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**Abstract:** Indirectly used as a theme and as a method, translation becomes a “contemporary metaphor” (Ribeiro, “A tradução”) in several Portuguese-language narratives of the 20th and 21st centuries and, particularly, in *Ancient Tillage* (2016 [1975]) by Raduan Nassar, the most important Brazilian writer of Lebanese origin. The narrative focuses on a family nucleus that, tensely, inherits Arab and Western influences, both characterized by moral rigidity. Appropriating a conservative interpretation of the Bible and of the Qur’an, the narrator refuses the idea of transparency that structures the imaginary and offers an unusual density to the Portuguese language. I will therefore analyze how the author, operating with instruments like those of the translator, inscribes the “other” as an antidote against autophagy, the untranslatable as a driver of reflection, betrayal as a practical alternative (Ricoeur, *Sobre a tradução*), and creation as an expression of a desire (Berman, *L’épreuve de l’étranger*).

**Keywords:** Raduan Nassar; *Ancient Tillage*; Arabic diaspora; Translation

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## The Idea of Translation in *Ancient Tillage*, by Raduan Nassar

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The material and symbolic boundaries between literature and translation have been the subject of numerous reflections in the last decades. Intensified by western expansion, the circulation of people, goods, and ideas made translation a fundamental presence in world exchanges. Therefore, it is not surprising that the translator and the interpreter have established themselves as characters in literary fiction. However, in this chapter, I will focus on another type of representation. Indirectly used as both a theme and a method, translation becomes a “contemporary metaphor”<sup>1</sup> (Ribeiro 77) in several 20th- and 21st-century Lusophone narratives and, particularly, in *Lavoura Arcaica* (1975) [*Ancient Tillage* (2016)] by Raduan Nassar. The most important Brazilian writer of Lebanese origin is also one of the leading voices in Portuguese-language literature, as confirmed by the extensive number of critics who have analyzed and valued his work since then. His novel has a very particular impact on the 21st century. Translations into several languages, including English in 2016, have made *Ancient Tillage* known to a wider audience. The 2016 Camões Prize, the most renowned literary recognition of lusophone countries, consecrates the novel in this linguistic community. In Brazil, this award also has a political dimension: the author is today one of the sharpest critical voices of the far-right populist government led by President Jair Bolsonaro. Far from being a political manifesto, *Ancient Tillage* is currently one of the most-read and revisited books by Brazilian readers and academics. Thus, Raduan

Nassar has inscribed his name in the history of Brazilian literature despite having published only three books: *Ancient Tillage*, which marked his literary debut in 1975; the novella *Copo de cólera* (1978) [*A Cup of Rage* (2016)]; and, finally, *Menina a caminho* (1997) [*Girl on the Way*], a volume of short stories bringing together narratives written between 1960 and 1970.

Naturally, writers of Arab origin have been part of the diaspora literature in Brazil for decades. Names such as Chaquif Maluf, Salim Miguel, William Agel de Mello, and Miguel Jorge and, more recently, Milton Hatoum, Alberto Mussa, or Michel Sleiman reflect in their works on the Lebanese presence in Brazil. Mixing Western and Arab influences, they contribute to expanding the thematic and aesthetic horizons of the Brazilian literary field. Most of them maintain intense literary activity and have published several fiction books in the 20th and 21st centuries. One way or the other, they revisit forms and themes inaugurated by Raduan Nassar in *Ancient Tillage*. Indeed, to understand the Arab impact on Brazilian literature and culture in the 21st century, a reading of *Ancient Tillage* becomes imperative.<sup>2</sup> Milton Hatoum underlines the importance of *Ancient Tillage*:

Por isso, o romance de Raduan me impressionou tanto. E também por outros aspectos que eu chamaria de afinidades temáticas ou laços de uma cultura comum: o Líbano, com suas ressonâncias islâmicas, bíblicas e orientais que Raduan incorpora ao topos da volta do filho pródigo em *Lavoura Arcaica*. Raduan talvez seja o primeiro ficcionista brasileiro de origem árabe a evocar de maneira tão densa e lírica certos temas da cultura oriental, mas num ambiente brasileiro e ‘tradicional.’

