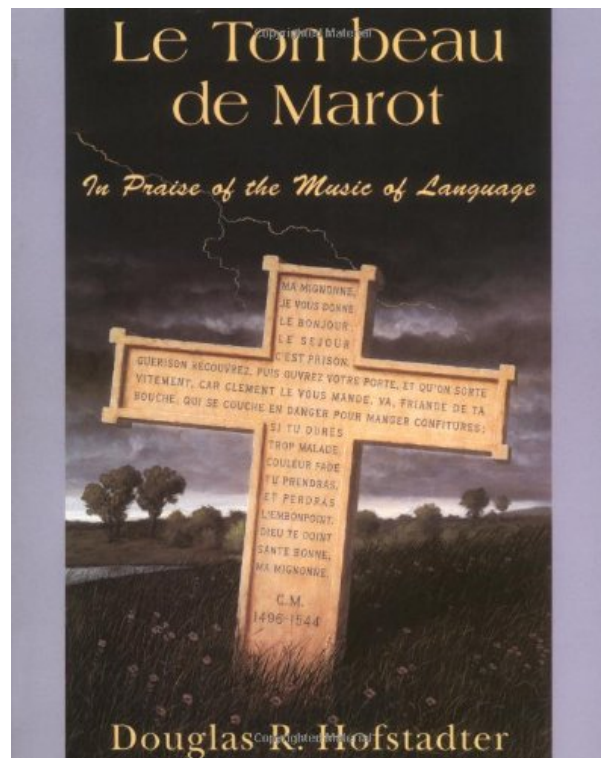
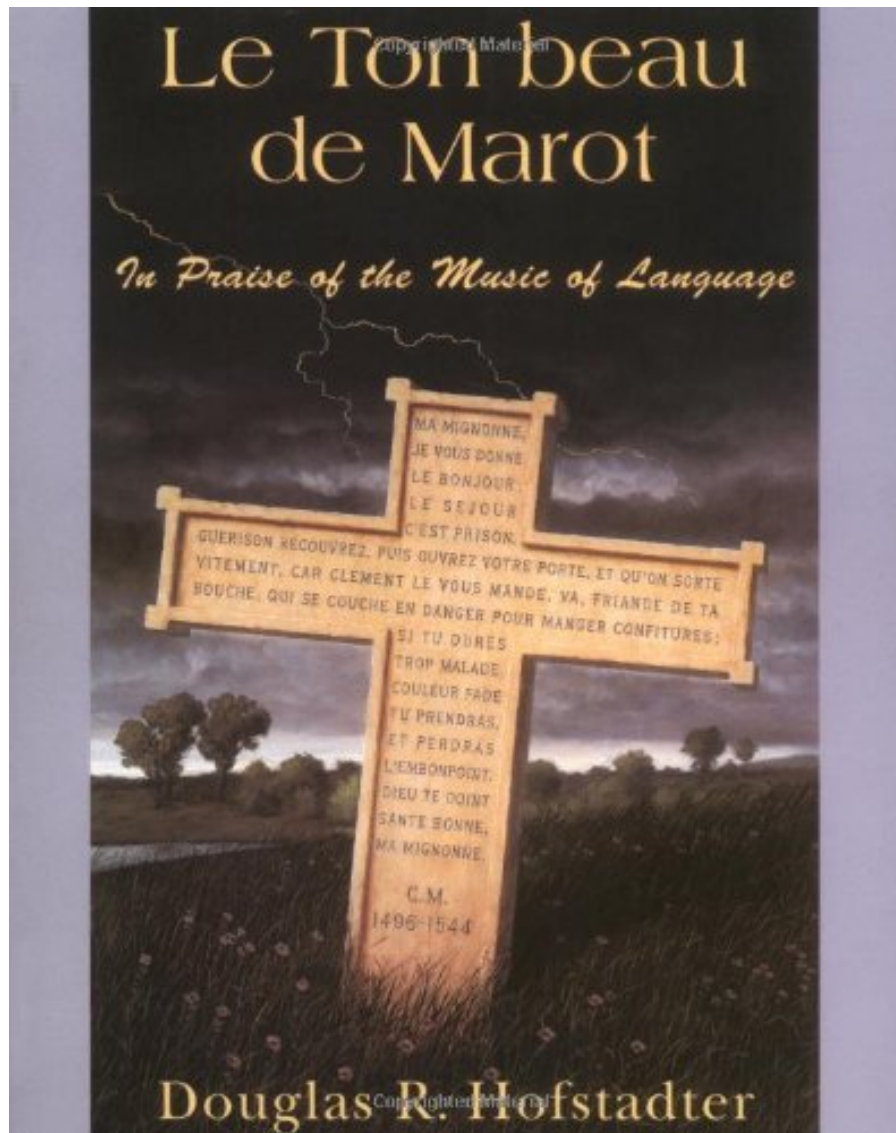


