

A TRANSLATOR'S ROOM

BY TONY BECKWITH



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*A woman must have money and a room
of her own if she is to write fiction.*
—Virginia Woolf

In her essay *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf suggested the idea she posits in the quote mentioned above. It was a revolutionary idea for its time and no doubt stirred many passions when she proposed it in the lectures she gave at Cambridge University in 1928. What she was referring to, of course, was the financial and conventional barrier that aspiring women writers faced in English society in those days. The luxury of having a room of one's own is something that is still, nearly one hundred years later, beyond the reach of a certain

percentage of women—and men—who are trying to be freelance translators, though today's barrier no longer reflects societal taboos; it is usually created by a shortage of funds.

Time and technology change our lives in a multitude of ways, and the modern trend of telecommuting has encouraged the proliferation of another modern trend: the home office. But not every translator has the space in which to create a home office or can afford to have a dedicated computer of their own, and some still work at the kitchen table and share the family laptop with spouse and children. Am I exaggerating? Perhaps. But surely it's no exaggeration to say that all translators want a room of their own in which to immerse themselves in their work, whatever form that might take. A room where they can disengage from other concerns and indulge in their research, reading, and translation, blissfully immune to unwelcome intrusion and outside distraction. I am one of the lucky ones. I have a room of my own, and I love every inch of it.

My home office is a good size; fourteen by twelve feet, and the ceiling is ten feet high so there's plenty of space for ideas to go "sailing alone around the room" as Billy Collins says. There are three large windows in two of the walls, and a French door that leads to the side porch and the rock garden beyond. There is a pond with a fountain in the garden, and when the weather cooperates I leave the door open so that I can hear water falling on water, one of the most soothing sounds imaginable. Among many other advantages, having a room of my own means that, when reminded of Billy Collins, I can reach up and take a book of his poems off the shelf and read a few of them; maybe even find one to quote.

Not everything I translate requires laser-sharp concentration in a monastic setting. Some materials have become a little repetitive as speech patterns become more homogeneous and buzz words beget set phrases and people begin to sound more and more alike. But when a text of subtle depth and nuance calls for every jot and tittle of my concentration, then I want to be in a place where I can respond to that demand with no distraction. Concentration is a rarified state that

is, by definition, volatile and fleeting. The quieter, more solitary the experience, the more I can concentrate; the longer I can concentrate, the more I can focus and—hopefully—achieve the deeper insight I’m searching for. I bring my translator’s tools to any task I undertake, of course, but at another, deeper level I also bring a bagful of attitudes, preconceived ideas, and biases. The writer of the document I am about to translate presumably had his or her own set of biases and perspectives that have informed and influenced the text to some extent. Will I be able to detect and identify those influences? What if I find that the author’s bias runs contrary to mine? At that point I must be able to explore my reactions and emotions, and make sure they are working with me rather than against. To do so, I find it best to be in a physical and mental space that is conducive to the kind of concentration required.

At one point I found music to be an interruption, but then learned that some music has just the opposite effect. One rainy afternoon I was listening to some piano pieces from the Romantic period¹ and noticed that the music was present in my awareness but not as an intrusion. Perhaps it has something to do with flowing, melodic sound as distinct from punctuated rhythm. At any rate, it enhanced my concentration by adding an aesthetic dimension to my thinking and the exploration process mentioned above. I now work with Pandora playing very quietly on my computer, with stations programmed to broadcast the kind of music I describe as “a pensive piano playing in an empty room,” and only rarely do I have to skip a track that jars the mood.

Virginia Woolf’s view that a woman must have a room of her own is surely true at a certain level for translators of all genders today, but it is also true that there are many different ways to do our kind of work. In the late 1980s and early 1990s translators claimed that, with a laptop and an internet connection they could work anywhere, and everyone had their own definition of “anywhere.” Mine was a beach in the Caribbean, and such was the idyllic (and unfulfilled) nature of this fantasy that it never occurred to me to wonder where I would plug in my laptop at night. Today many—

maybe most—translators work on a laptop, and mobility is a given, whether to a different room in the house or to the other side of the world. It is indeed efficient to work in coffee shops and parks, airports and hotel rooms, and I have experienced the road warrior lifestyle. It is thrilling, I admit, to feel like a self-contained and self-sustaining unit that can be constantly productive and permanently on the move. But in my opinion it doesn't hold a candle to working in my own room.

