing with animate structures and organise the action around a human subject: “Many shop-keepers still shut up shop for lunch,” for example. One way or the other, however, Chuquet and Paillard seem absolutely right to assume in this instance that there is no provocative ascription of agency to the temporal concept of a lunch break.

Thus neither anthropomorphism nor animacy appears to pose serious problems of translation since both refer to stable or predictable forms of signification. Both categories become more problematic, however, once we introduce the figure of prosopopeia between them. The spatial metaphor of “between-ness” is being used here to draw attention to where personification overlaps with each of the two other descriptive structures. As in an anthropomorphic evocation, the personified object is transformed before the reader’s eyes, given a human face, but it stops short of anthropomorphism because it is not encapsulated in a proper name. The personified object wears its human characteristics only lightly, ready to shed them under the sway of further descriptive strategies. In this respect it can return to its literal significance and further associations with “animate” verbs will not necessarily resuscitate the personification. Thus anthropomorphism, personification and animacy can be organised according to a sliding scale of degrees of transformation of the object or concept: the anthropomorphised object or concept is completely transformed, the personified one only appears under a certain light to be transformed, while the object or concept in the animate syntactical structure is unchanged. This sliding scale does not, of course, reflect a common rhetorical or grammatical base: anthropomorphic characterisations are topoi; prosopopeia is a figure; animate structures are a more or less frequent syntactical pattern. Instead it reflects how the external referent or image is constituted in language. As Chuquet and Paillard say, the categories of animate and inanimate are extra-linguistic, that is, part of the way we order our perception of reality, although language is inevitably their medium.

II

Focusing on the referent—on what the text causes to be seen—enables us to establish name, trope and sign in continuity with one another, and not in opposition. For the moment, this continuity or sliding scale appears to be composed of discrete terms. The question that lies before us now is whether the distinction between anthropomorphism, prosopopeia and animacy will hold good once these terms are ordered in such a way. By placing the figure between name and sign we allow for the possibility that figuration might usurp the other two, destabilising the sort of translation strategies outlined above.

But let us now turn to *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique* and Norman Denny’s translation in order to flesh out how these categories relate to our analysis of translation processes. The choice of this novel for a discussion of how degrees of animacy and personification are affected by translation was almost unavoidable given how important a theme humanisation is in Tournier’s work. *Vendredi* is, of course, a re-write of Daniel Defoe’s tale *Robinson Crusoe*, with a few crucial differences. From the point of view of narrative structure one of these crucial differences is the use of the third person, interspersed with extracts from Robinson’s diary. Within the terms of the novel itself, this third-person voice is a perplexing one because, unlike Defoe’s Robinson who returns to tell his tale, Tournier’s character chooses to stay on the island rather than be rescued by a passing ship. His companion Vendredi escapes on the boat, but the novel ends with the island closing back in around Robinson and his new companion Jeudi, returning them to their
insular existence cut off from all communication with the rest of the world. The storyteller thus has no conceivable position, and this contributes to the indeterminacy that governs the figurative processes analysed here. These figurative processes are principally focused on the representation of the island, which becomes first Robinson’s mother and later his lover.

Robinson begins to invest the island with human characteristics after the realisation that he has been hallucinating. His imaginative projection is a bid to preserve his sanity:

En l’absence de tout autre interlocuteur, il poursuivait avec elle un long, lent et profund dialogue où ses gestes, ses actes et ses entreprises constituaient autant de questions auxquelles l’île répondait par le bonheur ou l’échec qui les sanctionnaient."

He names the island Speranza, making it the embodiment of hope as well as a tantalising female presence. This presence is increasingly materialised as the novel progresses: the island appears more and more to Robinson as a female shape; then he buries his way into the heart of a cave deep in the centre of the island, lying in this enclosed space as if he had returned to the womb; and finally he invents a strange form of copulation with the island. Robinson does not merely consider the island as if it were female; he discovers the island’s female attributes. He gets to know the island as a woman, and not merely as he would get to know a woman. It is for this reason that the representation of the island is an example of anthropomorphosis, and not merely personification, and that Denny’s decision to translate the elle pronoun referring to l’île as “she” seems necessary."

