Tango Lessons
Miller, Marilyn G.

Published by Duke University Press

Miller, Marilyn G.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/64117

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2279345
Borges, Tango, and Milonga

ALEJANDRO SUSTI

Translated by Katharina Keppel and Marilyn G. Miller

Tango que fuiste feliz,
como yo también lo he sido,
según me cuenta el recuerdo;
el recuerdo fue el olvido.

[Tango, you who were happy,
as I also have been,
the way my memory tells it;
memory was forgetting.]

—“Alguien le dice al tango”
(Someone says to the tango),
Jorge Luis Borges

This chapter suggests a new reading of the relationship between the work of the twentieth-century Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges and two genres of Argentine popular music, the tango and the milonga.1 As is well known, Borges produced a series of texts, in poetry, fiction, and essay form, in which he postulates a very particular vision of the tango, one that changes over time and, for better or for worse, has occupied a privileged place in subsequent histories of the tango up to the present moment. Unquestionably, any study of this relationship in our own time should take into account the creation of a complex universe of imaginaries fundamental for understanding the entire oeuvre of this author. In this sense Borges’s approach to the tango was guided from the start more by the necessity of establishing a historical relationship
with the form than by the search for materials or supplies that would permit
the creation of a mythical or imaginary past.

At the same time, the establishment of a relationship between these two
discursive events, Borges and the tango, prompts a reconsideration of the re-
lationships between what we understand as the literary—which is inscribed
within a system that privileges certain mechanisms of production and artistic
reception—and so-called mass culture, whose mechanisms of production and
consumption obey the ever-greater influence of technology in art and daily
life, an influence that is most evident since the advent of photography and,
later on, cinema.2 In this sense we should not lose sight of the attraction certain
expressions of popular culture, such as tango, milonga, lunfardo, the sainete,
and popular poetry, had on Borges and other authors and intellectuals. Such
influences should be understood within the context of the new relationships
that emerged from a society subject to a whole series of structural transforma-
tions that were not only social but also economic and cultural.3 These popular
expressions became, to a certain extent, the venues for an imaginary that sur-
vived the repercussions of the major changes of the era and, at the same time,
operated as instruments of adaptation for those social subjects whose cultural
identities were threatened by these same changes.

While the formulation of these initial coordinates can help us better under-
stand the nature of the dialogue I hope to establish, my intention, nonetheless,
is not to apply a mechanical model of analysis in an attempt to justify the re-
sults of the contact and interaction between these two discursive instances.
Any use of categories such as the literary or the popular must acknowledge that
these categories ultimately respond to a particular way of understanding his-
storical phenomena. In our own day it’s evident that the boundaries that only
a few years ago clearly separated the terrain of the literary from that of the
popular have been toppled, prompting the rearticulation of methods and ana-
lytical tools taken from diverse disciplines such as literature and anthropology.
Clearly, the classification of an author’s work as literary runs the risk of leaving
aside elements that fall outside the a priori conceptualization of what the critic
judges should constitute literature. Borges’s works—and here we’re referring to
the author’s fictionalization of his own person in his texts as well as to a subject
constructed by and in a critical tradition and consecrated within that tradi-
tion’s canon4—provide an exemplary case of what we might call “atypicality.”5
Thus, the equation Borges = literature, and its immediate confrontation with
what we might define as the popular, become provisional categories of analysis
whose purpose is justified to the extent that they historically reconstruct a
relationship that was established very early on. To relate these two categories implies the task of restoration as well as the questioning of our very tools of analysis.

The Tango: “A Long Civic Poem”

In my analysis of the dialogue between Borges and the tango, I take as my point of departure citations from two separate essays by the Argentine author that in a certain way anticipate the outcome of the encounter between these two discourses. In his text on the Spanish Golden Age poet and dramatist Francisco de Quevedo in *Other Inquisitions*, Borges writes that the Spanish author “is less a man than a vast and complex literature” (42); later in “A History of the Tango,” first published in the 1955 edition of *Evaristo Carriego*, Borges refers to the tango this way: “At the end of the eighteenth century, Wolf wrote that the *Iliad* was a series of songs and rhapsodies before it became an epic; this knowledge may allow for the prophesy that, in time, tango lyrics will form a *long civic poem*, or will suggest to some ambitious person the writing of that poem” (108; emphasis added). Reading these two citations together serves to create an analogy with the two discourses that interest me here: Borges, like Quevedo, is a “vast and complex literature,” just as the lyrics of the tango are a “long civic poem.” Despite announcing the possibility of an “ambitious person” who could write an epic poem composed of tango lyrics, Borges erases the image of the author hiding behind the texts; he chooses to focus not on the author but on the text, a text that is transmittable throughout time, beyond the moment of its initial contingency.

This analogy suggests an encounter between two discursive instances whose positions are diametrically opposed. In his relationship with the tango or the milonga, Borges demonstrates a fascination with the limit or, perhaps more precisely, with the “margins” (*orillas*)—not only topographic but also symbolic—those territories that are not part of the “center” of a preestablished artistic or literary canon. In Borges’s approach to the margins, there is an intention to incorporate the liminal space into the center. However, this operation requires the understanding of certain modes of production of this liminal discourse. In the author’s work, this operation takes place in different stages and its development depends on a key point; at the end of this process, which encompasses his earliest discussions on the origin of the tango through to the penning of his own milonga poems, we see that the incorporation of the tango never crystallizes into a final product. Moreover, it becomes clear that Borges is not merely attempting the assimilation of discursive margins or peripheries
into the center but also a mutual exchange between the two realms. We might say that the canon becomes “marginalized” in the texts that emerge out of this contact (particularly in the case of the milongas, which I will discuss later) and, with it, the image of the writer as well, who becomes an “other,” an “I” who is different from the one that exists in the texts that do not include this contact.

