



A Word with Hofstadter

Language International General Editor Robert Sprung spoke with Douglas Hofstadter on his latest book and on translation—both human and machine.

Robert Sprung: Could you discuss the origin of your fascination with translators?

Douglas Hofstadter: With translators? Or with translating?

RS: Well, both I guess.

DH: If you speak of any kind of fascination with translators themselves, I would say that would have to have come quite recently in life, in the last few years in a certain sense, as I've started to compare translations of works done by different people.

The concept of translating has interested me since I first became involved in learning my first foreign language, which was French, when I was 12 or 13 years old. But literary translation and translation under the constraints of poetry, preserving both form and content, is something I certainly thought about a bit 15 or 20 years ago but didn't really get into deeply until about 10 years ago. And at that point, when I started translating "Ma Mignonne," the virtues and lacks of each individual version started to become more apparent, and I started to see how different translators approached a task in a very different way. Then probably the most important thing for me, in coming to appreciate different translators' styles, in a sense has been *Eugene Onegin* and focusing on different translators and their styles of that novel from Russian into English—preserving its poetic structures and discovering that there can be very recognizable individual styles, subtle parameters that are unique to one individual—and how willing they are, for example, to go out to the fringes of vocabulary. How willing they are to distort syntax—that is, to make awkward syntax, or to twist sentences

Ma mignonne

around versus always wanting to make it flow in the most straight manner. How literal they feel they have to be in terms of preserving it at a line-by-line level. And how willing they are to rearrange structures, how lyrical they are.

I've become extremely aware of those individual characteristics, and I've gradually come to love the Falen translations above all others. I've come to try to put my finger on what really makes it so absolutely marvelous. But that doesn't mean I don't like

the others; I think the others, several others, have their moments of extreme beauty.

RS: A question about your choice of the poem. Some people have classified the poem as a trifle. Is it just as difficult to translate this as something that is a lot "deeper"?

DH: Did you see the review by Robert Alter in the *New York Times Book Review*? Alter is a translator of the Bible, and he had a very lukewarm—well, a little bit warm and a little bit cold—review. Mostly I found it to be really regrettable, but in his review at the end he said the worst thing about this book is the choice of the poem on which it was based, and he said I should have chosen one by Baudelaire. He even mentioned the poem he would have liked to see—"L'Invitation au voyage," which he considered a much deeper poem. Well, it was very amusing to me that he did that even though I was annoyed as

Honey Bun

hell, because it happened that a friend of mine had asked me to translate that poem about a year earlier, and I had done that. So I just pulled out my translation when I replied to the *New York Times*. I wrote a good long letter, which they printed almost in its entirety. I began by quoting the first stanza of "L'Invitation au voyage" in my translation, and I was quite proud of it, but at the same time thought that it was a snap compared with "Ma Mignonne" because the constraints were far easier. I had much more liberty. I'm not saying it was trivial. Maybe "a snap" is an overstatement of the case. Maybe I could just simply tone it down a little bit and say I thought it was relatively easy compared with "Ma Mignonne" which was a much, much more tightly constrained, subtle task. I thought that doing the Baudelaire was a good exercise in the tone of words, in the imagery, and those kind of things, and I really enjoyed it. But I felt like in some sense it was not pushing me nearly as hard as "Ma Mignonne," which presented a real challenge to my ability to translate.

RS: Is there a particular translation of "Ma Mignonne" in here that you think comes closest, or is it the totality of them all that equals the original?

DH: That's a very tricky question. I say in the book that I wouldn't want to choose one because the totality is what makes it so much fun. But that doesn't mean there aren't a few that come to mind as sort of tops. I mean if I were to choose some of my tops the first one might be Bob French's

“Fairest Friend II,” the one that has 28 lines, rather than the original version which has 30 lines. Or I might choose the one by Bill Cavnar and myself, “O My Sweet.”

I would [also] choose my wife’s “Chickadee” for its tone; it’s not a literal translation, but its tone has something just extremely beautiful about it to me.

RS: *I’d like to change gears a little bit and talk about machine translation, which is getting a lot of press lately. There was actually an article in The Economist a couple of weeks ago by somebody who said that it appears that machine translation is finally workable, that the Japanese have poured in countless millions of dollars and now the paradigm that they’re using for machine translation is somehow different and better.*

DH: I’ve heard that before, I’ve heard that quite often before. I mean you know—the boy who cried wolf. Each time somebody cries it, you say, “Well, maybe this time it’s different.” But after

a while, even though it’s coming from a different source each time so it’s not one boy: it’s as if you have all these different

My Petite

boys crying wolf. After a while you start thinking: maybe boys in general just cry wolf.

RS: *As you may be aware, the field of technical translation is becoming a big-money business. A company like Microsoft spends many millions of dollars a year on translating all their operating systems and manuals and what not into all these different languages, so a lot of the purchasing managers in these companies...*

DH: Of course they don’t bother to write them well in the first place, so who cares about translating them?

