

**‘[La ville]. Ce territoire infini d’intersections, où l’on ne se rencontre pas’:ⁱ
Translating representations of loneliness and its effects in Delphine de
Vigan’s *Les heures souterraines***

Claire Ellender

Abstract

*Positing that reading literature which focuses on mental health problems can be both informative and of comfort to those interested in, or affected by, such issues, the present article proceeds in five stages. First, it presents the work of contemporary French author, Delphine de Vigan. It then provides detailed background information on loneliness before identifying how this phenomenon is represented in *Les heures souterraines* and how approaches to dealing with this reflect practices adopted in twenty-first-century Western society. Last, this study examines George Miller’s 2011 translation, *Underground Time*, and considers how this translated work could benefit Anglophone readers.*

Keywords: mental health issues; twenty-first century French women’s writing; English translation

Introduction

The eighteenth-century English writer, Dr Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), once professed that ‘the only end of writing is to enable the readers better to enjoy life or better to endure it’ (in Murphy 1846: 610). Inspired by the notion that reading literature can not only help people to understand, but also to cope with, deep emotional strain,ⁱⁱ the present article proceeds in five stages and adopts an inherently interdisciplinary approach. First, it presents the work of contemporary French novelist and film director, Delphine de Vigan, and, more specifically, her 2009 novel, *Les heures souterraines*. It then provides essential background information on loneliness and related mental health issues before identifying how this phenomenon is represented in *Les heures souterraines* and how approaches to dealing with this reflect practices adopted in twenty-first-century Western society. Last, this study examines the ways in which George Miller’s 2011 translation, *Underground Time*, preserves De Vigan’s portrayal of loneliness and its effects, and how this translated work could therefore be of benefit to an Anglophone audience.

1)Context: Delphine de Vigan and her worksⁱⁱⁱ

Born in 1966 in Boulogne-Billancourt in the western suburbs of Paris, the novelist and film director, Delphine de Vigan, began writing while working at a public opinion firm in Alfortville. De Vigan, who is the partner of the French journalist and television/radio presenter, François Busnel, with whom she has two children, published her first novel in 2001 and now has nine works to her name.

De Vigan's repertoire comprises a collection of short stories and eight novels. These cover a range of subject-matter, including certain social issues (homelessness in her 2007 *No et moi*) and mental health problems (such as morbid anorexia in her 2001 *Jours sans faim*). Probably the most celebrated of these writings is her breakthrough work, *No et moi*, which won both the Rotary International Prize (2009) and the prestigious Prix des Librairies, was translated into twenty languages and was subsequently released as a film in 2010, directed by Zabru Breitman. De Vigan's *Rien ne s'oppose à la nuit* (2011), which deals with bipolar disorder, was also awarded an impressive array of French literary prizes, namely the Prix du Roman Fnac, the Prix Roman France Télévisions, the Grand Prix des Lectrices Elle and the Prix Renaudot des Lycéens. Following these successes, De Vigan has also written and directed two screenplays (2011; 2014).

Les heures souterraines (2009)

In her *Les heures souterraines*, De Vigan skilfully depicts both the contemporary social evil that is loneliness and some of the mental health issues to which this can give rise. This, her fifth, novel focuses on two principal characters, Mathilde and Thibault. Although these two protagonists do not know each other, they have many things in common. Both are in their early forties, live in Paris, have devoted much of their lives to their careers and suffer variously from loneliness: in their personal lives, their professional lives, and in the impersonal environment that is twenty-first-century Parisian society. In *Les heures souterraines*, De Vigan devotes alternate chapters to the lives of Mathilde and Thibault, which she presents in parallel to one another. If these two protagonists come into very close contact in the final pages of this novel, De Vigan does not, however, allow them to meet. The novel ends with a sense of hopelessness as both characters continue to function alone and to be lonely. This situation is presented as inevitable in the anonymous, individualistic environment of a twenty-first-century capital city.

2)Background: Loneliness and mental health problems in twenty-first century, Western society

The ways in which we live and work in the West have evolved considerably over the last few decades and have become increasingly individualistic. Many people shop and socialise online, the divorce rate has doubled in the last fifty years, which partly explains that there are more one-person households, and it is not unusual for us to work at home. Other people commute long distances to their workplace, so have little time to spend with family. Furthermore, we frequently move away from our families and the communities in which we grew up in order to pursue our studies and careers. According to Griffin (2017: 8; 10), these societal changes can have a significant, negative impact on our mental and emotional health.