In a certain sense, this room has come to define me, and I feel more thoroughly myself (as in “me-the-translator”) here than anywhere else. When I was a boy I used to read about writers and scholars (and detectives) who had a study or den where they spent virtually all their time, and I came to covet those sanctuaries. Most of them had a fireplace, and my image of the perfect room does in fact include an open, wood-burning hearth. I was, unfortunately, unable to replicate that feature in my real-life version, although the truth is that Texas doesn't have many days when a toasty fire would be welcome. But I do have a sofa and an armchair in which to read and review a translation in a comfortable position. Or to take a break and read something else. A few pages of another writer's work can help to refresh and reboot my objectivity when reviewing a translation with which I am all too familiar.

While translating an art museum piece the other day I came to a section on Renoir's painting *Luncheon of the Boating Party*.² I have never seen the original but am familiar with the painting. In fact, it came up in a book I had recently enjoyed, *The Hare with Amber Eyes* by Edmund de Waal.³ From what I remembered of the passage in question, I thought it might contribute some insight into the painter and this particular painting, so I took the book off the shelf and lay on the sofa to read. The author describes his ancestor, Charles Ephrussi and his enviable life in Paris in the late 1800s. Charles is a wealthy *flâneur* (a variation on the better-known term *boulevardier*) and collects art for himself and others, frequenting the ateliers of the painters of his day—the Impressionists—and chatting with them about where to find the freshest croissants, how to capture light as it reflects off water, and so on. He assembles an impressive collection of paintings, and actually appears in at least

one of the more famous ones of the period. In the Renoir mentioned above, Charles is the one standing at the very back, wearing a top hat. The author names the people in the painting and explains who they are so, with book in hand, I Googled it and, for a brief, exhilarating moment, felt that I was looking at a group of friends in a familiar place. *The Luncheon* had always looked like a party I would have enjoyed, but this time, because I knew who everybody was, I identified much more closely with the scene, as though it was one I knew well. I felt that, but for some regrettable contretemps, I would have been at the Maison Fournaise that afternoon, sitting at the table, chatting to one of the girls in their pretty hats. By the time I got back to translating the museum essay, the painting was alive in my mind and the words flowed easily from one language to the other.

As daylight dies I light the lamp on the desk beside me. This desk is a relic of another age: a massive piece of mahogany furniture that looks as though it would have been perfectly at home in a writer's den in Virginia Woolf's London. Desks like this have been replaced by *elfa* shelving and modular furniture designed to open up a modern space and make it roomier. My cat lies on the desk, looking out of the window at the garden. When she sees something that requires her personal attention she jumps down and stands at the door, waiting for me to open it. Later, when she has had enough of the great outdoors she will appear on the windowsill beside me, waiting for me to let her in. This little charade may sound distracting but oddly enough, like solo piano music, it is not. It has become part of my routine and gives me a reason to get up and stretch a little more frequently than I otherwise would. Cat people will understand.

I moved into this room twenty-five years ago at the dawn of my freelance translator career. My wife gave me the desk, and I think its size and style say something about her expectations for my new venture. Speaking of generous wives, one day many years ago I reached the point where I felt ready to quit my day job and go full time. I asked a seasoned veteran—a colleague at our local association—what I needed most to become a successful freelance translator. Without any hesitation he said, “A spouse with a real job.” I was lucky again. The

fact is that without my spouse and her real job it is highly unlikely that I would have this particular room of my own, and I imagine I'm not the only one in this position. So, three cheers for our spouses and other supporters; words cannot express the depth of our gratitude to you all. Everyone's situation is unique but, as seen from my circumstances, I am tempted to paraphrase Virginia Woolf's dictum to read: "*A translator must have a spouse with a real job if she wants a room of her own.*"

ENDNOTES

1 One example of the music from the Romantic period is Chopin's Nocturne #8: [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nMz14eCD6IQ>], played here by Arthur Rubinstein

2 See Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party*: <http://www.phillipscollection.org/collection/boating-party>

3 Edmund de Waal, *The Hare with Amber Eyes*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010.