RS: *That’s true. But a lot of the purchasing managers in these companies often know relatively little about translation, and are pretty receptive to claims about cutting the labor down to 10 percent in cost. I think the argument against the use of computers in literary translation is made very eloquently in your book. Do you think that the prospects for technical translation are just as daunting, or are they perhaps more surmountable?*

DH: I think they fall right in between the two things you said. That is, I think they’re not just as daunting in a sense, although maybe I would take that back if I thought about it for a while. But in some sense one has to say clearly, mundane prose should pose less of a problem than exalted prose. But on the other hand, to say that they’re more surmountable or close to surmountable or something like that would also be a vast distortion in my opinion, because I think that it would require full human intelligence. It’s kind of like you’re asking: we’re not about to get an artificial Einstein out of AI, but maybe it’s more surmountable to get an artificial random-person-off-the-street intelligence. And I would say, “No way!”

I heard a very eloquent talk back a few years ago by Martin Kay of Xerox on the impossibility of—maybe impossibility is too strong—on the extraordinary difficulty of technical translation. And he tried to show why machine translation of technical things was still a pipe dream. And he gave lovely examples which I have written down somewhere. They have to do with the vagueness of language and they discussed such a thing as a lock, and how the innards of the lock were structured. You know, you insert a key and different parts make different sorts of rings inside the lock turn in different ways, and the physical relationships among these rings and such things... It was described in

a way that any human being who has any sense of how the world works could figure it out: they would understand it because we have certain ways of talking about physical objects and how they turn and twist and move and so forth, but if you literally translated them, they would come out completely jumbled. just garbage! He came up with dozens of examples of very simple, ordinary, trivial-seeming prose that is anything but straightforward when you really think

My Pet, Eat

about it. And that’s the way I look at language. That’s the way I look at human thought in general. So when I hear these claims from companies part of me reacts with a kind of a sneer, “Oh, cut it out, this is junk; this is nonsense!” But another part of me says with a little bit of trepidation, “Gee wiz, I wonder if they have done some amazing things that I just never would have thought could be done?” So I guess I’m always fearful that I may be shown wrong. I’m not so dogmatic that I would...

RS: *But you’re yet to be.*

DH: Yes, I’ve yet to be convinced that there’s anything even closely approaching a decent machine-translation program. You know, IBM’s *Candide* was under discussion in Martin Kay’s talk in 1993; IBM’s *Candide* was very highly touted, and around the world, people were looking at it as sort of the new model of translation because it used this enormous database and very powerful mathematical statistical techniques for correlating contexts and for trying to disambiguate words not using any kind of imagery or anything, but just using statistical tricks. And it was tackling prose without grammar—this was supposed to be some kind of great breakthrough.

Well when you look at its translation of “*Ma Mignonne*,” thinking of “*Ma Mignonne*” as prose, not as poetry, it’s by far the worst. It’s so terrible that it’s not even laughable, it just stinks! It’s pathetic! And this was supposed to be the absolute, one of the great machine-translation breakthroughs four years ago. I just don’t believe that we’re anywhere close. And as I say I really do feel that genuine translation of text requires understanding of the text, and understanding requires having lived in the world and dealt with the physical world and is not just a question of manipulating words.

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RS: *There was a recent MIT Summit celebrating 50 years of Machine Translation. Have we seen any notable progress at the 50-year mark: are systems today any better than they were 20 years ago?*

DH: Oh gosh, yes. Well I don't know about 20 years ago. That I can't compare because I haven't been in the field. But what can I say when I hear that Systran is used to translate a lot of lines per year—say at Xerox itself or these Air Force Centers or Nuclear

Sweet Sue

Research Centers? But in Xerox's case, we know that the stuff is fed in, in this artificial version of English, Multinational Customized English. So in a certain sense it's spoonfed; in a certain sense the translation almost takes place in the writing of the English.

RS: *Is that the solution for...*

DH: No, I don't think it's a solution at all—I don't think so.

RS: *And why is that?*

DH: I think the same problems really would crop up.

Maybe again I haven't followed MCE: I haven't followed Systran, but my guess is that a lot of what comes out is probably fairly incomprehensible. Let's put it this way—maybe you've had this experience, I've had it many times, that when I go out and buy some kind of object that has to be assembled at a store, and I get home...I ask the people at the store, "How long is it going to take to put this together?" "Oh, a half an hour, half an hour." I get home and, after eight hours of work, I'm finally finished. And during those eight hours I had to struggle and struggle: I had no idea what they meant by lots of sentences. I had no concept, and this was the original written text presumably. If you know people are willing to accept incomprehensible written text as perfectly fine, then sure they'll be willing to accept incomprehensible translations as fine.