It is important to distinguish between the states of being 'lonely' and being 'alone', as it is possible to be on one's own and to be perfectly happy. Indeed, a number of authors, both fictional and non-fictional, write of the benefits of solitude. The characters in Véronique Olmi's novels, for instance, often relish time alone ('Comme elle avait hâte d'être seule. Hâte de ne plus parler, de ne plus être regardée, attendue, sollicitée' (2004 : 15); 'Le silence de l'appart [...] était un apaisement' (2004: 21); 'Ce besoin de solitude, de recueillement, sans [lui]' (2010 : 182)). Certain contemporary writers of non-fiction display a comparably positive attitude to being alone. As Eric Kleinenberg (2012: 18) writes: 'Living alone helps us to pursue

sacred modern values – individual freedom, personal control and self-realisation [...] time and space for restorative solitude’. He continues: ‘Living alone is not merely a condition to be OK with. It’s an arrangement people have come to appreciate, value and even pursue’ (ibid: 221).^{iv}

Being alone only becomes problematic, and develops into loneliness, if it is chronic and causes unhappiness. Loneliness can occur for one of two principal reasons. If a person does not see or talk to people very often – they have an absence of relationships with family and friends at an individual level, and with society at a broader level - , they may suffer from ‘social isolation’ (Griffin 2017: 18). Alternatively, if an individual is surrounded by people and has a good social network but feels emotionally cut off, that is, not understood or cared for, they may experience ‘emotional loneliness’ (ibid). According to the mental health charity, MIND: ‘Feeling lonely isn’t, in itself, a mental health problem, but the two are closely linked’.^v Indeed, prolonged loneliness is detrimental to our health, both psychologically and physically, increasing not only the risk of mental health pathologies – including anxiety, depression, irritability, memory problems and suicidal thoughts - (Green 2016; Hari 2018) but also physical conditions, including impaired cardiovascular function and immune function (Griffin 2017: 4). In view of this, it is clearly important to acknowledge such feelings and to take steps to reduce them.

Anyone who experiences either social isolation or emotional loneliness can benefit from looking after their health and well-being (by exercising regularly, eating a balanced diet and sleeping adequately). Being in a good state of physical health and well-rested makes it easier to take positive steps towards dealing with negative feelings. Specific approaches to reducing loneliness depend on whether one is experiencing social isolation or emotional loneliness. When the former is the case, a person is encouraged to improve their social connections by using social media, joining a club or volunteering, for instance (Griffin 2017: 25-8; www.mind.org.uk). Someone who is affected by the latter can benefit from opening up to friends and family and by accessing talking therapies, in order to learn how to manage the mental health effects of their loneliness (ibid).

3) Representations of loneliness in *Les heures souterraines*

The following pages now consider in turn each of this novel’s two principal protagonists, Mathilde and Thibault. For each character, they provide background information, examples of the loneliness which they experience in their personal life, professional life and in society at large, identify how these two characters deal with their respective experiences of loneliness and outline the final outcome of their efforts.

Mathilde: Background

Mathilde Debord is forty years old and a single mother of three sons, including twins. Her husband, Philippe, died ten years ago in a road accident when they were on holiday in Normandy. Mathilde is a strong woman. Despite the pain of her loss, she has managed to raise her boys in a peaceful, happy environment (‘Souvent elle a pensé qu’elle avait transmis à ses enfants une forme de gaité, une aptitude à la joie’ (43)). An educated and intelligent woman

(12), she also concentrated on her career, as the assistant marketing manager of an international food company based in Paris (22,) in order to help to rebuild her life (167):

L'entreprise avait été le lieu de sa renaissance. L'entreprise l'avait obligé à s'habiller, se coiffer, se maquiller. A sortir de sa torpeur. A reprendre le cours de sa vie. Pendant huit ans, elle y était venue avec une forme d'enthousiasme, de conviction. Elle y était venue avec le sentiment d'être utile [...]. L'entreprise, peut-être, l'avait sauvée.

