

### **Translator's Note:**

#### **The Voynich Manuscript through an Intersemiotic Approach**

A translation by Angelica Garel

*The Voynich Manuscript* is known as the world's most mysterious manuscript.

Academics have been trying to decode this manuscript filled with an unknown language for many years, yet what scholars often question is, if this manuscript is really a hoax, or an alien language not familiar to society. The emphasis is on the extensive research done on this manuscript to determine whether or not it is a hoax or whether it achieves a level of complexities unknown to us. Being the world's most mysterious manuscript, it will be highly unlikely that it will be decoded by myself as there have been many intellects who have done so or rather, have tried to do so, in the past. With that taken into consideration, the methodology that I will utilize in regards to translating this work of history, precisely, the untranslatable, will involve a close and detailed analysis of specific parts of the manuscript in order to try and conclude whether or not this manuscript is legitimate or not. The close analysis of the six categories within the manuscript helps decode the unknown to determine how my art piece is created and why. In regards to the analysis of *the Voynich Manuscript*, a sense-for-sense approach to translation helps aid in the deconstruction, since I am not able to translate this piece through a word-for-word process, as there is a linguistic untranslatability problem present. As I try to translate the untranslatable by using what is familiar within the illustrations, I link this to the unknown text by filling in the incomprehensible parts of the unknown language with the information I do have from the illustrations. I do so by comparing each of the sections of the manuscript to health and the body in a modernistic view, as I believe this theme all links together. By incorporating Fitzgerald's method of translation into my own, archaizing this manuscript is where "the SL text is perceived as the rough clay from which the TL product is moulded" (Bassnett, 75). It can also be looked upon as "an adaptation" (ibid, 75) as this is my take on a manuscript that still has yet to be decoded.

The emphasis on background history has helped me to detect whether or not this is a hoax, and since it is untranslatable I use this to my advantage with the illustrations of the text to show how I piece together the unfamiliar with the familiar. Complexities begin with the author of *the Voynich Manuscript*. Supposedly written by Roger Bacon in the early 15<sup>th</sup> Century

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(approx. A.D. 1214-1292) *the Voynich Manuscript* was written as “a diary of novel scientific researches that were unacceptable to the Church.” (D’Imperio, 6) This idea of the mysterious manuscript has been going on for many years as academics such as D’Imperio tried to decode the meaning behind this alien language. Ironically, other texts indicate that there is no proof of authorship of this manuscript, which makes it entirely questionable whether or not it is a hoax. “It is written in cipher, and the author is unknown” (Williams, 305) Whether or not it is true that Bacon is the author, D’Imperio’s analysis of Baconian intellects indicate that the manuscript was written for Bacon’s student, John M. Manly, where Manly then states that it is Bacon’s writing (D’Imperio, 6). Yet other scholars state within D’Imperio’s text believe that the manuscript was written after Bacon’s years. The question that comes to mind is that if people knew who the author was of this manuscript, would it not be easier to decode it with information and background on the author. Some brief background information on Roger Bacon states that he had been an English philosopher who is well known for his work, *The Opus Majus*. The comparison of the similar texts to *the Voynich Manuscript* helps show how the translation can be partially decoded. Therefore I use my own interpretation of what I have from history research to help guide me with my translation. Written in Latin, there are “seven parts to *The Opus Majus* that involve human ignorance, philosophy and theology, language (including Greek, Hebrew and Arabic), math, optics, science and moral philosophy” (Bridges, 343-385). Ironically, Bacon’s past illustrations and writings look quite similar to *the Voynich Manuscript*, making it quite believable that he is the author.

In relation to the Voynich Manuscript, there is a more modern book called the *Codex Seraphinianus*, which is written by a Surrealist Italian artist, Luigi Serafini in 1981. Three hundred and sixty pages involve notions of an unknown world and Serafini had planned for it to be completely meaningless, with illustrations involving surrealism. “It contains 111 words of any recognizable language- English and a few words of French nonsense”(Bud) This comparison can be linked to my translation as I approach the Voynich Manuscript through a modernist view, as Serafini’s *Codex* seems quite appropriately relevant, as it looks as if he had done the same. “The second mode is that of appropriation through substitution and reproduction, where the translator absorbs the sense of a foreign work but reproduces it in his own terms.” (Bassnett, 66) With this taken into consideration, it will be evident to see how my translation of this manuscript incorporates the uniqueness of the original manuscript, by creating a modern form of it.