The analogy Borges = tango that I am proposing admittedly has its limitations. First, while Borges negates contingency and assumes a projective perspective, the two discourses I am referring to, “Borges as literature” and “the tango as poem,” emerge in the same historical period (with slight chronological differences). That is, the dialogue between both texts itself is the product of a concrete contingency: the period of the formation of what Beatriz Sarlo elaborates in *Una modernidad periférica* as the modernity of Buenos Aires. More significantly, during the 1920s and 1930s, Borges is immersed in the task of recognizing and establishing the basis of what will be called a national Argentine literature (Farías; Sarlo, *Una modernidad periférica* and *Jorge Luis Borges*). It is within this context that Borges tries to incorporate the tango in his own work, an operation that ultimately will imply the construction of a mythology that, as we will see, responds to an appropriation based on very personal and specific valorizations of the tango.

It is also important to take into account the nature of what we call literature, which is related here to Borges’s development as a writer. As Sarlo points out, Borges “wrote at [a] meeting of roads”; diverse literatures, both foreign and Argentine, converge in his work, and it is precisely this crossroad and the reordering in which it is situated that “allows him to invent a strategy for Argentinian literature” (*Jorge Luis Borges* 5). In the specific case of tango lyrics, and with those of the milonga, this strategy consists of rooting them in the payada, a manifestation of popular poetry that culminates in one of the founding texts of Argentine literature, *Martín Fierro*. Interestingly, the type of literature that Borges prefers as a reader of tango and as a creator of milongas shines through his own education as a writer and reader of other literatures. In terms of his milongas, Borges explicitly recognizes his debt to the payada tradition. Borges declares, “in my milongas . . . I have done my respectful best to imitate the joyous courage of Hilario Ascasubi and the old-time street ballads [coplas] of the different neighborhoods of Buenos Aires” (qtd. in Cara-Walker 284).

It should be noted that the second part of my proposed analogy, “the tango as poem,” supposes the arbitrary separation of at least two of the original and constitutive elements of the tango: music and dance. If one considers the tango a text or narrative that establishes a relation to other literary texts, then all
elements that shape the tango must be taken into account. The corpus of tango lyrics, that extensive “poem” that Borges presumes to be immortal, is subject to interpretation on the part of the musicians and dance couples who perform the pieces. Music is implicitly present in those texts by Borges structured around tango. We must also keep in mind that the tango was originally instrumental, and in its earliest form it was played and danced, not sung. Clearly, the tango did not originate with the goal of capturing the attention of its listeners through its lyrics but rather through the aspects of music and dance, a detail that doesn’t escape Borges in *Evaristo Carriego*.

Despite these limitations, the analogy proves nonetheless useful. Throughout his work Borges returns time and again to the idea of the civic (and I would add, popular) poem of tangos and milongas. He persistently shows his interest in cultivating a poetics of the tango and milonga, even if his approach differs significantly from that of other authors who develop a tango poetics.

A “Tearful Aesthetic”

While the term *tearful aesthetic* (*lacrimosa estética*) does not specifically refer to tango lyrics but instead to one of the weaknesses Borges identifies in the poetry of Carriego, the author also tends to apply it to the character of tango lyrics, especially those that pertain to the so-called golden age of tango from 1917 to 1943.9 In the following fragments, Borges divides the evolution of the tango into two eras, a division he shares with most tango historians:

The first milongas and tangos might have been foolish, or at least slipshod, but they were heroic and happy. The later tango is resentful, deplores with sentimental excess one’s miseries, and celebrates shamelessly the misfortunes of others. (*Jorge Luis Borges: Selected Non-Fictions* 400)10

The contemporary tango, made totally out of picturesque and worked-over lunfardo, is one thing, and quite another the old tangos made of pure insolence, pure shamelessness, pure happiness in bravery. Those were the genuine voice of the *compadrito*: the new ones (music and lyrics) are the fictions of those incredulous about comradeship, those who explain things and create disillusion. The primordial tangos—“The Cabaret,” “The Mustang,” “The Argentine Apache,” “A Night of Fun,” and “Hotel Victoria”—testify to the ribald bravery of the *arrabal*. (*On Argentina* 43)11

The “primordial tangos” Borges refers to in the latter citation belong to the so-called era of the Old Guard, which covers the final years of the nineteenth
and the first years of the twentieth century, 1895–1917. The tangos of this era might have lyrics or not, but such lyrics inevitably served to make the melody of the tango easier to remember. The lyrics could be replaced while keeping the same melodic base, as tends to happen with many folkloric songs that survive to this day.

The dominant protagonist in this form of tango was the compadre, a character who in turn was distinguished from the compadrito and the malevo (see the glossary). The tango of this period emphasized dance, a trait that separated it from tango song (tango canción) that appeared around 1917. Donald Castro in “Popular Culture as a Source for the Historian” explains that through dance, the criollo or native-born inhabitant practiced the art of the “cachada,” of ridiculing those who tried to imitate him. In general the target of this mockery was the poor immigrant who tried to imitate the criollo by assuming a new identity and thus integrating his new environment. The challenge implicit in the dance often resulted in knife duels, a fact that Borges himself includes in one of his milongas titled “Alguien le dice al tango” (Someone says to the tango):

Tango que he visto bailar
contra un ocaso amarillo
por quienes eran capaces
de otro baile, el del cuchillo.