However the apparent self-evidence of Denny’s solution for dealing with this anthropomorphic construction needs to be considered in terms of other syntactical features that may also be interpreted as animating or personifying the landscape, thereby complicating the representation of the island. In other words, we have to consider whether other, more apparently anodyne signs do not in fact disrupt the will to stability implied in naming and constituting the island as a sentient, conscious being. It may be the translator’s wish, just as it is Robinson’s to fix the island as a reliable interlocutor, an unchanging being that can be referred to systematically in the same way. But the anthropomorphic construction is itself a hallucination, and a hallucination to counter the dangers of hallucination merely makes any distinction between knowledge and illusion, or reference and figure, impossible.

The very first sentence of Tournier’s novel offers a good illustration of how unstable the process of figuration can be: Une vague déferla, courut sur la grève humide et lécha les pieds de Robinson qui gisait face contre sable. Is this an example of personification or not? Neither the verb déferler nor courir transform our habitual image of a wave, yet the final image produced by lécher does suggest some form of intentionality, as if the wave wanted to wake Robinson, perhaps in a dog-like manner rather than a human one as such. Denny’s translation produces a similar effect: “A wave curled and running up the wet shore licked Robinson’s toes as he lay face down on the sand.” Indeed, the use of the present participle, running up the shore, reinforces the intentional dimension of this action by appearing as the first stage of a two-stage process. In other words, the wave ran up the beach in order to lick Robinson’s toes, and not because the tide was coming in. There is no such coordination in the French, where the three simple past tenses merely indicate a succession. Moreover the verb run is less habitually associated with waves in English.

Next there is the question of Denny’s choice of “toes” as a translation for pieds. This is admittedly a small shift in meaning, but it presents an interesting case in terms of what
happens to the indeterminacy of a figure in the process of translation. On the one hand, “toes” tips the balance of meaning in English over towards minimal contact, away from the more insistent, animal-like image of the wave’s tongue extending its reach up the length of the soles of Robinson’s feet, the most vulnerable piece of flesh exposed since he is lying face down. Arguably this makes Robinson’s situation less perilous. Yet on the other hand, the image of the wave licking the man’s toes has a humanising, erotic connotation, which establishes an early suggestion of what will become a major theme in the novel when Robinson engages in a very strange, pseudo-sexual relation with the island. Thus the minimising effect of “toes,” which attenuates the danger, perhaps reinforces the personification by adding this teasing dimension, which anticipates on later stages of the novel when the island becomes a demanding lover. In this respect Denny’s translation reads as a reading of what remained only potential in the source text.

It is also true that there is a higher frequency of references to toes in English idiom than in French (to tread on someone’s toes, to turn up one’s toes, to toe the line, to dip a toe in, for example), and this feature of the target language no doubt enables Denny’s reading in this instance. This does not change the figurative potential of the English sentence, however. It merely shows that figuration can occur through perfectly normative constructions, as anyone who has thought for a while about the legs of a table or the face of a clock knows.

An example taken from another scene in which Robinson lies in an equivalently passive state, suspended in a pool of mire, having sunk into total abjection, shows the translation developing the same reading of Tournier’s novel, but in this instance the reading/translation distorts English idiomatic norms. The French gives us:

Une faiblesse d’une déchirante douceur envahit Robinson. Un sourire se dessina sur sa bouche qui affleurait au milieu des herbes pourrissantes et des feuilles de nénuphars.

The most marked aspect of this description is undoubtedly the first sentence, with the unlikely association between faiblesse and the aggressive action envahir, as well as the oxymoron déchirante douceur, with attention drawn to the adjective by placing it before the noun. The English works quite differently: “Weakness pervaded Robinson, exquisitely sweet. A smile parted his lips, amid the rotting grass and water-lily leaves.” Here the most marked sentence is the second one. In the first sentence the association of weakness and the verb pervade has nothing provocative about it, pervade implying a subtle spreading movement. Moreover there is nothing oxymoronic about exquisitely sweet. However the smile that parts Robinson’s lips in the second sentence introduces a degree of animacy into the smile that is uncommon in English as we would expect his lips to externalise or make visible Robinson’s state of mind by breaking into a smile. In other words, English tends to refer metonymically to the mind via the lips, and always in the possessive form, while the smile itself remains more distinct or remote from consciousness because more generic—a smile. Denny, however, has made the generic smile the initiating force, departing both from English idiom and from the quasi-passive form of un sourire se dessina sur sa bouche. This example does not, of course, constitute an instance of personification as such, but it does demonstrate that syntax cannot be considered independently of semantics. The animate syntactical structure in the English reflects the dehumanisation of Robinson, which is the explicit counterpart in the novel to the island’s humanisation.
In both of these examples the figurative potential of animate constructions, which nonetheless remain short of personification in the French, has been drawn out in the process of translation along lines indicated thematically in the novel. A second example taken again from the first page reveals the opposite tendency in the translation, however. Michel Tournier writes:

Au nord et à l’est, l’horizon s’ouvrait librement vers le large, mais à l’ouest il était barré par une falaise rocheuse qui s’avancait dans la mer et semblait s’y prolonger par une chaîne de récifs. C’était là, à deux encablures environ, que se dressait au milieu des brisants la silhouette tragique et ridicule de la Virginie dont les mâts mutilés et les haubans flottant dans le vent clamaient la détresse.

Denny translates:

North and east the skyline was open sea, but to the west it was broken by a rocky promontory which seemed to continue under water in a series of reefs. It was here, some two cable lengths away, that the ridiculous and pathetic shape of the Virginia rested, propped amid the sharp outcroppings, her broken masts and tangle shrouds a mute proclamation of disaster.

It is the image of the shipwrecked Virginia that should retain our attention here. In the French the boat struggles valiantly against the elements, animated by the crucial verb se dresser, while in English it is defeated, resting “propped” on the rocks. The French implies resistance, while in English the boat is fully the victim of forces superior to it. It is pathetic where in Tournier’s original it was tragic, and Denny’s reading appears again to have anticipated a later development in the novel, although in this case it is the demise of the boat, hence the less animate formulation.

The verb se dresser is one that we encounter regularly in unmarked animate constructions: la montagne qui se dresse à l’horizon, les obstacles qui se dressent devant nous, for example. Tournier’s use of it here is unquestionably normative, yet it also contributes significantly to the construction of a very marked image of the living dead, which culminates in the verbal construction clamaient silencieusement la détresse. This oxymoronic construction invests the verb clamer with a particularly volitional dimension—a feeling of protest and desperation—precisely because there is no actual sound. Denny has opted here for a nominal construction, “a mute proclamation,” which is equally oxymoronic but devoid of any animation. The final word of this extract confirms this general tendency in the translation to play down the personification of the boat. What in Tournier’s text is a human condition, détresse, becomes “disaster,” an objective state that might, indeed is very likely, to cause distress. Denny’s translation thus describes a scene, the wreck of the Virginia; Tournier’s text dramatises the boat’s agony.

Reading backwards from the action clamaient silencieusement to the animate construction with the verb se dresser, and perhaps even to the apparently quasi-passive constructions describing the landscape with the verbs s’ouvrir, s’avancer and se prolonger we can identify a figural system that connects all the descriptive details, setting their meaning in motion as the scene gains in dramatic movement and undoing any distinction between the merely animate constructions and prosopopeia as such. The final figure gives a voice to that which has no voice. It is a figure because it makes what is imperceptible or inaudible perceptible. In this respect it is a hallucination, but not one that rescues the subject from the loss of all human fellowship, not one that can be counted on to respond reliably, as the anthropomorphised Speranza does. Rather this figure leaves the matter entirely open or undecidable as to whether the boat is endowed with an expressive force. The translation does not completely foreclose this question since “mute proclamation” may
arrest the reader momentarily, but the doubt about whether to read literally or figuratively is not allowed to take hold.

In this sense the translation is more intelligible than the source text. The island is more emphatically human, the boat more obviously lifeless. Of course, intelligibility is what one requires from a good reading of a novel. Is it also what constitutes a good translation?

Let us first examine the consequences of Denny’s decision to use the feminine pronoun and the possessive form her in reference to the island. The first example we will look at is taken from Robinson’s diary:

Chaque homme a sa pente funeste. La mienne descend vers la souille. C’est là que me chasse Speranza quand elle devient mauvaise et me montre son visage de brute. La souille est ma défaite, mon vice. Ma victoire, c’est l’ordre moral que je dois imposer à Speranza contre son ordre naturel qui n’est que l’autre nom du désordre absolu.