(Coutinho 13)

[the human dimension of *Ancient Tillage* impresses me a lot. And also for other thematic affinities or ties of a common culture: Lebanon, with its Islamic, biblical and oriental resonances that Raduan incorporates to

represent the classical topic of the return of the prodigal son. Raduan is perhaps the first Brazilian writer of Arab origin to evoke in such a dense and lyrical way specific themes of oriental culture, but in a Brazilian and ‘traditional’ environment.]

The life of Raduan Nassar is intimately linked to the complex history of Lebanon and the migratory processes that led his parents to settle in Brazil in 1920. There are few concrete records of the flow of Lebanese to Brazil, especially when compared to other communities that came from Europe during the same period and were processed through an institutional apparatus upon arrival. As Priscilla Coutinho states in her doctoral thesis on Raduan Nassar, unlike most foreigners who arrived in São Paulo in the first decades of the 20th century, the Lebanese were not processed through the “Hospedaria de Imigrantes” (Immigrant Inn), the main registration and reception center in São Paulo at the time. As such, national lists and archives do not allow names or the exact number of entries that occurred at the time to be checked (Coutinho 42). Nevertheless, it is estimated that around seven million Syrians and Lebanese settled in Brazil between the end of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century. The Nassar family most likely left Lebanon for similar reasons to those of their compatriots in the first wave: the difficult situation in a land of numerous conflicts dynamized by foreign forces and the regular persecution of Christian communities in a territory, at the time, dominated by Ottoman forces. As Coutinho demonstrates, most of these immigrants left a rural world, fostered a patriarchal social organization, and considered the family the main identity element (41). Anchored in religion and agriculture, this model is internalized in the structure of *Ancient Tillage*. Also implicit in the novel is the fear that the family structure, so strong in the Lebanese context, runs the risk of weakening in foreign lands. Therefore, it is up to the patriarch of the home to strengthen the memory, reiterate a conservation model of ties, and reinforce the pillars of its composition (Coutinho 41). In addition to this legacy, time and space confirm the impression of immobility that surrounds characters’ lives: the Brazilian dictatorship, which,

between 1964 and 1984, was also structured on the premises of home, family, God, and national body, and the interior of São Paulo, one of the wealthiest and most conservative provinces in Latin America. Despite that, time and space are not explicitly inscribed in *Ancient Tillage*. The narrative presents the classic dispute between father and son on one level. The incestuous passion between the narrator André and his sister Ana constitutes the novel's main conflict. From this foundational tension, the narrator examines the great contradictions of the model of family organization designed by the father. On a second level, *Ancient Tillage* indirectly contemplates the opposition between two regimes of truth: the untranslated world of the colonial regime of representation (Ribeiro, "Traduzir e ser traduzido" 67), embodied in the family patriarch, and the world of "hospitality" to the difference that characterizes translation (Ricoeur 30), represented by André.

This story of universal scope, in effect, anticipates a set of questions that would mobilize the theory of translation in the decades that followed. Appropriating a conservative interpretation of the Bible (the Old and New Testaments) and of the Qur'an (which differs from the biblical text in that it does not have a new version), the narrator refuses the idea of transparency that structures the imaginary and offers an unusual density to the Portuguese language. In addition to emerging as a theme, Arabic languages, religions, and cultures penetrate the dominant discursive code (Portuguese language). Aware of the difference, Raduan Nassar recognizes that the semantic fields represented cannot always harmoniously overlap and, through different processes, expands the aesthetic code of the Brazilian literary field. Operating with instruments like those of the translator, the author inscribes the "other" as an antidote against autophagy (Campos, *Galáxias*), the untranslatable as a driver of reflection (Ribeiro, "A tradução"; Ribeiro, "Traduzir e ser traduzido"; Large *et al.*, *Untranslatability*), betrayal as a practical alternative (Ricoeur, *Sobre a tradução*), and creation as an expression of a desire (Berman, *L'épreuve de l'étranger*; Berman, *La traduction*; Carvalho, *a câmara, a escrita e a coisa dita*).

