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# Review of: Le ton beau de Marot: In praise of the music of language, by Douglas R. Hofstadter

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# Book Review

## Le Ton Beau de Marot: In Praise of the Music of Language.

**By Douglas R. Hofstadter**
New York: Basic Books, 1997. Pp. 632. Paper $29.95. ISBN 0465086454.

**Reviewed by Milton Watt**
SIM International

## Introduction

Busy translators may not have much time to read in the area of literary translation, but there are some valuable books in that field that can help us in the task of Bible translation. One such book is *Le Ton Beau de Marot* by Douglas Hofstadter. This book will allow you to look at translation from a fresh perspective by way of various models, using terms or categories you may not have thought of, or realized. Some specific translation techniques will challenge you to think through how you translate, such as intentionally creating a non-natural sounding text at times to give it the flavor of the original text. This book is particularly pertinent for those who are translating poetry and wrestling with the occasional tension between form and meaning.

The author of *Le Ton Beau de Marot*, Douglas Hofstadter, is most known for his 1979 Pulitzer prize-winning book *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (1979) that propelled him to legendary status in the mathematical/computer intellectual community. Hofstadter is a professor of Cognitive Science and Computer Science at Indiana University in Bloomington and is the director of the Center for Research on Concepts and Cognition, where he studies the mechanisms of analogy and creativity.

Hofstadter was drawn to write *Le Ton Beau de Marot* because of his knowledge of many languages, his fascination with the complexities of translation, and his experiences of having had his book *Gödel, Escher, Bach* translated. Although he translates many poems and other texts in this book, translation is not his area of expertise.

*Le Ton Beau de Marot* is a rhyming title that is a play on words. It means "The Beautiful Sound of Marot." But it also sounds like "Le Tombeau de Marot," which means "The Tomb of Marot" with an implied meaning of "A Memorial for Marot." (There is a picture of a tombstone on the book's front cover.)

Clément Marot is considered by some scholars to be the greatest French poet of the 16th century and was the official poet of the French Court for a time. In 1537 Marot wrote a brief poem called "A une Damoiselle Malade" ("To a Sick Damsel") that Hofstadter prefers to call "Ma Mignonne" (which means "My Dear Little Girl") because these are the two words that start the poem. It is a poem addressed to a bedridden little girl. The structure of the poem is fascinating as it is composed of 28 lines with 14 rhyming couplets (AA, BB, CC, etc.) where each line contains three syllables and the main stress falls on the third syllable of each line. Here is the start of the poem: "Ma mignonne, / Je vous donne / Le bonjour / Le sejour / C'est prison / …" which translates tri-syllabically and literally as: "My cute one, / I bid you / A good day; / The living / Is prison / ...."

Hofstadter provides 89 different translations of the poem into English (and a few other languages) in his book. He presents a multitude of variations and possibilities for translating it. He discusses various aspects of the translation process from literal to free translations, levels of language, style, borrowed words, and aiming toward the source culture or the target culture. The poem is a kind of skeletal structure of the book or its overarching theme, but he sometimes goes off on long, tangential discussions, and the discussions are not always directly related to translation principles, but sometimes reflect his own personal interests.

But overall, the author discusses a range of issues pertinent to translation. The discussion will be broken down into the following four categories:

- Description of Translation

- Role of the Translator
- Process of Translation
- Result of Translation

## Description of Translation

Hofstadter uses various analogies to describe the nature of translation. Each model or analogy emphasizes various truths of the translation task and can help the translator to reflect further on the complex task of translation.

### Translation as Analogy-Making

Translation is seen as "the faithful transport of some abstract pattern from one medium to another medium—in other words, analogy" (p. 45). Another way of saying this is that if you state something in one language within a certain culture, you want to find an analogous way to say it in another language and culture.

We generally cannot say something exactly the same way from one language to another, but try to find the closest approximation or analogy. When we translate phrase A of one language into phrase B of another language, we often presume that phrase A = phrase B. But the reality is that phrase A ~ phrase B. All translators know this, but do not always act that way.

### Translation as Frame-Blending

Hofstadter develops a term he calls a "frame blend." He defines it as a "mental mixing of two situations, whether purely in one's mind or expressed via language" (p. 325). He created this term based on the term "mental spaces" used by French cognitive linguist Gilles Fauconnier. The idea of a "space" is the same as the idea of a "frame" as used by Hofstadter. The ideas of "frame-blending" and "mental spaces" have extensive overlap so I have combined them together in this discussion, just using the term "frame-blending." He explains (p. 117):

> In the act of translation, there are always two "frames"—the culture of origin, and that of destination—that inevitably get blended in countless ways as the ideas are transplanted from one soil to the other. Some ideas transplant easily, others put up a fight, occasionally ferocious, and some simply will not go at all, no matter how hard they are shoved. Out of a myriad [of] stunningly diverse and utterly unrelated cross-cultural matches, quasi-matches, semi-matches, pseudo-matches and mismatches, few if any of which were ever pre-dreamt-of by the original author, emerges the unpredictable shape and feel of a translation into another land, tongue, culture and time.

This image can be helpful for Bible translators dealing with difficult texts, such as poetic texts. It is a picturesque way of describing the struggle to find just the right way of saying something as you transfer a difficult text from one culture to another. It can be a time-consuming battle and wrenching process as translators weigh one translation principle against another and decide what to do. This analogy underscores the tensions of finding just the right way to say something in the target culture and language. Sometimes we do not realize this tension until we sit back and reflect on it. As Bible translators we also know how difficult it is to express some ideas from the biblical culture into a target language, so Hofstadter's image is quite powerful and has a ring of truth experientially. But much of the difficulty is determining how far to bend or blend, and when it is appropriate.

