

# A Comparative Study of the French & Italian Translations of Anne Michaels' *Fugitive Pieces*

## Une étude comparative des traductions française et italienne du roman de Anne Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*

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Résumé de l'article

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# A Comparative Study of the French & Italian Translations of Anne Michaels' *Fugitive Pieces*

W. Terrence Gordon

During its two years at the top of the Canadian best-sellers list, Anne Michaels' first novel, *Fugitive Pieces* (1996), was also being translated into seventeen languages. While critical acclaim for the original has been virtually unanimous, scant attention has been given to the translations, in spite of the intriguing and daunting problems involved in producing them. The availability of such an exquisitely crafted and absorbing work as *Fugitive Pieces* in so many languages provides a rich ground for the examination of translation problems on a comparative basis. The present study is confined to the French and Italian versions of Michaels' work but could be viewed as the first step in an extensive study with much potential for broadening the base of contrastive linguistic analysis.

Both the Italian and French versions of *Fugitive Pieces* appeared in 1998. Roberto Serrai's *In fuga* (Giunti Gruppo Editoriale) is only slightly longer than the English original (approximately 91,000 words as opposed to 88,000), while Robert Lalonde's *La mémoire en fuite* (Les Éditions du Boréal) runs to approximately 115,000 words or 30% longer than Michaels' text. In this respect, Lalonde's work represents an exception to the translator's rule of thumb that the length of a French translation will be approximately 120% that of the original.

It may seem odd to begin here with an examination of the translation of scientific terms, given that *Fugitive Pieces* is not only a literary work but one which, in the opinion of many reviewers, positively blurs the line between prose and poetry. But one of the

principal characters of the novel, a geologist and specialist in petrified wood, practices his profession in a manner which blurs the lines between science and philosophy, between history and art. This is Athos Roussos, whose writings are characterized as “lyrical geology”. The phrase applies no less to the writing style of his creator, Anne Michaels, in whose prose the entirely accurate use of the interrelated geological terms *limestone* and *karst* transcends their scientific definitions to express metaphorically one of the principal themes of the book.

As strictly scientific terms, *limestone* and *karst* present no problems of translation for either Italian or French. They are respectively *calcare* and *formazioni carsiche*; *calcaire* and *formations karstiques*. It is pertinent to note that limestone is made of calcite (CaCO<sub>3</sub>) and that *karst* refers principally not to a type of rock but to topography that occurs in limestone terrains.

The first mention of karst in *Fugitive Pieces* precedes the first mention of limestone:

The shadow past is shaped by everything that never happened. Invisible, it melts the present like rain through karst. A biography of longing. It steers us like magnetism, a spirit torque. This is how one becomes undone by a smell, a word, a place, the photo of a mountain of shoes. By love that closes its mouth before calling a name. (p. 17)

In the corresponding passage of the Italian translation, *formazioni carsiche* does not occur (nor is it to be found anywhere else in the Italian text), but the long-term effect of rain on limestone, explicitly mentioned and correctly called *calcare*, in karst terrains is described:

L'ombra del passato è formata da tutto quello che non è mai successo. Invisibile, squaglia il presente come la pioggia col calcare. Una biografia del desiderio e della nostalgia. Ci guida come un campo magnetico, una forza che torce lo spirito. È per questo che si resta turbati per un odore, una parola, un posto, per la fotografia di una montagna di scarpe. Per l'amore che chiude la bocca prima di gridare un nome. (p. 23)

At a later point in the text, the French translator will use both *karst* and *karstique*, but in the present passage he uses neither of these:

Le fantôme du passé est façonné par toutes les choses advenues dans une courte vie. Sans qu'on puisse jamais l'apercevoir clairement, on sait bien que c'est lui, le passé, le fantôme, qui, jour après jour, s'infiltré dans le temps présent, marée venue d'on ne sait où et qui coule de partout à la fois. Ainsi se compose toute seule, en nous, la longue histoire de nos désirs et de nos regrets. Elle nous brasse et nous secoue, tantôt violemment comme une décharge magnétique, tantôt plus doucement comme la pale d'un moulin. Quelque chose s'effondre à l'apparition soudaine d'une odeur, d'un mot, d'un paysage, au brusque surgissement devant nos yeux d'une photographie, comme celle que j'aperçus un jour, où l'on voyait une montagne de chaussures, empilées étrangement les unes sur les autres. Vient un moment où chacun se tait, les lèvres serrées sur un nom aimé, jamais prononcé ! (p. 26)

Unlike his Italian counterpart, the French translator does not make explicit reference to the effect of rain on limestone, retaining only the metaphorical value of liquid elements with the verb *s'infiltré* and the noun *marée*, suggesting thus the modifying effect that past time exerts on the present.