The religious statement and the moralizing reprimand, also synthesized in Portuguese as the term “sermão” (sermon), are merged in the words of the head of this family of immigrants from the Mediterranean coast. From the transfiguration of the same material based on the lexicon of the body, the house, and the land, André, one of the sons, elaborates a kind of profane prayer that reveals the open wound of the family. In that house, the time for sermons was also mealtime. The metaphor of autophagy, that is, of thought that consumes itself and leads to dangerous proximity to totalitarian regimes, could not be more literal. The description of the setting, on the other hand, reinforces the idea of a universe closed around moral rigidity: the old, “solid, heavy” table (85); the immaculate white tablecloth laid out at one of the heads of the table; the light that makes the clean forehead of the motionless patriarch’s thick body; and the antique clock hung off the wall behind him, “each and every one of his words weighted by the pendulum, with nothing distracting us more at that time than the deep bells marking the passing of the hours” (28). Interweaving the regimes of religious and political domination, these symbols seek to attenuate the division that time has forged in the family and that, ironically, is manifested in the arrangement of the seating at the table: the father at the head and, on the right, in order by age, Pedro, Rosa, Zuleika, and Huda; on the left, the mother, André, Ana, and Lula, the youngest of all. Thus, if the “right branch [were] a spontaneous growth off the trunk, starting from its roots” (87), the left branch “bore the stigma of a scar, as if Mother, from where the left side started, were an anomaly, a morbid protuberance, a graft on the trunk, perhaps even fatal, it was so weighed down with affection” (87). Finally, at the opposite head of the table, the empty place of the deceased grandfather, an old immigrant who represents the passage of time, the transit in space, and the displacement of the Arabic language by Portuguese. However, the movement is damned since the imagery remains. The difference between father and grandfather is merely formal: while the former expands the vocabulary of austerity in a litany that confiscates the hidden meaning of the world, the latter, with a “coarse belch” (52), determines the order of things: “Maktub” (“it is written”).

To the narrator André, the grandfather was just a silent, old ascetic, a stalk of bone in which nothing shone “besides the chain of his terrible, golden, oriental hook” (26). But to the father, who carries on his project, he is the model of moral rigidity, “the patriarch whose mineral cleanliness of thought was never disturbed by the convulsions of nature” (34). Therefore, for the narrator, “it would be an exaggeration to say his chair remained empty” (87).

The father’s message is based on keywords that bring together different religious traditions, such as Christianity and Islam, and it is founded on the idea of transparency: the veneration of blood ties, work, austerity, self-control, and a sense of duty. As described in the Biblical and Qur’anic texts, the house is also an offshoot of a healthy body. Indeed, the metaphor of the protected home/body endows the father’s discourse with force: only houses with “strongly built foundations, strongly erected walls and a strongly supported ceiling” (35) and delimited by “our fences” (32) can ward off the imbalance caused by the “malignant tremor” (32) that seizes the hands of lovers; corrupts the “blessed strength of the arms” (32); spreads “throughout the pure regions of their bodies”; and penetrates through the head, “clouding their eyes with turmoil and darkness” (32). In this line of reasoning that values the retreat built around well-sealed boundaries, preventing the invasion of external impure shadows, “build a fence around your body or simply shield it” (33) are the two faces of a world without translation. According to António Sousa Ribeiro, no translation theory can be based on a perspective such as the one expressed in this way, built on a logic of mutual exclusion and a definition of the border as a dividing line (“A tradução” 81). In the same article, Ribeiro reminds us that this model is designed for simple corroboration of the starting point references and thus is destined to silence everything that is presented in the Other as discrepant to those references. In this conception, for Ribeiro, a simultaneously partial and universal world is built, within which the Other and its differences are reduced to the same (84–85).