### Translation is a Transfer between Two Linguistic Media

Hofstadter sees translation as something signficantly more specific than a transfer of a text from one language to another:

> A translator's most basic choice is of course that of language…, but an equally important set of choices is the combination of constraints voluntarily donned for the duration. A constraint need not be hard-and-fast and black-and-white, like… trisyllabicity—it can be as vague and hard to pin down as

> "romantic in tone" or "sprinkled with subtle allusions to Greek mythology"—but it is nonetheless constantly exerting pressure and making itself felt. Often the constraints constituting the medium selected are not decided upon explicitly or consciously; they simply lurk in the back of the translator's mind, unformulated in verbalized terms. Even so, they are no less real for their tacitness. (p. 192)

He goes on to say (p. 193) that the choice of a specific medium—or perhaps a more accurate term might be 'register'—represents "the most delicious degree of freedom open to a translator, and is what makes translation so open-ended and full of unlimited potential for creativity." In the book, Hofstadter dons many different caps as he and others try to express the *Ma Mignonne* poem through various linguistic media: Elizabethan English, rap, street language, and American country twang, to name a few. Hofstadter receives a lashing from many reviewers of his book for his wild translations that seem to not be in the spirit of the original. Because of the constraints placed on some of the target media such as monosyllabicity, there is a distortion of the original poem. So I prefer to regard the poems that are changing the meaning of the original poem (by adding, deleting, or significantly changing) as adaptations or paraphrases of the original poem and not actual translations. Hofstadter raises this question in the book as to "how far one can go" before it is no longer a translation, but he does not set clear parameters.

Another issue that needs to be carefully examined is transculturation. Some of the poems radically transplant the poem out of the original 16th century French context into another culture or context. For example, the rap poem is one such radical transfer where the first line for *Ma Mignonne* or "my dear little girl" becomes "Yo there dog!" and there is basketball imagery later in the poem: "For the hoop, whoop joy / Say this rapper boy." If the *Ma Mignonne* poem had been written in the inner city context, perhaps it *could* find its equivalent in this rap poem, but it is such a radical transfer that it can only be labeled as a transculturation or a cultural adaptation.

A third issue that needs to be scrutinized is historicity. In one poem the sick damoiselle whom Marot called "Ma Mignonne" becomes "gentle cow" and the entire poem becomes a heart-warming plea for the cow to get better. So a little girl in the original poem becomes an animal in the "translation." This changes a historical fact of the poem, and is no longer a translation but an adaptation or reformulation of the basic idea of the original poem. Hofstadter clearly questions whether such attempts are legitimate translations, but does not answer the question or wrestle with ways to distinguish a translation from a non-translation.

A final factor to consider is the original author's intent, attitude or style. This requires interpretation of the meaning and an exegesis of the original text (hermeneutical issues). A good translation takes these things into account. For example, one of the *Ma Mignonne* translations uses the Elizabethan English media which can be justified as antiquating the English to approximate the antiquity of the 16th century French poem. Such antiquating is not necessary, but adds to the style or feel of the poem.

This principle is another way of stating a long-standing principle in translation: Who is your audience? Great care, obviously, must be made when determining your audience, or put in the terms above, choosing your linguistic media. A biblical translation example of a transculturation is the Cotton Patch Version, in which historical data is changed. Dynamic translations can stray into historicity problems and risk many kinds of distortion as the message is oriented toward the target culture, but literal translations equally can risk many kinds of distortion as the message is oriented toward the source culture.

### Translation as a Game: A Creative Challenge

The following quote underscores the author's fascination with the creative process. His motive is his own enjoyment. He at least admits this premise whereas most of us would try to hide it, but we may be inwardly motivated in exactly the same way much of the time.

> When I tackle a translating challenge, it is not in the least because I yearn to reveal to the poor deprived non-speakers of language X the hidden structure and meaning of some intricate passage in language X—no, for me, translating is simply the sheer joy of trying to do something deeply paradoxical: namely, to carry off in medium 2, radically different than medium 1, some virtuoso stunt that someone else once carried off from medium 1. That's all, no more. It's just a game, and exercise in creativity, a challenge that, if met with sufficient flair, provides a wonderful esthetic reward.

> Sadly, guiltily, but truthfully, I confess I'm not someone who makes translations as gifts…. I'm just a selfish translator, someone who translates solely and entirely because doing so is exhilarating and beautiful and because it brings me into intimate contact with a work and an author that I admire. (p. 366)

I appreciate the honesty of the author, and it shows his underlying motivation to understand the processes of human thought and explore the concept of creativity and analogies. But for me and others involved in Bible translation, it is not just a game or an intellectual exercise. It is an awesome responsibility.

## The Role of the Translator

### The Invisibility of the Literary Translator: A Servant's Role

Hofstadter describes and espouses a perspective that is common among literary translators, namely, a strong desire to give credit or glory to the author. So translators can be described as being servants to the author. Hofstadter compares the translator's role to that of a performer of a musical piece:

> From what I can tell from my readings, literary translators tend to be quite reverential toward their authors… [but] despite all the reverence for the original, a skilled literary translator makes a far larger number of changes, and far more significant changes, than any virtuoso performer of classical music would ever dare to make in playing the notes in the score of, say, a Beethoven piano sonata. In literary translation, it's totally humdrum stuff for new ideas to be interpolated, old ideas to be deleted, structures to be inverted, twisted around and on and on. (p. 365)

In music the performer is often given as much credit as the original composer, or more. Brilliant interpretations are highly esteemed. Often people go to see a great performer and the composer is of equal billing (or even less prominence). But this is unheard of in translation circles; the translator is an unseen force accomplishing a task as a servant. Hofstadter feels that the translator should be given more honor for a job well done, for an interpretation magnificently accomplished, for a splendid performance.

In my literary translation reading, literary translator authors have commonly used this image of a performer, or more specifically an actor on the stage (someone performing), sometimes talking about the putting on of a persona. Many of the "significant changes" mentioned by the author are referring to the translation of poetry. In Bible translation, too much deletion or changing of material would be frowned upon unless there was some solid reasons as to why this was done. However, it is my impression that the majority of those who want to use this image of a performer use it to justify a significant amount of re-creation of the text, whereas a minority also use that image or illustration but remain more balanced in their execution of the principle.