Given the elimination of *karst* at the first occurrence of the term, one wonders if the French translator's strategy is to spare the reader technical vocabulary. But such vocabulary forms part of Anne Michaels' style, even when less thematically important terms than *karst/limestone* are involved (*eskiers of ash, spectre of Brocken, ionic bond, etc.*). What then is the justification for eliminating them, when literal translations are available, when brief explanatory notes or expansions could be provided? The elimination is at odds with the French translator's predilection for expansions, some of which are redundant and difficult to justify, in terms of translation units in the original text.

The first explicit mention of limestone in the English original is rendered in the Italian by *arenaria* (sandstone).

Athos \_ Athanasios Roussos — was a geologist dedicated to a private trinity of peat, limestone, and archaeological wood. (p. 19)

Athos \_ Athanasios Roussos — era un geologo consacrato a una sua privata trinità fatta di torba, arenaria e reperti archeologici di legno. (p. 25)

Compare the French translation:

Athos — Athanasios Roussos \_ était géologue. Il avait décidé de consacrer sa vie à la sainte trinité qu'il adorait en secret: la mousse, la pierre calcaire et le bois calciné. (p. 30)

The Italian translator will subsequently alternate *calcare* and *arenaria* in apparently random fashion for *limestone* but retain *calcare* for *karst*, as becomes apparent from an examination of the following passage:

Athos had a special affection for limestone — that crushed reef of memory, that living stone, organic history squeezed into massive mountain tombs. As a student, he wrote a paper on the karst fields of Yugoslavia. Limestone that develops slowly under pressure into marble \_ Athos describing the process made it sound like a spiritual journey. He was rhapsodic about the French Causses and the Pennines in Britain; about “Strata” Smith and Abraham Werner, who, he said, like surgeons “folded back the skin of time” while surveying canals and mines. When Athos was seven, his father brought him home fossils from Lyme Regis. When he was twenty-five, he was entranced by Europe’s new sweetheart, a limestone fertility goddess that had risen from the earth fully formed, the “Willendorf Venus.” (p. 32)

Compare:

Athos aveva una passione particolare per l’arenaria \_ quello strato di memoria frantumata, quella pietra vivente, storia organica compressa in enormi sepolcri di montagna. Da studente scrisse un saggio sui giacimenti di calcare in Jugoslavia. Arenaria che per effetto della pressione lentamente si trasforma in marmo — mentre descriveva il processo Athos lo faceva sembrare un viaggio spirituale. Diventava un rapsode entusiasta quando parlava delle Causses in Francia o dei Pennini in Inghilterra; oppure di “Strato” Smith e di Abraham Werner che, diceva, « ripiegavano indietro la pelle del tempo » come due chirurghi mentre esploravano canali e miniere.

Quando Athos aveva sette anni, suo padre portò a casa dei fossili da Lyme Regis. Quando ne aveva venticinque fu incantato dalla nuova fidanzata d'Europa, una dea della fertilità di arenaria che era emersa dalla terra in tutta la sua bellezza, la "Venere di Willendorf". (p. 37)

The *calcare/arenaria* alternation is unacceptable from a scientific point of view (sandstone consisting of quartz or feldspar, not calcite) and leads to factual errors, for example, with respect to the description of the Credit Valley limestone of Toronto's Union Station. Though it might be reasonable to speculate that the translator's motivation for alternating *calcare* and *arenaria* is the so-called principle of elegant variation, this is doubtful, given that the textual occurrences of *limestone* in the original text rarely cluster.

An error is also to be found in the French translation with respect to *karst*:

Il affectionnait particulièrement la pierre calcaire, une pierre vivante, véritable cristallisation de mémoire broyée, substance dure et froide, et pourtant matière organique, enchâssée dans le flanc des montagnes, gigantesques tombeaux où dort l'histoire. Étudiant, Athos avait écrit un mémoire sur les immenses carrières de Karst, cette étrange pierre calcaire qu'on trouve en Yougoslavie. Du calcaire qui se transforme lentement en marbre, sous l'effet de la pression terrestre. Athos avait, pour décrire l'incomparable transmutation, des gestes et des mots d'officiant. Il se fit rhapsode pour chanter les Causses françaises et les Pennines d'Angleterre, et aussi pour célébrer Smith et Abraham Werner, ces grands archéologues qui, disait-il, avaient su ouvrir le temps comme de très habiles et très tendres chirurgiens, tandis qu'ils inspectaient les grottes et les mines dont ils avaient la charge. Athos n'avait que sept ans quand son père rapporta à la maison des fossiles provenant de Lyme Regis. À l'âge de vingt-cinq ans, il s'emballa pour cette nouvelle coqueluche de l'Europe, la fameuse déesse de la fertilité, dont la statue de beau calcaire vierge venait de surgir de la terre, dans toute la splendeur de ses formes généreuses, la *Vénus de Willendorf*. (p. 49)

Here the error is not in relation to the limestone/karst connection, rather it is an unwarranted expansion of *karst* to *carrière de karst*, where no reference to a quarry is justified by the original, though there are references to such quarries elsewhere in the text.

