

In the Origins of Brazilian Haiku – Guilherme de Almeida

Michele Eduarda Brasil de Sá, Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil

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Abstract

Haiku is a trendy poetic genre, read and written by many worldwide. Originating in Japan, this small piece of three verses, seventeen syllables, a word for the season (*kigo*), and other strict rules has gained different scents and characteristics, and it also happened in Brazil. Haiku as a genre was introduced in Brazil mainly through two ways: one, the modernist poets who had contact with it in France, in the waves of the “Japonisme,” and wanted to write haiku as an exercise of new style; and two, the Japanese immigrants that came to Brazil since 1908 and kept the tradition of organizing weekly haiku clubs - yet these produced haiku in Japanese, not in Portuguese. This work presents an exercise of translation (Portuguese-English) of some works by the poet Guilherme de Almeida (1890-1969), one of the pioneers of haiku in Brazil. It follows his main view of haiku as a literary critic, conveyed in his emblematic essay *My haiku (Os meus haikai)*, published in 1939.

Keywords: Haiku, Brazilian Poetry, Translation

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Introduction

Because of the 100th-anniversary celebration of Brazil's Modernist movement, whose beginning milestone is the Brazilian Modern Art Week (São Paulo, February 13 to 17, 1922), many of its original participants have recently received renewed attention from artists, academics, and educators. The legacy of the Modernists was revisited, and their artistic event caught the public's attention again because of the centennial. However, even being considered a relevant mark in Brazilian Literature history today, the Modern Art Week in São Paulo became such a celebration happening only during the 40s, after the death of Mário de Andrade, one of its leaders. Recent studies (Cardoso, 2022; Marques, 2022) question the Week's success in its declared objectives—and we need to acknowledge that some of the Modernists themselves had already done their self-critique in the past. There are participants like Yan Moreira Prado, who went as far as to write a 150-pages book against Modern Week in 1976 (Secchin et al., 2022).

One thing usually said about that unconventional group of artists is that they had the project of showing authentic Brazilian culture, revealing its uniqueness and distinctiveness from European culture. Nevertheless, most artists were influenced by vanguardist movements abroad (especially from France). Moreover, what is/was the “authentic Brazilian culture,” Brazil being a country of continental dimensions, whose population was formed by people from diverse origins, carrying various cultural features?

Another aspect of Modern Art Week was the rupture with the previous tendency that enthroned formal aesthetics (*ars gratia artis*). In literature, generally speaking, this tendency was materialized in rigid rhyme schemes in poetry, as well as the constant use of figures of speech and sometimes over-elaborated sentences. Modernist writers would then exercise new patterns different from those already cultivated and accepted.

One of these “new patterns” was the haiku, a Japanese genre whose traditional elements are its brief form (three verses with 5-7-5 syllables, 17 in total), the technique of cutting (*kireji*), and the principle of the seasonal theme expressed in a *kigo*, or “word of the season” (Kuriyama & Yasuda, 1983, p. 81). Brazil would come to know haiku in two different ways: 1) some Modernist poets found it in French writers, under the influence of the “Japonisme,” and 2) the Japanese immigrants that started to come to Brazil from 1908 on and used to write haiku in organized clubs. Since these immigrants wrote haiku in Japanese, not Portuguese, the literary production inside the clubs was not accessible initially.

As Franchetti (2008, p. 258) points out, the poet Afrânio Peixoto (1876-1947) made the first positive mention of haiku in Brazil in his *Popular Brazilian Trovas (Trovas Populares Brasileiras)*, published in 1919. Comparing the Japanese haiku to the popular genre named “trova,” Peixoto presented haiku as a “lyrical epigram,” highlighting its “untranslatable charm.” French poet Paul-Louis Couchoud (1879-1959) was Peixoto's source and inspiration to write haiku in Portuguese as a new and challenging style exercise. He probably called haiku “epigrams” because of Couchod's work *The Lyric Epigrams of Japan (Les Epigrammes Lyriques du Japon)*. Similarly, B. H. Chamberlain's pioneer book *Japanese Poetry* (1910) had a chapter entitled “Basho and the Japanese Epigram.” Also, William Porter's anthology of translations was entitled *A Year of Japanese Epigrams* (1911). Other poets started experimenting with haiku, and the newly-found genre spread to Europe and the United States — and then to Latin America.