(Gobello and Bossio, Tangos, letras y letristas 3: 34)

[Tango that I have seen danced
Against a yellow sunset
By those who were capable
Of another dance, that of the knife.] 13

Regarding the linguistic aspect of the tangos, Daniel Vidart in Teoría del tango points out that the lyrics of the tangos of the Old Guard were written in the language of the slum and not in lunfardo. This characteristic has been described by Borges in El idioma de los argentinos (The Language of the Argentines), published in 1928: “The first tangos, the old, wonderful tangos, never had lunfardo lyrics: This use of lunfardo is merely an affectation that novelty-seeking, contemporary simpleness makes obligatory, and which fills tangos with phony secrets and false emphases. . . . The soul of the orillas combined with a vocabulary that belonged to everyone: That was the substance of the snappy milonga; international banality and an underworld vocabulary are what we have in today’s tango” (On Argentina 82). 14 Vicente Rossi, cited
by Vidart, also describes this language: “The language of the riverfront slum dweller (orillero) springs from his particular ingenuity; always graphic with exact allusions, metaphorical, of onomatopoeic simplicity, brutally ironic and always innovative, because the orillero is a tireless renovator of his picturesque vocabulary” (Teoría del tango 28). Despite the distinctions drawn by Vidart, Borges, and Rossi, there doesn’t seem to be a way of demonstrating any appreciable difference between “marginal” language (lenguaje orillero), “slum” language (lenguaje arrabalero), and lunfardo.

From the musical point of view, the tangos mentioned by Borges in El tamaño de mi esperanza (The extent of my hope) also have other particularities. According to José Gobello, Vicente Greco, the author of “El flete” and “El cuzquito,” is responsible for creating the first orquesta típica (typical orchestra), which includes for the first time “two instruments that until then had been ignored by the academies: the piano and the bandoneon” (Crónica general del tango 58). The inclusion of the sound of the bandoneon to replace the flute signals to a certain extent the Italianization of the tango—despite the German origin of the instrument. For some critics, the bandoneon, with its sad and melancholic sound, represents the entry and predominance of the sentiment of uprooting felt by the Italian immigrant in the tango. Initially, Borges opposes the Italianization of the tango, but later he accepts it in Evaristo Carriego. Nonetheless, despite this change of mind, in his essay “A History of the Tango” there is no mention of what he considers Italian beyond the last names of early native-born composers such as Bevilacqua, Greco, or de Bassi (On Argentina 108).

The musical critique that Borges outlines also coincides with the previously mentioned division regarding the evolution of the tango: “the old tango, as music, immediately transmits that joy of combat which Greek and German poets, long ago, tried to express in words. Certain composers today strive for that heroic tone and sometimes conceive competent milongas about the Batería slums or the Barrio del Alto, but their labors—with deliberately old-fashioned lyrics and music—are exercises in nostalgia for what once was, laments for what is now lost, intrinsically sad even when their melody is joyful” (On Argentina 104). Borges finds some clues regarding the origins of the tango in the use of certain instruments. For him, the tango does not originate from the common people, since it is played with expensive instruments such as the piano, the flute, and the violin. Borges does not think that the guitar, which he identifies as being characteristic of the milonga, was used in early tango (Sorrentino 9–10).
The sources on which Borges bases this judgment are, as he himself points out, works on the origins of the tango by Vicente Rossi, Carlos Vega, and Carlos Muzzio Sáenz. However, the methods these authors use to treat the subject differ considerably from each other. For Borges, Rossi’s work, for example, suffers from chronological imprecision and a discontinuity in terms of development. Among other theories, Borges agrees with Rossi’s statements in relation to the black influence in the formation of the tango: “I must say I subscribe to all their conclusions—as well as to others” (Jorge Luis Borges: Selected Non-Fictions 394).18 Nevertheless, Castro observes that there is an important disagreement between Rossi, Borges, and the critic Julio Mafud regarding the origin of the milonga, a genre practiced by urban payadores and a direct precursor of the tango: “The critical element in their counter argument is the specific geographic origin of the tango ingredient in milonga. Rossi suggests strongly that it came from Brazil via Montevideo and was essentially a Black cultural contribution to the tango mix. Borges and Mafud present the argument that, while the milonga may have been part of the tango mix, it was from the Argentine creole (mestizo) and was different from the Black milonga” (“Popular Culture as a Source for the Historian” 73). The disagreement between Rossi and Borges regarding the origin of the milonga shows Borges’s eagerness to situate the tango in a purely Creole environment, a characteristic that we have already highlighted in his stance on the subsequent Italianization of the tango. One could say that Borges maintains a purist position regarding the tango and the milonga, a position he assumes not only as it concerns the origins of the tango but also its later manifestations. Finally, in terms of the tango’s rhythmic structure, Borges points to the change it suffers in its evolution after the era of the Old Guard, an aspect also noted by Gobello, who refers to the “slowing down of the tempo in the execution of the tango, reflected in the move from 2/4 time to 4/8 time” (Crónica general del tango 193; refrenamiento de la velocidad en la ejecución del tango que se refleja en el paso del compás de 2 por 4 al 4 por 8).

