

Re-Reading Millôr Fernandes's Haikus from the Perspective of Epigram

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Abstract

The Brazilian Millôr Fernandes (1923–2012) created a range of artworks, including the haiku-painting collection *Hai-Kais*. This consists of 93 his haikus and his paintings, published in a magazine format from 1957 to 1986. Millôr's *Hai-Kais* met with commercial success and popularized the haiku in Brazil. However, his haikus have not met praised in perspective of the discipline of literature.

For example, Paulo Franchetti (1954–), a Brazilian authority on the haiku study, referred to Millôr's haikus as epigrams. This term was previously used as the alternative word by the West to describe the haiku. However, Paul-Louis Couchoud (1879–1959), when introducing the haiku to France, did not compare it to the epigram, as epigrams tend to be satirical, which the haiku is not. Franchetti agreed Couchoud's definition of the haiku and thus likely recognized that an epigram was not an appropriate term to characterize the haiku, although he nevertheless used it for Millôr's haiku.

Do all of Millôr's haikus contain satire? This paper conducts a re-reading of Millôr's haiku with focus on the term epigram. This paper also focuses on *kigo* (the Japanese word for a specific season) as concept generally not found in the epigram and as an important element of Franchetti's ideal of the haiku. The variety of Millôr's haiku world is examined with reference to Millôr's epigrammatic haikus and non-epigrammatic haikus.

1. Introduction

The Brazilian artist Millôr Fernandes (1923–2012) left works in the various fields of art. In his haiku¹ collection *Hai-Kais*², the brief personal history starts with the sentence: "How to can we speak about Millôr Fernandes? It is impossible to classify him, because he escapes any mold" (Fernandes),³ calling him "writer" (*ibid.*), "philosopher" (*ibid.*), and "humorist" (*ibid.*), but even all these words are not enough.

Among his various works, there was his series of haiku-paintings. In the

¹ In this article, I use the term *haiku* as a generally categorical term, although *haikai* (or *haikai*) is more common in Brazil.

² In *Hai-Kais*, there seems to be three versions; 1968 (E. Senzala São Paulo), 1986 (Nórdica), and 1997 (L&PM Editores). All versions have different haikus and paintings, therefore in this article used 1986 version because in this version Millôr's paintings are presented without others' works, and he provides a preface and a postscript.

³ In *Hai-Kais*, there are not number in page, therefore each cite does not show the page.

preface to his *Hai-Kais*, Millôr wrote, “My interest in haikai as the form of expression that is direct and economical begun in 1957, when I was writing a section of humor (*Pif-Paf*) in the magazine *O Cruzeiro*” (Fernandes). It was in the weekly illustrated magazine that he began the haiku-painting. *Hai-Kais* consists of 93 haikus from works from 1957 to 1986.

Millôr’s *Hai-Kais* had had commercial success, because the series was long-running and that the *Hai-Kais* came in three versions each. His popularity was mentioned by a poet Rosa Clement. She said that “Several of his followers present in this essay also write using this kind of rhyming” (Clement). In addition, Paulo Franchetti (1954–)⁴ reports that Millôr was one of the “two authors who made haikai definitively popular in Brazil: Paulo Leminski and Millôr Fernandes” (Franchetti, 12).

Although, Franchetti does not praise Millôr’s haiku as literature, Franchetti called Millôr’s haikus not haiku but instead “three free verses” (Franchetti, 12) and epigrams (*ibid.*). In addition, he judges Millôr’s paintings as follows: “Always accompanied by a drawing by the author to complete the poem’s meaning, to dialogue with it or merely as an illustration” (*ibid.*). Also, it should be noted that the haiku group Grêmio Haicai Ipê,⁵ where Franchetti played important role, did not include Millôr’s name or his works in the anthology *100 Haicaístas Brasileiros* (1990).⁶

Are Millôr’s haikus really inferior as literature? This article re-reads Millôr’s haikus using the poetic concept of the epigram. In Franchetti’s article, there are no mention any specific haikus by Millôr due to space restrictions.

This article does not take up the low evaluation that Franchetti had of Millôr’s paintings. In the postscript to *Hai-Kais*, Alfredo Grieco, a journalist, photographer, and curator, praises Millôr’s paintings as showing his “languages of visual expression(s)” (Fernandes). The space restriction prevents this article from examining the artistic aspects of this work and concentrates on the literary one.

All translations from Portuguese and French are by me. In quotations, I have interpolated notes marked with brackets.

2. Millôr’s Haikus as a Category of the Epigram

2-1. Characteristics of the Form of Millôr’s Haiku Described by Franchetti

Franchetti writes that “The Millôr’s “Hai-Kai” are usually epigrams (most times composed by a single phrase) in three free verses, with a rhyme between the first and the third verses” (Franchetti, 12). This description has three main points: an epigram, in three free verses, and with a rhyme between the first and the third verses. The first point relates to the content of the haiku and will be treated below.