I guess I'm talking about clarity. I'm talking about high quality. High-quality input, high-quality output. I really do mean clarity. And I don't think you're going to get that. I'm sure you can have somebody write some kind of gobbledygook

in Multinational Customized English that some sort of drone can read and say, "Yeah, this sounds okay to me!" Then they feed it into the program, and it comes out, and a drone in the other languages reads it and says, "Yeah, this sounds okay to me." Meaning that there's no grammatical error, that the words are spelled right, and stuff like that, but whether somebody could understand it and use it, to put together an object in less than eight hours when it was supposed to take half an hour, that would be a breakthrough.

RS: *So I take it the trend today on the Web of people posting a document to a site and having it automatically translated is pretty dumb.*

DH: I guess, but you see, I don't use the Web, so I can't comment on it from personal experience. It sounds ridiculous to me. It sounds absolutely preposterous.

RS: *MIT vendors have largely scaled back their claims. Having been criticized so long, they seem to be saying, "We cannot produce the perfect translation, but we can produce a workable first draft that a human editor with some tweaking can make usable." In general, do you think that in fact this would probably be a labor-saving path or is it just another way to salvage their product?*

Fairest Friend

DH: Well, I think it depends on a lot of things. I knew this woman who had worked at Xerox, and

she told me that often Systran would put out several pages in a row of output from its MCE input that did not need post-editing—let's tone that down and say that they only needed minor tweaks. If you're in this very limited domain of discourse where the computer has been prepared with thousands of ready-made phrases so it won't stumble on those, and where you've written it in this very artificial English so that all ambiguities are avoided, then you can get output that only needs minor tweaking. I guess that's some kind of labor saving. [Of course,] you have to teach people how to write MCE and put in all the tons of phrases that pertain to the domain and so forth. I'm prepared to believe that in certain kinds of restricted domains a first draft might be plausible for certain very limited tasks.

Martin Gardner

explains the mysteries of

Special and General Relativity

(A. Einstein)

The Nagel–Newman Duo

clarifies

The Incompleteness of Formal Arithmetic

(K. Gödel)

I can't tell companies that they're wrong, but I haven't any direct personal experience with this.

RS: *Your book is set in the Baskerville typeface. Are there any particular reasons or associations?*

DH: I think Baskerville is probably the most elegant book face: I still love to look at Baskerville. I love the lowercase *g*, the way its bottom, the stroke that bends around to make the circle at the bottom, doesn't quite close; it comes very close to closing, but doesn't quite close [see below]. And you see "Nagel". There you can see some of the nice features of Baskerville. To me the shapes of the letters are just extremely graceful and underdone in some sense; I love the lowercase *a*; there's not a capital *E* here, but I like the shape of the capital *E*. By the way in this display just as an example, I did a tremendous amount of kerning. I moved the letters around microscopic amounts, in order to get the letter spacing exactly how I wanted it!

RS: *Could you give an example?*

DH: Well look at "Gardner". The capital *G* sorts of sticks into the *a*; that's closer than it would have been normally.

RS: *I noticed that you're very careful on your conventions in punctuation and so forth. You use a serial comma; at the same time you use punctuation outside the quotation marks...*

DH: Oh yeah, absolutely. That's a British convention, but it's also the convention that represents what you mean by the quote marks. It's literally saying, "look, here's what's being quoted". What's being quoted is what is within the quote marks. And things that are not being quoted are outside the quote marks.

RS: *Are there any trendy typographical or stylistic things in the air that are pet peeves of yours?*

DH: Yes, the vertical apostrophes and the vertical quote marks that you see everywhere ["text" as opposed to "text"—ed.]. I'm so shocked. They survive

Chickadee

because of email and such things. And you see it in what look like otherwise very well typeset documents, and it always really annoys me. Of course there are tons of people who still ignorantly use a hyphen instead of an em-dash. I mean, it's so hilarious! Sometimes two words, with a hyphen, not even spaces around the hyphen, and this person thinks that the hyphen is serving as an em-dash. It's just incredible.

RS: *At the same time, I think you use two spaces at the end of the sentence.*

DH: Yes, I do. You mean borrowed from typewriter?

RS: Yes.

DH: You're right. I've always done that. It's something that's ingrained in me. And are you telling me that that's not really a standard thing?

RS: *Well, I think in a lot of current typography they just use a single space.*

DH: To me it's not a very visible thing, but you're right; it is visible enough that obviously you picked it up, but it's never looked wrong to me on the page. I have certain conventions that are not standard. Like an em-dash in most people's writing should have no spaces to the left or right of it, whereas I put a space to the left and the right of it, out of my own aesthetic

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principles, and I say "Tough luck, that's the way I do it." And I've seen that there's a small minority of people who do that.

Another thing that's really annoying to me is the underline that passes through the descenders of letters. That's so crass. And I make sure that my underlines never do that.