Milonga: Para las seis cuerdas

According to Rossi, the tango emerges from one of the variants of the milonga, the dance milonga. This latter form existed alongside the song milonga, a genre that Borges himself includes in his book of poems Para las seis cuerdas (1965).19 In the prologue the narrator announces to the reader: “In the modest case of my milongas, the reader should supply the missing music to the image of a man who is humming in the doorway or in a storefront, accompanying himself with a guitar. The hand lingers on the strings and words tell less than
the chords” (*Obra poética* 281). Borges leaves it up to the reader to provide the music that should accompany his verses. However, when one of his readers takes over the task of musicalizing the verses of four of his milongas—as happens with the work of the famous bandoneonist Astor Piazzolla—Borges’s reaction to the result is rather harsh: “I don’t want anything to do with that man . . . he does not feel the Creoleness [lo criollo]” (Salas, *Borges* 266). Piazzolla, on the other hand, confirms the care with which he addressed the task, as noted and remarked on by Gobello: “‘Jacinto Chiclana’ has the air of a guitar milonga, that is, an improvised milonga; “Alguien le dice al tango” can be considered melodically and harmonically to belong to the style of ’41; “A Nicanor Paredes,” given its dramatic content, I have composed over the eight-count beat of the Gregorian chants, solving the melodic part without artificial modernisms, everything very simple, deeply emotional and honest; “El títere” can be defined as a prototype of the light rhythm from the beginning of the century, humorous and fraternal [compadrón]” (Gobello and Bossio, *Tangos, letras y letristas* 3: 30). We should clarify that for the text of “Alguien le dice al tango,” Piazzolla composed a tango and not a milonga (Gobello and Bossio, *Tangos, letras y letristas* 3: 30).

According to Piazzolla’s comments and Borges’s musical preferences as espoused in previous writings, in at least two of the four musicalized milongas, the composer sticks to the canon that historically rules the tango and the milonga. Because of its improvised character, “Jacinto Chiclana” is adapted to the tradition of urban payadores at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. “El títere” (The puppet), on the other hand, is linked to those “primordial” tangos that Borges mentions in *El tamaño de mi esperanza*. In only one of the milongas does Piazzolla diverge from Borges’s manifest tastes in tango: “Alguien le dice al tango” is situated in the tradition of the golden age tango that Borges deplored because of its “tearful aesthetic.” Now that we know the positions of the writer and the musician, the question is: What does it mean for Borges to “feel the Creoleness [sentir lo criollo]” or not?

To respond to this question, it might be useful to take up a position first suggested by Ricardo Ostuni. For this critic, there is an implicit connection between the pride that Borges exhibited many times in relation to his “creole ancestry” (*prosapia criolla*) and the nature of the feats attempted by the characters of the primitive tangos. For Ostuni, the Borges of *El tamaño de mi esperanza* “intuits an epic in the primitive tangos, a sort of heroic drama whose characters, though marginal, nonetheless had their brush with the great feats of their ancestors” (28; intuía una épica en los Tangos primitivos,
una suerte de gesta bravía cuyos personajes, aunque orilleros, en algo rozaban las valerosas hazañas de sus mayores). Along these lines, we could assume that for Borges, “the Creole”—at least in terms of his praise for the milonga as opposed to the later tango of the era of the Old Guard—responds to a desire to trace a genealogy that could be defined as “mythic,” in which the autobiographical element comes together with a so-called tango epic. The tango epic or “long civic poem” referred to earlier constitutes a kind of narrative archetype located in a remote past in which history gives way to myth and in which its protagonists—the compadritos—embody virtues such as valor and bravery. These characters are modeled in such a way that they never express the weaknesses of the troubled and remorseful beings who will appear in the later tango lyrics of the golden age. Taking these elements into account, one might conclude that Borges, by way of a subtle intellectual operation, produces a tango chronology or, more precisely, a tango mythology in which not only is the history of the genre reconfigured and resignified but also in which the tango in fact reinvents itself. Through the simulacrum of a voice authorized by its own descent from this valiant race, Borges reformulates his own genealogy, creating a common parentage with the compadritos and their heroic deeds.

Musicalization and Instrumentalization in the Milonga

Given the title of his book of milongas published in 1965, Para las seis cuerdas (For the six strings), the reader can anticipate that Borges envisions simple instrumentation with one single guitar, such as in Rossi’s description: “The simple-hearted payada of the pastoral hearth, a romance unique to those natives healthy in body and soul, became the milonga of the urban hearths and hovels of the city. This is why the milonga is the payada of the townspeople. It consists of octosyllabic verses that are recited in a not unpleasant tone tinged with suitable guitar accompaniment, filling the hold measures between one stanza and the next, usually marked by three different notes, while the milonguero catches his breath or looks for inspiration” (124–25).22

Apparently, Borges didn’t like Piazzolla’s musicalizations because of his use of instruments such as the bandoneon, the piano, and the violin to interpret some of the writer’s milongas, a use that for him presented an imbalance with what he hoped to represent textually and in the interpretation of those texts musically. The implicit agreement between Rossi’s observations and the way in which Borges conceives the musical execution of the milongas reveals the link between the milonguero and the payador. It becomes clear that
Borges’s concept of Creoleness is already announced in the payador, and that his transformation coincides with the displacement of this figure to the margins (orillas) of the city. Perhaps this is why Borges sees little relation between the later tango that derives from the dance milonga (and even less of one in Piazzolla’s musicalizations of his milongas) and the tradition of popular Creole poetry that developed in the payada and later in the milonga. Once more Borges clearly establishes the origin of the tango and its instrumentation in the brothels of the red light district: “The primitive instrumentation of its earliest orchestras—piano, flute, violin, and later the concertina—confirms, with its extravagance, the evidence that the tango did not arise from the riverbank slums, where, as everyone knows, the six strings of the guitar were sufficient” (Jorge Luis Borges: Selected Non-Fictions 395). In musical terms the Creole signifies for Borges a return to the simple sound of the guitar as played in alleys and doorways, postulating a lone melody and lacking a defined song, a feature shared by the payada and the milonga. As Rossi notes, “indeed, one performs the payada and the milonga singing, but it’s not quite a song, it’s more like a tone which, associated with the guitar, gives the imagination time and a rest for inspiration” (130; Ciertamente que se paya y se milonguea cantando, pero no es precisamente un canto, es una tonada que asociada a la guitarra da a la imaginacion [sic] tiempo y alivio a la inspiración).

