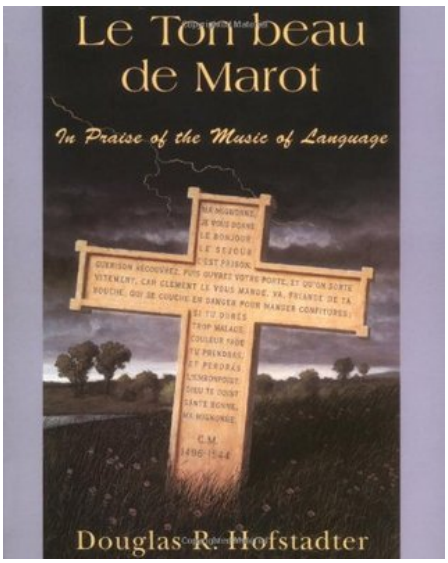

Le Ton beau de Marot: In Praise of the Music of Language

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Lost in an art—the art of translation. Thus, in an elegant anagram (translation = lost in an art), Pulitzer Prize-winning author and pioneering cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter hints at what led him to pen a deep personal homage to the witty sixteenth-century French poet Clément Marot."

Le ton beau de Marot" literally means "The sweet tone of Marot", but to a French ear it suggests "Le tombeau de Marot"—that is, "The tomb of Marot". That double entendre foreshadows the linguistic exuberance of this book, which was sparked a decade ago when Hofstadter, under the spell of an exquisite French miniature by Marot, got hooked on the challenge of recreating both its sweet message and its tight rhymes in English—jumping through two tough hoops at once. In the next few years, he not only did many of his own translations of Marot's poem, but also enlisted friends, students, colleagues, family, noted poets, and translators—even three state-of-the-art translation programs!—to try their hand at this subtle challenge.

The rich harvest is represented here by 88 wildly diverse variations on Marot's little theme. Yet this barely scratches the surface of *Le Ton beau de Marot,* for small groups of these poems alternate with chapters that run all over the map of language and thought.

Not merely a set of translations of one poem, *Le Ton beau de Marot* is an autobiographical essay, a love letter to the French language, a series of musings on life, loss, and death, a sweet bouquet of stirring poetry—but most of all, it celebrates the limitless creativity fired by a passion for the music of words.

Dozens of literary themes and creations are woven into the picture, including Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* , Dante's *Inferno,* Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* , Villon's *Ballades,* Nabokov's essays, Georges Perec's *La Disparition,* Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate,* Horace's odes, and more.

Rife with stunning form-content interplay, crammed with creative linguistic experiments yet always crystal-clear, this book is meant not only for lovers of literature, but also for people who wish to be brought into contact with current ideas about how creativity works, and who wish to see how today's computational models of language and thought stack up next to the human mind.

Le Ton beau de Marot is a sparkling, personal, and poetic exploration aimed at both the literary and the scientific world, and is sure to provoke great excitement and heated controversy among poets and translators, critics and writers, and those involved in the study of creativity and its elusive wellsprings.

Le Ton beau de Marot: In Praise of the Music of Language Details

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From Reader Review Le Ton beau de Marot: In Praise of the Music of Language for online ebook

Scott says

Le ton beau
de Marot —
Quite a read.
You won’t speed
Through this book.
Take a look,
Word lovers.
‘Tween its covers,
Poems, songs,
Thoughts thereon,
Make it full.
Beautiful-
ly typeset.
Author gets
How frames blend
As words wend
Through the brain.
Can’t explain
Why it’s great
But to state
Professeur
Hofstadter’s
Writing’s good.
So I would
Recommend,
(To friends, lend)
Le ton beau
de Marot.

W.C. says

I really can't say anything about this book that hasn't already been said. This is the more organic and human sequel to GEB, much denser and more complex, takes forever to read, and is deeply moving and personal in a way the whimsy of GEB never gets. A book for GEB lovers to read when they get out of college.