Personal life

Although Mathilde lives with her three sons, has some contact with her mother and friends and is not, therefore, suffering from social isolation, she does experience some degree of emotional loneliness. Her husband's death has clearly left a large void in her life ('La mort de Philippe est un manque qu'elle a apprivoisé. Avec lequel elle a appris à vivre. Philippe est sa part manquante, un membre amputé dont elle garde la sensation précise' (144)). Although she admits that she would sometimes like the physical comfort of a man ('Elle aimerait qu'il la prenne dans ses bras. Comme ça, sans rien dire, juste un instant. Se reposer, quelques secondes, prendre appui. Sentir son corps se relâcher. Respirer l'odeur d'un homme' (138)), she is sceptical that she will ever meet anyone else with whom she is compatible. Indeed, over the past ten years, despite some brief encounters with other men, she has never felt able to commit to anyone else (225):

Depuis dix ans, elle a vécu des *histoires*, en marge de sa vie, juste au bord, à l'insu de ses enfants. Et les histoires, au fond, elle s'en fout. A chaque fois qu'il a été question de réunir les meubles et le temps, de suivre la même trajectoire, elle est partie. Elle ne peut plus. Peut-être que cette chose-là n'a eu lieu que dans l'inconscience de ses vingt ans, vivre ensemble, au même endroit, respirer le même air, chaque jour partager le même lit, la même salle de bain, peut-être que ça n'arrive qu'une fois, oui, et qu'ensuite plus rien de cet ordre n'est possible, ne peut être recommencé.

Professional life

It is in her workplace that Mathilde possibly feels the greatest emotional loneliness. Having once disagreed with, and dared to contradict her manager, Jacques, at an important business meeting (26), her relationship with this man rapidly disintegrated. Jacques began to ignore her (32), destroy her reputation by criticising her (33) and excluding her from meetings (35). Progressively, this bullying treatment, which Mathilde was afraid to speak about, led to her isolation ('Une somme de petites choses insidieuses et ridicules, qui l'avaient isolée chaque jour davantage, parce qu'elle n'avait pas su prendre la mesure de ce qui se passait, parce qu'elle n'avait pas voulu alerter' (35-6)). She was also ostracised by her colleagues who were reluctant to be seen to take her side (86; 88) and was ultimately replaced by a colleague and given an old store cupboard as her new office, far from the rest of her department. At this point, Mathilde clearly sees her workplace as the bullying, totalitarian environment that it has become (168). At her lowest point, she becomes so lonely that she is grateful to hear automated voices when she telephones other companies, such as the *SNCF* (186-7):

Du fond de son bureau, elle parle à quelqu'un qui n'est personne. Quelqu'un qui a le mérite de lui répondre gentiment, de lui faire répéter sans s'énerver, qui ne se met pas à hurler, ne prétend pas qu'elle l'insulte. Quelqu'un qui lui indique comment faire, pas à pas, [...] sur le même ton patient et bienveillant.

Society. A frequent user of the Paris *métro*, Mathilde comes into close contact with her fellow citizens on a daily basis. However, in spite of this proximity, she is aware of the anonymous, impersonal, and fundamentally lonely, nature of their city life (226):

Mathilde se tient à l'écart, elle observe les gens, la fatigue sur leur visage, cet air de contrariété, cette amertume à leurs lèvres. Le FOVA est supprimé, il va falloir attendre. Il lui semble qu'elle partage avec eux quelque chose que d'autres ignorent. Presque tous les soirs, côte à côte, dans ce courant d'air géant, ils attendent des trains aux noms absurdes. Pour autant cela ne les rassemble pas, ne crée aucun lien entre eux.

Mental health problems caused by loneliness. The fact that Mathilde's loneliness occurs in a number of areas of her life and persists over an extended period of time results in her experiencing several mental health problems. Ultimately, her physical health is also affected. Mathilde suffers from chronic anxiety and associated insomnia ('Il y a longtemps que Mathilde a perdu le sommeil. Presque chaque nuit l'angoisse la réveille, à la même heure [...]') (15)) and she takes sleeping tablets (22). She often cries, is irritable and struggles to concentrate (43). In the following, Mathilde summarises concisely the difference between her mental states before and after she became bullied in her workplace (22):

Avant ça [...] Elle déjeunait avec des collègues, allait à la gym deux fois par semaine, ne prenait pas de somnifères, ne pleurait pas dans le métro ni au supermarché, ne mettait pas trois minutes pour répondre aux questions de ses enfants. Elle allait au travail comme tout le monde sans vomir un jour sur deux en descendant du train.