So it is that in the milonga that Borges cultivates, there is what we might call a “double silence” that excludes the sound of other accompanying instruments, in particular the aforementioned orchestra, and the sound of the voice, understood as another instrument performing a melody that is added to the lyrics. The voice in this case gathers the verses and interprets them without actually singing them. From a historical perspective, the milonga crafted by Borges can be considered an archetype or a reconstruction that does not necessarily coincide with the original model. This reconstruction also includes the incorporation of stories of compadritos (the Ibarra brothers, Juan Muraña, and so on) that Borges claims to have heard from different sources and references to bygone urban spaces, such as Maldonado, mentioned by Carriego himself. This archetypal milonga, or the mythical milonga referred to above, probably did not exist in terms of these themes and this treatment until Borges gave shape to it. With it, he displays his knowledge of how this type of discourse is formed, but in addition he reinvents it. The creation of this archetypal milonga, or “mythic” milonga, to use an expression that Borges employs in his well-known poem “Fundación mítica de Buenos Aires” (Mythical founding of
Borges, Tango, and Milonga

Buenos Aires), is established in a passage of another poem significantly titled “El tango,” published after the milonga poems in *El otro, el mismo* (1965):

Una mitología de puñales
Lentamente se anula en el olvido;
Una canción de gesta se ha perdido
En sórdidas noticias policiales. (*Obra poética* 204)

A mythology of knife thrusts
Slowly dying in oblivion:
A chanson de geste lost
In sordid police reports. (*A Personal Anthology* 159)

Borges reconstructs this “mythology of knives” in his milongas, where it simultaneously signifies oblivion and memory, “the impossible memory of having died while fighting.” This creation, or re-creation, of a milonga archetype implies a recovery of the musical genre but also, and most importantly, the incorporation of certain procedures that are characteristic of popular poetry translated into Argentine literature through the milonga, as shown analogically in the case of the payada in the gauchesque literary genre. In this way Borges plots an attempt to incorporate a kind of milonga poetics into literature, which is itself a product of what he himself defines as the literary, a definition that depends on atypicality and that responds to a constant reformulation of the limits that separate it from the popular.

Borges in the History of Tango

The next step in the study of the relationship between Borges and the tango consists of an inversion of the terms in this relationship: How important is Borges to the history of tango? More specifically, what role do tangueros, and especially lyricists, assign to the venerated author as a composer of tango lyrics? Opinions vary considerably. For Enrique Cadícamo, one of the most famous tango authors and poets, the answer is decisive. When asked by Clark M. Zlotchew, “What position does Jorge Luis Borges occupy in the history of the tango?” Cadicamo responded:

EC: Borges? In the history of tango: none. In the history of Argentine literature, he has a brilliant place; he is taken as the literary main-spring of this country. I don’t know, to what degree, but that’s the way it is, isn’t it? . . . Borges can be thought of as an intellectual,
but not as a poet of Argentine roots. . . . Borges, in his literature, uses foreign turns of phrase which we have read in all the European classics.

CMZ: I ask because he has written quite a few milongas.

EC: Yes, well, but without managing to give them the substance, without being able to make concrete the substance of Buenos Aires, the humble neighborhoods of Buenos Aires. (Zlotchew, “Tango from the Inside” 138)

Cadicamo also emphatically points to the differences between the writer of popular musical lyrics and the poet, although without explicitly referring to the case of Borges: “You know, there are important, illustrious poets here who can be found in anthologies as great poets, but who have never been able to write any tango lyrics. The reason is that they don’t have that contact with the atmosphere, the environment, of the tango, which is so difficult to capture” (“Tango from the Inside” 136). Another testimony regarding Borges’s possible influence on the authors of tango lyrics appears in the interview conducted by Zlotchew with José Gobello (“Tango, Lunfardo and the Popular Culture of Buenos Aires”). The central topic of that exchange is the poetic value of tango texts. Gobello recognizes a Borgesian influence in some lyricists (Homero Manzi and Catulo Castillo), an influence evident not in the themes they treated—such as the mythification of the neighborhood thug (malevo) and of other marginal characters, which are present in Borges—but rather in the devices they use in their lyrics. According to Gobello, the Borgesian mythification of the malevo has an antecedent in Eduardo Gutiérrez, to whose style Borges will add a poetic personality (Zlotchew, “Tango, Lunfardo and the Popular Culture of Buenos Aires” 275). This detail is noted by Borges himself in the prologue to Cuaderno San Martín (1929): “The two pieces of ‘Muertes de Buenos Aires’s [Deaths of Buenos Aires]—titles I owe to Eduardo Gutiérrez—unpardonably exaggerate the working class connotation of the Chacarita neighborhood and the elite connotation of the Recoleta neighborhood” (Obra poética 87; Las dos piezas de “Muertes de Buenos Aires”—título que debo a Eduardo Gutiérrez—imperdonablemente exageran la connotación plebeya de la Chacarita y la connotación patricia de La Recoleta).

