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As told to J. Bennett, 3059 words.

Tags: History, Translation, Process.

On being invisible in your creative work

Historian and translator Aurélie Dekoninck discusses finding your subject, disinformation, and why translators are undervalued. **You describe yourself as an infernal archivist, which I quite like. Have you dealt with satanic texts—real or otherwise—prior to this project?**

Not so much prior to this project, not in terms of actual primary-source material, but I've been interested in history for as long as I can remember. I spent a lot of time in archives in various places around the world. And it's only through first hearing about this insane story of Léo Taxil that I became interested in his writing.

For readers who aren't familiar, could you give a brief overview of the Taxil Hoax?

There is no such thing as brief with the Taxil Hoax. The guy wrote 2,000 pages, which is absolutely mental. Léo Taxil was a French journalist in the late 1890s who decided that he wanted to fuck with the Vatican, mostly, and a little bit with the Freemasons as well. He came up with this insane hoax that he devoted 12 years of his life to, a web of intrigue and deception where he embodied different characters and had alternate identities that he would write as. All of this to convince the world, or at least the Vatican, that there was a group of Luciferian Freemasons on some of grand global satanic conspiracy to overthrow the good world order and bring about the birth of the antichrist.

And it worked!

He got believed, which is crazy, especially when you start reading what he actually wrote. And what I love about his story is that there're a lot of people who've pulled weird hoaxes in history, and sometimes—you never know—they were just nutjobs who believed what they wrote. I think what makes Taxil interesting is that from the beginning his plan was basically to get the Vatican to believe it, get the Vatican to back his lies—he met with the pope and so on—and then make them look like idiots. Then he did the ultimate mic drop, where he convened a conference at which he invited loads of journalists and basically strolled on stage and was like, "Ha-ha, I conned you all. Wasn't that fun?"

How were you first introduced to this story?

One of my friends was taking a class by a Swedish professor, Dr. Per Faxneld, in western esotericism, a kind of history of esoteric movements, and Faxneld mentioned the Taxil Hoax. My friend came back from lectures and was like, "I heard the craziest story and it's a French one, so you'll be interested." And I was.

This story really captivated French audiences at the time. Why do you think so many people—including the Vatican—fell for it?

Obviously, this was a different time. It was much harder to fact-check things before the internet. I also think Taxil sold a good story, and I think it's very interesting reading his hoax now in the light of all of the conspiracy theories, especially in the States, that are taking over, because we see the building blocks of how you get people to believe these outrageous things. And he does it very cleverly. There are all these little moments where he enables the reader to think that they're being cleverer than Dr. Bataille [the main pseudonym Taxil used in orchestrating the hoax], the man who's kind of running this investigation. And I think that's how you lure people in. It's sort of a little bit like a large-scale murder mystery or puzzle. You have people trying to figure it out.

He was also very clever at breaking down the wall between his fictional world and reality. One of the things he did that I think is just sheer brilliance is that he told his readers, "Do you want to know how you can find out if you are in the company of Luciferian Freemasons? I will tell you." He said, "The next time you are at your café or having dinner, take your glass of water or your glass of wine," and he described doing the horns to the sky, like you would at a metal concert. There's a picture of how you hold your glass with your fingers wrapped and the two fingers up. He said if there are any Luciferian Freemasons present, they will return the sign.

So, you can just imagine someone doing this because so many people were reading his work. They're sitting at their local café, and someone sees them and maybe does the sign back or just sees them, and suddenly it's, "Oh my god, this is true. I just saw someone do the horns to the sky." I think it's a little bit ahead of his time in a way. There're so many things today about immersive reality and how you turn readers or players into actors in the story in a way, and I think he was doing that before anyone else.

Had Taxil pulled anything like this before, but on a smaller scale?

Oh, yeah—so many things. The man was a journalist by profession, but a prankster by nature. There's a whole slew of hoaxes that he pulled, starting from when he was younger. He convinced everyone they were swimming with sharks in the Sea of Marseilles, to the point where the government got involved and was sending out search patrols. He moved to Geneva for a while and convinced people that there was an ancient city at the bottom of the lake. What's interesting—and it's happened throughout history—is whenever Taxil makes up a lie, there are always people who join on and think it's true. He was very convincing.

Over the 12 years of his Luciferian Freemasons hoax, he wrote several long articles under different names to back up his story. He was providing his own sources, essentially.