In view of this, Mathilde feels that she cannot cope (15), loses her self-confidence ('Et elle, à quel milieu appartient-elle? Au milieu des lâches, des amoindris, des démissionnaires?') (238)) and has violent impulses ('Alors l'image est revenue. Le visage de Jacques, tuméfié, un filet de sang sortant de sa bouche' (163)). She manages to overcome suicidal thoughts by thinking of her children (59), but eventually reaches breaking point and resigns from her job (212). She is so exhausted that she has lost her ability to reason and to express herself (154-5) and is physically weak (223; 244):

[...] le trottoir se dérobaît sous elle, par endroits, ou bien étaient-ce ses jambes qui pliaient sous le poids du renoncement. C'était un affaissement vers le sol, imperceptible, comme si son corps ne savait plus comment tenir debout. A un moment elle s'est vue s'écrouler là, sur l'asphalte, par une forme de court-circuit.

Elle a pensé que si elle s'asseyait, elle ne pourrait plus jamais se relever. [...] Et puis les affiches se sont mêlées, confondues en une seule étoile, mouvante, un kaléidoscope aux couleurs brillantes qui tournoyait autour d'elle. Elle a senti que son corps tanguait, elle a fermé les yeux.

Dealing with loneliness and mental health problems. Despite her feeling under great strain, Mathilde makes concerted efforts to remain positive (191-3). She consults a medium in order to receive guidance for the future and some concrete information to give her hope (11). She is positive and mindful in her daily activities ('Sous l'eau tiède elle s'attarde. Souvent, dans ce bien-être que lui procure la douche, elle retrouve des sensations d'avant, quand sa vie coulait comme de l'eau' (40-1)) and continues to take pride in her appearance (Là-dessus, elle n'a jamais lâché. S'habiller comme avant. Enfiler une jupe, un tailleur, se maquiller. Même si parfois elle n'avait plus la force' (130)). This said, she struggles to manage certain aspects of her well-being, such as exercise and sleep (22) and she is disheartened by repeatedly comparing

herself and her professional life to that of other people (181-2). As Mathilde is ashamed of her situation, she has also reduced contact with her friends (45) and family (112-13). Although a part of her would like to ask for help and contact a doctor (49), she cannot bring herself to do so (56) and therefore does not receive appropriate medical treatment or have access to talking therapies. Although Mathilde eventually leaves her job and there is therefore some hope that her situation will improve, the novel ends somewhat pessimistically for this character since it is not clear how she will be able to deal with the mental health problems to which her chronic loneliness has led.

ii)Thibault: Background

Thibault is forty-three years old and single, having recently ended his relationship with girlfriend Lila, who was not sufficiently committed to, or in love with, him (20). This character is a doctor for *Les Urgences Médicales de Paris* (84); he therefore spends his time responding to emergency calls and visiting patients in their homes throughout the city (53). As a student at medical school, Thibault was involved in an accident in which his left hand was trapped in a car door and two of his fingers were subsequently amputated (81-2). This put an end to his dream of becoming a surgeon (83). He therefore began his career as a doctor in the small, provincial town in which he had grown up, but he was unfulfilled by this quiet, settled life and felt drawn to the hustle and bustle of the capital ('Il voulait la ville, son mouvement, l'air saturé des fins de journée. Il voulait l'agitation et le bruit' (84)).

Personal life

During his relationship with Lila, Thibault felt a constant sense of emotional loneliness ('Il suffit de les regarder quand elle marche à côté de lui sans jamais l'effleurer ni le toucher, il suffit de les observer au restaurant où à n'importe quelle terrasse de café, et cette distance qui les sépare [...]') (18); '[...] cette solitude fondamentale que [Lila] oppose à ceux qui l'entourent [...]') (54). Unable to continue in this way, Thibault ended their relationship (52). Although he sometimes feels that he needs the physical comfort and presence of a woman ('Il est fatigué. Il aimerait qu'une femme le prenne dans ses bras. Sans rien rire, juste un instant. Se reposer, quelques secondes, prendre appui. Sentir son corps se relâcher' (149)),^{vi} he is not sure that he wants, or is able, to commit to anyone else again (149-50):

Est-ce qu'il pourrait désirer une autre femme : sa voix, sa peau, son parfum ? Est-ce qu'il serait prêt à recommencer, encore une fois ? Le jeu de la rencontre, le jeu de la séduction, les premiers mots, le premier contact physique, les bouches et puis les sexes, est-ce qu'il a encore la force ? Est-ce qu'au contraire, il est amputé de quelque chose ? Est-ce que dorénavant quelque chose lui manque, lui fait défaut ? Recommencer. Encore. Est-ce que cela est possible ? Est-ce que cela a un sens ?

