Myth as Microscope:
Michel Tournier's
Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique

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Michel Tournier's Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique presents an odyssey of Robinson's personal development which explicitly tackles the philosophical and psychological problematic of Self and Other – a problematic which, as we know, is magnified and thrown into relief by the literal isolation of the protagonist. I would like to chart this particular Robinson's search for a solution to the problems of solitude and alterity by considering two of the novel's narrative strands, tracing, on the one hand, Robinson's physical and erotic development, and on the other hand the evolution of his relationship with language. I shall first point to the type of personal evolution these two themes appear to portray, and then focus a little more closely on the novel's conclusion, to see whether initial appearances are fully borne out.

Robinson's sexual development constitutes perhaps the dominant narrative of Tournier's novel. When he first arrives on the island, he is already married and the father of a family, and his
conformist virility is thus established. It is confirmed by his adhering (when he finally accepts that he is definitively marooned) to a patriarchal stereotype; he casts himself in the role of Governor of the island, identifies in his autocratic fantasies with Jupiter and Jehovah, and develops a superstitious regard for a giant cedar tree which towers like a sort of phallic totem in the centre of the island. His sexual life, for a long time, also remains modelled on his past experience as a *pater familias*, as he simulates human coitus with objects on to which he projects a female identity. However, this behaviour appears increasingly futile as, underneath the superficial maintenance of his patriarchal dignity, Robinson begins to suffer a series of failures in the course of his sexual activities, which finally lead him to understand that he no longer has anything to gain from these remnants of a past which had trained him to be a 'normal', virile heterosexual. For instance, an amorous liaison with a fallen log is cut short by a poisonous spider which crawls out of the bark and bites him in the tenderest possible spot, signalling to Robinson not only that some failures are more stinging than others, but also – vaguely, at this stage – that eventually, his specifically phallic sexuality may have to be sacrificed.

Next, he turns to a suggestively shaped pink grove in the island itself (which he has baptised 'Speranza'), and in this 'relationship' he reinforces his paternal status by believing that the island, fecundated by his lovemaking, offers him 'children' in the shape of mandragora plants which grow up wherever his seed is spilt. But this passion too is finally disappointed when he belatedly discovers, initially through the suspicious appearance of black-and-pink striped mandragoras, that Speranza has been adulterously succumbing to the surreptitious visits of the manservant Vendredi as well. Such failures in his erotic endeavours gradually undermine the retrospective bases of Robinson's sexuality, until at last this paternal phase is brought to an end, years after Vendredi's arrival, when Vendredi accidentally detonates Robinson's gunpowder store and blows up part of the island. The explosion destroys all the physical trappings of Robinson's patriarchal authority, and so undermines the great cedar tree that it crashes impotently to the ground. Robinson finally accepts the futility of adventures modelled on the past, and is ready to start afresh, to construct a new eroticism.