LE TON BEAU DE MAROT: IN PRAISE OF THE MUSIC OF LANGUAGE BY DOUGLAS R. HOFSTADTER



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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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Most helpful customer reviews

57 of 59 people found the following review helpful.

The French for GEB is *Le Ton Beau de Marot*.

By A Customer

Some people say it's not as good as GEB - but it really is. It's just different. Both of these two books - Hofstadter's best, along with *Metamagical Themas* - are controlled by some single vision, some idea that somehow managed to spark seven hundred or so pages of ideas.

GEB was more complex. The ideas were harder. *Le Ton Beau de Marot* is, at its core, a book about translation. The book was inspired by the author's attempts to translate a short (28 trisyllabic lines) poem by an obscure French Renaissance poet named Clement Marot. (You'll probably have the poem memorized by the end of the book, at least if you know French - and if you don't, it's conveniently included on a detachable bookmark on the inside back cover.) Hofstadter, after tackling this challenge himself, sent out a letter (reprinted in the book) to many friends challenging them to translate it as well, including a list of some formal constraints on the poem that he wanted to point out and two fairly literal glosses of the poem for the non-francophones in his circle. The book's structure (like all of DRH's other books) is one of alternation - small groups of translations of the poem, which originally were meant to constitute the whole book but now make up a sort of sideshow and can be skipped without detracting from the understanding of the book, alternate with chapters on various issues of translation. The poems don't play the role that you might expect, a role roughly analogous to that of the dialogues in GEB. In GEB, the dialogues were meant to introduce some point that would be developed in the chapter. Here, they're not.

Most of the book consists of discussions of some of the dilemmas of literary translation, with examples drawn from various literary works. Among Hofstadter's favorite examples is Alexander Pushkin's quintessential Russian novel in verse, *Eugene Onegin*. EO is written in several hundred "Onegin stanzas", essentially modified sonnets, but some translators don't do a great job of keeping this form. Hofstadter didn't know Russian at the time, but he exhibits various translations and shows their merits and flaws, and does a quite good job, at least to my inexperienced eye. (He has since learned Russian, and did his own translation of *Eugene Onegin*, which is currently for sale.)

Poetic translation, of course, is the soul of this book, and Hofstadter subscribes to the school of translation believing that the medium and the message are equally important. He thus spends a chapter talking about Dante's *Divine Comedy*. One of the important things about the *Divine Comedy* is that it is written in a form known as *terza rima* - three line stanzas, rhyming ABA, BCB, CDC, DED, and so on - which contributes greatly to the interest of the poem. Many translators ignore this, for reasons of "scholarly purity" or something equally pompous - but Hofstadter convinces us that that can't be done.

Again, dealing with the issue of form, I note the large number of constraints that Hofstadter placed on himself in the writing of this book. He claims to have spent an inordinate amount of time worrying about the typesetting and such things; thus, none of the poems within chapters, for example, are broken across page boundaries. (There are literally hundreds of poetic examples - so don't say that this is just a coincidence.)