### A Skilled Translator Brings More Accuracy and Clarity

A skilled translator is like one who produces a fine quality picture. There are more dots per square inch (dpi) than by an unskilled translator whose work is grainy or less clear. The skilled translator reveals to us more clearly the intended image of the original author (pp. 180-181).

This image underlines the importance of continuing to gain skills in translation and to seek after and value translation personnel who have finely honed skills through some combination of natural giftedness and experience.

### The Necessity of Target Language Mastery for Poetic Translation

For translators to achieve the right effect for a poem, they must have a total mastery of the target language. Only those with total mastery of the target language can feel the subtle nuances necessary to translate the text in just the right way.

When dealing with poetic texts, this level (or at least "near-mother tongue level mastery") is important for Bible translators. It emphasizes the dependence on mother tongue speakers in the translation and checking process. It is also important to realize that the translation team should seek out contacts with people who

are particularly gifted in their language—who love, appreciate and can feel the poetic flow of their language.

### The Author-Translator Blur

Each word in the original text has a certain feel in its original context. Every word choice that the translator makes is in a sense a re-creation of the original text. Each little change could be footnoted as: "I have replaced the original author's phrase in Russian by this English phrase because this phrase gets across the feeling better than would a literal translation" (pp. 424-5). But such footnotes would be silly and repetitive and would result in a gradual transfer of ownership of the text. Therefore, it must be understood as a given that unforeseen nuances in the target language are created. Languages differ and have different cultural contexts where a word in one language is not exactly the same as in another language.

Another aspect of the author-translator blur is when the translator consistently makes choices that are relevant to the target culture. It then starts to sound like the event is not happening in the original context, but in the target culture. This phenomenon is particularly the case when you are dealing with a historical text deeply steeped within a particular culture.

The author gives an example from "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich" by Alexander Solzhenitsyn (p. 151). A certain translator translates the expression "From the first clang of the rail to the last clang of the rail" as "from reveille to lights out." One good natural expression is being translated by another. This is often a good translation technique. But in this case with the word "reveille" and "lights out" you tend to think of a bugle call or a military setting. This choice radically transfers you far from the Gulag setting in Siberia or gives a distorted view of that setting. Hence, Hofstadter recommends keeping a literal expression (like the "clang") for translating this phrase. He further recommends using borrowed words ("zeks" rather than "guys") to keep the flavor of the original historic context. This aspect of style is something worth thinking about in translation for culturally bound texts but this principle has been discussed in literary translation literature, especially by Translation Studies scholar Lawrence Venuti.

Some Bible translators accentuate the biblical culture too much and produce a strange text that is difficult to understand—often in the name of "literal faithfulness." Other Bible translators accentuate the target culture too much and produce a highly relevant text that has lost the historical or ancient flavor and sometimes accuracy of the biblical text—all in the name of "dynamic relevant communication." In some cases, Bible translators may want to choose more foreign-sounding key terms that retain a flavor of the original text (like the "first clang of the iron" example) rather that over-modernizing (or over-translating) the biblical text. At least, it is a concept worth considering.

### Translators are Like Painters, Not Cameras

This is an excellent image:

> A translator does to an original text something like what an impressionist painter—van Gogh, say—does to a landscape: there is an inevitable and cherished personal touch that makes the process totally different from photography. Translators are not like cameras—they are not even like cameras with filters! They distort their input so much that they are completely unique scramblers of the message—which does not mean that their scrambling is any less interesting or less valuable than the original "scene." (p. 388)

This image applies more specifically to translating poetry, but it still applies in a general sense to prose translation because it underscores strong differences in crossing from one culture to another and the inability to translate perfectly from one language to another. Of course, the larger the cultural distance the more distorted or strange the text can seem, and the more that comprehension of the text can be blocked; and thus the more impressionistic is the translation effort.

As translators we sometimes think that we are communicating the exact sense of the original text. But so often (for example, the prologue to the Gospel of John) it is a monumental task that can only be described as an impressionistic painting rather than an exact camera image. This is particularly the case in more poetic or difficult texts (often culture-bound texts). But we are approaching more of a camera image in

straightforward narratives with a minimal amount of imagery. So it seems better to talk about a continuum between an abstract painting and a photographic image.

## The Process of Translation

Hofstadter often describes how to do translation; that is, he gives details of the translation process. Consequently this section will be longer than the others. Many of his comments are reflections he has made after trying to translate the *Ma Mignonne* poem.

### The Complexity of Translation

Hofstadter speaks often about the complexity of translation. As he worked on the *Ma Mignonne* poems he realized "the genuine unpredictability of the creative process, and… [how] it illustrates the cognitive process of struggling to resolve the multiple pressures provided by various simultaneous, independent constraints" (p. 40a). Specific categories of complexity are as follows:

**Attitudes Toward the Text or Author.** Perception of the author's identity changes one's interpretation of a piece of text. Hofstadter gives an example of a poem that is hard to understand:

> As swerving swarms with mingled wings of silt
> And frothy fronds by pond up-floating logs
> Did balance where, when pick'd unto the hilt, …. (p. 408)

Then he asks how you would try to interpret the poem depending on whether you thought it was written by a great poet, computer program, two young kids, or a madman (and other choices). One's perception of the author's identity will influence one's attitude in interpreting each line (with care and diligence or with a light and dismissive attitude). Attitude toward the composition of the original text or interpretive decisions can influence how one handles the text.

**Multiple Creative Solutions.** To illustrate some of the complexities of translation, Hofstadter shows how many possible ways there are to translate a text. One example can be called "permutations of a theme." An author, Queneau, took a simple yet ambiguous scene and told it as a story in about 100 different ways—always keeping the basic theme. The variants of the story are with the following kinds of emphasis: conversational, legalistic, pompous, humble, and so on (pp. 224-232).

Translators are faced with multiple choices in every aspect of the text. This can be on the simple level of word choice or word order of different structural possibilities. If you start adding stylistic variations or tone and changes according to audience, the possibilities multiply. Translators can translate the same text in a multitude of ways depending on the target audience and the intended purpose of the translation.