RS: *Is there such a thing as the easiest or hardest poet or novelist to translate?*

DH: I gave some examples of things that are hard to translate, for example e.e. cummings, and Dylan Thomas as sort of a ridiculous example. I guess I'm a believer that most high-quality pieces of literature can in some sense be reproduced in other languages.

RS: *Do you generally find that the translations done by the great poets are great translations?*

DH: I'm not sure. Look at Richard Wilbur—he to me is a wonderful poet, and his translations are just absolutely brilliant. I guess James Falen, my favorite translator of *Eugene Onegin*, is not known as a poet, but when you see his work, you have to say, "My god, he's an incredible poet." But I don't think that being a poet guarantees that you will be a good translator. I don't think that's a guarantee by any means.

RS: *If you had to put yourself through another ordeal to create a similar book on another poem or two, are there some that in your mind have a special place that you think would warrant treatment like that?*

DH: I could easily imagine taking other French poems, perhaps some poems by Verlaine. I could also imagine doing some stuff with *Eugene Onegin*.

Cutie Pie

RS: *What is it about Eugene Onegin that you find so captivating?*

DH: It's hard to phrase it. It's Pushkin's impish character, the way in which he tells a story, and weaves himself into the story and weaves his meditations on life in and out of the story, and weaves in beautiful and sometimes very melancholy poems into the story line which have nothing to do with the story line, but are just his own reactions to life. He has lyrical passages about

the glitter of Moscow society, the beauties of riding through the streets of Moscow or Saint Petersburg on a sleigh, the beauties of the snow that's just fallen. And then he has these tremendously sardonic or cynical passages about life and society and people that have nothing to do with the plot, but that are still

Mia Adorata

woven into the plot. It's going back and forth and back and forth between his meditations and his descriptions and his story line, and it's so delightful and so engaging. It's done in this absolutely perfect meter and rhythm that just never stops, yet it's highly diverse—each stanza has the same form, but within a stanza it changes. ABAB for the first four and CCDD for the next four and EFFEFG for the final six. But that doesn't mean that it's grouped into 4-4-6. Sentences can flow across those boundaries; the first sentence can be three lines, the next four lines, the next five lines, so you have this marvelous flow in which dialogue fits in, letters fit in, everything just fits in so beautifully and sometimes things will jump across stanzas. It's just a way of filtering the world through a kind of a crystal, a magic crystal, and to me it's beyond description.

RS: Which few books, either works of literature or criticism, that relate to language or translation are most valued on your shelf?

DH: Well, I've always liked, despite some reservations, George Steiner's *After Babel*. And Walter Arndt has a book called *Pushkin Threefold*—a marvelous book of studies of Pushkin and various translations of Pushkin. There's the book by Willis Barnstone, *The Poetics of Translation*, that I like very much; it's full of sparkly, puckish remarks. The reason I like some of these books is that they're more explorations than dogmas.

One of the things that Alter tried to complain about in his review of me is that I haven't taken into account what is called "translation theory." Although I didn't say it in my response in the letter, I said it between the lines, but I can say it to you: translation theory strikes me as a horribly pedantic bore. Translation is an art; it's a marvelous, living art, and any theory that attempts to give rules for this extremely fluid, constantly creative innovative art is doomed. You can give guidelines and suggestions, but best of all is just give examples, and that's what those books do most of all: they raise issues, they don't pronounce dogma. They don't say, this is right, this is the absolute truth. They just say, look at all these issues in translation, there are a million issues in translation. Look at how many different ways they can be tackled, look at how many questions they open and so forth and so on.

RS: You made a couple of comments about the Web. Is it merely a lack of time that keeps you from going to the Web, or are there deeper...

DH: Well it's the same thing that keeps me from going to bookstores. I never go to bookstores. I never turn on a television. I never look at the Web. At this point, just to give you an indication of the status of my life: I never go to movies; I never read a newspaper; I never listen to the radio. And even so, I'm infinitely behind. So that gives you a sense of it.

RS: Any comments on the Web in terms of the printed book, and does the Web have any particular significance for you?

DH: Well, I worry that printed books are sooner or later going to go the way of the horse-drawn carriage. With all the claims of how wonderful horse-drawn carriages are, they don't exist any

more except as sort of charming quaint oddities in Central Park or something like that.

And I don't know what's going to happen to books. Some people are very confident that books will remain, and others are very dubious. I would find it a great sadness if they disappeared. But at the same time, if the reason that they disappeared was that some kind of structure or some medium came about that was superior in most ways, that allowed you to essentially do what you can do, everything you can do with books, like flip their pages, or something equivalent to flipping their pages. I guess I might buy into it eventually.

I'm not somebody who's against technological advances but so far, to me, the Web is very boring. I don't like to look at things on a screen, I don't like to read things on a screen. But I don't have any sense of what it could be like in 50 years.



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