This description of Robinson’s struggle with Speranza is also a description of a battle with himself. Thus the strongly anthropomorphic dimension of the second sentence, with the intentional action chasser and the island revealing an ugly face to Robinson, exists in tension with the idea of his own inclination to sink into abjection. Denny’s translation follows the source text closely in this respect:

Each man has his slippery slope. Mine leads to the mire. That is where Speranza drives me when she grows evil and shows me her animal face. The mire is my defeat, my vice. My victory is the moral order I must impose on Speranza against her natural order, which is but another name for total disorder.

Yet the use of the feminine possessive forms reinforces Speranza’s separateness from Robinson, endowing her with a stronger sense of agency that in turn determines the more obviously significant shifts in the translation. For example, the translation “her animal face” for son visage de brute seems at first sight to attenuate the humanising dimension. But it also reflects the incompatibility between the feminine form and the idea of a brute or of brutishness. The latter evokes the idea of man reduced to basic physical instinct, no longer moved by reason or morality, perhaps lower even than any gender distinction, and if the brute is gendered, he is certainly male. In contrast, the female who takes on an animal face gains in deviousness, rather than losing the powers of thought. So while Tournier’s Speranza occasionally sinks below the call of reason, Denny’s Speranza appears more vicious and thus more human. This also explains the choice of “evil” for mauvaise, when “nasty” might have been sufficient, evil being, of course, a human characteristic, whereas brutishness is rather the collapse of any moral fibre.

If we turn to an example drawn from the third-person narrative we find a similar effect. This example is the continuation of the passage quoted above:

En l’absence de tout autre interlocuteur, il poursuivait avec elle un long, lent et profond dialogue où ses gestes, ses actes et ses entreprises constituaient autant de questions auxquelles l’île répondait par le bonheur ou l’échec qui les sanctionnaient. Il ne doutait plus que tout se jouait désormais sur ses relations avec elle et sur la réussite de son organisation. Il avait toujours l’oreille tendue vers les messages qui ne cessaient d’émaner d’elle sous mille formes, tantôt chiffrées, tantôt symboliques.

Denny translates:

Having no one else to talk to, he discoursed with her in slow, deep dialogue in which his movements, his acts and undertakings were so many questions to which
she replied with the favour or disfavour that befell them. He no longer doubted that everything must henceforth depend on his success in ordering their joint affairs. He was always on the alert for her responses, which came to him in a thousand forms, sometimes ciphered, sometimes symbolic.

27 Once again there are no obvious figures of speech as such at play here. Yet there are undoubtedly figurative effects, and they work quite differently in the source and target text. These differences hang principally on the way in which pronouns and possessive forms are handled. Tournier reintroduces the substantive l’île as the subject of the verb répondait, thereby leaving the significance of this verb open, caught between a literal and therefore personifying meaning and a figurative, yet normative meaning, while Denny’s translation, “she replied,” reinforces the idea of a dialogue both because of the feminine form and the choice of verb, which is almost always associated with a human subject. The same reinforcement of the island’s human identity occurs with the choice of “favour” and “disfavour,” which are feelings that belong to the “person” responding to an undertaking, and not something that describes the outcome of the undertaking, as bonheur and échec do. Equally, Denny’s translation “their joint affairs” implies a degree of reciprocity and equal participation that is absent from Tournier’s more one-directional formulation: ses relations avec elle. And lastly, “her responses” implies the island’s active participation in the dialogue in contrast with les messages qui ne cessent d’émancer d’elle, which leaves the possibility that these messages be a figment of Robinson’s imagination much more open, especially since émaner implies an absence of agency.

28 These may all seem small points, but these shifts in the linguistic organisation of the text contribute to consolidating the island’s human identity, transforming a hallucinatory figure into an essentialised being. Their impact is all the more striking when we compare them with another instance of prosopopeia in Tournier’s novel:

Il se leva et regarda la mer. Cette plaine métallique, clouée déjà par les premières flèches du soleil, avait été sa tentation, son piège, son opium. Peu s’en était fallu qu’après l’avoir avili elle ne le livrât aux ténèbres de sa démence. Il fallait sous peine de mort trouver la force de s’en arracher.

