

The Forgotten Words: Translator's Preface

by Rachel Daniels

Fabien Vannereau bumps into a gypsy musician from his childhood who offers the writer the strange and mystical gift of seven words. A bewildered Fabien continues with his life and forgets all about this encounter until many years later. Now struggling with his career, he is in desperate need of some source of inspiration, and the words start coming back to him and offer him just that. He ends up at a mysterious masquerade meeting in the château of a countess, where he regains hope for his writing career. But there is more to this enchanting place than he thinks. He will soon discover both the truth about the Countess and the purpose of the musician's strange words.

Les mots oubliés (or in English, *The Forgotten Words*) is the 2009 fantasy short story by French author Xuan Vincent that details these bizarre occurrences in Fabien Vannereau's life. I was attracted to this tale by both its genre and its writer. Fantasy is a genre in which magical or supernatural elements drive the story and which draws inspiration from a tradition of mythology, legends, and fairy tales. Though this short story is classified as such, Vincent also expresses an interest in accounts of magical realism ("les récits du realism merveilleux" *Nouvelles de Xuan VINCENT*)¹, which is a genre in which the magical exists but is not primary to the plot. As Vincent herself puts it, magical realism is when "the marvelous bursts into reality" ("le merveilleux fait irruption dans le réel"). The influence of her interest in this genre on her short story can be seen in her characters' easy acceptance of the "other," or the magical. While these elements do drive the plot of Vincent's story (which is a feature of fantasy), her characters are

¹ *Nouvelles de Xuan VINCENT* is one of the blogs on which Vincent posted her short story (<http://xuanadoo35.over-blog.com/>). All following citations are from this website until otherwise noted.

not surprised by that which seems magical (which fits more into magical realism). Still, like many fantasy works, *Les mots oubliés* makes references to Greek and Roman mythology – mentioning Ariadne, Cerberus, and Diana – and invokes elements common in the *lai*, a medieval French genre closely related to fairy tales.

Additionally in this short story, Vincent alludes to a wide range of literature from several traditions. With characters dressed as Peter Pan, Tinker Bell, Columbina, Zorro, Count Dracula, D'Artagnan, and Mandrake the Magician, she makes reference to works from quite varying backgrounds. These first two characters come from Scottish writer J.M. Barrie's work (also of the fantasy genre), the famed 1904 play and 1911 novel of multiple names: *Peter Pan*, *The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up*, and/or *Peter and Wendy*. Columbina ("Colombine" in French) is a stock character in an Italian form of theatre known as the Commedia dell'Arte, which dates back to 1551 or perhaps even earlier. With Zorro, Vincent references the 1919 creation of American pulp writer Johnston McCulley (but Zorro himself lives in California during the Spanish rule). Dracula comes from the 1897 horror novel of the same name by Irish author Bram Stoker. D'Artagnan is the protagonist of French author Alexandre Dumas's 1844 novel *The Three Musketeers*. Mandrake, the character Vincent's protagonist chooses to disguise himself as, is from the American newspaper comic strip *Mandrake the Magician*, written by Lee Falk beginning in 1934. Thus, though Vincent herself writes in French, she evokes the literary traditions of many cultures, ranging from ancient Greece to renaissance Italy to twentieth century America.

In addition to these surface references, Vincent also directly quotes from the works of two French writers. First is what she cites as simply "an extract from a work" by author and poet

Christian Bobin (“extrait d’un ouvrage de Christian Bobin”²). This citation occurs when the château guard presents his riddle, asking, “Well! Can you tell me, what does he who does nothing do?” (“Soit ! Saurez-vous me dire ce que fait celui qui ne fait rien ?”). Second is the 1942 poem “Liberté”³ (“Liberty” or “Freedom” in English) by poet Paul Éluard, which is partially quoted by several characters near the story’s end. While there is an existing English translation by George Dillon⁴, I chose to translate these excerpts myself rather than use his words, though the language of the poem is rather straightforward and can only be interpreted so many ways. The poem turns out to be significant to Vincent’s story – its title being one of the seven words Fabien receives – and thus I found it important to represent it with my own translation in order to keep my style consistent, just as Vincent likely chose the poem in the first place because it complimented her own writing.