David says

Another one of my all-time favorite books, this is by the author of "Godel, Escher, Bach". Impossible to categorize accurately, it's a kind of extended riff on the difficulties and challenges of translation, carried out

with a kind of beguiling enthusiasm. It shares the playfulness that characterized "Godel, Escher, Bach" but I found it more accessible and more interesting.

Starting with a single unifying thread that winds through the entire book (various* translations of a single 28-line poem by the French author Clement Marot, Hofstadter weaves a fascinating tapestry about the challenges facing a translator. There is a whole chapter dedicated to translations of Eugene Onegin; another discusses various efforts at translating Dante. Along the way there are fun digressions about such challenges as translating lipograms (text written with the constraint that one or more letters of the alphabet are never used), the paradoxical usefulness of writing under constraints of various kinds, be they artificial as in lipogrammatic writing, or metrical constraints, as in Pushkin, Dante, or the sonnets of Shakespeare, difficulties in writing translation software, linguistic issues such as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis**, how one would translate a 'dirty' joke to a clean version, while preserving the humor.

*: I haven't counted, but there must be at least 50 different translations. Oddly enough, the accumulation of so many is not boring, but fascinating - Hofstadter's boyish enthusiasm helps to charm.
**: (very) roughly, the linguistic notion that how we think is constrained by language. Dismissed by Steven Pinker in his book "The Language Instinct", though I think Pinker's case is less than convincing.

A fascinating tour-de-force, it is also the kind of book one can dip in to from time to time and be entertained by any one of its chapters.

Sean says

I loved Godel Escher Bach, and a couple of Hofstadter's other books too, but this one, no. His playfulness with words works wonderfully in the context of explaining mathematical concepts, but in explaining poetry and translation, his playfulness has all the depth of a computer scientist making puns. Which is what this is.

There are smart observations here and there. That's the good part. But this book is huge. It could be cut down by a third and still be redundant. Worse still is what a pompous ass Hofstadter comes across as. His "rules" for what makes poetry poetry are insane. When he talks about music you'll be pulling your hair out. He calls out other translators and authors for being opinioned jerks, then turns into an opinionated jerk, smug and self-righteous--when the topic is the art of translation.

In the same paragraph he'll talk about translation as a hugely subjective art, then trash a translater for not obeying the "correct" aspects of a poem. It's absurd. He should stick to what he knows: computer science, math, AI.

David Reiley says

This is one of my favorite books ever. How do you translate poetry? How do you respect constraints of rhyme and meter? Do you have to let the literal meaning slip? If so, how? What kinds of creativity are involved?

Lots of great examples of constraints producing artistic creativity, including poems (lipograms) where the authors don't let themselves use certain vowels and consonants. A very engaging and satisfying read.

Marjorie says

Perhaps I am too tired to give it its due.

Edward says

In which Hofstadter attempts to bottle lightning a second time. But where *Gödel, Escher, Bach* excelled in its loose and free-associative style, in its detailed probing of diverse disciplines, which become interrelated in surprising an interesting ways, *Le Ton Beau De Marot* feels like a deep dive into a comparatively shallow pool. Hofstadter bottoms-out fairly quickly, and spends a lot of time treading water, paddling aimlessly in great circles. The subject matter (or at least the author's treatment of it) does not justify this level of detail.

That's not to say that *Le Ton Beau De Marot* doesn't contain a host of fascinating insights into the wonders of language and translation – it absolutely does, and for these the book is worth reading. But it is heavily mired in the author's self-indulgences. The book is deeply autobiographical – frustratingly so. It is bogged down with endless personal anecdotes, many of which are only tangentially related to the subject at hand (If you open the book to just about any random page, you will find it heavily peppered with the pronoun "I"). Frankly, most of these vignettes are not particularly interesting, and make the author seem self-absorbed. It's unfortunate, but what primarily came across to me in this book was not a love of language, but a writer in love with the sound of his own words and thoughts.