Thibault also feels a sense of emptiness, and a lack of meaning, in other aspects of his personal life as he has devoted all of his time to his career (176-7):

Il est médecin de ville et sa vie se résume à ça. Il n'a rien acheté de pérenne, pas d'appartement, pas de maison à la campagne, il n'a pas eu d'enfants, il n'est pas marié, il ne sait pas pourquoi. [...] Il a quitté sa famille et ne revient qu'une fois par an. Il ne sait pas pourquoi il est si loin, d'une manière générale, loin de tout excepté de son travail qui l'accapare tout entier. Il ne sait

pas comment le temps est passé si vite. Il ne peut rien en dire, rien de particulier. Il est médecin depuis bientôt quinze ans et il ne s'est rien passé d'autre. Rien de fondamental.

Professional life

Despite his evident accomplishments, Thibault feels a sense of solitude in his work. This is largely due to the transitory nature of his role as an emergency doctor ('Peut-être qu'il ne sera jamais rien d'autre que celui qui passe et s'en va' (84); '[...] il laisse derrière lui les gens démolis qu'il ne reverra pas' (123)). Furthermore, he regularly witnesses the social isolation experienced by some of his elderly patients (174):

Des femmes et des hommes comme Mme Driesman, il en a vu des centaines. Des femmes ou des hommes que la ville abrite sans même le savoir. Qui finissent par mourir chez eux et que l'on découvre quelques semaines plus tard, quand l'odeur est trop forte ou que les vers ont traversé le plancher. Des hommes ou des femmes qui parfois appellent un médecin, simplement pour voir quelqu'un. Entendre le son d'une voix. Parler quelques minutes. Au fil des années, il a appris à reconnaître l'isolement [...].

Society. Thibault is a highly sensitive and observant man. He is not only aware of his own loneliness and that of his patients, but also of the anonymous, impersonal nature of Parisian society, in which so many people feel alone and disconnected ('Il regarde la ville, cette superposition de mouvements. Ce territoire infini d'intersections, où l'on ne se rencontre pas' (128)). At times, Thibault feels that he has tired of this hostile environment (108-9). Nevertheless, he has no intention, or desire, to leave Paris ('Maintenant il sait combine la ville est brutale et qu'elle fait payer le prix fort à ceux qui prétendent y survivre. Et pourtant, pour rien au monde, il ne repartirait' (234)).

Mental health problems caused by loneliness. Due to this chronic loneliness, and especially his relationship problems, Thibault's mental and physical health gradually begin to suffer. He experiences insomnia ('Il n'arrive pas à dormir. Il n'arrive pas à dormir parce qu'il l'aime et qu'elle s'en fout' (18), feels emotionally unstable and sad ('Il ne va quand même pas pleurer comme un con, enfermé à quatre heures du matin dans une salle de bains d'hôtel, assis sur le couvercle des chiottes' (16)), is tired and irritable ('La fatigue avait suffi à faire de lui cet être à fleur de peau [...]') (247)) and sometimes has difficulty concentrating at work (81). In addition to this, as he feels that he has become emotionally weakened by his relationship (18), his self-confidence has been affected ('Pendant des semaines, il a perdu son temps en hypothèses et en conjectures. Il a cherché ce qui n'allait pas, chez lui, ce qui faisait dissonance' (201), he angers easily and he has violent thoughts ('Une fraction de seconde, Thibault se voit sortir de la voiture, se précipiter sur l'homme et le rouer de coups' (107)). Eventually Thibault becomes exhausted, both mentally-emotionally and physically ('Il arrive un moment où le prix est devenu trop élevé. Dépasse les ressources. Où il faut sortir du jeu, accepter d'avoir perdu. Il arrive un moment où on ne peut pas se baisser plus bas' (234-5)).

Dealing with loneliness and mental health problems. As Thibault has witnessed many cases of loneliness and mental health problems in his work as a doctor, he is familiar with strategies which can be used to deal with these and clearly puts them into practice himself. He uses positive self-talk ('[...] il s'est répété qu'il allait y arriver' (38)), ends the relationship which was at the root of his problems (52) and uses techniques to calm his anger ('Alors il allume la radio, monte le son. Il inspire' (107)). Although he has difficulty sleeping and is sometimes tempted to smoke (232), he is able to use self-soothing techniques, such as listening to music

and taking time to reflect (235). Very importantly, Thibault talks about his problems with his colleague and close friend, Frazera (54-5), and, despite not socialising regularly, he resolves to reconnect with old friends (201):

Le week-end prochain il s'achètera un écran plat pour ses soirées DVD. Et puis il invitera ses amis de fac, ceux qui se sont installés à Paris mais qu'il ne voit jamais parce qu'il travaille trop. Il organisera une petite soirée chez lui, il achètera de quoi boire et manger. Et peut-être pousseront-ils la table et les chaises pour danser dans son salon. Comme avant.