Therefore, the playbook of principles is based on the cliché of the cleanliness of the body and the protection of the home. In both cases, the “dead metaphor” binds the diversity around a commonplace and, focusing on the most intimate and political space of all (the body), removes the possibility of movement. It has nothing to do with the transit between different worlds, which mutually enriches each other by producing the negotiation of difference. Remember that, for Paul Ricoeur (*A metáfora viva*), the “living metaphor” combines style and perception to construct new knowledge (22). Far from the characteristic *transposition*<sup>3</sup> of this poetic and translational procedure analyzed by the French theorist, the father’s words are fixed in a *position*. His grammar is oriented toward the division between “us” and “them” and towards the linkage between notions of race (“our blood”) and geography (“our house”). Used in all eras for the purpose of conservation of power and/or as a defensive attitude, communitarianism is the first effect of racial hierarchization based on spatial criteria (Mbembe 174). This combination also gives rise to formulations of a primordialist nature (Appadurai 15), that is, based on essentialist arguments: backed by the invention of an ancestral purity, selects information, erases difference, produces new forms of universalism for its own benefit, and, ultimately, consolidates fascism in the world without translation. Colonial in nature, this vision is therefore bound to the conviction of self-sufficiency. Deprived of contact with the “foreigner,” it disables translation; feeds the legitimacy of sovereignty; and justifies, in the symbolic plane, the emergence of “deadly identities” (Maalouf, *Les Identités meurtrières*). It is a conception remarkably close to the theory of “the clash of civilizations,” which was advocated in the field of ideas by Samuel Huntington (Ribeiro, “A tradução” 86) and put into practice by some of the most violent governments of yesterday and today.

As a reaction to the archaic and “indefatigable tillage” (23) of the father, André takes refuge in the room of a boarding house, from where he begins to visualize the “ancient sky” (72). The narrator becomes the full subject of translation from the moment he expresses the tense coexistence among the family members and, consequently, between two

or more cultural and ideological reference frames that inhabit the same space. André questions the values that structure the father's imagery, refuses the fate of uncritical assimilation, and surrenders to the conflict – a central problem of translation. Aware that the light projected in his house during the father's sermons was burning his eyelids, André is nourished by a speech composed of “moss, mud, and mire” (50), “good surplus manure” (70), and the shadows that live with the family. That is, from his temporary refuge, in the tense dialog he has with his eldest brother, who is trying to bring him back home, he conceives the space in a different way (now fertilized) and tempers his saliva with time (now circular). André knows that to demolish the body of the old house, he needs to get to a symbolic border and settle there as a translator who “goes into virgin forest and stays there overnight, like when someone penetrates a circle of people instead of circling it timidly from afar” (50). From this precarious and dialectic place, he evaluates the difference, examines and puts back together the shards strewn across the floor, dissects the most secret intricacies of the family, and redesigns the vessel of his old identity “from the clay of my own hands” (24).

As happens in any process of matter transformation or of transition from tradition to translation, André adds to the evaluation of the context (and its resources of a historical, geological, and metaphysical nature) a poetic investigation of the lexical, phonic, and rhythmic substances of ancient texts that expatriate, now in a different way, to the Portuguese language: “which startling, hot breath suddenly lifted up my eyelashes? Which abrupt, restless colt was carrying my body off in galloping levitation?” (29). Therefore, there is also an issue of translation at the core of his existence. Born of agony and moved by desire, André's expression combines language and communication. Just like that, as stated by Carvalho, the expression navigates the agitated waters of the confluence of the cold current of language with the hot current of speech (62).

*Ancient Tillage*, in effect, uses the method of translation and simultaneously anticipates a series of questions that would occupy the theorists of this science for the next

five decades. In the first place, André is aware of the limits in the house and the limits of his own resistance. He knows it's not enough to reverse the world since it would remain static in doing so. This is not just an ethical and moral issue but also a political and contextual one. Unlike Lula, the youngest brother who dreams of breaching the border without considering his own dispersion, André prepares an expression closer to music. Familiarity with the instrument is decisive in an undertaking of this nature:

in strumming the string of a lute – stretched to the limit – a highly tuned note would resonate (was assuming that it would be no more than a melancholy, shrill twang), yet it would be impossible to draw any note at all from the same string were it to be stretched until broken