With the juxtaposition of references to limestone and karst occurring at a very early stage in Michaels' text, the two elements are seen not only in their relation to each other but within the unity of the mineral and the spiritual worlds which the author develops out of the notion of "organic memory." The French translator's choice of *crystallisation de mémoire* to render *reef of memory* reinforces the sense of the phrase in its dramatic relation of *coincidentia oppositorum* to the dimension of the book's theme which he chose to emphasize in selecting as title *La mémoire en fuite*, a relation privileged by Michaels herself in various passages such as that describing the geological formation of islands as simultaneous victory and defeat.

In the English original, the explicit linking of memory to limestone will find a much subtler echo later in a grotesque modern parody of the myth of Sisyphus.

In the Golleschau quarry, stone-carriers were forced to haul huge blocks of limestone endlessly, from one mound to another and back again. During the torture, they carried their lives in their hands. The insane task was not futile only in the sense that faith is not futile. (p. 53)

Unlike Sisyphus, who was constantly reminded of his transgression by his punishment, the stone-carriers of the Golleschau quarry are senselessly punished by their task and can only give sense to their lives by making use of memory to transcend their circumstances. The Italian translator adheres closely to the original, while the French translator chooses to expand on it, thus reinforcing the link with the theme of memory.

Dans la carrière de Golleschau, les ouvriers transportaient inlassablement d'énormes blocs de calcaire, d'une colline à l'autre encore. Cette torture n'était rien, comparée à la tâche de charrier sans fin les vies et les souvenirs des disparus. C'était, pour les prisonniers fossoyeurs, un labeur insensé, que seule la foi les empêchait de décréter absurde et inutile. (p. 74)

Compare:

Nella cava di Golleschau i portatori di pietre erano costretti a trasportare all'infinito enormi blocchi di calcare, da un cumulo all'altro e viceversa. Durante quella tortura tenevano tra le mani la loro vita. Quel folle compito non era inutile solo nello stesso senso in cui non lo è la fede. (p. 55)

It is clear, by this point in the text, that each translator has developed a strategy from which he does not diverge in dealing with the complementarity of *limestone/karst* and that the French translator has also made a decision to maximize the resonance of themes and rhemes.

Let us now make the dizzying leap from the issues involved in translating a pair of terms doubly anchored by their scientific senses and Michaels' metaphor to the semantically unmoored *bateau ivre* of word-play and the prospect it offers translators of moving beyond the confines of a canal to an ocean, where all the expressive resources of language surge and invite, transport and transcend, even as they destabilize the coherence of textual meaning.

In what follows, I will examine passages which show a variety of approaches on the part of the translators and attempt to move toward a conclusion based on warranted inferences from this diversity.

In the case of homonyms, the English original is in various instances rendered by homonyms or near-homonyms in both the French and Italian translations.

“Hip hip Fauré.” I turned around to eyes as blue as the Kianou caves. To eagerness, strength, and energy. “I’m making a check list, is Liszt Czech?” (p. 127)

« Hip hip Fauré ». Mi voltaì per incontrare due occhi azzurri come le caverne di Kianou. Per incontrare vivacità, forza ed energia. « Non seguo una lista, vado alla cieca, è ceco Liszt? » (p. 117)

« Il faut forer pour trouver Fauré, non »? Je me suis aussitôt retourné pour apercevoir une paire d’yeux plus bleus que l’eau des grottes de Kianou, illuminant le visage d’une jeune femme d’où irradiaient une force, une franchise et une énergie extraordinaires. « Je n’ai pas trouvé Liszt sur la liste, et vous? » (p. 162)



By contrast, elsewhere, the Italian translator is able to invent an anagram as a counterpart to the same figure in the English, whereas the French translator is apparently obliged to replace the original anagram by a *calembour*.