Thibault clearly has much in common with previously discussed Mathilde. When the two characters' paths ultimately cross in the *métro*, medically trained and observant Thibault notices the signs of Mathilde's physical exhaustion, but is embarrassed to be identifying with this stranger (248):

Il lui a semblé que cette femme et lui partageaient le même épuisement, une absence à soi-même qui projetait le corps vers le sol. Il lui a semblé que cette femme et lui partageaient beaucoup de choses. C'était absurde et puéril, il a baissé les yeux.

Although Thibault wants to talk to this woman, Mathilde leaves the densely packed carriage at the next station and he misses the opportunity to connect with her (249). For Thibault as for Mathilde, the novel ends pessimistically. Thibault is resigned to the fact that his loneliness – and that of his fellow citizens – is inevitable in this anonymous and impersonal capital city (249):

Emporté par le flot dense et désordonné, il a pensé que la ville toujours imposerait sa cadence, son empressement et ses heures d'affluence, qu'elle continuerait d'ignorer ces millions de trajectoires solitaires, à l'intersection desquelles il n'y a rien, rien d'autre que le vide ou bien une étincelle, aussitôt dissipée.

4) Treatment of loneliness in *Les heures souterraines* in relation to current practices in the West

Instances of loneliness have increased dramatically in recent years and currently present significant social problems in twenty-first-century, Western society. *Les heures souterraines* provides a perceptive and sensitive insight into the loneliness experienced personally, professionally and socially by two middle-aged, French adults in present-day Paris, and demonstrates how this phenomenon causes each of the characters both mental health problems and physical ill-health. Although Mathilde and Thibault have varying degrees of success when employing currently advocated self-help strategies to deal with their loneliness, the outlook for both characters ultimately seems bleak; both are resigned to the inevitability of their situation and seem unable to envisage an effective means of changing their fate. It is significant that neither Mathilde nor Thibault consults a therapist about their issues. In twenty-first century Europe, talking therapy is a widely used approach to dealing with the emotional loneliness which these two characters experience; this approach may, ultimately, have offered both Mathilde and Thibault effective means of acknowledging and dealing with their feelings and of moving forward positively.

5) Translating representations of loneliness in *Les heures souterraines*

Thus far, the present article has focused on representations of loneliness in Delphine de Vigan's *Les heures souterraines* and on Mathilde and Thibault's experience of this social phenomenon. It has provided background information on each character, has identified how each experiences loneliness in their personal and professional life and in society at large. It has also considered how loneliness has resulted in these characters' suffering from mental health problems and how they have each dealt with their loneliness and associated problems.

In its Introduction, this article posited that literature which concentrates on mental health issues may be not only informative to those affected (sufferers, their family, friends and carers), but also comforting to all concerned, particularly those who are suffering. If these two functions which are present in a given source text (ST) are to be preserved in its corresponding translation, both the factual content of the original text and its style, which communicates much about the affected character's experiences, feelings and thoughts, must clearly be rendered in the target language (TL). Against this background, this section of the present article sets out to identify how these objectives have been met in literary translator George Miller's 2011 English-language translation of *Les heures souterraines*.

In brief, Delphine de Vigan's treatment of loneliness and the mental health problems in which this can result, is detailed, perceptive and sensitive. Throughout her work, the author blends factual content and insightful descriptions of the characters' emotions in order to successfully convey Mathilde and Thibault's torment. The following pages present a selection of excerpts from the character's respective stories, paying attention to experiences of loneliness in their personal and professional lives and in society, to their mental health difficulties and to how they deal with these. In each instance, Miller's corresponding translation is offered in order to determine how De Vigan's representations of loneliness have been preserved for an Anglophone audience.