He mostly wrote pamphlets, sort of like the British penny dreadfuls. So, coming out every couple of weeks are little snippets of the story. It started with this alter ego, Dr. Bataille, the good Catholic doctor, who was a doctor on board of a merchant ship. He wrote Dr. Bataille's investigative reports over the years, and then he introduced different characters. Dr. Bataille at one point meets a reformed Luciferian temple mistress, and then Taxil obviously starts writing as her as well. So, there's all these cross-referenced texts, or sometimes Dr. Bataille will quote Taxil as well because Taxil had written a little bit about Luciferian Freemasonry to set the scene. It's hilarious because you'll have Dr. Bataille, who's really Taxil, talking about, "As the writer Léo Taxil said..." But then Bataille will say that Taxil didn't really go that far in exposing the truth about these sects. So, he's sort of dissing himself to give the story more credibility. There's a lot of little amusing things like this.

Taxil had been expelled from the Freemasons, and he was one of the founding members of the French Anti-Clerical League. So, he wanted to embarrass the Freemasons and the Church, but he also wanted to see what he could get away with, right?

Definitely. I think sometimes you see that, especially a little bit later on in the story where the things he's coming up with are so outrageous, you kind of have this feeling that he pushes credibility to amuse himself. But he was very against the Church. I read a quote from him where he talked about swearing eternal hatred to the Catholic Church at age 15. But we're all very dramatic at that age.

Taxil sat for an interview in 1906, a little less than a year before he died. In it, he claims he was sure that all his Luciferian Freemason pamphlets would be recognized for the jokes that they were. Do you buy that? Or do you think he knew people would fall for it?

I think a bit of both, probably. Because the level of outrageousness or the level of suspension of disbelief that is required from the reader does grow over the years. So, there is this sense that he's kind of pushing how far he can go, but I think he also knew that people would believe him—or at least that certain segments of society would.

He concluded, correctly, that there's no limit to human stupidity. And he had a proven track record for exploiting that. But this was his masterpiece.

Absolutely. I think a journalist called it, "The Hoax of the Century," which is pretty spot-on. He lied to his wife and his friends. He felt it was better if everyone thought he was a little mad. He faked his conversion to Catholicism to make his hoax more believable. He reneged all of his anti-clerical writing. When that happened, his friends at the Anti-Clerical League called a meeting and expelled him and branded him a traitor. These are the lengths he would go to. It boggles the mind a bit to be like, "I'm playing such a long con that it's okay that most of my friends are going to think I've betrayed them or lost my mind because... just you wait 12 years!"

How difficult was it for you to find an original copy of the original text, *Le Diable au XIXe Siècle*?

It took a few months of a dedicated searching. This was during the pandemic, so there was a lot of email back and forth and a lot of trying to find antique book dealers that might specialize and so on. In the end, I think I just lucked out because I don't think that the person I bought it from, the book dealer, knew what he had because the price was quite fair. Maybe it's that nobody else cares about this, but who knows? As a historian, you always want to have your hands on the real document so that you know you're not missing anything.

What were the challenges involved in translating French from the late 19th century?

French is quite verbose at the best of times. We like long sentences, but in the 1890s, they really took that to the next level. You'll have entire paragraphs that are just one sentence. This isn't really how English people write. For me, part of the interesting challenge with a historical text is that you want to modernize it enough that modern-day readers can understand the implication of certain things.

For example, when it comes to sexuality, which is something that Taxil used a lot to hook people in, he was able to convince these middle-aged men that they were being good Catholics by reading these reports about the bad Luciferian Freemasons. They could tell themselves that, anyway. But really, they're reading about half-dressed women who are cavorting in various temple rituals. There's a whole ritual about raising Lazarus, and it takes quite a literal interpretation of "raising."

What I love is that Taxil treads such a clever line where he'll talk about these rituals, hint at them, and then he will very quickly turn bashful. He's like, "But clearly I, as a doctor and a good Catholic, could never describe these outrageous things that are happening. I could not put them into words, they are so bad. But my reader who has the benefit of middle age and the experience of marriage, might guess at the things that are happening." And so on and so forth.

Why do you think this has never been translated into English before? It seems like there would be a big audience for this in the UK, and certainly in the States, given that one of the characters, the antipope, is an American.

Because clearly, most historians prefer very boring history. But I think the fact that it's a hoax means that it has to appeal to a certain kind of person because maybe some historians or translators would think, "Well, it's a hoax. What's the value of it?" But yeah, I'm not sure. I'm not sure because I think it's fascinating.