The next poet to appear as a representative of haiku in Brazil is Guilherme de Almeida (1890-1969). If Afrânio Peixoto was responsible for bringing haiku to the Portuguese language, Guilherme de Almeida was the one who made it reach a wider audience. His first step was to adapt haiku to an aesthetic compatible with Portuguese (Franchetti, 2012, p. 202). This adaptation would then imply the use of rhyme and the attribution of a title to the poem, both of which are unusual in traditional haiku. Summing up, Almeida kept the seventeen syllables but determined that the first verse should rhyme with the third and that there should be an internal rhyme in the second verse matching the second and the seventh syllable.

The fact is that, as in other parts of the world, haiku is a well-established genre in Brazil, adapted and practiced. After Peixoto and Almeida, many other Brazilian poets from different regions in the country, since the Modernist movement until today, have continued to adapt Japanese haiku to Brazilian Portuguese. Some poets included elements of the Brazilian fauna and flora to substitute the kigo, for example; others did not strictly follow the rule of 17 syllables; others embedded a humorous tone in their poems.

This work is an exercise in translating some of Almeida's haiku from Portuguese to English. Haiku is undoubtedly a challenging form to translate. Its briefness cannot be considered an indication of vulgarity or easiness. Varley (2000) writes:

Since the rules are simple, almost anyone can compose these seventeen-syllable poems, and indeed Japanese of all classes have written haiku through the centuries from Bashō's time. But the haiku is something like the ultimate in deceptive simplicity, and out of a vast number of acceptable ones only a fraction are apt to be truly fine. [...] With little more than a handful of syllables at his disposal, the writer of haiku obviously cannot hope to enter into extended poetic dialogue. He must seek to create an effect, capture a mood, or bring about a sudden and sharp insight into the truth of human existence. (p. 195)

Conjugating the small number of syllables, the intention of rhyming, and the decision to give titles to the poems, Almeida writes some creative haiku that can arouse a reflection about the act of translation and also about the translator's choices. Before we move on to the poems and their translations, we must first turn our eyes to the poet's concepts and perspectives.

Guilherme de Almeida — a word on originality

Before we proceed to Almeida's poems, it is crucial to understand what his view about haiku is described in his essay *My haiku*, published in 1939 in the *Brazilian Literature Annual Report (Anuário Brasileiro de Literatura)* from the Brazilian Academy of Letters:

But what is haiku? Created by Basho (17th century) and humanized by Issa (19th century), haiku is poetry reduced to the simplest expression. A mere statement: logical but unexplained. Just a pure emotion harvested in the furtive flight of the passing seasons, as one harvests a flower in spring, a sunray in summer, a dead leaf in autumn, a snowflake in winter. Emotion concentrated in a fine synthesis, seventeen sounds spread over three verses: the first with five syllables, the second with seven, and the third with five. A brief impression, but so extensible, so unfolding [...] ¹

¹ In Portuguese: "Mas, o que é o haikai? Criado por Basho (Séc. XVII) e humanizado por Issa (Séc. XIX), o haikai é a poesia reduzida à expressão mais simples. Um mero enunciado: lógico, mas inexplicado. Apenas uma pura emoção colhida ao vôo furtivo das estações que passam, como se colhe uma flor na primavera, um raio de

In this short paragraph, Almeida indicates haiku's Japanese origins in its most well-known representatives (Basho and Issa), delimitates its form (in explaining the number of verses and syllables), and also highlights its essence by defining it as "poetry reduced to the simplest expression." He continues his essay exalting haiku's brevity, saying that "there is no poetic idea, no matter how complex, that, stripped of all extraneous garments, washed of all excretions, purged of all impurities, does not fit strictly and sufficiently, in the end, into the seventeen syllables of a haiku." He quickly cites titles of poems in Portuguese and in French that could be reduced, in his opinion, to a haiku, and calls Western poetry "dispersive."

After presenting some "similarities" between Japanese and Portuguese (poetry measured in syllables, primarily based on "elemental sonorities," followed by the use of verses with odd numbers of syllables), Almeida then introduces his formula of haiku: it must have three verses and the same distribution of syllables as in the Japanese format (5-7-5); the first verse must rhyme with the third; the second verse must have an internal rhyme (second syllable rhyming with the seventh); and must follow the way "feel, think, and do not say: only insinuate."

With this metric and rhyme delimited, Guilherme de Almeida evidences that his primary interest in the Japanese haiku was not the content but the form. According to Franchetti (2012, p. 203), rhyme is not the main problem in Almeida's Brazilianized haiku, even though it is an artificial feature set to the Japanese form. What damages his compositions is the creation of titles for his poems. Title attribution is not mentioned in his formula, but he keeps it a practice that could well be added to his *haiku-dō*.