Though she has a unique and effective style, and though she is aware of the works of many famous authors, Vincent herself is not famed for her writing (yet). She has been crafting short stories since 1999, which she publishes on multiple blogs and online forums dedicated to such works, but she is not a well-known or recognized author. In addition to her online posts, she does have two published collections of her writing, *Mashiro et autres courtes nouvelles* and *La Féline et autres nouvelles*⁵. Just as her writing evokes the mystical, Vincent herself is somewhat of a mystery. Besides what she directly posts about herself online, there is not much public knowledge of her. Vincent is simply someone who loves to write and wants to share her ideas with whoever will read and enjoy them. As someone who also has a passion for writing and who

² Vincent’s use of these French writers’ works is announced by an asterisk (or two) where it occurs in the short story and a line stating where the quote is from at the very end of her text.

³ The original French poem can be found at <http://www.poetica.fr/poeme-279/liberte-paul-eluard/>.

⁴ Dillon’s translation: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse/67/1#!20584456/0>.

⁵ These collections are available at <http://www.lulu.com/shop/search.ep?contributorId=1030981>.

posts written work online without having yet received (or really sought) any real notice, I can identify with Vincent. Her stories are not widely popular in French, let alone known by speakers of other languages. Translating someone who has not been translated before opens his or her work up to a larger audience and creates the possibility for more recognition. This is something I hope to do for Vincent's short story, especially since it isn't yet well known. After contacting the author about my translation, I think she seems open to that possibility.

In translating *Lets mots oubliés*, I wanted to bring Vincent's ideas to life for an English-speaking audience with an interest in fantasy. To do so, certain elements of the text – such as the format, sentence structure, and some of the diction – had to be converted. I wanted the story to feel familiar to the reader in the sense that it looks and feels like stories the reader has encountered before. For this, I put my translation in the paragraph form English readers are used to, with indentations rather than line breaks, and reformatted the dialogue. While English texts indicate dialogue with quotation marks, paragraph indentations, and extensive dialogue tags, French treats this much differently: the start of speech is marked by a hyphen or dash (most but not all of the time), and dialogue tags, when present, are only separated from the dialogue itself by commas. Without reformatting or making any changes to the punctuation of the original, one section of dialogue from my translation would look like this:

– You see, it is not so difficult. I am happy to offer you these words. Do not forget them, they could be a great help for you one day. (clearing his voice) Naturally, if you dropped a few coins in old Zsikajo's bowl, I would be grateful, he added addressing the novelist with a big smile.

With this type of dialogue, it is oftentimes unclear which parts are being spoken and which parts are not, at least at first glance, because English speakers are not used to this. Using the traditional format of English dialogue and making some stylistic changes to the punctuation, I rewrote this section as:

“You see, it is not so difficult... I am happy to offer you these words. Do not forget them; they could be a great help for you one day.” The musician cleared his throat. “Naturally,” he added, addressing the novelist with a big smile, “if you dropped a few coins in old Zsikajo’s bowl, I would be grateful.”

I made these changes in order to remove a source of distraction – so in a sense I chose to domesticate Vincent’s original text with my translation.

Though Lawrence Venuti, in *The Translator’s Invisibility*, offers two ways to approach translation, the “domesticating method” and the “foreignizing method” (20), I don’t completely accept this binary. In my translation, I have made conscious choices that fall into both methods. Though I chose to adhere to certain “target-language cultural values” (20) by following what English speakers see as the ‘correct’ format for dialogue and a story as a whole, I made the decision to frequently remind the reader of the Frenchness of Vincent’s story – that it takes place in France and the characters are French. I did not alter the protagonist’s name or the location of his hometown. Rather than having characters address one another as “sir” or “ladies and gentleman,” I kept the French titles of “monsieur” and “mesdames and messieurs.” Fabien’s daughter calls him “Papa” rather than “Dad” or “Daddy.” The piece of furniture he writes at is called an “escritoire” (“écritoire” in French) rather than simply a “writing desk.” I also chose to keep “château” over translating this word to “castle,” in order to consistently affirm that it is a residence for nobility in France rather than elsewhere. With these decisions, I’m not sure if I am “sending the reader abroad” (20), as Venuti puts it, but I would like to think the reader at least has France in mind while reading my translation.