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Rugg's take on *the Voynich Manuscript* is that he goes into further detail about the origins and theories for the manuscript. He states,

“It is implausible that a scholar several centuries ago could have devised a cryptographic system so good that has resisted the best modern cryptographers for almost a century, when no other early coding system has taken modern researchers more than a few days to crack. It is unlikely that the manuscript is a plaintext in an unidentified language, since the manuscript contains linguistic features unlike those in any known human language” (Rugg, 33)

Rugg explains how the manuscript is a hoax due to the linguistic dissimilarities compared to languages today. D'Ipmerio states that "It appears to be gibberish to many serious-minded academics, who are apt to scoff at the idea that its solution would be of any value to science or learning. " (D'Imperio, 5).

Since there are academics who believe this manuscript is a hoax due to the complexities of an unknown language yet to be decoded, focusing more closely to details of the characteristics in the manuscript seem to be consistent within the texts researched. “All the translations reflect the individual translators’ readings, interpretations and selection of criteria determined by the concept of the function both of the translation and of the original text.” (Bassnett, 102) With this taken into consideration, I approach this manuscript intersemiotically by using a sense-for-sense approach since the text cannot be translatable. Because it is untranslatable, I fill these empty gaps of the unknown language with my own by incorporating information I do have with the illustrations. By taking what is familiar to me, I use the information I have and understand to my advantage. This will help me translate the untranslatable, which can be compared to an unfamiliar language, as one would normally use that which is familiar to them.

In relation to this, *The Voynich Manuscript* is approximately six by nine inches and contains no more than two hundred and fifty pages. Out of these pages, two hundred and twelve contain text and illustrations, thirty three only contain text and there are a couple of pages that are missing. “The Voynich alphabet contains twenty-three letters, and like most languages, letter groups are words.” (Williams, 305) The European Voynich Alphabet, also known as EVA was created to help decode certain letters and characters, as Gabriel Landini and Rene Zandbergen felt this was necessary. The characters of the text are still unknown. However, there have been many references to symbols and characters being similar to other languages such as “Arabic

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numerals, the Roman alphabet, Italian medieval codes and also shapes from the Middle Ages.” (Landini, 277) With the research done, it seems more evident that the Voynich characters are closely related to Latin letters, as “single Latin letters may be represented by single Voynich symbols” (D’Imperio, 30).

Rugg also discusses the idea of the language, known as Voynichese, where the language is very repetitive. It seems to be a legitimate language, where “The line forms a distinct unit: some characters tend to occur only at the start or at the end of the line. Words towards the end of the line tend to be shorter.” (Rugg, 34) Other characteristics such as “labels or subheadings seem to be apparent throughout the manuscript, as there are detached words that follow illustrations.” (Landini, 277) Punctuation also does not exist within the manuscript, which can be compared to other forms of writing, such as the Maya Script, and early Sanskrit. Looking at the manuscript’s illustrations, it focuses on a simple colour palette involving faded colours of green, yellow, brown, blue and red, and it is divided into a few categories. These specific categories are the main focus of my translation, as each art piece symbolizes the characteristics of the individual categories.

The first section- herbal, seems to be one of the main focuses throughout the manuscript. It involves mostly drawings of unidentified and bizarre plants as there are many illustrations that involve trees, branches, leaves, etc. Some of these plants are also attached to other objects, which make the drawings seem less realistic. If we compare these two illustrations, it almost looks like a herbal book or a book on botany. The large illustrations take up most of the page, with a small paragraph of text. Similar to my translation of this particular section, I incorporate a close study of what I believe to be a lily pad. I write down my notes as to where I “found” it, as if I were studying this plant like a botanist. The next illustration is of an unknown flower, one that I also came across. Similar to the Voynich Manuscript, the text beside the original looks as if it is describing the plant, otherwise if the text was not related to the illustration, there would be no complete link at all. In my translation, I link the drawing of the flower, present here, to flowers I am familiar with, and write down the description of how it may help cure illnesses. The last illustration I translated almost looks like the Venus fly trapper, therefore I wrote a brief description describing what it is. As I use a sense-for-sense approach to this, I also take on a modernistic point of view, from what I can see from the illustrations.