According to Gobello, the direct influence of Borges in the work of lyricists such as Homero Manzi consists of the use of particular literary devices such as enumeration, which are present in Borges’s early poetry collections.
We can add to this the nostalgic element found in some of Manzi’s lyrics, such as “Sur”—a title that, in turn, Borges had used for one of his poems from *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923) to evoke the topography of the margins of the city. For Manzi, the “south” is:

San Juan y Boedo antiguo, y todo el cielo; 
Pompeya y más allá la inundación; 
tu melena de novia en el recuerdo 
y tu nombre flotando en el adiós. 
La esquina del herrero, barro y pampa, 
tu casa, tu vereda y el zanjón 
y un perfume de yuyos y de alfalfa 
que me llena de nuevo el corazón.

Sur, 
paredón y después, 
Sur, 
una luz de almacén 
Ya nunca me verás como me vieras 
recostado en la vidriera 
y esperándote . . . (Gobello and Bossio, *Tangos, letras y letristas* 1: 145)

[Ancient San Juan and Boedo and the entire sky, 
Pompeya and beyond, the swampland, 
In my memory, the long hair you had when we were together, 
and your name floating in our goodbye . . . 
The blacksmith corner, mud and pampa, 
your house, your pavement, and the ditch 
and a smell of weeds and alfalfa 
that fills my heart all over again.

South . . . a thick wall and then. . . . 
South . . . the light of a grocery store . . . 
You will never see me again like you used to, 
leaning against the shop window, 
and waiting for you . . . ]

When asked about Borges’s prejudices regarding the tango of the Guardia Vieja, Gobello responds by pointing to Borges’s inattention to the phenomenon of immigration, a phenomenon that for Gobello finds its expression in
tango. Borges only “stays with the compadrito, with the knife-fighter. He is very sensitive to these things” (qtd. in Zlotchew, “Tango, Lunfardo and the Popular Culture of Buenos Aires” 283).

Although Cadícamo and Gobello measure Borges’s influence on tango differently, their positions coincide in pointing out the arbitrariness of his judgments concerning the form. For Cadícamo, Borges remains completely oblivious to the development of the tango and his influence on it is null. He emphasizes the division between tango literature and poetics and suggests that there are few writers who successfully engage in both. Even when Borges, in the attempt to write a “mythology of tango” tied to a remote and archetypal past, creates lyrics not for tango but for milongas, Cadícamo considers the project a failure. For him, Borges is incapable of inscribing himself in a tango poetics, and by extension a milonga poetics, because such a poetics has “a great deal to do with people, with popular sentiment” (qtd. in Zlotchew, “Tango from the Inside” 132). In this aspect he seems to coincide with Gobello, who affirms that tango lyricists “have to write things that people like, that people understand” (qtd. in Zlotchew, “Tango, Lunfardo and the Popular Culture of Buenos Aires” 277). Both opinions emphasize the “popular” or the inclusion of the “other” in tanguero or milonguero texts—in this case the listener or the public of the tango. This inclusion refers not only to referential components that are shared by the lyricist and the listener but also to the inclusion of the “other’s” sensibility, a fact that implies, to some extent, the depersonalization of the lyricist in his work.

The project of rewriting that Borges takes on in the elaboration of his milongas involves a personal component that differs substantially from the anonymous or pseudo-anonymous character of the original payadas and milongas. The lyrical “I” never disappears from the texts of Borges’s milongas, as can be seen in the “Milonga de Jacinto Chiclana”:

Me acuerdo. Fue en Balvanera,
En una noche lejana
Que alguien dejó caer el nombre
De un tal Jacinto Chiclana.

... Quién sabe por qué razón
Me anda buscando ese nombre;
Me gustaría saber
Cómo habrá sido aquel hombre. (Obra poética 287)
I remember. It was in Balvanera,
On a night long ago
When someone let drop the name
Of a certain Jacinto Chiclana.

... 
Who knows for what reason
That name comes looking for me
I’d like to know
What that man would have been like.]²⁶

Borges himself, when commenting on Manzi’s famous tango “Sur,” brandishes certain arguments that eventually can be applied to his own milonga poems and can help to explain their lack of acceptance by other tango lyricists:

The tango “Sur,” yes. It has a nice opening line: “Southside, an alley and then…” At the same time, there are some phrases that obviously don’t ring true, that betray, I won’t say the man of letters, but certainly the pseudo-man of letters. For example, in a tango I believe is his there is a mention of “the wind of the outer limits.” This is a phrase that no neighborhood tough would have used. In the first place, because the idea of the wind of the outer limits is a phony idea and, in the second place, because the slum dweller doesn’t boast of living in the outer limits.…” The stars and the wind of the outer limits whisper her name”: you can plainly see it was written by someone from the affluent downtown area, who has sentimental ideas concerning the compadre and is totally unfamiliar with the songs of the people, which never would have contained such lyrics. (qtd. in Sorrentino 104)

In the milonga “Alguien le dice al tango,” though, Borges uses the same devices he criticizes in Manzi and even adds others that erase the character of verisimilitude he demands from this lyricist:

Tango que fuiste la dicha
de ser hombre y ser valiente.
Tango que fuiste feliz,
como yo también lo he sido

... 
Yo habré muerto y seguirás
orillando nuestra vida. (Obra poética 34)
[Tango, you who were the happiness
Of being a man and being brave.
Tango, you who were happy,
Like I also have been