**Non-Formulaic Nature of Translation.** One of the complications of translation is its non-formulaic nature. Although there are many principles of translation we can follow, we must learn when to apply which principle according to the situation and the target audience. Hofstadter explains (p. 378),

> It is my hope that the sample study just shown, seemingly going quite deep yet in truth revealing but the iceberg's tip, helps to make clear how non-formulaic and filled with fantasy the task of translation really is—how much mental exploration of various potential scenarios, word choices, rival syntactic structures, and so forth, goes into each little line.

**Untranslatability.** Hofstadter deals with a whole chapter on the "untranslatable" (Chapter 14). He first shows how some words that are labeled "untranslatable" are really not, but that there is a range of choices according to contexts. The Spanish word *macho* can be translated into English as "male," "he-man," "tough guy," "idiot," and "macho." So it is not really right to say that it is "untranslatable" but rather "hard to translate" or "translated differently in different contexts because of its multiple meanings in English." Similarly the German word *gehen* can be translated into English in a long list of ways besides the "general" meaning of "go."

He gives examples of things that are truly untranslatable like anagrams. For example, how would you translate the anagram "astronomers = moon starers" into French? The letters in "astronomers" have been rearranged to make "moon starers." You cannot preserve the rearranging of letters from French into French

because the rearrangement is a specific manipulation of an English language phenomenon. Of course, you could explain in a sentence what is happening in English, but you almost certainly cannot exactly translate the anagram-like quality of the equation.

Palindromes are equally extremely language-specific. For example, the simple palindrome, "Madam, I'm Adam," which reads the same going forwards and backwards, cannot be translated into French with the same effect even though Madam and Adam have the same spelling in French and English. It is the "I am"—"Je suis"—that is the difficulty. You could technically do "Madam, Adam!" in French, but the meaning is larger! In each case the intonation of the expression will affect the meaning of the phrase.

He goes into many other examples such as a book entitled "Let's Parler Franglais!" that combines French and English expressions. He also discusses lipograms (texts that omit one or more letters of the alphabet entirely), and even some cases where somewhat successful translations have been made of these lipograms.

In the end when you translate from one language to another there is something lost, yet hopefully much gained. This is particularly true in texts that have a literary device such as a certain rhythm, rhyme or image and where certain words being translated have deep cultural roots. In these cases the translator must get as close as possible to the meaning and make a choice as to which aspects of the original text cannot be reproduced in the translation.

Bible translation work is always an evolving process. New solutions to difficult problems continue to be found as one works on a translation project. Languages seem to have an infinite capacity for expressing ideas or creating ways to say them. This makes the work of translation so enjoyable and informative!

There are certain formulaic aspects to Bible translation; at least, routine ways of translating ideas and translators must be consistent in their handling of such regularities, especially when they are exact. But there are always new challenges, and sometimes a weighing of one Bible translation principle against another to determine the best translation for a given context.

## Useful Terms

**Rigidism.** Rigidism, a term coined by Hofstadter, is defined as "a philosophy of translation where 'the self-reference of an entity in Framework 1 does not translate into self-reference of a counterpart entity in Framework 2'" (p. 445). (The rigidist's reason for this is that "literal reference is sacrosanct.") A good example he gives is the phrase from a novel that says, "Don't they teach them the difference between "lay" and "lie" any more in school?" A strict rigidist that was translating this into French would have to say this in a roundabout way like: "Don't they teach them the difference between the English words "lay" and "lie" any more in school?" This would preserve the referents "lay" and "lie" in the original text (self-referenced to the English language). But it would be an exceedingly awkward translation (at least, for a novel) to translate in this way from English into French. Doesn't it make more sense to find a French equivalent—e.g., the difference between "donna" and "a donné" in French—and thus "simply convert it into a more general complaint about the quality of language education in high schools?" (p. 445). The overall issue is: in the act of translation, when can we use an equivalent expression for a self-reference in a text? Sometimes the self-referent may be important, but in other cases the overall communication is more important.

One area of application of "rigidism" for Bible translation is on the retention or changing of meaningful names in the biblical text. For example, for the Samson story in Judges 15:17 there is one place mentioned called *Ramath-lehi* (meaning "Jawbone Hill") and a second place mentioned in verse 19 called *En-hakkore* (meaning "Caller's Spring"). The King James Version (KJV) keeps only the Hebrew terms. The Revised Standard Version (RSV), New International Version (NIV), and Today's English Version (TEV) keep the Hebrew terms in the text and give a footnote for the meaning. A strict rigidist would only be satisfied with one of these two methods, because the literal reference to the place name must be preserved.

Non-rigidists would have more liberty with the text. In this same text, the Contemporary English Version (CEV) and the New Living Translation (NLT) put the meaning in the text and use footnotes for the Hebrew terms. Francais Courant (FC—French popular language) and Semeur (French—more like a New International Version in French) put both the Hebrew terms and their meaning in the text.

Some of these translations are more rigid than others with respect to keeping the literal form (transliteration) of the Hebrew place name. Who is right? The KJV gives no help to the reader or hearer. At least a footnote would help to understand the Hebrew word. The RSV, NIV, and TEV solution is fine for readers who are used to reading footnotes. The CEV and NLT are lively choices that aid the reader in not having to look down to the footnote for the meaning.

So this issue of rigidism is a vital concern for Bible translators and is a topic of vivid debate that must be resolved by thinking carefully about the audience of the translation, and thinking and testing the text from their perspective. But the translator's own philosophy of translation will guide in making these choices.

**"Frame of Accuracy" or "Unit of Fidelity."** These are two terms used by Walter Arndt to describe and defend his translation technique when translating the Pushkin's poem *Eugene Onegin* into English (p. 271). "Frame of accuracy" or "unit of fidelity" is "the largest allowable unit of form within which maximum fidelity must be achieved." This is a very useful term that will help in the translation of poetry. It will be examined further below under the category "literal versus free tension."

"Frame of accuracy" or "unit of fidelity" are also helpful terms if they can be clearly defined for the translation of biblical poetry. In biblical parallelism, for example, one could examine how far the meaning is communicated over several lines and how that meaning can be communicated with vibrancy in the target language.