i) Mathilde

Context	ST (De Vigan 2009)	TT (Miller 2011)
Personal life. Loss of husband	Aujourd'hui, la mort de Philippe n'est plus une douleur. La mort de Philippe est un manque qu'elle a apprivoisé. Avec lequel elle a appris à vivre. Philippe est sa part manquante, un membre amputé dont elle garde la sensation précise (144)	Today Philippe's death doesn't hurt any more. Philippe's death is an absence which she has tamed. Which she has learned to live with. Philippe is the missing part of her, an amputated limb of which she has retained a precise sensation (146)
Personal life. Unable to commit to another relationship	Depuis dix ans, elle a vécu des histoires, en marge de sa vie, juste au bord, à l'insu de ses enfants. Et les histoires, au fond, elle s'en fout. A	For ten years she's had affairs in the margins of her life, just on the edge, without her children knowing. And ultimately she couldn't care

	chaque fois qu'il a été question de réunir les meubles et le temps, de suivre la même trajectoire, elle est partie. [...] peut-être que ça n'arrive qu'une fois, oui, et qu'ensuite plus rien de cet ordre n'est possible (225)	less about the affairs. Every time the question of sharing their furniture and their time has come up, of following the same path, she's left. [...] maybe that happens only once, and afterwards nothing like that is possible (233)
Professional life. Bullying treatment at work	Une somme de petites choses insidieuses et ridicules, qui l'avaient isolée chaque jour davantage, parce qu'elle n'avait pas su prendre la mesure de ce qui se passait, parce qu'elle n'avait pas voulu alerter (35-6)	A collection of insidious, ridiculous little things which made her more isolated every day, because she hadn't been able to take stock of what was going on, because she hadn't wanted to raise the alarm (28)
Professional life. Felt the need to call automated telephone lines in order to be addressed politely	Du fond de son bureau, elle parle à quelqu'un qui n'est personne. Quelqu'un qui a le mérite de lui répondre gentiment [...] (186)	She's sitting in the back of her office, speaking to someone who is no one. Someone who has the merit of answering her nicely [...] (192)
Society. Anonymous, impersonal nature of city life	Mathilde se tient à l'écart, elle observe les gens, la fatigue sur leur visage, cet air de contrariété, cette amertume à leurs lèvres. [...] Il lui semble qu'elle partage avec eux quelque chose que d'autres ignorent. Presque tous les soirs, côte à côte, dans ce courant d'air géant, ils attendent des trains [...]. Pour autant cela ne les rassemble pas, ne crée aucun lien entre eux (226)	Mathilde is standing by herself, watching people, the tiredness on their faces, that look of upset, the bitterness in their lips. [...] It seems to her that she shares with them something which other people are unaware of. Nearly every evening side by side they wait for trains [...]. And yet this doesn't bring them together, doesn't create any link (234)
Mental health problems experienced: anxiety and exhaustion	[...] le trottoir se dérobait sous elle, par endroits, ou bien étaient-ce ses jambes qui pliaient sous le poids du renoncement ? C'était un affaissement vers le sol, imperceptible, comme si son	[...] the pavement seemed to give way beneath her, or else it was her legs which were folding under the weight of having given up. It was as if she were imperceptibly subsiding into the ground, as

	corps ne savait plus comment tenir debout (223)	if her body no longer knew how to remain upright (231)
Dealing with loneliness	Là-dessus, elle n'a jamais lâché. S'habiller comme avant. Enfiler une jupe, un tailleur, se maquiller. Même si parfois elle n'avait plus la force (130)	She has never given up on her appearance. She dresses as she used to. Wears a skirt, a suit, puts on make-up. Even if sometimes she doesn't have the energy (131)
Final outcome	Elle n'a pas téléphoné [au médecin]. Au moment de composer le numéro qu'elle venait de trouver sur internet, il lui a semblé que cela n'avait aucun sens. Elle n'est pas malade. Elle est fatiguée. Comme des centaines de gens qu'elle croise tous les jours. [...] Elle n'aurait pas su lui dire. Dire simplement : je ne peux plus. Et fermer les yeux (56)	She didn't call [the doctor]. Just as she was on the point of calling the number she found on the Internet it seemed to her that it was pointless. She isn't ill. She's tired. Like hundreds of people she passes every day [...]. She wouldn't have known how to tell him. To say simply: I can't go on. And shut her eyes (50)