(96)

This passage contains perhaps one of the most beautiful definitions of translation. Sensitive to the need for harmony, the narrator faces the conflict and the tumult of his silenced pain, disdains the ruler that measures the apparently solid world of the family, accepts the risk of “[taking up] the hammer and saw and [rebuilding] the silence of the house and its corridors” (39) and the challenge of placing oneself in the solitude of the border. From this complex center of operations, he removes “the nectar of my dagger from the fringes of these tender words” (63) and begins his transposition. And this happens even in those moments when the narrative moves on to secondary issues, such as when he recalls an episode from childhood. The narrator remembers when he unintentionally hunted and crushed a dove at his bedroom window. There, he is confronted with the responsibility and the mistakes characteristic of the two activities. Pursuing animals and searching for the exact word are ancient sciences that intertwine wakefulness and movement, the instant and agility, contact with the sordid solidity of order, and with the living matter that subverts this order. In André's voice, these dimensions are on a porous border:

which terrible instant marks the leap? Which gale and spatial depth conspire, toying with the limit? The limit where all newly vibrationless things no longer simply make up life in the day-to-day current, but have become life in the subterranean memory.

(56)

He knows that in the hunt and the expression there can be “one kernel too many, or one second less . . . ; no rapture, no jerking while pulling the string, not one extra second in the weight of the tense arm” (56–57).

This awareness becomes sharper after the narrator recognizes the irreconcilable distance between his father and the carnal passion for his sister Ana. André, deep down, is faced with the oldest problem of translation: the relationship with the unspeakable, the untranslatable. As António Sousa Ribeiro says, like Walter Benjamin, Antoine Berman, Lawrence Venuti, or Paul Ricoeur, because languages and cultures are incommensurable by definition, the entire theory of translation must start by confronting the problem of untranslatability (Ribeiro, “Traduzir e ser traduzido” 62). From this confrontation also arises the need to fill the gaps left open by that contact. In other words, the relationship with the hidden dimension of family discourse and the carnal passion for his sister, which is established like two sides of the same and deep-seated untranslatable situation, far from blocking the narrator’s undertaking, allows it to be practiced effectively. André retrieves the father’s lexicon but pours it out profanely. To this end, he integrates categories into his discourse that are challenging for any translator for reasons of meaning, effect, and equivalence: the murmuring, the dark omen, the secret, and the poetic virtuality that they safe keep. Finally, from the smallness of the boarding house room, the voice will circulate a broad memory in an uninterrupted flow, and, in this itinerary in which each syllable is calculated, the paradoxes of family tradition are revealed. Moreover, the narrative begins

with an emphasis on the same type of lexical overlap, space/body, but now under another regime of interpretation:

My eyes on the ceiling, nudity in the room; pink, blue or violet, the impenetrable room; the individual room, a world, a cathedral room, where, during the breaks of my anguish, I gathered a rough stem in the palm of my hand, the white rose of desperation, since, among the objects the room had sanctified, the objects of the body came first.

(7)

First, the new notation is marked by the group of colors, which refutes the fallacy of purity, and by the conjunction “or” that indicates the alternative and, simultaneously, the ordeal of nonfulfillment. The room’s environment is compared to a cathedral because a person lives alone with their own pain. Also, in conjunction with the space, the body becomes the main subject of the enunciation, and it is the object of a detailed cartography, the borders of which are of a different nature. Endowed with a language or with an “infralanguage” (Gil 32), the body recovers the lost complementarity of the world and converts into the main “operator of recollections” (Carvalho 60) of André’s translation of the world. In the tense dialog with Pedro, who assimilates the principles of tradition from the father, André contrasts an in-depth reading of the home space with the traces left there by the bodies with the paternal syntax. Thus, against the rhythmic linearity of the world without translation architected by the father, the narrator addresses the “confused hallways” (25) of the house and proposes the imaginative exercise of removing the lid of the bathroom laundry basket to his brother. For André, it sufficed to put his hands in there to hear better “all of our cries” (26) and “the guarded silence of the intimate articles thrown in there” (26). It was possible to “realize how ambivalently they were used, the men’s handkerchiefs, which had been extended like trays to protect the purity of the sheets” (25),