## The Importance of Intuition and Experience

Translation is learned through experience, and intuition plays an important role in the process of selecting just the right way to translate a text. Hofstadter provides a useful discussion about an internal process that is at work in translators for making the right choices. It could be called a sixth sense, or following hunches (p. 376). This emphasizes the art aspect or the intuitive nature of translation. It should be added that this intuition is based on extensive experience in practicing the art of translation.

He goes on to discuss a more detailed interior process in our brains that helps to explain the intuitive and experiential nature of translation. The internal checker can be described as a self-launching "background process running in the [translator's] brain" (p. 376). You can describe various checkers such as "pun searcher, syntactic regrouper, phonetic substitutor, semantic substitutor, evaluator of joke potential," and so on (p. 376). These processes work in the mind on a deep hidden level as the translator searches for the right way to say something. Those of us who love to manipulate words engage in these kinds of processes constantly and instinctively.

Hofstadter had done very little translation of poetry when he started writing this book. But as he made more and more translations he gained confidence and explored many different ways to translate the poem. He states, "My later translations of 'Ma Mignonne' would have blown me away if I could have seen them when I was just starting out a few years ago" (p. 367).

An important principle of translation is established here in that we learn how to translate through experience. We also gain confidence and build intuition as we succeed in translation. One aspect that Hofstadter did not emphasize that is important in Bible translation is the importance of testing a text with mother tongue speakers of the languages.

## Literal vs. Free Tension

An ever-present theme in the book is the tension between a literal and a free approach to translation—an age-old issue for translators: how literal, how free? Hofstadter deals extensively with this issue, especially as he interacts with the translation philosophy of Vladimir Nabokov. Since it is an important issue in the world of literary translation, I have chosen to deal with it in some detail here.

Vladimir Nabokov, a famous Russian novelist, advocates a literal translation approach, although Nabokov has not always followed this approach when he has translated his own works and when he translated *Alice in Wonderland* into Russian when he was young.

Nabokov spent ten years writing a literal translation and commentary of Alexander Pushkin's classic Russian poem *Eugene Onegin* (Pushkin 1964). Nabokov used more than one thousand pages in four volumes to explain this work, with voluminous footnotes and detailed literary and historical discussion. Every nuance of Pushkin's poem and its 19th century Russian setting are discussed. Nabokov claims that it is mathematically impossible to translate faithfully this long, structured poem by preserving its rhyme, rhythm and content.

Nabokov was Russian-born, yet was taught English from an early age and was educated at Cambridge University. He was equally proficient in French. Some have labeled his works as the greatest of the 20th century—from short stories to novels, and especially his novel *Lolita*. He was extremely gifted and well-trained, and this shows in his production of these great works. Why should such a creative, brilliant writer choose such a flat method of translation to translate a poetic masterpiece? Thus Nabokov is viewed by many as rather enigmatic.

Nabokov's viewpoint is often referenced as an oddity in literary translation circles and has stirred up a hornet's nest of controversy. It is a frequent topic for literary translators in articles and books—especially where translation principles are discussed. Hofstadter is no exception. In fact, he attacks and criticizes Nabokov's viewpoint vehemently.

Hofstadter analyzes four translations of *Eugene Onegin* into English and rates them in his own order of preference. He discusses the poetic merits of each version. He showed his analysis to a native Russian speaker who agreed with his assessment. He then discusses Nabokov's peculiar literal translation and long commentary. He documents Nabokov's approach and rationale and gives an example of Nabokov's commentary. In the end, he strongly disagrees with Nabokov's approach and condemns Nabokov for ruthlessly attacking anyone who attempts to translate *Eugene Onegin* into English. Nabokov sometimes became cruel, demeaning and nasty with those who disagreed with him. He even castigated former friends who went against his position.

Later in the book, Hofstadter takes on a Nabokovian role in the analysis of those attempting to translate Dante's *Inferno* (p. 531ff) with its difficult *terza rima* rhyme scheme, a triple rhyming scheme between two stanzas that pushes the poem forward. He attacks and belittles people in order to imitate what Nabokov has done to others. Although Hofstadter clearly states what he is doing, some reviewers criticize Hofstadter's exaggerated approach with the purpose of emphasizing how he sees the importance of translating the form of Dante's poem.

People are usually so busy attacking Nabokov and his position that they are not hearing what he is saying or trying to say. We need to first try to understand what he's saying. It is easy to rail against him.

First of all, why such bitterness, contempt and rage over a poem? It is because words communicate deeply to people—especially a writer—and even more so a great writer; it is a consuming passion. Nabokov is extremely sensitive to language, emotionally attached to the text, and wants to defend the author. The poem *Eugene Onegin* is a national treasure in Russia that was written in the 19th century and has often been memorized or at least deeply studied and appreciated in the Russian educational system. Expressions from the poem have turned into popular sayings, and so it has influenced the development of the Russian language.

Nabokov emigrated out of that context in his early adult years to live in England, and later America, and therefore had tremendous adjustments to make. I believe that the poem represents a part of his culture and even a part of himself—a deep attachment to the poem. Thus this emotional bond was stronger when he was in an alien context because it linked him back to his home culture, and when others who did not even speak Russian attempted to translate the masterpiece *Eugene Onegin*, he saw each flaw, or sought to find one, to justify himself and his position. Some of this stems from pride, he being superior in understanding to them, but since he is such an expert, some of the criticisms he makes have a certain level of justification, except when he launches into personal attacks, assaulting people's characters or belittling them.

One way to look at Nabokov's translation is that it is an emotive argument—a kind of protest in the literary community—a reaction to the awful things that take place when people try to translate great works such as *Eugene Onegin*, the inaccuracies that can occur when attempting to translate a nuanced, beautiful text. This

is a kind of psychological argument and explains why Nabokov is so extreme and irrational at times over this issue. It helps us to understand Nabokov, but not justify his actions. Other Russians deeply immersed in their culture do not take such a radical stance.