While the aforementioned choices were straightforward enough (often a one-or-the-other decision – *sir* or *monsieur*, *castle* or *château*, etc.), knowing what to do with the diction at other times was not as easy. Like any language, French has its peculiarities that don’t always translate well. For example, there were certain expressions I came across that do not have an exact or even

a very close equivalent in English. One notable expression is “emportée par un mal fulgurant,” which I’ve translated as “taken suddenly by a swift and severe illness.” The word “fulgurant” in French suggests stormy, thundery, lightning, dazzling, flashing, or searing, and the verb “emporter” can mean “to carry away” or “to blow away” (WordReference). So in the original text, this expression conjures up storm imagery while still conveying the actual meaning of death by disease. Though there are ways to incorporate this idea of lightning and the like, I found that the meaning was more clear when concise, which meant avoiding the improvisation of adding another clause to the sentence and thus excluding this imagery.

Throughout the translation, I was faced with choosing (what I saw as) the best synonym for a particular meaning. There are undoubtedly many moments in which another translator would choose differently, but none of us – not even the original author herself – can reach Walter Benjamin’s idea of “pure language,” of “the intention underlying [the] language” (*The Task of the Translator*, 18). Vincent’s word choice, my word choice, and that of another translator (whatever the target-language may be) cannot perfectly express the idea Vincent had in her head when creating the story, but rather all of our choices work together to contribute to this idea, to convey portions of the meaning. Thus, whether I say Fabien “emerged in the square,” “appeared in the square,” or “entered the square,” the reader has almost the same image in mind. It is the particular connotations conveyed that were at my discretion, which is something every translator must deal with, and so some creative freedom was necessary.

A particular choice I made that could be seen as something that temporarily takes the reader out of the text is my inclusion of footnoted explanations. During the initial and even intermediary stages of the translation process, I was unintentionally following another of Benjamin’s ideas, albeit one that was meant to be thought-provoking rather than true. That art

involves man but that “none of its works is concerned with his response” (15) – i.e., one should not be thinking of any particular intended audience when creating art – seems like a radical suggestion, but it is useful to consider in practice. As Benjamin boldly declares, “No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener” (15), and applying this to myself, my translation was not intended for any reader – at least not initially. During the translation process, I had to write and edit in a way that sounded good to *me*; I, the translator, was the sole audience at this time and was not consciously thinking of others’ responses. In adding footnotes to explain certain concepts, however, I began considering my potential readers. Most English speakers do not know where or what Perche is (a location in the story), even if I do, and some have probably never come across the word “escritoire” (I certainly hadn’t before searching for the best English equivalent for “écritoire”). Even though I myself am familiar with much of mythology, I found it important to offer brief explanations for these references since they are meaningful to the text.

Providing these footnotes was a literary choice rather than one relevant only to translation. In newer editions of classic novels, there are often footnotes explaining intertextual and cultural references in order to help the reader more fully understand the story. This is what I have tried to do with *Les mots oubliés*. Xuan Vincent made many beautiful and well-thought-out choices in her original short story, and I wanted to make sure the reader of my translation notices them. Overall, my goal is that my reader enjoys experiencing Vincent’s story as much as I enjoyed translating it, though the process certainly wasn’t simple.

When I initially set out to translate *Les mots oubliés*, I had a very strict plan for how I thought I was going to do it. As I actually began translating, however, I quickly realized the process was going to be much more complicated and a lot less straightforward than I had

imagined. Thus I have come to see translating as similar to taking a road trip: even if you don't follow the most direct route on the map precisely, you will still reach your intended destination eventually – and you'll have much more to show for your trip if you take a few detours along the way.

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