

Northern European Studies – and then what?

A video series on career prospects by j o l n e s

Transcription Episode 1: Literary Translator

Paul Berf, Alumnus University of Cologne

I started studying in the dim and distant past, in 1986. Here, at this department, Scandinavian Studies, and otherwise I studied German and English Studies, and actually stayed in Cologne, except for one year, which I studied in Uppsala, Sweden.

WHAT WAS YOUR PROFESSIONAL CAREER LIKE AFTER GRADUATION?

In my case, I graduated in 1993, and then stayed here at the department as a research assistant. Relatively long, five years, but in those five years I also realized that university is not necessarily my career goal, and that I actually want to reorient myself. Then it was more by chance that I came into contact with the translation scene. I met someone, a writer, Aris Fioretos, who asked if I could translate something for him. Then the opportunity arose to translate some poetry. So that's what I did. This resulted in invitations to seminars for translators. And that's when I realised that this is something that I enjoy - working with language - and I also realised that I can do it. And sometimes it's important to find out where your own strengths and weaknesses lie. And that's what actually led to this development, that I started to make contacts with publishers. And when I quit here, I actually started translating seamlessly.

WHAT SKILLS DID YOU ACQUIRE DURING YOUR STUDIES THAT HELP YOU TO TRANSLATE?

Well, basically, the training started when I was six years old, when I started reading. Every reading experience you have is actually a step of literary education that you internalize and then build on. During my studies, of course, the language skills are added, which I have partly acquired here or during my stay in Sweden. Then there was the knowledge of Scandinavian literature, both older literature and newer literature, contemporary literature, and the study of these texts. In this respect, one learns to deal systematically with texts, to deal systematically with language, and that helps one a lot later on.

WHAT DO YOU NEED FOR LITERARY TRANSLATION?

On the one hand, it is like this: for literary translation you need a very special feeling for language. It's clear, of course, that you have to have a good command of the language you are translating from, whether it's Swedish, Norwegian or Icelandic. Above all, you have to have a very, very good command of your own language. You must have a literary interest, a feeling for literature. But there is a special way of dealing with language among the literary translators I know. You don't necessarily have the impetus to convey your own language, but you look for the language of the original. As a rule, one talks about having to find a tone that exists in the original, and which one then has to recreate in German. That's this special kind of creativity that you need to be able to translate literary.

HOW DOES ONE BECOME A LITERARY TRANSLATOR?

After all, it is not a classic training occupation. You don't learn to be a translator, there's no such thing. That means there are basically different ways to enter this profession. I would advise everyone to find out first of all: is that my thing? Can I translate literary? You can simply do that by sitting down with a literary text and trying to translate it. However, the German Translators' Fund also offers seminars for complete beginners in this field, which are intended to serve exactly this purpose.

If you now want to get into the profession in a concrete way, you really have to go door to door, as they say. You have to make contacts with the publishers. To do so, you have to get an idea of what kind of publishers you are dealing with, what kind of books might be interesting for them. And then you have to look for contact. One way to establish this contact is to write reports. The German publishers have to be informed about what is in the Scandinavian books. They get this information from reports written by literature students or translators, and that's a good way for both sides to get to know each other, to see what the literary feeling is, if it fits together. This is actually where most of my contacts have come from.

WHAT SOFT SKILLS DO YOU NEED AS A LITERARY TRANSLATOR?

I believe that soft skills include the fact that you have to get along well with people. You have to be sociable, you have to be able to establish contact with people, because bookmaking is clearly a task that is tackled collectively. There are editors with whom you have to get in touch, there are literary critics who sometimes want something from you, you hold readings, which you moderate, or where you read the texts. You always have to deal with a lot of people and you have to get along with them. Scandinavian Studies is actually quite nice because it's a relatively small circle of students, so there's always a lively exchange, whereas in the major subjects there's often a mass of people attending lectures and they're relatively anonymous.

WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OF STUDYING A SMALL SUBJECT LIKE SCANDINAVIAN STUDIES?

At that time I found that you simply get a much faster access to the teachers as well. In Scandinavian Studies, the hierarchies are relatively flat: there are also relatively flat hierarchies between students and lecturers, so that you are perceived as having equal standing relatively quickly.

Credits

The interview was conducted on January 29 2020 at the University of Cologne, Department for Scandinavian and Finnish Studies.

Interviewed by:	Anja Ute Blode, Anne-Katrin Heinen
Cinematography and Editing:	Adam Polczyk
Transcript by:	Anja Ute Blode, Anne-Katrin Heinen
j o l n e s – Design:	Heide Matz
Produced by:	University of Cologne, Department for Scandinavian and Finnish Studies