to “gather up the wrinkled sleep of the nightgowns and pajamas and to discover, lost in their folds, the coiled, repressed energy of the most tender pubic hair” (25), to feel “the stains of loneliness . . . , many of them aborted, greased by imagination” (26). André’s invitation, therefore, was to suspend the alienating time of the wall clock while the house slept to return “the roots” of his feet “to their origins” (53) and, “among gray rats” (52), to feel “the creaking wood, the cracks in the walls, the slack windows, the darkness of the kitchen” (53). With this gesture, he intends to scrutinize the vibration of the nervous foundations, to hear the palpitations of the doors, to relive “the squalid whispers and spiderwebs dangling from the rafters” (53), to paw at the “red-dust-covered sanitary napkins, as if they were an assassin’s rags” (25). It is, in fact, a literal and metaphorical movement that helps André to relate to the “vinegary, rotten smell of the cold, vein-ridden walls of a dirty clothes hamper” (26), and investigate the dough from which the restrained scream of the millenary family rituals is made. In short, in his rereading of the world, André proposes the replacement of religious guilt with individual responsibility. To this end, he precipitates language along pathways never suspected within the confines of that house. From his boarding house room, he celebrates the body in all its thickness: the markings of the filthy body of the disheveled, the intense smells, the spilled remains, the mites that impregnate the pores, the wound and the turgid bone, the cancer, the delirium, and the blood clots that spill out to release “the nauseating words that had been forever locked away in silence” (62), the anger and its text(ure). André also describes the murmuring that wanders among the rubble, probes the lime, the salt, and the “sand-filled pain of the desert” (107) contained in the bitter words of his mother and her “ancient lament that to this day can still be heard along the poor Mediterranean coast” (107). Through the body, a greater order, metonymized in the house’s objects, is also profaned: “scratching into the softness of the lilies in their vases, leaving my fingerprints on their chaste parchment leaves, combing the alcoves for lascivious saints” (76).

A reflection on culture and the ways of reading it is at play throughout this process. For Ribeiro (“Traduzir e ser traduzido”), in line with what Stuart Hall proposed in the 1990s, cultures are dynamic and conflictual processes and not simply established canons. According to this definition, culture is less a question of tradition (represented in the father’s narrative) than translation (incarnated in André). As such, it must be thought of as not originating from an immobile center but from a position within a relational network: “to be in translation” is not an incidental trait but an essential, defining characteristic of any culture (63). Questioning the ambiguities, disheartened by restful ideas, impatient with the clotted faces of his family, André does not disregard the history of an origin in his speech. But he also knows the very idea of origin – linguistic, religious – resulting from long-term exchanges. Therefore, he opposes the imagery of linearity and the notion of the immaculate house/body that drives the father. Attentive to porosity, he scrutinizes the “turgid bones” (76) or the “shavings of bone” of each family member, the “skeleton of my thoughts” (93) that hides them, the mother’s “calcified womb” (19), Ana’s feet with their “soles aflame” (20), and the “soft stomach of the moment” (20) in which everything is revealed. The narrator seeks to restore the lost complementarity of the world somehow. Imperfection plays a decisive role in this endeavor. Therefore, he celebrates the physical defects that organize the animal world: “the graceful, wobbling teal, the ducks, flat from their beaks to their webbed feet, the puffed-up turkeys, as well as the adventure-seeking, ornery guinea hens, bearing their sickly lump as if it were a crest” (69). The figure of God is rewritten based on the same type of procedure:

carefully removing the webs covering the ancient light of Your eyes . . . ; I  
will also remove the corrupt dust suffocating Your terrestrial hair, and  
zealously remove the lice that have left tracks on Your scalp; I’ll clean Your  
dark fingernails with mine, and will eliminate, one by one, the dragonflies  
laying eggs in Your pubis.