And what's so interesting from a historical perspective, why I think the fact that it's a hoax doesn't mean it doesn't have historical worth, is because a lot of the rituals that Taxil invented and described have been used as inspiration. A professor I was talking to was telling me that the Church of Satan, the Anton LaVey offshoot of satanism, actually has rituals inspired by Taxil's rituals—even though Taxil came out publicly to say, "This is all hogwash."

It's the same thing with the idea of Luciferian Freemasons. Taxil is the one who really embedded that cliché, which survives to this day. It feels like it's only grown since, and I'm not sure if he could have predicted that.

Apparently, the Satanic Panic that happened in the '80s here in the States took inspiration from the Taxil hoax as well, even though it had been debunked nearly a century earlier by its own author. But I think that's part of why this project is so relevant today. It shows that we really haven't learned much in terms of critical thinking and discerning disinformation.

I think that's so spot-on. In Taxil's day, it would've been very hard for people to fact-check anything. And in a way, it's also hard for people to fact-check things today, but for a different reason. We went from no information to too much information. Unless people have learned critical thinking and they know how to tell a bad source from a good source, who knows what they're going to find on the internet?

I think a lot of what Taxil pokes the church about is spreading this lie of Christianity and getting people to believe ridiculous things. His angle is very much, "The things I've gotten them to believe are nothing compared to the resurrection of Christ and water into wine."

But if you want to understand conspiracy, if you want to understand how people get tricked into believing outrageous things, read Taxil. Because if you read it through the lens of knowing it's a hoax, which obviously people at the time didn't do, it's so clear the various tricks he uses. I had moments when I was reading this and I was like, "This is brilliant. This man is a genius." I think half the reason I started translating it is so that I'd be able to share it with other people so we could talk about it.

On the Kickstarter page for this project, you mention that translators are often undervalued in the crucial process of bringing a text from one language to another. Tell me a little bit more about that.

This has been a kind of hot-potato issue in translator communities: Standing up for our craft. Recently, the British Museum took the work of a translator who translates Chinese history and used it in an exhibition without crediting her. They ended up in a big Guardian article about it, and eventually they retracted her work completely. But I think that kind of goes to the core of it.

As translators, our names rarely appear on the cover, and we are a little bit invisible in a way. As I say on my page, the mark of the good translation is that you don't want to see the translator. We're there to bridge that gap between, in this case, Taxil and the reader. You're the road or you're the bridge, but you shouldn't be visible. It often means that we get paid terribly and our work isn't mentioned in reviews often.

But translation can change the way you see a text or the way you experience a text, and through it, history. Recently *The Odyssey* was translated by a woman for the first time (Emily Wilson), and it's so interesting to see the way she describes Helen of Troy. It's so different from the way men have described her. It's gone from "the face that launched a thousand ships" and male translators having Helen describe

herself as a “shameless whore” to something more like, “They made my face the cause that hounded them.”—which is very different. Kind of like, “They used my image to justify their querulous instincts.”

Wow, that puts the whole story into a different context.

Yes. Being a translator is a very interesting skill because I think it’s different to just being a writer. Obviously, writers invent worlds. Translation is more like a mix between art and the craft and a heck of a lot of research. But I prefer translating than I do to writing new things. I know some people might do, I don’t know, Sudoku, and that’s the same level of brain pleasure that I get out of translating—how a single word can change the meaning of the text completely.

Aurélié Dekoninck recommends:

The Magnus Archives podcast – I have jokingly referred to myself as an infernal archivist, helping Hell wrestle the narrative from Heaven by resuscitating forgotten archival sources with an amusing anticlerical or satanic bend. As such, placing *The Magnus Archives* in my top five list is a no-brainer. I have listened and re-listened to the story of Head Archivist Jonathan Sims and his descent down the supernatural rabbit hole. *The Magnus Protocol* series is due to start this autumn, giving readers enough time to listen to all of *The Magnus Archives* episodes first.

The Odyssey, translated by Emily Wilson – Wilson was the first woman to translate *The Odyssey*, and her work is a testament to the power of translation to make us see a piece of literature through entirely new eyes.

The Love Songs of W.E.B. Du Bois, a novel by Honorée Fanonne Jeffers – This novel took my breath away. It’s a love song to the strength of women (especially Black American women), the power of education, and the complex work of history. I couldn’t put it down.

The Historian, a novel by Elizabeth Kostova – Another love letter to history, this time weaved into a reimagining of the myth of Dracula. One of the best books I’ve read in the last decade.

A Shoggoth on the Roof, musical by the H. P. Lovecraft Historical Society – What’s not to love about clever tongue-in-cheek ways of giving classics of literature life in a different form?

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Vocation

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Fact

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