To treat the second point, I checked the number of syllables in all 93 of Millôr’s haikus, confirming that each verse has from 2 to 11 syllables. Millôr acknowledges this variability: in the preface to *Hai-Kais*, Millôr writes that “I started to compose in almost every week, however, using only the three verses of the original [Japanese] form, not worrying about the number of syllables” (Fernandes).

⁴ Franchetti had been a professor of literary theory in the State University of Campinas from 1986 to 2015.

⁵ Grêmio Haicai Ipê introduce himself that “since 1987 the members of the Grêmio Haicai Ipê meet monthly to study, produce and appreciate haikus, with the intention of acclimating this poetic form, Japanese in origin, to Brazil”(CAQUI).

⁶ For another example, Millôr is included in an anthology *HAICAI DO BRASIL*(2014).

The third point is characteristic: All 93 haikus have a rhyme between the first and the third verses. In his preface, Millôr writes that “In the original [Japanese] form it [the haiku] had no rhyme, which was generally added to it in Western translations” (Fernandes). Before Millôr began to compose, haikus had already been composed in Portuguese with rhyme by Guilherme de Almeida (1890–1969), although the rhyme scheme differed, with the school of thought of Almeida rhyming the last syllable of the first and third verse and the second and last syllable of the second verse.

Incidentally, both of Millôr and Franchetti understood the absence of rhyme in Japanese haiku, Millôr composed in the tradition of Western poets and Franchetti does not use rhyme in translating Japanese haiku into Portuguese and in composing haikus.

2-2. Epigrams: Characteristics of the Content of Millôr’s Haikus Described by Franchetti

According to an encyclopedia, an epigram can be defined as:

A form of writing which makes a satiric, complimentary, or aphoristic observation with wit, extreme condensation, and, above all, brevity. As a poetic form, the e. generally takes the shape of a couplet or quatrain, but tone, which is usually either ironic or gnomic, defines it better than does verse form (Frank J. Warnke and Alex Preminger, 247).

The most significant point regarding the epigram is that it is defined not as having a certain verse form but in terms of its content. In the history of the West’s acceptance of haiku, the term epigram is essential. Basil Hall Chamberlain (1850–1935), who introduced the haiku to England in the article “Basho and the Japanese Poetical Epigram.”

Their native name is *Hokku* (also *Haiku* and *Haikai*), which, in default of a better equivalent, I venture to translate by “Epigram” using that term, not in the modern sense of a pointed saying, [...] but in its earlier acceptance, as denoting any little piece of verse that expresses a delicate or ingenious thought (Chamberlain, 147).

In short, Chamberlain used the word epigram, not in the modern meaning, “pointed saying,” but in the ancient meaning, “delicate or ingenious thought.” The term epigram was thus used to introduce haiku to English readers who were unfamiliar with the haiku. Paul-Louis Couchoud (1879–1959), who read Chamberlain’s article and wrote an article about haiku in French [Couchoud, 54]: “Les Épigrammes Lyriques du Japon.” An important difference between them can be seen in that Couchoud called haiku as *haikai*, not *épigramme*, with the exception of the title. He explained the reason:

Strange thing, in so many sketches, there are almost no satirical ones. In our country [France], a short poem which wants to paint a person is always satirical. This is what we call an epigram. Almost without exception, a *haikai* is not an epigram. It does not paint people to mock them, but for the pleasure in painting them (Couchoud, 106).

The use of epigram in explaining haiku was passed like a baton from France to Brazil by Afrânio Peixoto (1876–1947), a doctor, a writer, and a critic. He published *Trovas Populares Brasileiras* in 1919, wherein he presented an understanding of haiku thorough Couchoud, as in his book there is a reference to Couchoud’s translation of Basho’s teachings (Peixoto, 20). According to Franchetti, Peixoto showed “the first positive mention of haikai in Brazil” (Franchetti, 8). Peixoto defined haiku as *epigrama lirico*, coinciding with the *poetical epigram* of Chamberlain and the *épigrammes lyriques* of Couchoud. The haiku had been introduced to Brazil through various routes to Brazil, and from the end of the 19th to the beginning of the 20th centuries, approaches came through English, French, Portuguese and Spanish language.

Franchetti praised Couchoud’s definition of the in “Les Épigrammes Lyriques du Japon” as a “beautiful definition.” Franchetti only refers to Chamberlain as a precedent for Couchoud, most likely because Chamberlain considered that the haiku is “essentially fragmentary” and “part only of a complete stanza” (Chamberlain, 164). In short, Franchetti praises haiku, and his definition of it, including the usage of epigram, is similar to Couchoud rather than Chamberlain. In this article, the definition of epigrammatic haiku is in terms of its use to “paint people to mock them.” According to Couchoud, this is an inaccurate definition of haiku, because the haiku is not satirical but lyrical. Below, we discuss Millôr’s haikus in particular in this light.