Ironically, what is proposed in the entire narrative is a one-on-one with the sacred. André investigates the religious universe from where he desecrates “the family shrine at the top of [his] lungs” (78). He in no way ignores the body of tools that must be used in his solitary task. For the world he imagines by the side of his sister-lover, he foresees scrutinizing “the hammer claws, the level vial, and the saw teeth . . . so they’re always ready, for I’m well aware that no one cuts without a blade” (69). Thus, using stylistic devices like the oxymoron, the ellipsis, personification, and the metaphor, which, here, favor the broadening of philosophical thinking and the application of a poetic rhythm anchored in orality, André’s holy fury contemplates the demands of artistry and unity with the goal of transfiguration.

To gather together the material dispersed in this calculated dialectic, the narrator devours other texts and confirms an indispensable element in the production of knowledge: ethical responsibility. And this happens implicitly, as we have seen, or explicitly, as when he reacts to his father’s reading of the tale of the starving man from the Arabic classic *Arabian Nights*: “how could a man with bread, meat and wine on his table, and salt for seasoning, tell a story about hunger? How could Father, Pedro, have left out so much every time he told that oriental tale?” (48). By focusing on the underprivileged of yesterday and today, André blows his father’s hypocrisy wide open with the invention of aphorisms: “it was the apposite prerogative of gluttons to test the virtue of patience with other people’s hunger” (63). In this synthesis, the teenager also indirectly presents a definition of translation processes: “It’s a strange world, Father, which only unites by dividing; built up on accidents, there is no self-sustaining order” (91). The narrator’s proposal, in short, encompasses a vast network of relationships that starts in the universe of religious figuration, passes through literary representation, and culminates in the socio-political

plane. As for translation, which condenses all these phenomena, it emerges as a metaphor, method, and vehicle of a desire.

As a translator moved by an ethical sense, André fills gaps, creatively and harmonically transfigures the context, dares to use the exact word for that which until then had been silenced. I also underscore, within this architecture, the game that he establishes between lexical extension and repetition. As we have seen, the former allows the breaking in of a new statement about the body and, with it, transposition to a new regime of interpretation of the sacred text. Repetition, in turn, occurring in a functional manner as in the stories of the oral tradition, allows articulation between digressive and anticipatory discourses. The most important of them is the description of Ana's dance, inserted in chapters 5 and 29. In the first instance, we observe a ritual characteristic of the family, which refers to the legacy of Lebanese traditions. Then, in chapter 29, Ana adds several significant details that place the body at the center of all the subversions. That is, the narrative seems to want to show that it is not enough just to position oneself at the border. The step that each body may or may not take in this negotiation of space is significant. The dancer now appears with the small objects that her brother André secretly kept in a box. With them, and with calculated impetus, she reveals the differences at play: "confidently introducing her fiery decadence into the centre, shocking the surprised looks still further, dangling cries from each of the mouths, paralyzing all gestures for an instant, yet still dominating everyone with the violent impetus of her spirit" (103–104). The accumulated surplus is at the source of the passage from one code to another, from position to transposition, from formation to transformation, and from tradition to translation. For José Gil, in his studies on the language of the body, this type of performance is sent directly back to the corporeality of the audience. That is, the path of the dancer's "corpo-significante" [body-significant] is aimed at the spectator's "corpo-significado" [body-significance] (35).

In this context, Ana experiences the vertigo of displacement. The dancer's body is thus established as a "transdutor de signos" ["transducer of signals"] able to emit and receive signals, inscribe them on itself, and translate some of them into others (Gil, 32). As a demanding translator, Ana disturbs and fascinates the family, to whom now falls the task of forming – with the help of her body-grammar – the sentences she necessarily leaves incomplete (Gil 35). Favoring the passage from the closed regime of tradition to the regime of possibilities of translation, Ana expresses the limits of the exchanges between collectivity and individuals. This is possible because her body abandons its previous condition of muteness, chastity, and passivity and takes on the condition of the subject of memory, conveyor of meaning, and engine of knowledge and creation. Therefore, it can be said that, in the final stretch of the narrative, Ana's body is simultaneously the matrix and the place of reckoning of History (Weigel 88).