The second section is the astronomical section contains illustrations of symbols that

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represent the sun and stars. This section also touches upon the notion of zodiac signs, relating to horoscopes. Since there is no text available in these illustrations, I decided to keep it similar to the original as well. These illustrations of the sun show how the sun and stars play an important role in this health and body manuscript translation. Horoscopes also play a large role in this manuscript, as there are illustrations of a fish, representing the horoscope Pisces, a woman representing Virgo, a scale representing Libra, a ram representing Taurus and two people representing Gemini. I wanted to keep to the original without the text, as it gave I gave it a more modernistic view of the manuscript, by sticking to the original but elaborating and emphasizing the astronomy.

The third section is the biological section is also quite a large part of the manuscript, where there are drawings of naked bodies, which seem to be representations of women rather than men. This section I emphasized on the role of women and fertility as there were only illustrations of naked women present in the entire manuscript. My point of view on this is that this represents reproduction and as these naked women are situated in greenery, this represents the nature and role of women within the manuscript.

The fourth section is the cosmological section, with circles, stars and celestial spheres, which also include other shapes such as circles and ovals. This section, as you can see, covers 6 connected pages, where it opens up almost like a map. Most of these shapes are rounded and there does not seem to be any illustrations with sharp edges or shapes representing squares. I believe these rounded shapes can be linked to fertility as it reminds me of ovulation and a fertilized egg. My translation of this emphasizes the role of the stars and circular objects, representing the earth. During this time of the manuscript, many people were not aware of the earth or space, therefore with my translation of this, my illustrations are imitations of the originals, and similar to the astronomical section, there is no text. I decided to stick to no text as this is also a representation of space, and emptiness. The lack of text on these pages show how the illustrations leave you to your imagination, which is what most of *the Voynich Manuscript* did, as I use the sense-for-sense approach to this manuscript.

The fifth section is the pharmaceutical section, which contains illustrations of vases and parts of plants which include drawings of plants and greenery. Plants and the environment seem to be an exceptional noteworthy theme throughout this manuscript as it involves the notion of nature and medicine, which was significant during the time period that this manuscript had been

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written. Looking at the manuscript more specifically, there is an illustration of a large plant along the bottom half of a page, and above the drawing is a paragraph of text. These plants look like they are being prepared for medicinal use. Therefore my translation is a representation of medicinal use and how herbs can help heal the body more efficiently, rather than modern day medicine. This can be linked to the last section, which is the recipe section.

The last section, which is the recipe section contains many paragraphs that are preceded by a star. (Landini, 275- 276). This illustration looks like a recipe, where the author describes a herbal cure and then draws what is needed. In the illustration it looks almost like a recipe for a herbal medicine cure. Since they did not have antibiotics or other modern forms of medicine during those times, people used natural ways of curing sicknesses. In my translation, I look at this illustration with a modern eye, with the cans portraying Campbell's soup, and illustrations of herbs around the side showing how natural remedies can help you cure a stomach ache better than anything else. The second illustration represent bullet points of stars, also relating to the astronomy and cosmological section, where it emphasizes the recipes. I believe that this is the last section as it sums up all of the sections together, taking influences of the astronomy, with herbal references in the recipe that help the biological system. This is my view on the entire manuscript, as it cannot be decoded through text, it is translated through a sense-for-sense approach using the illustrations that I have linked and pieced together.

These areas go into detail and seem to have a common reappearance throughout the manuscript giving it a more realistic touch as it involves areas related to health and the body. With the characteristics I stated earlier, my project overall will consist of a flowing argument of how these illustrations link to one another in reference to health and the body. These specific details in each of the illustrations are used within my translation of the manuscript, since the language is unidentifiable; these illustrations help me link together what is unknown.

With the comparisons between *The Opus Majus* and *The Voynich Manuscript*, it is quite evident that Bacon seems to be significantly linked to the manuscript. The illustrations that correspond with the unknown language seem to be quite complex and detailed, with two hundred and fifty pages filled with similar content, making the manuscript appear to be more genuine. Therefore with the information presented above, my hope is that this will aid in a "translation piece" where The Voynich Manuscript's background and history help shape the overall look and content of the art piece. It appears that maybe after studying Bacon's style of writing in depth

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and culminating all the other conclusions of the various intellects is the only way to try to come to some sort of conclusion or various common conclusions enabling us to decode the manuscript. Translating in this case involves observation and decoding of the unknown language, and due to the complexities of this manuscript and the history behind the characteristics and each section, this analysis transforms it into an art piece that describes the process of decoding the unknown, and the research that is required in order to achieve a full understanding of how the art piece is transformed and why it was created the way it is.

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