... I will have died and you will go on
margining our lives.]²⁷

Borges invents a tango man and imagines his acts with equally obscure words, such as orillar (the verb form of margin). In this marvelous act of invention or reinvention of a “tango that was,” there is no concern with verisimilitude in the creation of the milonga or tango text, or of the words pronounced by an urban payador accompanied by his guitar. It is in this sense that the Borgesian project differs substantially from the original milongas. Nevertheless, later on Borges shows more concern for authenticity and takes more care with the coherence that the milonga genre demands, a development that will prompt him to omit “Alguien le dice al tango” from the second edition of the book and successive volumes of his Obra poética.²⁸

Once the milongas from Para las seis cuerdas are integrated into the rest of Borges’s poetic works, the writer seems to be convinced that this volume is not a book of poems in itself, or that it does not fit into the category of lyrical texts. This lack of adaptation can also be perceived in the little attention the book has received from the critics.²⁹ In the prologue to the collection Elogio de la sombra (In praise of darkness), published in 1969, immediately following the milonga book, Borges notes, rather disturbingly, “this is my fifth book of verse.”³⁰ This affirmation would indicate that his milongas occupy an autonomous space in his poetic work, a space in which the poet tries to become the “other,” not the lyrical “I” of his previous books but rather what we could call a payador “I,” who sits down to intone texts in which he includes stories and characters known by his “public,” which is also an imaginary construction of this “other” Borges.

Borges’s project of incorporating a milonga poetics into the literary canon or, inversely, of moving the canon toward the margins, has awakened little understanding or empathy from the tango historians cited in this study or from literary critics and the reading public in general. This response can be interpreted in various ways. It indicates the difficulty Borges must have experienced in trying to erase the contingency of being “Borges, the writer” who presents himself before a public (his public), a contingency that probably is more at-
tractive to the reader than the reconstruction of a discourse pronounced or intoned by an urban payador from the margins of Buenos Aires almost a century later. A series of obstacles emerge from within this context: first, the milongas do not fit the lyrical definition established by the literary tradition the reader venerates. Second, another canon exists that unfolds from the evolution of Borges as a poet and that also influences the reception of his texts. Finally, we have that canon established according to a milonga poetics that rules the production of lyrics and whose guidelines must be observed. The judgments of Borges’s efforts by Cadícamo constitute an example of this type of canon.

In this way the displacement intended by Borges in his milonga poetics—in which an alternate “I” is moved toward the limits (las orillas), and the poetic discourse is marginalized or takes on popular elements—operates in a terrain in which the writer runs the risk of being isolated. However, this transgression, if it can be called that, does not constitute a full rupture with the previously mentioned canons, whether the lyrical, the “Borgesian,” or the milonga canon. As we have already seen, Borges introduces certain lyrical notes in his milongas, a trait that not only restores his own “poetic voice,” recognizable in all his poetic works, but also the genre as such. In this way we can recognize an exchange in which the poet both gives and takes in this dialogue between texts or discourses that come from different latitudes. The resulting heterogeneity—lyrical, milonguera, and, finally, entirely personal—is proof of Borges’s efforts to enrich and develop the “long civic poem” that in 1955 he had divined would become immortal.

Notes

1. It is important to clarify that even though they were two separate genres historically, the milonga is one aspect of tango in a practical sense, since it is one of the three rhythms that is played and danced within the tango repertoire. For this reason, the distinction between the two that Borges proposes is somewhat arbitrary. In order to better explain the origin and multiplicity of the meanings associated with the term milonga, Mónica Fumagalli goes back to the testimony of Ventura Lynch, who in 1883 documented the milonga as a popular dance par excellence: “This encounter . . . we called milonga; as a consequence, to say ‘let’s milonga’ could mean interchangeably to sing or to dance or both at the same time. The new and tempting dance could not elude the baptismal oil of the environment in which it was created and was called Milonga, incorporating a fully developed criollismo” (A la reunión entonces se le llamó milonga; en consecuencia, decir vamos a milonguear, indistintamente podía significar cantar o bailar o ambas cosas a la vez. El tentador y nuevo baile no pudo eludir el óleo bautismal del ambiente en que se creaba y se llamó Milonga, incorporándose al criollismo neto) (62).
2. As is well known, the bibliography on this topic is abundant. I refer readers to the classic essay by Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," as well as the chapter titled "La impronta estética del mundo moderno" in Jiménez.

3. To better understand the historic, cultural, and political panorama of Argentina from the end of the nineteenth century through the beginning of the twentieth, and its relationship with intellectuals of the time, see Fumagalli.

4. On the notion of canon and its distinct types, see Harris, who uses the framework of Alistair Fowler for distinguishing up to six different types of canons. Even though these distinctions do not operate systematically due to overlapping, one in particular seems to apply particularly well in the case of Borges: the so-called critical canon, which, according to Harris, “se construye con aquellas obras, o partes de obras, que son tratadas por los artículos y libros de crítica de forma reiterada” (is constructed with those works, or parts of works, that are repeatedly taken up in books and articles of criticism) (42).

5. Regarding this atypicality, I acknowledge the work of Sarlo, Jorge Luis Borges.

6. Borges added several new chapters to the second edition of Evaristo Carriego (first published in 1930), the last of which is titled "Historia del tango" (A history of the tango).