Let us take a look at the following poem:

Infância
Um gosto de amora
Comida com sol. A vida
chama-se agora.

Childhood
A taste of mulberry
Eaten with sunlight. Life
is called now.

Using the poem above as an example, Franchetti (loc. cit.) observes that, without a title, it can be read as an authentic haiku: the word *mulberry* functions as a *kigo*; the poem undeniably sets up a picture of the present moment finishing with the word "now." However, when we pay attention to the title chosen by Almeida, "Infância" (*Childhood*), it becomes a memory rather than an immediate sensation. The word *mulberry* loses its weight of *kigo*, for it no longer triggers a particular emotion experienced in the current season.

Despite Franchetti's observation, Goga (1988, p. 40) affirms that Almeida's way of writing haiku, emphasizing the form, constitutes one of the three currents of haiku in Brazil, one followed by other poets. The other two currents regard the use of *kigo* and appraise content as more important than form. Almeida is always remembered as a reference in Brazilian haiku. His constant use of titles can be interpreted as an attachment to the Western poetry he criticizes in his essay. Maybe the idea that the title is essential in a poem is so deeply rooted in his practice that he does not question its use in haiku and does not even feel the need to mention it as an aesthetic element in his formula.

sol no verão, uma folha morta no outono, um floco de neve no inverno. Emoção concentrada numa síntese fina, poeticamente apresentada em dezessete sons, repartidos por três versos: o primeiro de cinco sílabas, o segundo de sete e o terceiro de cinco. Impressão breve, mas tão extensível, desdobrável [...]"

Translating Almeida's haiku — from Portuguese to English

Writing about the translation of haiku from Japanese to English, Henderson (2004) mentions the four “general rules” for haiku: 1) Japanese haiku “syllables” are indeed units of duration (each one represented by a kana symbol or character — and a character may correspond to a single word); 2) the *kigo*, or words for the season, are mostly conventional, so their reference to nature is not always apparent or direct; 3) it covers one event; 4) this event happens now (in the present moment). When translating haiku from other languages (in our case, Portuguese) to English, these rules must be relativized. Rules 3 and 4 are easy to observe, but 1 and 2 rely on linguistic and cultural peculiarities.

As for the translation of Almeida's poems, this work will experiment with two forms: the first version will be straight and literal for general comprehension, not really elaborated under any rules (Japanese or any other in a particular way); the second one will try to keep Almeida's formula with rhymes. We present then the two translations of the poem *Infância*, as follows:

Childhood

A taste of mulberry
Eaten with sunlight. Life
is called now.

Childhood

Mulberries we savor
allow the sunlight in. Now
is the present flavor.

Because our main concern is translating Almeida's poems following the precepts in his formula, the rules applied to haiku in general (like the mandatory use of a *kigo*, for example) will be considered secondary. Moreover, we will also keep the titles, for they are inherent to the poet's creations.

Almeida's essay *My haiku (Os meus haikai)* was published in a prestigious journal, the *Brazilian Literature Annual Report*, from the Brazilian Academy of Letters. The essay is an apology for haiku as a genre. His quest for haiku is sincere, although he only touches it indirectly through the reading of European writers. He tries to compare — and then approximate — the Japanese language to Brazilian Portuguese, yet he always mentions the French poets when needing to add his source of authority. When he mentions that the Japanese say that haiku is not to be explained, he does it from what he had heard from the French. He confesses himself as “only an initiate, not yet familiar with the spirit and form of this small novelty.” He then proceeds in his text, allying practice and theory, showing some of his own haiku together with brief explanations.

The first poem he brings up is called *Charity (Caridade)*, and he explains it before showing it:

Caridade

Desfolha-se a rosa
parece até que floresce
o chão cor-de-rosa.

Charity

The rose defoliates
it even seems that
the pink floor blooms.

Charity

Leafless roses' gloom
it seems, though, that in their dreams
the ruby floor is in bloom.

In his words, “the flower that defoliates itself is a moral lesson of high charity” because it gives itself entirely to the ground, making it think it is also capable of blooming. This moral lesson (and this is the expression Almeida uses in his explanation) resonates more with the spirit of the fables (especially when we remember the Western tradition) than with the feeling of a Japanese haiku, which would probably be interpreted under the concept of the impermanence of things. This poem, like the first one we saw before (*Childhood*), is somehow betrayed by the use of a title: it undermines its connection with an event that happens now by referring to something that is not inside that event (in this case, a “morality” allotted to the rose).