29 Denny has chosen not to translate the personification of the sea:

He got to his feet and stood looking out over the sea. That metallic surface, glittering already under the first rays of the sun, has been his temptation, his snare, and his drug. Only a little more was needed to degrade him utterly and drive him to the depths of madness. Under pain of death he must find the strength to tear himself away from it.

30 Now it is clear that there is no anthropomorphic projection here. The sea does not become a named essence. Yet the sentence Peu s’en était fallu qu’après l’avoir avili elle ne le livrât aux ténèbres de sa démence attributes a strong sense of agency to the sea, implying also a gendered dimension as the feminine sea breaks down the moral fortitude of the lonely man. Denny’s translation removes any hint of this ensnaring agency with the loose formulation “Only a little more was needed to degrade him utterly.” “A little more what?” we may wonder. By implication it has to be the drug of the sea, but that casts Robinson as the weak drug-dependent subject, rather than emphasising the wiles of the sea.

31 In the case of the island, then, Denny has systematically chosen to underscore the human guise it takes on for Robinson, while he has suppressed the other fantasy forces that Robinson’s imagination conjures up. He has operated a sharp distinction between the anthropomorphic elle relayed by the name Speranza, and the pronoun elle used in relation to la mer, for example, which he reads only in terms of reference and not as a vehicle of
significance itself. Approaching these pronouns and the verbs they are associated with as elements that engender a process of figuration, however, disrupts this distinction between the island and the sea, just as it unsettles the categories of animacy, personification and anthropomorphism. It breaks with an essentialising interpretation of Robinson’s relation to the island whereby his desire is focused exclusively on Speranza by observing that other objects—the sea, the sun, the savage Vendredi—may also function as outlets for his hungry, hallucinatory imagination. Robinson’s desire is mobile and adaptable, and Tournier’s novel as a whole is more about transformation as such, or the power of the imagination to animate a lifeless world, than it is about the totalising process of Robinson’s humanisation of the island environment.

This is most clearly demonstrated in the arrival of Robinson’s new companion Jeudi at the end of the novel. The attentions of Vendredi’s old taskmaster slide unperturbedly onto Jeudi, and the sequential nature of the slaves’ names opens up the prospect of a potentially endless series of companions: after Jeudi, a Mercredi and so on. Arguably the hero of the novel, Vendredi, is also just one in a million. Indeed, Robinson’s earlier reflections on why he named the Indian he rescued then enslaved as he did indicate the limitations to his essentialising anthropomorphic drive:

Un sauvage n’est pas un être humain à part entière. Je ne pouvais pas non plus décemment lui imposer un nom de chose, encore que c’eût été peut-être la solution de bon sens. Je crois avoir résolu assez élégamment ce dilemme en lui donnant le nom du jour de la semaine où je l’ai sauvé : Vendredi. Ce n’est ni un nom de personne, ni un nom commun, c’est, à mi-chemin entre les deux, celui d’une entité à demi-vivante, à demi-abstraite, fortement marqué par son caractère temporel, fortuit et comme épisodique... (Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique, 1996: 170)

This last sentence provides an excellent definition of what is produced by figuration: half-living, half-abstract beings, which confound any attempt to order the world according to sense certainty versus flights of the imagination. In terms of Tournier’s novel, this section from Robinson’s log-book enables us to see clearly the continuity between his hallucinatory experiences with Speranza and his interaction with Vendredi. Both are the focus for the projection of conscious responsiveness from and to Robinson, but both fall short of constituting a fully human Other. And in this respect, instead of the “reading” that Denny’s translation proposes, which consolidates Robinson’s imaginary Other and stabilises his desire by focusing it on the feminine Speranza, Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique seems to exemplify a form of voracious narcissism that absorbs the world into the self’s orbit, renouncing self-containment by undoing any dualities.