Hofstadter also seems to like lipogrammatic writing (that is, writing without a certain letter, usually the letter "e"), and even translated Searle's Chinese Room anecdote into "Anglo-Saxon" (that is, "e"-less English). This raises an interesting question - why is it that translating from, say, English to French is totally acceptable, while translating from British English to American English (or vice versa) is sacrilege?

In conclusion, an excellent look at the issues involved in translation. Of course, this being Hofstadter, there is some talk about AI and machine translation - but that isn't the core of the book. Much more literary than you might expect - but Hofstadter is polymathic enough that that's not a problem. Don't let the size put you off - it will go quickly. Maybe too quickly - but don't all the best?

167 of 188 people found the following review helpful.

In Disparagement of the Monotony of Language

By A Customer

Dearest Doug,
Please don't bug
Us with rhyme
One more time.
Reading through
Sev'nty-two
Poems built on
"Ma Mignonne"
Is real tough.
Nuff's enough!
And no line
For Will Quine
When you ask
If the task
To create
A translate
Can be done?
It's no fun,
Also rude,
To conclude
Douglas Hof-
stadter's off
Of his game.
All the same,
We can see
G-E-B
This is not.
Thanks a lot!

46 of 52 people found the following review helpful.

an idiosyncratic book, sometimes clever, but flawed

By Theodore M. Alper

Hofstadter is a very clever guy, with an ear for wordplay and some interesting things to say about the concept of translation. But he could use an editor and he has a number of blind spots as a thinker and as a literary judge.

Much of what is most intriguing about the book is its strong individuality. H. knows what he wants to say, he knows how he wants to say it, he has intensely precise ideas of how the book should look. For example, it matters painfully to him that the pages come out just so, with just the right number of lines so that every word comes out on the right place on its page. He takes this to extremes -- when he can't get permission to quote from *Catcher in the Rye*, he is forced to improvise a passage of EXACTLY the same length in order to keep everything perfect.

Incidentally, it's sort of surprising, given his feelings about the importance of all these details of presentation, that he can't understand Nabokov's insistence that translators, by paraphrasing and padding lines, inevitably alter dramatically the effects of the originals. H. would find his own book unacceptably altered if a linebreak was wrong, but he refuses to accept that someone might find something essential lacking when Pushkin's stanzas are rendered into English approximations.

I'll confess to being somewhat biased in favor of Nabokov -- and I can't help but wonder if Hofstadter has ever read *Pale Fire*.

[in several places, H. plays upon the titles of Nabokov's works, but not in a way that gives any sense that he

has read anything other than his essays on translation and his literal translation of Eugene Onegin] Anyway, back to *this* book -- it's a very personal book in content, too, the details of Hofstadter's life intertwine with the poem, all the translations, and the commentaries. At times, it's quite moving -- the illness of H.'s wife and his sense of loss come through almost everywhere, even when he seems to be discussing something completely unrelated; even the most playful parts of the book seem to have a slightly sad twinge. On the other hand, many of his reminiscences of his college days, or clever things someone came up with at a dinner party in Italy [something like that, I don't remember all the details any more] don't work for me. And I really don't like the way H. so often dismisses those he disagrees with in pretty, well, dismissive terms. If H. doesn't understand a psychologist, it's because he's speaking psychobabble or pseudo-intellectual fakery (maybe he is, of course; but I need more than H.'s word to believe it); if a modern poet tries to translate Dante without rhyme, or with only 37 stanzas in a canto instead of 45, H. is stunned and contemptuous. (Incidentally, it often seems to me that some of the mechanical details of a poem matter more to H. than the language and imagery it contains.)

And, of course, he hits poor, dead Nabokov so hard you might think that he wasn't actually one of the greatest novelists of the 20th century as well as someone deeply aware of the issues of literary creativity in multiple languages and the problems of literary translation. To H., it's not enough that N. be wrong, he must be "jealous", full of "bitter bluster", and, finally, "pathetic".

I don't mean all this to be as negative as it sounds -- there *is* a lot to like in this book, and I'm very glad I read it. The series of translations of the Marot poem are charming and varied, though only a few of them sustain anything like the tone of the original (as I dimly sense it) throughout.

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