Nevertheless, not all titles in Almeida’s haiku produce such a discrepancy. Some provide a metaphorical sense that offers a second interpretation of the poem. This is what we can see in his *Two of us*, where the poet declares the images of a bird flying and the ground symbolize a woman and a man — a metaphor for love:

Nós dois

Chão humilde. Então,
riscou-o a sombra de um voo.
"Sou céu!" disse o chão.

Two of us

Humble ground. Then,
the shadow of a flight scratched it.
“I am sky!” said the ground.

Two of us

Humble ground. So spry
a flight crosses the broad light.
The ground says: “I’m sky!”

It is possible to notice the same device of double (or dubious?) interpretation in the poem *Story of some lives*, where Almeida compares the “imperceptible creatures through whom life seems to pass without leaving or taking anything” with “the railroad trains through insignificant little stations where nobody boards or disembarks.” It also shares a moral impression, confirmed when we read Almeida’s comments to the poem in his essay:

História de algumas vidas

Noite. Um silvo no ar.
Ninguém, na estação. E o trem
passa sem parar.

Story of some lives

Night. A hiss in the air.
No one at the station. And the train
passes without stopping.

Story of some lives

Night. That hiss again.
The station in bleak expectation
sees the stopless train.

Choosing the words to do translations that would imitate Almeida’s formula in English was an enriching experience. It was an exercise of crafting the form wishing to convey (or at least trying to express) the message and the images the poet used to accomplish his goals. In the following haiku, *Old Age*, the second verse was unsolved at first because the word “branch” was difficult to rhyme. Substituting it with “twig” would allow more options, and a satisfying translation was closer as long as it did not fall for the overused and generic word “big.” The final translation uses the word “prig,” which means “to be considered arrogant or annoying.” This word choice is justified by Almeida’s explanation as well: he says this haiku is a

description of old age and mentions the things that he considers to be part of it — including what he calls “the loneliness and selfishness of the old ones.”

Velhice

Uma folha morta.
Um galho no céu grisalho.
Fecho a minha porta.

Old age

A dead leaf.
A branch in the gray sky.
I close my door.

Old age

Dead leaf on the floor.
The twig in the gray sky's prig,
makes me close my door.

Almeida's negative impression of old age is not concealed in this poem. Being one of the Modernists of 1922, he was imbued with renewal aspirations, so when writing this haiku, he might have thought of the “old school” of what he must have considered the outdated fancifulness of poetic forms. Maybe he thought of some poet who would insist on keeping things as they were before — who knows? Furthermore, he finishes his essay with a haiku about haiku, his ultimate apology:

O haikai

Lava, escorre, agita
a areia. E enfim, na batêa,
fica uma pepita.

The haiku

Wash, drain, stir
the sand. And finally, in the panning,
a nugget remains.

The haiku

Wash, drain, stir the grains
of sand. At last, in the digger's hand,
a nugget remains.

In the end, this poem is Almeida sustaining that haiku is as precious as gold; that it does not come easy, taking time, effort, and patience; and that any subject is suitable for treatment in haiku, despite the limitations of form. It also shows that two independent images can still fit in a haiku in such a way that each image enriches the understanding of the other. Moreover, as for “despite the limitations of form,” he is undoubtedly not advocating a simplification effort; on the contrary, his hands have very sharp, sophisticated pieces of carved poetry.

Conclusion

I close this brief exercise of translation by taking Almeida's words at the end of his essay:

There you have it.

Understand well: this is still an experiment, nothing more.

What I claim for these verses are not the deep wrinkles on the severe forehead, for the sentence that acquits or condemns; but the light wrinkles at the corners of the witty lips, for the smile that neither acquits nor condemns because... because the smile is still the only thing in the world that cannot be ridiculous...

Playfully, Almeida made his point and affirmed haiku as a genre once more even though its value was still under scrutiny. Ironically, he would later be criticized for his attachment to the

use of rhymes and titles, a sign of giving too much importance to the poetic form. Antonio Carlos Secchin (a member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters and emeritus professor of Brazilian Literature at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), for example, considers Guilherme de Almeida a pre-Modernist, not a Modernist in a proper sense, because of his preference for fixed forms (Secchin et al., 2022).

Almeida's haiku inspired many poets in Brazil after him. Such a relevant figure of Brazilian literature should be better known outside Brazil, but this can only be done through translation. Finally, we understand that a translation of Almeida's haiku, even if only an exercise or a preliminary attempt, needs to take into account his style and his conception of what a haiku is or can be. His essay *My haiku (Os meus haikai)* is a kind of summary of his understanding and must be considered when translating his haiku.

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Contact email: michele.eduarda@ufms.br