Débora Landsberg was the translator in residence in the Trinity Centre for Literary Translation last year. She is a literary translator from Rio de Janeiro and she’s translated authors such as Charles Dickens, Agatha Christie, Anne Enright and Sally Rooney. She shared some of her knowledge and experiences as a translator while being a teacher to the students of the M.Phil. in Literary Translation.

Q: How did you start as a literary translator in Brazil?

When I finished high school, I went to college to study journalism, and it lasted for 1 or 2 years. I wasn’t happy so I went to study design, cause I wanted to do book covers. But I was terrible at it, I can’t draw. One of the courses was “Image Gestalt”, i.e., a psychology theory applied to design, so it’s how do you look at images and what do you see first etc. At that moment I thought, “I’m in the wrong place; everyone hates this course and it is the only one I love”, so I dropped everything and I started to take courses on anything that interested me, like the Teacher’s Training Course. One of the subjects in this course was American Literature and there I read Bartleby, by Herman Melville, and I loved it. It’s my favourite book ever now. We also read other authors and I fell in love with literature all over again. I was always an avid reader, but until then it never really crossed my mind to do something with it professionally. I was doing this course and I saw an ad to a translation course at PUC-Rio, and one of the subjects was literary translation and I though “really? Is that a profession? Can you make a living doing that?” There was an exam and an interview. I remember exactly what the text was, it was the beginning of The Book of Illusions, a Paul Auster novel. I already had the book at home but I hadn’t read it yet. So we did a sample and then we went to the interview. Two of my teachers were there, one of them a well-known translator in Brazil, and I remember they asked me: “so did you live in the United States, where did you learn English?” And I just answered: “I’m self-taught.” When I went out of the room I thought I screwed it up because I said it that way, but I got in and I fell in love with translation. Then I got into College and I got my Bachelor of Art’s degree in Language and Literature.

Q: You once told us in class that you don’t read books before translating them, why is that?

At first it was because when you are a beginner, you don’t have the time to read it beforehand. You have a deadline, so you are wasting time reading it, but then I saw that it’s better because you don’t come in to the work with your own interpretation of it. So actually, you don’t put more meaning into something than what the writer is trying to put there. For instance, in Agatha Christie, I though the murderer was someone from the beginning, and I got it right. But I didn’t look, I didn’t want to know if I was right or not, because I think we have a tendency to explain too much when we are translating. So if we already have an interpretation we might extrapolate our job. I can see it with fresh eyes, as if I was a new reader. I think we already read too much into it, because we have to think about every single word. I’m a bad influence.

Q: Which is the book that you’ve enjoyed the most while translating it?
I had a lot of fun translating this one (the one she was translating while being a translator in residence in Dublin, *Conversations with Friends* by Sally Rooney). The language is not too hard, so it was more of me trying to not translate using more difficult words than the original, as I think we tend to do. There are books that I’ve translated that I call “paid vacations”, since they were fun and easy to do, but now I don’t have that anymore; they just give me hard stuff. I love translating Joyce Carol Oates’ novels. And Charles Dickens was nerve-wrecking, but it is always a great pleasure to overcome a challenge like that.

**Q: How many books have you translated so far?**

I think it is a number close to 35 books. I started early. I think usually people start when they are older, at least in Brazil. Often it is one’s second profession; they do something else and then, later in life, they pursue translation as a full-time profession, but it was my first one. I was aiming at 30 books at 30 but I could not do it because of my Master’s.

**Q: How old were you when you translated your first book?**

I was 23. Besides having a great command of the language that (s)he is translating into, a literary translator has to have a good general culture, a lot of curiosity, and a lot of patience to do research. When you are that young, publishers do not usually think you have all of that, so they don’t even want to waste their time on you. I had to hide my age in order to be tested on my translation skills by a publishing house.

**Q: What are the thing you love most about your profession?**

A lot of things. I’m a night person, and I can work at night. I don’t need to leave my house to go to work, I don’t need to commute, I don’t have traffic. There are days when you work in an office and you don’t feel like talking to others. Well, I am not required to. I get to read books, I know a few “bookish people” and some brilliant people. I can do what I want with my life, I can get my things and travel because as long as I have internet I can work. You just have deadlines, there is no one saying “where is the translation? How many pages have you done?” I think these are the things I love most about it.

**Q: Is there anything you don’t like about it?**

We should earn more. It is a very underrated job, and there are not many people who can do it. People should pay more attention to translators, maybe in reviews. There are some publishers that think you can translate books quickly, and if that happens it’s going to be bad, so you need time.

**Q: How do you feel about teaching translation in the future?**

I really really really want to do that, and I think it is necessary to have people who are in the business as well as people that focus on theory. When we read too much theory and we are not hands-on, we start seeing things from another point of view that is far from reality. For instance, I love Venutti, but you cannot do what he says; you will never work again if you do. He is able to do it because he is Venutti. I think we can do forewords and give interviews, but not “sabotage” a translation by trying to be visible. We are here to serve the author and the reader. We must try to be invisible in the translation, and leave visibility for other places and moments. We are often
considered co-authors, however, but we are not the authors per se. When you buy a book, you do not buy it because of the translator, but because of the author.

**Q: How was your experience as a literary translator in residence in the Trinity Centre for Literary Translation? Has this experience changed the way you see translation? Has your translation been affected by the fact that you were in Dublin?**

It improved my knowledge of Irish literature and the Irish world. When you translate a book, you are not translating only words, but a culture, so I think I’m worlds apart from where I was in regards to Ireland. However, it is very hard to explain it; it’s more of a feeling than something I can express. I can picture things better. It helps being and living in the place in which the work that you are translating is set. Now going back to my translation of Anne Enright, I understand some things better. I wish I could have been here to translate it. It could have helped me. I would have had fewer uncertainties since it was very hard to translate her. I do think it will not be quite as hard if I ever translate one of her books again.

**Q: A tip for beginner, what would you tell them?**

Read a lot of translations, good and bad. And aim at something, at the kind of literature you would like to translate; you don’t usually begin from that but if you aim at it you can try to make your way in order to get there. There was an exercise I did with you in class, the one that I told you to think about 3 books and 3 different publishers, and I did it because you have to know the publishing houses and you have to know what they do. And even if you are not working for them, let’s suppose you are talking to an editor and they talk about some other publishing house, it’s good to know what they are all about. Moreover, suppose you want to translate sci-fi; you don’t want to try to convince a publishing house that never publishes sci-fi. I would also recommend that you have a proof-reader that you trust — a family member, your partner, a friend. It must be someone who reads a lot, someone who knows what’s right and what’s wrong. Just make sure that they read your translation, but not the original.