In spare moments she made up medical anagrams \_  
Physician, heal yourself: Ill? Pay-shy? Our fee in cash.  
(p. 130)

Nei momenti liberi lei inventava bizzarri anagrammi  
medici — Medico, cura te stesso: come su scorte di seta.  
(p. 119)

Dans ses moments libres, Alex s'amusait à mettre au point  
des calembours à partir du vaste lexique médical, comme  
celui-ci : « Epistaxis, combien pour la course? » (p. 165)

In the case of palindromes, a translator, no matter how accomplished, resourceful, and inventive, faces limits imposed by the most fundamental features of language structure itself, features of which we have a fairly clear indication in the following:

We sat in Bassel's or in Diana Sweets; we talked in the haze of Constantine's bakery where the smell of cigarettes obliterated even the smell of bread. She called Constantine's place "Yreka bakery" \_ a palindrome. Alex adored palindromes and we habitually hauled out a few favourites on our walks downtown. "Too far Edna we wander afoot." "Are we not drawn onward, we few, drawn onward to new era?" (p. 131)

Ci andavamo a sedere da Bassel's o da Diana Sweets; parlavamo nella nebbia della panetteria di Costantino, dove il puzzo di sigaretta era perfino più intenso del profumo del pane. Chiamava il negozio di Costantino "Onrofono" — un palindromo. Alex adorava i palindromi e di solito tiravamo fuori i nostri preferiti nelle passeggiate che facevamo in centro. « Era poeta e di nome Semonide, ateo, pare». « Avida di vita, desiai ogni amore vero, ma ingoiai sedativi, da diva ». (p. 121)

Assis sur la banquette, au bord de la fenêtre, chez Bassel ou au Diana Sweets, nous parlions sans cesse. Quand on ne se retrouvait pas dans la petite pâtisserie de Constantin où

*l'étouffante fumée des cigarettes faisait disparaître la bonne odeur des pains et des gâteaux qui cuisaient.* (p. 167)

Here the meanings of the words in the source text have been cast adrift, and both Italian and French translations are similarly fugitive pieces of echoic form. The French translator appears to simply give up rendering any of the stylistic effect of the original; but compare the following, where he replaces the palindrome with internal rhyme.

This was Alex's rhyming slang for palindrome, which in this case we all knew referred to one of the best in her arsenal; "Desserts, I stressed." Alex would never dream of saying simply, Let's stop for a rice pudding. (p. 135)

Era la sua rima in gergo per palindromo, e in questo caso tutti sapevamo che si riferiva a uno dei migliori del suo arsenale: « Acetone o enoteca! ». Alex non si sarebbe mai neppure sognata di dire semplicemente « Fermiamoci a bere qualcosa ». (p. 125)

« Que diriez-vous d'un petit verre, envers et contre l'amer hiver? » Il ne lui serait jamais passé par la tête de lancer tout simplement : « Arrêtons-nous, j'ai envie d'un petit gâteau! » (p. 172)

Apart from exceptional and extreme cases such as the palindrome, it is not unusual to find points of convergence between the approaches taken by our two translators:

"Jakob, your wife always wants to know what's going on at work. Doesn't she know the museum is no place to find hepcats? All I can tell her is old news. Now Alex, if you want to hear about past lives" – "Why not? Hepcats have nine lives, don't they?" (p. 136)

« Jakob, tua moglie vuole sempre sapere che succede al moda? Non posso darle altro che notizie vecchie. Ora, Alex, se vuoi sapere di vite passate... » « Perché no? I tipi alla moda ne passano di tutti i colori, o no? » (p. 125)

« Dis donc, Jacob, ta femme est bien curieuse de ce qui se passe au musée? Elle devrait pourtant savoir que c'est pas là qu'on entend les tout derniers cancans! Si au moins tu t'intéressais aux vieilles histoires, Alex, je ne dis pas... »  
« Non, mais c'est ce que je fais! Quand on ne cesse de répéter "Quand? Quand?", c'est qu'on cherche à fouiller dans le passé, non? » (p. 173)

But there is one instance in which the Italian translator shifts to didactic mode, whereas his French counterpart not only allows his imagination to soar but does so via the geological metaphor that we have already examined.