Hillary says

Perfect for total compulsives, among whom I number myself when it comes to language. One of my favorite details of this book is when Hofstadter admits that he rewrote pages over and over again so that they would end in a happy place physically--that is, not only no widows or orphans (a huge no-no from my stance), but many pages end with the end of a sentence. It's also witty, light, insightful about translation from many different views of that task, a little bit sad, personal but not stupid, well-designed, and smart. Plus, if you don't have the urge to do your own translation (or a couple) after finishing it, you have a dead soul. The late Hugh Kenner contributes one of my favorites, which includes an awesome visual pun on Rx.

Isis says

(addition 5/12/2010)

I would mark this book six stars, if I could. This was my third (or fourth? Or fifth?) trip through, and I still think it's amazing, brilliant, quirky and fun. Basically, it asks: What should stay constant across translation of a work? Translation is normally thought of as to do with plot, mood, connotations of individual words – but what about rhyming, scansion, lipogrammatic constraints? Is transculturation a thing to avoid, or to work toward? If your various constraints conflict, how do you pick which to follow?

You can dip into it at any random point and find lots and lots of fascinating tidbits about words, history, authors, AI, how humor works, musical analogy, analogous musings, stylistic analysis of writing, and so on. You'll want to play along, too – as I did for this discussion! (Hint: it's in "Anglo-Saxon.")

(Previous review)

This is one of my favorite books ever, and as I just recommended it to someone I thought I'd put it here as well. Hofstadter's examination of translation and transformation taught me that the best translation is not necessarily the most literal one, nor even the one that captures the most exact meaning, and that transformation of text is indeed a creative activity. (Heh - I read this before I even *heard* of fanfiction!) There are a lot of thoughtful ideas in here about how humans use language - how stories and poems are bigger than just the words in them, how meaning is only one dimension of text. Perhaps it's not as groundbreaking as his "Goedel, Escher, Bach," but it's more approachable for non-computer-science types, I think, and I like it better.

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greg says

Douglas Hofstadter wrote a full length (and then some!) book related to the topic of poetry translation: Le Ton Beau De Marot: In praise of the music of Language. I am only about half way through this long volume, but over and over run across observations or declarations that I find fascinating. This is a volume that is nearly as massive in its conception as Goedel, Escher Bach, written much later in his life, incorporating more mature and collectively honed ideas about language, formal media, translation, the hopelessness of machine translation, and grief, all built around a 500 year-old piece of short French verse and dozens of diverse translations. Knowing French better than I would be a bonus. He quotes and comments on verse written in a language distinguished from English by completely avoiding the vowel "e" (which he calls Anglo-Saxon), or a language differing from Italian by excluding all the words that contain consonants other than L and T. (in which a short version of "Lolita" has been written in verse). Can you translate such a poem into or out of such a language? Is the "meaning" dependent on the form? How lame would a Google translation be, oblivious to the formal elements of the original language? Some people will find it tedious, but I think you will find delightful passages often enough to carry you through the slow bits. I am finding it so.

Have you ever come across this odd poem?
Read it and see if you can figure out what makes it
seem a bit awkward, besides its irregular meter:

Washington Crossing the Delaware

A hard, howling, tossing water scene.
Strong tide was washing hero clean.
"How cold!" Weather stings as in anger.
O Silent night shows war ace danger!

The cold waters swashing on in rage.
Redcoats warn slow his hint engage.
When star general's action wish'd "Go!"

He saw his ragged continentals row.

Ah, he stands - sailor crew went going.
And so this general watches rowing.
He hastens - winter again grows cold.
A wet crew gain Hessian stronghold.

George can't lose war with's hands in;
He's astern - so go alight, crew, and win!

David Shulman, 1936

This poem was is one of the ones quoted in this Hofstadter book, and it's one that would be hard to imagine translating faithfully into another language, since in addition to whatever the content is or appears to be, and the standard sonnet rhyme scheme, you might have noticed that each line is an anagram of the poem's title. Remarkable.