Hofstadter criticizes Nabokov for not attempting to make a beautiful verse translation of *Eugene Onegin*, for who else could do a phenomenal translation of this work as well as Nabokov could, with his mastery of Russian and English, plus his ten years of research into the background and understanding of the poem? But Nabokov's position is perfectly coherent from a scholarly perspective, and Hofstadter does not fully take into account that it would betray the perspective that Nabokov is advocating—that is, the "mathematical impossibility" of such a translation. Also Nabokov's approach is correct from an ultimate, idealistic perspective. Isn't this true with any translation effort? Are we not attempting the impossible by translating a great piece of literature? Isn't our greatest effort a crude approximation of the original? Isn't much lost in the translation? But that should not stop us from translating!

Let us agree with certain elements of Nabokov's argument. Let us first embrace the beauty of the original text's language, imagery, and cultural background, trying to absorb all that it is saying. Nabokov is attempting to do that through his extensive footnotes about the poem.

Let us embrace Nabokov's premise by agreeing that it is mathematically—that is linguistically and culturally—impossible to translate perfectly this poem, or any text to varying degrees, but especially a beautiful highly structured text full of meaning and nuances.

Let us realize that Nabokov's position is an emotive overreaction and not a recommended general procedure for translating. In technical works such as biblical commentaries, you often find rather literal translations of the original text, and then extensive commentary of each detail of the text and its background. Nabokov's work falls into this genre of writing.

Let us not attack and belittle the works of others who attempt to do the impossible, but rather let us admire their efforts to feel the beauty of the original text. Let us be humble in our approach to the task.

There is a similarity between the issues raised by Nabokov and the King James Version (KJV) debate in the world of Bible translation. There are extremists in this debate who I feel are more excessive than Nabokov. They are enamored of the tradition and majesty of the King James Bible. There is nothing wrong with these opinions, but some go to extremes. The extremists condemn all modern translations as heretical and attack the translators of these translations. Vicious and malicious words are thrown at anybody who would question the superiority of the King James Version text, or the Textus Receptus. They rail against others with emotive, irrational arguments, and at least one advocate has claimed that the King James Bible is more inspired than the original Greek and Hebrew manuscripts!

Notice how Nabokov is emotive about a treasured old text that is revered in the community. Notice the parallel to the upholders of the tradition of the KJV. It is futile to try to argue against an emotive issue. Notice also how influential *Eugene Onegin* has been on the Russian language just like the KJV has been very influential on the development of the English language. Notice how Nabokov loses touch with rationality to defend a cause. Notice the parallel to some KJV defenders in their defense of a traditional text. Notice how Nabokov rails and bitterly attacks those who oppose him, becomes irrational, and how he refuses to listen to reason. Notice the parallel to some KJV defenders.

I agree with Hofstadter's opinion that we should attempt to translate *Eugene Onegin* in verse into English doing the very best job that we can, attempting the impossible. Hofstadter has gone on and published his own English poetic version of *Eugene Onegin* (1999). I agree also that Nabokov sometimes becomes arrogant and ruthless, and unfair in his criticism of others. However, I feel that Hofstadter never understands fully Nabokov's position, and resorts to his own vehement attacks and belittling of Nabokov without understanding him. Nabokov's position is a *reminder* of the extraordinary challenge of translating beautiful poetry, but it is the pendulum swung out too far.

### The Equality of Form and Content in Poetry

Hofstadter considers form equally as important as content in poetry. Thus he tries to preserve rhyming, stress patterns, chiasm or other structural elements of a poem. He observes (p. 557), "The essence of the act of translating poetry is to exercise the highest respect for the original poet's indissoluble fusion of a message with a medium, the unsunderable wedding of content to form as equal partners."

The translator of biblical poetry needs to have a good understanding of how biblical poetry works, and needs to understand well the target language, and especially its poetic elements. This sounds formidable, but the good news is that there are some excellent helps available and the translator does not work alone. In the translation of poetry in the Bible, Zogbo and Wendland (2000) give many practical guidelines for translating biblical Hebrew texts. The interesting part of their book is the many language-specific examples that they give for how to translate poetry in various non-Western contexts. They even include some rules that teams have developed for guiding them in the translation of poetry. There is a sensitivity to the form of the original text and to careful exegesis. A great deal of study is necessary to understand the poetry of the target language. There is also much work involved in understanding biblical poetry and how it works. Their book is highly recommended and useful.

The interesting aspect of this discussion of content and form is that it strikes to the heart of my own translation principles. Sometimes I am closer to being a literal translator, and sometimes a more dynamic translator. Each passage must be weighed carefully to determine what is important while taking into account the target audience, the setting, and the traditional renderings of the text. It is an art and a science, and experience is the best teacher.

### Practical Advice or Helpful Analogies

**The Metaphor of a Rickety Bridge.** Solving a difficult translation problem is like constructing a rickety bridge over a deep narrow chasm (p. 367). In making a primitive bridge, you throw a long piece of rope across the bridge and tie it to two trees, one on each side of the chasm. You take a second rope parallel to the first and do the same. You secure some boards on top of the ropes and you have a tentative bridge. Then using your tentative bridge as a base, you build a second more solid bridge out of wood. If the second bridge should collapse, you have at least the tentative bridge as a backup. Over time as you go through various stages, you have constructed a wide, strong bridge that you once only dreamed of.

Analogously if you are translating a difficult biblical text, you are initially overwhelmed. It is often quite a chasm to cross from the ancient biblical cultures to modern cultures. You make some feeble attempts. But you gain confidence and see that crossing the chasm is really possible. You then make other more solid translations, always realizing that you can go back to your initial attempts if your new explorations should fail.

**Balancing Many Factors.** When Hofstadter sends out instructions for those who will accept the challenge of translating *Ma Mignonne*, he talks about the poem's properties of rhyme, syllable counts, and stress patterns and then says, "Such considerations will surely enter into every translator's mind, but each one will be just one among a large number of mutually vying pressures, the relative strengths of which must be judged subjectively" (p. 8).

This rings true for anyone who has translated. Often a translator must weigh one translation principle against another. Many factors, sometimes conflicting, must be taken into account to produce just the right translation for a given audience and context.