Indeed it is precisely this disruption, or postponement, of dualities—be it between self and other, knowledge and hallucination, or sign and trope—that disappears in the most overt omission from Denny’s translation, that is, the second part of the title. In keeping with Robinson’s remark quoted above, Tournier’s title associates a name with an abstract concept, linking them with the indeterminate ou that operates like a brake on any attempt to fix the reference or the significance of the title. Whichever way we turn the sentence it is impossible to resolve one term into the other. Thus the title performs the very limbo of which it speaks, suspending us between at least two ways of approaching this novel. Denny’s translation, in contrast, establishes Friday as the focus, marking a clearer opposition to Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe by reversing the relation of master to subaltern, perhaps in this respect responding to the prominence of Robinson Crusoe in the English canon, but losing in the process the indeterminacy of the source text.
What becomes apparent at the term of this discussion is the consistency of Denny’s approach to the humanisation at play in *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique*. His consistency does not operate at the level of translation strategies, however. Rather we have seen that he adopts a wide variety of solutions for the animating structures in Tournier’s novel, each time shaping his translation according to a reading of the novel, or a sense of the overall meaning of the text, as opposed to linguistic criteria. The increased intelligibility of his text corresponds closely to what Peter Newmark recommends in his *Approaches to Translation*:

> The translator has to assist his reader. In plain terms, it is usually more important for him to make or indicate the sense of a passage than to funk the issue by rendering it ‘correctly’. He may have to explain or transpose allusions, supply reasons, emphasize contrasts. Even if the SL text is generalized and abstracted on the analogy of non-figurative art or has what seems like surrealistic or stochastic interventions, it is his duty to make his version a little more accessible to the reader, to find at least some pattern in non-sense. (Newmark, 1981: 128)

The point is not to suggest that Tournier’s novel can be considered as “non-sense,” of course. Newmark’s statement is useful, though, for the description it gives of what Denny has tended to do, that is, transpose allusions, draw out patterns, emphasize contrasts, and make the target text more accessible. In this sense, *Friday* would appear to accomplish its end by partly explaining *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique*. But is it in fact the case that Denny’s consistent reading helps us understand the source text better? He anticipates developments in the novel, and in particular the evolution in Robinson’s relation with Speranza, by consolidating the anthropomorphosis of the island. Thus it is knowledge of *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique* that is necessary to understand what is happening in the translation. Reversing Newmark’s assertion, therefore, it is possible to conceive of the asymmetry between source and target text in the opposite way: *Vendredi* explains *Friday*, while *Friday* leaves *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique* as intriguing and perplexing in places as ever.

This asymmetry reflects what has happened to the figuration in Tournier’s novel in the process of translation. Passages that give scope for visualisation, that generate hallucinatory, vacillating figures before the reader’s eye, have tended to be transformed into designations, either of the proto-human Speranza, or of the inanimate landscape. The potential of the source text explains the choices made in the translation, but these choices do not eradicate the doubt inspired by the original description. This is because figures of speech, that is, words that give us to see something that is not there in any literal sense, do not lend themselves to explanation. Their effects are too unpredictable.

---

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

**Textes de référence**

Ouvrages et articles


—, 1979, La Production du texte, Paris, Seuil.

Steiner, Georges, 1989, Real Presences, London, Faber and Faber.

ABSTRACTS

This article proposes to consider how figures are constructed by an interplay of different textual features, a process referred to here as “figuration.” In an analysis of Michel Tournier’s novel Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique, the article will demonstrate how this process breaks down a distinction between literal and figurative speech, revealing an unpredictable dimension to the textual performance. It will examine how the translator has responded to this unpredictability in order to conclude whether translation is also a form of explanation.

Cet article se propose d’analyser comment des figures se construisent à travers un réseau large d’éléments textuels, un processus qu’on appellera ici « la figuration ». Prenant comme texte de référence le roman de Michel Tournier, Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique, on verra que la figuration tend à réduire, voire effacer, toute distinction entre le sens propre et le sens figuré, ce qui fait ressortir l’imprévisibilité de la performance textuelle. Cette imprévisibilité nécessite une intervention de la part du traducteur, dont on explorera les modalités afin de déterminer si la traduction relève aussi de l’explication.
AUTHOR

ANNA-LOUISE MILNE

Anna-Louise Milne, actuellement maître de conférences à l’Institut britannique de Paris (Université de Londres), a préparé un doctorat en littérature comparée à l’Université de Columbia à New York avant de s’installer à Paris où elle a travaillé à l’Ecole normale supérieure, à l’université Sorbonne Nouvelle-Paris 3 et Denis Diderot-Paris 7. Elle est spécialiste de l’œuvre de Jean Paulhan et du milieu littéraire de La Nouvelle Revue Française pendant l’entre-deux-guerres. Elle a également publié plusieurs articles sur la traduction littéraire.