Proceeding slowly through the book, I've read through an annoying patch with a particularly hearty and personal attack on Nabokov, in part accusing him of hearty and personal attacks on his critics regarding poetry translation. And a boring chapter or two of repetitive and less than inspired digressions, but then I find some treasures later on. Ah, well. The work of a brilliant and successful academic, proud and accomplished enough to rebuff the stern editor this book so badly needed. He even remarks that once one has established a reputation as a fine writer, one can often get away with publishing drivel later, although I'm not sure he intended that to be self-
referential.

James Swenson says

Some fascinating insights on the difficulty of translation, along with examples showing that apparently untranslatable texts often aren't. "Borges thinks you should try a little harder." (p. 539)

Hofstadter interleaves a variety of surprising sample texts with reflections on his life with his recently deceased wife and with extended attacks on the work of John Searle and Vladimir Nabokov.

Hofstadter says interesting things, many of them several times each. When you have won the Pulitzer Prize for general non-fiction, it is probably harder to find an editor who can advise you to shorten your new book by 75-100 pages, but it would have been worth the trouble in this case. I was charmed by the poem "A une Damoyselle malade" by Clément Marot -- the translation of which inspires the present book -- when I first saw it, but now I don't want to see it again for at least five years.

[Edit:] By the way, you can see the poem in French, and judge how hard it might be to translate, here.

Jessica says

I kind of can't wait to clasp my grubby hands on this book.

Bruce says

Count me among those who regard Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid as a masterpiece. Le Ton beau, however, is Hofstadter gone overboard. Wow, does the man need an editor. This book is so exasperating: occasional drips of insight interspersed with ramblings, ephemera, and juvenile verse, all in the name of exploring as many aspects of language translation problems as may have occurred to the author during an artificially prolonged compositional process.

That last is Hofstadter's armslength observation, not my assumption. The author begins his work with irrelevant poignancy by telling us that the recent death of his beloved wife was what prompted this writing. It's an oddment of shared intimacy, as the book can scarcely be considered an homage to her her interests or accomplishments. If anything, the matter-of-fact dedication leaves the impression that Hofstadter used this book as an excuse to escape, sublimate, or suppress his grief for as long as possible.

So he talks in his prologue about holing himself up in a bungalow for more than a year, alienating himself from the company of others to endlessly rewrite and reorganize chapters and sections as new ideas occur to him. Far less than impress, it conjures the tragic image of a man in denial essentially orphaning his school-age children at what must have been their moment of greatest emotional vulnerability. It's a confession that casts a pall over the casual tone of the book as a whole, not to mention its sprawl. Your father has gone bye-bye, kids, you'll just have to salvage whatever you can find to eat in the fridge.

To make matters worse, the work's substance is not nearly worthy of its backstory. Ton Beau's foundational intellectual conceit is the challenge of properly translating poetry and exploring what if anything properly means in this context. So Hofstadter dissects Clement Marot's poetic bon-bon *Ma Mignonne* (reproduced in full on the book's cover), taking it through multiple variations -- some by others, but most by himself -- to demonstrate the ultimate futility of any exercise to generate a perfect reproduction of any poem in another language... Hofstadter defines the perfect translation as an identical copy of the rhyme, meter, syntax, quanta of syllables, assonance, consonance, and semantic substance, with neither addition nor subtraction.

Of course, any change is tautologically incommensurate with identity; you don't need to read all the examples to grasp this concept any more than you need to read his largely vacuous line-by-line annotations/explanations of what he thinks each translator has done well or poorly. About five well-chosen samples would have sufficed to get his point across, and a good editor might well have come in handy here. Unfortunately this author refuses to be edited, even going so far as to alert the reader with self-conscious pride that he insists on full control of his work, to the point of delivering untouchable, pre-typeset manuscripts including all selections of fonts, kerning, and font size.

As much an act of obsessive-compulsive behavior as hubris, Hofstadter nonetheless manages to marble a bit of thought-provoking meat in the midst of this mountain of fat. Among the ideas Hofstadter tosses out are:

- *On languages as independent structures* such that disparate languages even those from neighboring regions do not form a topologically-pure continuum (p. 345). "An expressive structure created in French will not just continuously transform like a piece of rubber being stretched or bent into the equivalent structure in German. Rather ... the fragments must be put back together in radically different ways... each one analogous to the choice of an item from a restaurant menu so huge that one can never scan all of it...." All translations

therefore require conscious choice and selection.