ii)Thibault

Context	ST (De Vigan 2009)	TT (Miller 2011)
Personal life. Lonely in past relationship	Il suffit de les regarder quand elle marche à côté de lui sans jamais l'effleurer ni le toucher, il suffit de les observer au restaurant ou à n'importe quelle terrasse de café, et cette distance qui les sépare [...] (18)	You'd only have to look at them when she walks beside him, never brushing against him or touching him. You'd only have to see them in a restaurant or on a café terrace, and that distance which separates them [...] (9)
Personal life. Sceptical about committing again	Recommencer. Encore. Est-ce que cela est possible? Est-ce que cela a un sens? (150)	Start over. Once again. Is it possible? Does it have any meaning? (152)
Professional life. Loneliness witnessed at work	Des hommes et des femmes qui parfois appellent un médecin, simplement pour voir quelqu'un. Entendre le son d'une voix. Parler	Men and women who sometimes call the doctor simply in order to see someone. To hear another human voice. To talk for a

	quelques minutes. Au fil des années, il a appris à reconnaître l'isolement (174)	few minutes. Over the years, he has learned to recognise the signs of isolation (178)
Society. Anonymous, impersonal nature of city life	Il regarde la ville, cette superposition de mouvements. Ce territoire infini d'intersections, où l'on ne se rencontre pas (128)	He watches the city, all these superimposed actions. This place of endless intersections where people never meet (129)
Mental health problems experienced	Il arrive un moment où le prix est devenu trop élevé. Dépasse les ressources. Où il faut sortir du jeu, accepter d'avoir perdu (234-5)	There comes a moment when the price becomes too high. Exceeds your resources. When you have to get out of the game, accept you've lost (243)
Dealing with loneliness	[...] il invitera ses amis de fac, ceux qui se sont installés à Paris mais qu'il ne voit jamais parce qu'il travaille trop. Il organisera une petite soirée chez lui [...]. Et peut-être pousseront-ils la table et les chaises pour danser dans le salon. Comme avant (201)	[...] he'll invite his university friends, the ones who've settled in Paris whom he never sees because he works too much. He'll organize a little get-together at home [...]. And maybe they'll push the furniture aside and dance in the living room. Like they used to (207)
Final outcome	Emporté par le flot dense et désordonné, il a pensé que la ville toujours imposerait sa cadence, son empressement et ses heures d'affluence, qu'elle continuerait d'ignorer ces millions de trajectoires solitaires, à l'intersection desquelles il n'y a rien, rien d'autre que le vide ou bien une étincelle, aussitôt dissipée (249)	Carried along by the dense, disorganised tide, he thought that the city would always impose its own rhythms, its haste, its rush hours, that it would always remain unaware of these millions of solitary journeys at whose points of intersection there is nothing. Nothing but a void, or else a spark that instantly goes out (257)

Delphine de Vigan's *Les heures souterraines* provides both a factual and a deeply personal and emotional insight into loneliness and the mental health problems in which this phenomenon can potentially result. As the above selection of ST-TT pairs demonstrates, thanks to his overwhelming close and very accurate translation, George Miller succeeds remarkably well at preserving the factual and stylistic content of De Vigan's work in his 2011 *Underground Time*.

This translated work could therefore certainly be both informative and comforting to Anglophone readers who are affected by the issues with which this work deals.

ⁱ De Vigan (2009: 128).

ⁱⁱ In his ‘Stephen Fry, Ian McKellen and Melvin Bragg share stories of how literature can help with mental health problems’, Gallagher (2016) explores how some famous people have turned to literature in moments of crisis. Lord Bragg, for instance, who grew up in the north of England in the 1950s and was unable to talk about his depression, found comfort in the poetry of William Wordsworth. Similarly, Stephen Fry, who famously suffers from Bipolar Personality Disorder (BPD), acknowledges the value of poetry and poetic form. Fry believes that the metrical stresses of poetry, in which the emphasis falls on certain syllables, can help people to cope with the mental and emotional stresses of modern life.

ⁱⁱⁱ The factual content of this section of the present article is informed by the following sources: De Vigan (2009: 3); <www.franceinter.fr/personne-delphine-de-vigan> [accessed 18 May 2018].

^{iv} Similar views are expressed by Kate Bolick (2015: 10; 71) and Helen Croydon (2014: 13; 16).

^v MIND: <www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-enjoying-living/loneliness/#W73F02hKjIU> [accessed 18 May 2018].

^{vi} As the wording of this sentence is virtually identical to that of a previously discussed phrase which describes Mathilde’s feelings (138), the reader becomes acutely aware of the similarity between the experiences of these two characters.

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Dr Claire ELLENDER
19, Peterhouse Close, Peterborough, PE3 6EN, England
Email: claireelle@yahoo.co.uk

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