2-3. The Epigrammatic Haiku in Millôr

This article describes Millôr’s epigrammatic haikus from among his 93 published ones. Millôr’s epigrammatic haikus have strong relation to a simple constitution. The idea of a one-sentence haiku⁷ derives from Franchetti’s pointing “a single phrase” (Franchetti, 12). A one-sentence haiku is one in which readers can connect three verses to one-sentence. Some of these epigrammatic poems are composed to specific persons: to VIPs, to a snob, to a man of stature, to a skeptic, to professors, and to a magistrate. Here, Millôr sends to readers a clear message for specific persons, using one-sentence haikus.

For example, this haiku paints the political scene.

No aeroporto, puxa-sacos
 Trocam adeuses
 Com velhacos.⁸ (Fernandes)

Readers can read it in terms of a one-sentence: “*No aeroporto, puxa-sacos trocam adeuse com velhacos.*” Jeers see off politicians or VIPs at an airport. Airports are filled with the noise of planes taking off, so they do not notice that jeer’s backbiting that come with waving-hands. This haiku shows the ignorance of persons in authority and readers come to grin cynically.

Next is another example of epigrammatic haiku.

Esnobar

⁷ There are 32 one-sentence haikus in 93 haikus in *Hai-Kais*.

⁸ In the airport, bootlickers
 Replace farewell
 With jeers.

É exigir café fervendo
E deixar esfriar.⁹ (Fernandes)

This haiku can be read as one-sentence: “*Esnobar é exigir café fervendo e deixar esfriar.*”, the snob does not enjoy the very hot coffee, but nevertheless, he ordered it. This haiku does not explain the reason to leave it, but the readers can use their imagination. For example, they may think that the snob is boasting about how vast his knowledge is and as a result, leaves his coffee to cool. This haiku portrays the snob in an indirect way that makes his readers grin cynically.

3. Non-epigrammatic Haikus in Millôr

I have selected five non-epigrammatic haikus by Millôr to focus on. This section will perform a critical re-reading, in contrast to Franchetti’s article. It does not give definitions of fine haikus and epigram due to focus on the history of the haiku in Brazil. Therefore, this section portrays some elements of Franchetti’s sense of fine haiku, not the definition of the entity.

In the body of Franchetti’s article, he mentions only one haiku by Almeida; “this tercet could be classified as a haikai in the Japanese tradition, because it exemplifies an unexpected perception arising from a concrete sensation” (Franchetti, 10). In short, it is “an unexpected perception arising from a concrete sensation,” which is one of a condition of fine haikus for Franchetti. In my opinion, the next haiku is an adequate example of “an unexpected perception arising from a concrete sensation.”

Se o cão é uivante
A lua vira
Quarto minguante.¹⁰(Fernandes)

This haiku contains a conditional clause and a main clause. Actually, the moon does not change its form, no matter how many times a dog barks at it, but this haiku states that changes; the reason part is unmatched to and the result one and this incoherent point leads to an interesting point as a haiku poem. Comparing Franchetti’s condition, the concrete sensation is the dog’s howling, and the unexpected perception refers to seeing the change in the waxing or waning of the moon.

While discussing Almeida’s haiku, Franchetti also takes up the idea of *kigo* (a word that refers to a specific season); whether it plays a role in that haiku or not (Franchetti, 10-11). Franchetti returns to the idea of *kigo* many times, leading me to the conclusion that *kigo* is an important element. This second discusses Millôr’s haikus that were in reference to the *kigo*. While, he did not write haikus to provide a complete definition of *kigo*; however, haikus do demonstrate *kigo*. As shown in the work *Comparative studies on season words (kigo) and poetic almanacs (Saijiki) in international haiku* (2012), various dictionary definitions of *kigo* have been compiled.

⁹ The snob
Is to demand boiling coffee
And let it cool.

¹⁰ If the dog is howling
Moon turns
Third quarter.

In this article, I refer to the *Natureza—Berço do Haikai*, which Franchetti praises in his article as “the first Brazilian dictionary of *kigo*.”

There are several *kigos* among Millôr’s haikus: these are the moon (in three haikus), the palm tree, the cockroach, the shooting star, the rose, and the scarecrow. The haiku including a shooting star runs as follows:

Estrela cadente
Ponto de exclamação
Quente.¹¹ (Fernandes)

The exclamation mark in the second verse presents the interesting metaphor of the meteor, which disappears in the sky after a moment. The shape of the exclamation mark is similar to the star itself and its footsteps. In the third verse, readers feel a high temperature, as if they had touched the star. The *kigo* dictionary in Portuguese published in Brazil explains the nature of a shooting star as follows:

Shooting Star (Autumn Atmospheric Phenomenon)¹²
Fragment of matter from the interplanetary space when it penetrates in the atmosphere that heats up, becoming luminous. Meteor. Ephemeral star. They are most visible to the naked eye in autumn, owing to the transparency of the celestial atmosphere.
Sensation of fugacity (Goga and Oda, 121).