- *The challenge of translating language-dependent literature*, considering the futility of creating a word-for-word translation of a Stanislaw Lem story about a machine that destroys all things beginning with the letter 'n' including science (*na'uk* in Polish), there being no English word with the same meaning beginning with 'n' (p. 56).

- *The fact that connotations evolve over time*, considering the gender of hypothetical people referenced as "you guys" (pp. 20-23). Does a translator render a text in its original or current temporal context and to which context in the target language?

- *The problem of layered meanings*, an especially vexing issue for would-be translators of poetry (pp. 81-82). What to do with puns, grammatical errors, syntactical ambiguities, and other wordplay?

- *The meaning of meaning itself as something ineffable* "where even the tiniest epsilon... is not identical to zero" (p. 519). Here it's worth quoting Hofstadter at length to point up his hobbyhorses.

> [T]he quest to develop an artificially intelligent entity is a marvelous, mystical quest, in which we are brought face to face with the deepest enigmas concerning our own nature. What is language? What is music? What are concepts? What are words? What is thinking? What is insight? How does analogy work? What is memory? How do we learn? How do we forget? How are mistakes linked to invention? What is perception? What is consciousness? What is creativity? What is artistic beauty? How do we mirror other minds inside our own? What are empathy and compassion? How does a soul come out of inanimate matter? What is a self? What does the word "I" represent?

Hofstadter poses these questions to defend the validity of exploring and developing AI in the context of a critique of a philosopher's thought experiment without once considering the applications of information theory that have made such explorations possible. The author touches upon the reductio ad absurdam of chatbots and thesaurus-powered mechanical translators, but never thinks to mention the works and successfully applied theories of Claude Shannon or Ed Thorp.

John Searle is the philosopher whose writings Hofstadter goes to extraordinary lengths to vilify, and in doing so offers a neat takedown of the "Chinese Room" (a box in which a non-Chinese speaker manages to render perfect English translations simply by following detailed, written instructions). Whence the intelligence in this design? Of course it lies in the original authorship of the impeccable instructions and the ability to faithfully follow them, appreciating that doing so in a reasonable time actually requires impractically vast reference materials and the superhuman speed to navigate them. Okay, but why reproduce Searle's essay in "Anglo-Saxon" (for Hofstadter, this is English stripped of any word containing the letter "E") to make the argument? Sure, it's a neat stunt -- I loved Gilbert Adair's masterful translation of Georges Perec's La Disparition (see A Void) -- but it doesn't enhance his critique. Rather it presents one more example here of an otherwise brilliant thinker who has apparently lost his mind.

Tom says

I finally finished this book over the weekend. I've been reading it for years--it's that kind of book. And it was sitting on my bookshelf for quite a while until I picked it up again last year.
I told someone it was one of my favorite books of all time to read. I know that sounds awkward but what I

mean is that I like reading Douglas Hofstadter. He's a bit of a rambler but has such an interesting mind that I don't mind being taken hither and yon by him.
This book is essentially about translation and the ways that humans and computers use language. But the thing that makes the book more than just a treatise about the psychology of language is that Hofstadter's wife had died suddenly of a brain tumor just shortly before the book was published and the book as much a tribute to her as anything else.
Hofstadter is fascinated by patterns as evidenced in his most famous book "Godel, Escher and Bach." The present title takes a "simple" poem by an obscure 16th century French author Clement Marot and shows how translation works (or doesn't).
If you love language and have an open mind and take your time with this book it will reward you with a wonderfully pleasurable experience.

Sebastian says

I bought it inspired by Godel Escher Bach, but although it has lots of interesting
elements, I find it quite exhausting. Maybe that's because the playfulness I appreciated in the mathematical domain in GEB in this book, applied to the linguistic and literary domain, turns into pointless speculation. At least for me.
(And the typography is a crime. Note: never, ever let authors design their books!)