It is also important to highlight the change in verb tenses throughout the description of the scene: from the imperfect tense ("would make strident cymbals," "I would untie my shoes, take off my socks and, with my clean, white feet, scrape away the dry leaves") (used in chapter 5), we move to the past perfect tense ("made strident cymbals," "I untied my shoes, took off my socks and, with clean, white feet, scraped away the dry leaves"). Used in chapter 29, this verb tense suggests that this was the last dance. In fact, the father, "possessed by divine wrath" (106) due to the provocation that exceeded the limits of family morality, murders his daughter with a cutlass. The tragedy, in fact, had already been anticipated at several moments in the narrative. Raduan Nassar summarizes in small segments the past of forbidden love, the future of death, and between them, a reflection on the transposition: "reason is generous, dear sister, it cuts through in any direction, will agree to any byway, as long as we handle the blade skillfully" (74). Ana's death ironically confirms both the grandfather's precept ("Maktub," "is it written") and the punishment foretold in the sacred book of Islam, cited between chapters 21 and 22: "Forbidden to you are your mothers, your daughters, and your sisters, (Koran, Chapter IV, 23)" (81).

In conclusion, *Ancient Tillage* is centered around two opposite interpretations of the border, which are also two rival conceptions about the representation of the world and to antagonistic forms of a relationship with a difference: the first is that of the father, summarized in the image of the fence that protects the house from the dangers of the world. The border, in this conception, is the manifestation of a defensive reaction of the world without translation. With the second interpretation, that of André, we know the incommensurability of the things that hide behind the rotted silence of the family. We travel, with the narrator, to the border where the characteristic passage of the world of translation is articulated. In the successive scale of interactions that he experiences, the young man deals with some of the most significant challenges (the secret, the unspeakable) and meets the most common fate of the entire endeavor of translation (betrayal). Aiming for a sense of balance distinct from that of his father, whose discourse is marked by stereotypes, André surrenders the exercise of transposition and, thence, establishes a new relationship with the land and with time. Therefore, two registers emerge in the narrative: the ancient tillage of the family patriarch, who assimilates and reduces the different into the identical in a process of deadly autophagy; and the labor of André, who, refusing the limiting and fallacious synthesis, keeps the tension and the mutual estrangement between the contexts of departure and arrival alive (Ribeiro, “A tradução” 84). This occurs when the narrative welcomes the word of the “foreigner.” Reconfiguring the language from an exercise of tense comparison between opposing imaginaries, Raduan Nassar confirms the proximity between poetic invention and translation. At every moment, the work problematizes “the concept of original and the priority of original,” presents the way “to negotiate differences and to make the difference manifest,” and, finally to examine the estrangement “as a not only intercultural but also intracultural phenomenon,” essential dimensions prescribed by the contemporary theory of translation (Ribeiro, “A tradução” 87). In the novel, moreover, we locate not only the “problem” of translation (untranslatability), but also the potential of this practice for broadening the esthetic code of

the literary field, for expanding the linguistic and cultural horizons of the frames of reference in play, and, finally, for recognizing the ethical responsibility that accompanies the task of mediating the difference.

If the practice of translation continues to be a risky operation always in search of a theory (Ricoeur 37), *Ancient Tillage* plays a decisive role in this undertaking – and has been doing so for nearly 50 years.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> All translations from Portuguese, direct or paraphrased, except the quotes from *Ancient Tillage*, are my responsibility.

<sup>2</sup> On Brazilian authors of Arab origin, see *A Literatura Brasileira e a Cultura Árabe*, by Moema de Castro e Silva Olival. In this work, the author analyzes the literary production of six Brazilian writers of Lebanese origin, including Raduan Nassar, and highlights their contribution to the field of cultural production in Brazil.

<sup>3</sup> On the notion of transposition and its relationship with the concepts of migration, translation, and music, see Rice (*Transpositions: Migration, Translation, Music*).