**Translating Ambiguity.** If possible, the translator should translate deliberate, author-intended, ambiguity with ambiguity. Dylan Thomas, a famous poet of the 20th century, is known for his vague style. How do you translate him? Hofstadter gives an example of the poem "How Soon the Servant Sun," which is very ambiguous and difficult to translate.

> Even if this particular poem is among his most obscure, just about every poem he ever wrote contains a good deal of obscurity and ambiguity. Murk is crucial to Dylan Thomas' style, and that's what your job, as a translator, would be to get across. You would have to reproduce the exact same flavor of

> murkiness—or come close—on a line-by-line basis. No matter who you are, this would push your abilities as a translator to the limit. This poem thus brings us as close to the elusive goal of untranslatability as anything we have seen so far. (pp. 406-7)

In a footnote he notes a scholar who claims to interpret the poem, but it is not convincing. The explanation is as murky as the poem. The problem is one of interpreting the source text and then matching the ambiguity or murkiness in the target text. Translating genuine ambiguity with ambiguity is challenging translation and difficult to do effectively. This concept goes against the characteristic of clarity.

**Experimentation and Exploration.** Creativity is an important aspect of successful translation. Experimentation and exploration are two components of the creative process. Hofstadter underscores this when he states that in translation, it is amazing "how much mental explorations of various potential scenarios, word choices, rival syntactic structures, and so forth, goes into each little line. And then, of course, how tentative every little decision remains, even after words and lines and whole themes seem to have gelled completely" (p. 378).

Hofstadter's emphasis is more on the supreme challenge of translating poetry, but it has application to all the efforts necessary for Bible translation. Often, it is necessary to explore deeply to find new solutions when translating into a different culture.

**Letting Your Work Sit for a While.** It is good advice to let difficult problems sit for a while and then come back to them. Sometimes the problem continues to be processed by your brain while you are working on something else.

> As a poem sits on a sheet of paper and ages for a while, it becomes more and more detached from its creator, so that after a few days, or perhaps even less, I come to be as detached from my own creation as if it were somebody else's. Thus after a sufficient delay, I am in effect no longer criticizing *myself* (or indeed anyone)—I am simply criticizing a *poem*. (p. 377)

This is good practical advice for Bible translators. Sometimes you are wrestling with a difficult passage. It may be best to take a break and come back to the problem. In other cases, as you look back on your work several days, weeks or months later, you may discover a flaw in the text that you never saw before, or come up with a new solution you have never seen before.

**Constraints Bring Challenge and a Call for Creativity.** Constraints in translation are evident in every situation—some external, some self-imposed. Constraints bring structure, and creativity can flow within that structure. Sample constraints would be a strict rhyming pattern, a metrical scheme or an alliterative pattern.

> Paradoxical though it surely sounds, I feel at my freest, my most exuberant, and my most creative when operating under a set of heavy self-imposed constraints. I suspect that the welcoming of constraints is, at bottom, the deepest secret of creativity… Translation, too, is a dense fabric of constraints… the merging of translation with poetry gives rise to such a rich mesh of interlocking constraints that the mind goes a bit berserk in a mixture of frustration and delight. (p. xix)

Each situation is different so factors such as determining the audience, finding the level of language and sensing the stylistic aspects of the translation must be made. In other words, the translation task itself is full of constraints, but many other cultural and social constraints can have an impact on the translation team and their effectiveness.

## The Result of Translation

### Excellent Translation Maintains the Essence of the Original Text

Hofstadter personally believes that "high level translation maintains essence, though of course, it loses specifics… as the structure flits from medium to medium to medium" (p. 344). He quotes an experiment done by Walter Arndt who randomly chose four lines from the poem "Chorus from Atalanta" by Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909). Then he hired four professional translators to translate it from English to French, then French to German, from German into Russian, and then Russian back into English. Each

translator could only view the four lines of verse that he had in front of him to translate and he could not communicate with the others. If you compare the two English translations—the first and the last—the essence is indeed preserved with some loss of details.

Such an experiment encourages us Bible translators that the seemingly impossible—communicating across languages and cultures—can be done, at least with the broadest strokes of the paintbrush. The challenge is to make the masterpiece with all the fine strokes that are necessary and linguistically possible.

### Relativistic, Reader-Oriented Emphasis to Evaluating Translations

Hofstadter essentially says that each poem has its own appeal; each is a gem.

> No—a far better metaphor for the "Ma Mignonne" challenge and all that it inspired would be mineralogical display featuring sparkling crystals of all sorts of dazzling colors and an unimaginable array of forms. Some of these crystalline translations will appeal more to one reader, others to another. The real point of the exhibit is simply to allow readers to revel in the diversity of this collection of deeply related gems, so beautifully illustrative of the endless inventive spark residing in the human spirit. (p. 13)

In this view creativity and diversity are highly esteemed. With such an embracing view it is difficult to critique translations. Throughout the book Hofstadter does critique and "improve" some of the poems according to his own intuitive feel of what makes a good translation. But in the end he has a more relativistic, reader-oriented philosophy of evaluating translations.

I cannot agree certain aspects of this perspective. Most people can intuitively distinguish bad poetry from good poetry, but is each a gem? It is true that each poem angles toward a particular audience with various appeals to different people. But setting parameters to describe what is legitimate translation and what is adapting the message would help to clarify this whole issue. Hofstadter already has this intuitive feel that some of the translations have stepped over the line of fidelity. But the tricky questions are: a) Where have they stepped over the line? b) How often? c) Has the author's general intent been preserved, as best as we can determine?

### Family Trees

Hofstadter presents 89 different translations of *Ma Mignonne* in his book. Some of these can be grouped into different families (p. 346). For example, one version of *Ma Mignonne* into Italian was called *Mia Adorata*. Hofstadter translated this poem in a dynamic way and called it *My Dear Adored*. He then translated it in a literal way and called it *My Cherie*. This Italian version and the two corresponding English translations would be like a family of poems, all related to the original poem *Ma Mignonne*. Hofstadter poses the question as to how many derivative poems it would take to say that it is no longer a translation of the original poem, but he does not attempt to answer the question.