Millôr’s haiku responds to the characters that this dictionary defines. The “sensation of fugacity” appears in the metaphor of the exclamation mark. The last verse tells us that the shooting star shows heat if we approach it.

The next haiku contains the *kigo* term of the scarecrow:

Pássaro posado
No espantalho
Aposentado.¹³ (Fernandes)

Scarecrow (Fall Livestock)
Dolls, usually with open arms in the shape of a cross and wearing a straw hat, that are placed in cultivated fields to frighten away birds or rodents. sentinel (Goga and Oda, 138).

As seen in the dictionary excerpts, scarecrows are intended frighten away birds. However, in this context, we see a reference to a retired scarecrow, which has completed his role and now provides a resting space for tiny birds.

¹¹ Shooting-star
Exclamation-point
Hot.

¹² “Autumn Atmospheric Phenomenon” is one of the categories in its dictionary. Most Japanese *kigo* dictionaries contain a similar category.

¹³ Bird posed
On the scarecrow
Retired.

Franchetti repeatedly refers to Japanese haiku in his article, especially in the fifth section, about Japanese immigrants. Also, Millôr learned from Japanese haiku, not only by writing on his own.

A nuvem atenua
O cansaço das pessoas
Olharem a Lua.¹⁴ (Fernandes)

This translation of Basho's haiku appears in Millôr's preface, and later in the body of the book as well. Millôr did not mention what haikus he referred to, but it is easy to find the original well-known haiku. An annotated edition Basho's haiku in fact has its own relationship, with a *waka* by Saigyō. After the notes, this annotated edition provides the following comment on the meaning of this haiku; "The occasional clouds will give those who are admiring the moon a rest" (Minoru, Horikiri, Yoshinobu, Tanaka, and Katsuaki Satō, 361).

The characteristics of Millôr's translation can be made clear by comparing the translation of Reginald Horace Blyth (1898–1964), who was the researcher of Japanese culture.

雲をりをりを人を休むる月見哉 芭蕉
Kumo oriori hito wo yasumuru tsukimikana
From time to time
The clouds give rest
To the moon-beholders (Blyth, 931)

Unlike Blyth's version, Millôr translation is not strictly literal it not in a verbatim way but is based on his understanding of the contents. He tried to approach Basho's spirit through the translation¹⁵(together with painting pictures).

In addition, he pays homage to Basho.

(À maneira de Basho)
Nem grilo, grito, ou galope;
No silêncio imenso
Só uma rã mergulha — plóóp!¹⁶ (Fernandes)

This haiku is a response of Basho's best-known haiku: "*furuikeya/kawazutobikomuzumizu-nooto*." Millôr adds his own interpretation. He removes the element of the old pond (*furuike*) and begins with the wordplay. The pronunciation of the letter *g* recalls us the call of the frogs, and the plop! expresses the sounds of frogs jumping into the water.

¹⁴ The cloud attenuates
Fatigue of peoples
(Who) view the moon.

¹⁵ In the preface of *Hai-Kais*, Millôr cited two Basho's haikus and two Issa's haikus.

¹⁶ (In the manner of Basho)
No cricket, scream, or gallop;
In the immense silence
Only one frog dives — plop!

There are various translations and responses to this haiku, and some haikus use the sound effect *plop*. It is necessary to consider what Millôr read before starting to compose his own haikus. This question may prompt further research on the relationship between Brazilian poets and haiku.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, there is no clear mistake in Franchetti's description of Millôr's haikus. However, his article presents a biased image, as Franchetti emphasizes Millôr's epigrammatic haikus. However, as I note section 3, Millôr composed fine haikus from the perspective of Franchetti's ideal: "an unexpected perception," *kigo*, and Basho.

At the end of this essay, I present prospects for future research. First, it is important to discuss the definition of terms in Franchetti's article. In my paper, even though I do not call for delicate requirements that a haiku be one-sentence, satirical or not, or involving *kigo*, I devoted several paragraphs to clarifying the definition of the epigram. In addition, I note that other terms should be used to analyze haikus, besides that of the epigram, and this deserves more exploration in comparing haiku's cultural acceptance in the world. It is also necessary to adopt a critical approach to Franchetti's understanding and his idea of the haiku. I respect him as a pioneer and an authority in the study of the haiku in Brazil. However, I believe that my approach will produce new insights to this research field that will make us re-think established theory.

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