



Le Ton Beau De Marot: In Praise Of The Music Of Language

By Douglas R. Hofstadter

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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 *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.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

In the fall of 1537, a child was confined to bed for some time. The French poet Clément Marot wrote her a get-well poem, 28 lines long, each line a scant three syllables. In the mid-1980s, the outrageously gifted Douglas R. Hofstadter--*il miglior fabbro* of *Godel, Escher, Bach*--first attempted to translate this "sweet, old, small elegant French poem into English." He was later to challenge friends, relations, and colleagues to do the same. The results were exceptional, and are now contained in *Le Ton Beau De Marot*, a sunny exploration of scholarly and linguistic play and love's infinity. Less sunny, however, is the tragedy that hangs over Hofstadter's book, the sudden death of his wife, Carol, from a brain tumor. (Her translation is among the book's finest.)

Marot's poem, in Hofstadter's initial translation (he is to compose many more), begins: "My sweet, / I bid you / A good day; / The stay / Is prison. / Health / Recover, / Then open / Your door ... "--a slim frame on which to hang 600 or so pages of text. But the book is far more than a compendium of translators' triumphs (with the occasional misstep). Most of the renderings are original and lively, some lovely, though Hofstadter often feels compelled to improve them. He lightly laments that Bill Cavnar's rendering, "though superb along so many dimensions at once, still seems to lack a bit of that intangible verbal sparkle that I associate with the deepest Maroticity."

Hofstadter's talents lie in linking his intoxication, erudition, and vision with humor, autobiography, and free association. His book takes on "rigidists," asks questions like, "Is plagiarism potentially creative?" and strives to define linguistic soul. Along the way, it accords the same level of respect to the seemingly trivial: sex jokes, Texas jokes, *The Seven Year Itch*, and the puzzle of how someone you love can hate a food that you adore. Throughout there is pun, ingenuity, and above all, love for language--which can compress distance and, through constraint, lead to freedom.

From Publishers Weekly

Clement Marot (1496-1544) may have been a great French poet, but "A une Da-moysselle malade" is not his best effort. Essentially it's a get-well greeting: sorry that you're sick, but try to eat something and get some fresh air. The ditty serves as a springboard for Hofstadter's thoughts about language, translation, culture and human genius as the author, his friends, translators, scholars and even computer programs contribute to numbing permutations of this one weak lyric. Hofstadter, a professor of artificial intelligence at Indiana University, had bestsellers with the 1980 Pulitzer Prize-winning *Godel, Escher, Bach* and a collection of essays reprinted from *Scientific American*, called *Metamagical Themas*. Here he is on shakier ground. Hofstadter is not a poet but doesn't hesitate to lay out his opinions: for example, all rhyming translations of "Eugene Onegin" are "excellent" and "fine," but he trashes Vladimir Nabokov's monumental and helpful literal version; he also calls *Lolita* "pedophilic pornography." And while there are moments of wit, intelligence and uncommon curiosity, there is also a diffuse structure and inflated?and sometimes hokey?prose: "In SimTown, many other things can happen including houses being set on fire and goldfish flopping out of their bowls. (I'm leaving off the quotes merely as a shorthand?I know they aren't real goldfish!)." His cheery gee-whizzery often rings false, and there's probably a good reason for the hollow sound?in 1993, his wife died of a rare disease, which probably also explains his choice of the verse. This book pays tribute to her, while illustrating the powers and limitations of speech. \$60,000 ad/promo. Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc.

From Library Journal

Using a small but stylistically potent work by 16th-century French poet Clement Marot as a compass, Hofstadter (Godel, Escher, Bach, LJ 10/1/79) takes us on the sea of issues related to the act and product of translating. The reader encounters questions, such as what is translation? How does the translator cross cultures? Who can judge the validity of the translated product? When is a translation more than repackaging one vocabulary with another? Where does the reader/listener comprehend that there is an original behind the translation? He succeeds in demonstrating his subtitle as a heady metaphor of literal truth: translation is a constant human condition because "words do not have fixed imagery; context is everything." Combining autobiography, scholarly insights on artificial intelligence and a variety of human languages, a contagious sense of play, and incisive writing, Hofstadter's work deserves attention from scholars and alert layreaders. Highly recommended for academic and public library collections. ?Francisca Goldsmith, Berkeley P.L., Cal. Copyright 1997 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Mark Feaster:

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Luz Davis:

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