Athos and I made up characters and stories during our Sunday walks, to practise my vocabulary. We invented a suspense serial involving two detectives, Peter Moss and Peter Bogg. In one episode, they trailed a villain who "took things for granite" (my most accomplished malapropism); he robbed museums and left, as his mark, a block of stone in the empty space. (p. 100)

Io e Athos ci inventavamo personaggi e storie durante le nostre passeggiate domenicali, per esercitare il mio vocabolario. Inventammo un giallo a episodi con due detective, Peter Moss e Peter Bogg. In uno degli episodi i due erano sulle tracce di un malvivente che "scambiava le cose col granito" (il mio miglior gioco di parole); svaligiava i musei e lasciava, come marchio, un blocco di pietra nello spazio rimasto vuoto. [Translator's note: Gioco di parole tra "took things for granite" (scambiava le cose col granito) e "took things for granted" (dava le cose per scontate); "granite" e "granted" si pronunciano in modo simile.] (p. 95)

Durant nos promenades du dimanche, Athos et moi nous plaisions à inventer des histoires avec toutes sortes de personnages. Cet exercice avait pour but de parfaire mon apprentissage de l'anglais. Ensemble, nous avons échafaudé une sorte de roman-fleuve mettant en scène deux détectives, auxquels nous avons donné les noms de Pierre de Lamousse et Pierre Desmarais. Dans un des nombreux épisodes, nos limiers se lançaient à la poursuite d'un bandit qui avait résolu de « faire de la vie de ses victimes un véritable calcaire! » (Ce fut ma trouvaille la plus ingénieuse.) Le voleur déroba des objets d'art dans les musées et abandonnait chaque fois, pour bien marquer son

passage, un bloc de pierre, au beau milieu de la salle vide.  
(p. 129)

With such data, we move ostensibly from *stylistique interne* to *stylistique externe*; “ostensibly” because, in a sense, the fugue structure of Michaels’ original requires that any examination of a translation move from *stylistique interne* to *stylistique externe* and then back to *stylistique interne*. It is, so to speak, an instance where Wittgenstein’s ladder does *not* get kicked away, because the text compels our focus to move from understanding to the interplay of *what* we have understood and *how* we have understood it. We contemplate the rungs from the top of the ladder that we have climbed. I would contend that it is the fugue structure of the original work which makes the comparison of its French and Italian translations fruitful. By studying simultaneously the *stylistique interne* of English-Italian and that of English-French through the two translations, I believe that we move toward a new way of laying the groundwork for a comparative stylistics of French and Italian.

In this regard, one passage in particular from Anne Michaels’ original text merits the translator’s attention. (Jakob, the narrator of Part I of the novel, is a translator and offers this observation on his craft):

“Reading a poem in translation, wrote Bialek, is like kissing a woman through a veil, and reading Greek poems, with a mixture of *katharevousa* and the demotic is like kissing two women. Translation is a kind of transubstantiation; one poem becomes another. You can choose your philosophy of translation just as you choose how to live: the free adaptation that sacrifices detail to meaning, the strict crib that sacrifices meaning to exactitude. The poet moves from life to language, the translator moves from language to life; both, like the immigrant, try to identify the invisible, what’s between the lines, the mysterious implications.” (p. 108)

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**ABSTRACT : A Comparative Study of the French & Italian Translations of Anne Michaels' *Fugitive Pieces*** — W. Terrence Gordon examines the notion of translation problems by comparing the French and Italian versions of Michaels' work. He begins by examining the translation of geological terms which, although they cause no translation problems on a strictly scientific level, are a cause of divergence in the French and Italian versions because they express metaphorically a main theme of the novel: memory and the modifying effect that the past has on the present. Gordon also examines the strategy of each translator with regards to word play, and in particular homonyms, anagrams and palindromes, which are rendered anywhere from a strictly didactic translation to a translation based on various linguistic resources and creative expression. Gordon reminds us that we are invited to study the *stylistique interne* of English-French and English-Italian through the two translations.

**RÉSUMÉ : Une étude comparative des traductions française et italienne du roman de Anne Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*** — W. Terrence Gordon examine le concept de problèmes de traduction à travers la comparaison des traductions française et italienne de l'œuvre de Michaels. Il commence par une étude de la traduction de termes géologiques qui ne posent pas de problème de traduction du point de vue scientifique mais qui sont ici sujets à une divergence dans les deux traductions parce qu'ils expriment de manière métaphorique un thème principal du roman : la mémoire et l'effet modificateur du passé sur le présent. Gordon examine également la stratégie employée par chaque traducteur en ce qui concerne les jeux de mots, et plus particulièrement les homonymes, les anagrammes et les palindromes. On remarque que ces jeux de mots sont traduits aussi bien par un moyen strictement didactique que par l'emploi de diverses ressources linguistiques et par une force créatrice de la part du traducteur. Gordon nous rappelle que l'étude des deux traductions nous invite à mieux saisir la *stylistique interne* de l'anglais et du français, de l'anglais et de l'italien.

**Keywords** : karst, limestone, organic memory, anagram, palindrome.

**Mots-clé** : karst, pierre calcaire, mémoire organique, anagramme, palindrome.

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