When John Wycliffe translated the New Testament into English, he essentially translated Jerome's Latin Vulgate, which in turn is a translation of the Greek. This is a third generation from the original. If someone translated Wycliffe's translation into, say, Swedish, that would add a fourth generation. What happens is that translational choices and sometimes errors are inherited in the later generations. This is one reason why William Tyndale's New Testament English translation was superior to Wycliffe's, because Tyndale went directly from Greek into English. This is also why it is recommended that translators learn the original languages so that they can translate as directly as possible the biblical text.

### Three Characteristics of a Good Translation

Hofstadter describes three characteristics of a good translation: faithfulness, clarity and grace (pp. 166-167). These three characteristics of translation were described by Yan Fu, a celebrated Chinese translator of the early 20th century. The characteristic of "grace" or "elegance" is the interesting choice here.

Hofstadter gives two examples where similar transculturations took place, where one was deemed acceptable and the other not. In the first example, the author was telling a story about American football. When this was translated into French it was translated as "rugby," which is more well-known to French

speakers. This introduces a falsehood into the story as told in French, because the author of the original story had never played rugby. So this choice was rejected. In the second example, the author wrote a symmetrical story based on the concept of the Crab Canon by Bach, which is totally symmetrical. In the story he used the English expression "not at all" toward the beginning of the story, and then again toward the end of the story with a different nuance. When this was translated into French, the French translator could have translated "not at all" more literally but would have lost the double entendre of the phrase in English. Therefore the French translator found a phrase *finir au violin* which would fit into the story symmetrically at the beginning and end but with two different meanings, like its English counterpart "not at all." However it did change the accuracy or content of the translation. This was accepted because the point of the written text was to demonstrate symmetry of language and not equivalence of content.

When he describes the battle of the translation choice "not at all"/*finir au violin*, he says it is a question of "simplicity and elegance" (or clarity and grace) that pushes him to allow the non-literal translation *finir au violin*. He concludes, "Very subtle combinations and interactions of pressures make all the difference, and I cannot imagine there being any hard-and-fast theory that could explain all such choices in translation" (p. 167).

In Bible translation circles the typical characteristics of a good translation are deemed to be faithfulness, clarity and naturalness. Wu's idea of "grace" or "elegance" has certain advantages to be a replacement for naturalness. The advantages would be as follows:

- A strong element of style and the beauty of language.
- More general and abstract than "naturalness." Thus the beauty or "grace" of a natural sounding translation would often encompass the idea of "naturalness."
- Some non-natural translation choices (like the "clanging iron") are not natural but could be described as elegant solutions.

But the disadvantages would be as follows:

- Naturalness as a characteristic helps the translator to focus on avoiding a slavish literalism to the original text, which is often a tendency of new translators. It helps to concentrate on natural forms of expression in the target language.
- If the original text is rudimentary or basic, and not gracious or elegant, it does not seem right to impose the characteristic of grace onto such a text. This would be changing the style of the original author.
- "Grace" or "elegance" may be too abstract and thus enter into very subjective categories for evaluating a translation.

Instead of a substitute, perhaps a better perspective would be to say there are four characteristics of a good translation: faithfulness, clarity, naturalness and a locally important characteristic such as grace. Each of these factors must be weighed against each other to determine the excellence of the translation. The first three characteristics could be viewed as the overall principles of translation, and the fourth one as a cultural perspective pertinent to the translation. The fourth in this case—grace —is so esteemed in the culture as to be a highly relevant factor for any translation in that culture.

It seems that "grace" or "elegance" or "beauty" is highly esteemed in Chinese culture and many of the oriental cultures. Therefore it makes sense and is helpful to translators to evaluate translations based on an important characteristic in their culture.

Where I work among the Fulani of West Africa, perhaps a highly esteemed cultural value such as *pulaaku* should be one of the characteristics of a good translation. *Pulaaku* could be defined as "restraint." Values such as patience, not becoming overly angry or emotive, and self-control are highly esteemed. As a translation team we sometimes discuss this element of *pulaaku*, but I have never viewed it as a possible characteristic for viewing the quality of the translation. Perhaps, freer translations would be frowned upon by Fulani people, since they might prefer conservative or restrained translations. It is an interesting

perspective to consider when trying to adapt to the mindset of a people group. It is worth reflecting on all the characteristics of a good translation in the local setting.

In conclusion, we could think about four characteristics of a good translation: faithfulness, clarity, naturalness, and a locally important characteristic such as grace or restraint or a more general term called "cultural appropriateness." Faithfulness is always a goal. Clarity is typically important, but there are exceptions such as translating intentional ambiguity as discussed earlier. Naturalness is typically important, but there are exceptions like the "first clang of the iron" example. A fourth characteristic, more locally important such as grace or restraint, can be considered from time to time when there is a choice among equal alternatives, or even as a more general principle when used with caution and not violating the principle of faithfulness.

## Concluding Challenge

We have examined only one book among the storehouse of books coming from the field of literary translation. It was chosen because of its interesting, refreshing and helpful perspective. But the ideas were taken and critically evaluated especially through the lens of Bible translation.

We should continue to develop resources for the specialized field of Bible translation, but we also should look beyond ourselves to the wide world of literary translation. We can learn from the vast amount of literature that is available. We can learn from those who have wrestled in this field for a lifetime. But since we have our own particular field, it will have its own constraints, namely a sacred text where the content must be preserved, that will be different from those of the literary translation field, although Bible translation is technically a specific kind of literary translation.

If we look at literary translation as the ultimate challenge for the translator, we need all the resources at our disposal to face this task. We need to talk about legitimate constraints and where we draw lines in terms of faithfulness, while encouraging expressiveness at the same time, to communicate powerfully.

Where are the biblical scholars who will rise to the challenge? Some may have an extraordinary background in literature that would open up some doors of conversation to those in the literary translation field. Some walls will remain because of the different world views that are often represented. However, perhaps there are open hearts that are waiting to be challenged by the biblical message and by our approach to the task. Do we not have an obligation to explore this area?

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