7. As regards the writing of that hypothetical "long civic poem" suggested by Borges, the author’s desire would in fact become a concrete reality. On this point I refer to an electronic conversation with Oscar Conde in which he noted: "Borges was asking for a Martín Fierro for the city, that is, an epic poem whose protagonist was not a gaucho but a compadre: 'I hope that this volume will serve as a stimulus for someone to write that authentic poem that will do with the compadre what Martín Fierro did with the gaucho'" ("Historia del tango" 161). What is remarkable is that this poem was written. Although it can’t be proved, its author possibly ‘was inspired’ upon reading this stimulating request by Borges made in La Nación in 1952, because in 1954 Miguel D. Etchebarne published a long poem titled Juan Nadie: Vida y muerte de un Compadre (Buenos Aires: Editorial Alpe). We can surmise that in 1955, when Borges published the second edition of Evaristo Carriego, he wasn’t aware of the existence of Etchebarne’s book, since a year later, when he formed part of the jury for the Premio Nacional de Literatura in the poetry category, corresponding to the three-year period 1953–1956, Borges read the work and was fascinated by it. Lastly, the back cover of the 1995 edition (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Iniciales), cites Borges’s comments in this regard: ‘there is a poem that I would like to bring to your attention, which I had the honor of giving an award in a national literary competition. Unfortunately, I could only get a third place award for the author. Cervantes said that in competitions, the second prize was first, because the first is always given for reasons apart from literary concerns. But I wasn’t even able to get this second-first prize for Miguel D. Etchebarne, but only third, and the book was titled Juan Nadie: Vida y Muerte de un Compadre. That book sought to be for the compadre the book that I had prophesied years earlier, but naturally, it is easy to prophesy a book and very difficult to write it, a book that would do for the compadre what Hernández had done for the gaucho. And I would like for you all to remember the name of this book: Juan Nadie, the name of its author, and that you order it unsuccessfully in the bookstores of Buenos Aires, which never obtain any book—but at least I have done my part in this useless task’ (from the conference ‘Poesía y arrabal,’ delivered in the Paraninfo of the University of Antioquia,
Borges, Tango, and Milonga

Colombia. Published in the Revista Universidad de Antioquia 53, no. 203 (January–March 1986): np.”

8. Cara-Walker also includes the testimony of critic José Gobello, who observes that “in those lyrics [of Borges’s tangos and milongas] a payador-like tone is displayed. I think that the compadritos would have written them just like Borges, had they not been illiterate” (284). While Gobello’s criteria are debatable, the citation illustrates the tone Borges preferred in the tangos he listened to and the milongas he wrote.

9. I follow the chronology suggested by Donald Castro (1986), who focuses on the tango’s diffusion after World War I. Another key event was the success of the first tango song (tango canción), which appeared in 1917: “In 1917 Pascual Contursi wrote the first tango which was designed to be sung and not just danced. This tango “Mi noche triste” [My sad night] began the new era for the tango, one in which the tango moved ‘from the feet to the mouth.’ This is the origin of the tango-canción” (Castro, “Popular Culture as a Source for the Historian” 45).

10. “La milonga y el tango de los orígenes podían ser tontos o, a lo menos, atolondrados, pero eran valerosos y alegres; el tango posterior es un resentido que deplora con lucio sentimental las desdichas propias y festeja con diabólica desvergüenza las desdichas ajenas” (Borges, Prosa completa, vol. 1, Evaristo Carriego 95–96).

11. “Una cosa es el tango actual, hecho a fuerza de pintoresquismo y de trabajosa jerga lunfarda, y otra fueron los tangos viejos, hechos de puro descaro, de pura sinvergüencería, de pura felicidad del valor. Aquellos fueron la voz genuina del compadrito: éstos (música y letra) son la ficción de los incrédulos de la compadrada . . . Los tangos primordiales: El caburé, El cuzquito, El flete, El apache argentino, Una noche de garufa y Hotel Victoria aún atestiguan la valentía chocarrera del arrabal” (Borges, El tamaño de mi esperanza 29–30).

12. Castro observes that “the Argentine tango in its stages of development prior to World War I (La guardia vieja [The Old Guard], 1895–1917) was very much an example of the ‘human condition’ in that it was the dance and musical vehicle of the urban poor, the socially unacceptable, the disenfranchised, and the disinheritied of the Argentine littoral. After World War I, the tango was changed. While it still had some elements of its earlier form, it became more a vehicle of those who were recognized as being socially acceptable, the middle and upper classes” (“Popular Culture as a Source for the Historian: The Tango in its Era of La Guardia Vieja,” 70).

13. Editor’s translation.

14. “Los primeros tangos, los antiguos dichosos, nunca sobrellevaron letra lunfarda: afectación que la novelera tilinguería actual hace obligatoria y que los llena de secreto y de falso énfasis . . . Alma orillera y vocabulario de todos, hubo en la vivaracha milonga: cursilería internacional y vocabulario forajido hay en el tango” (Borges and Clemente, El idioma de los argentinos 21).

15. “El lenguaje del orillero es de su particular inventiva; siempre gráfico, exacto en la alusión; metafórico y onomatopéyico meritísimo, siempre inclemente en la ironía; siempre novedoso porque ese orillero es un incansable renovador de su pintoresco léxico.”

16. Regarding the influence of the Italian immigrant, Castro notes that “even in his own creation, the tango, creole ascendancy was gone. The musical instrument most equated with the tango is the bandoneon. It became associated intimately with the tango
after 1899 and primarily was due to Italian influences (notwithstanding the fact that the bandoneon is German in origin). With the introduction of the plaintive tone of the bandoneon, the tango becomes sad and loses its earlier joyfulness associated with the flute” (“Popular Culture as a Source for the Historian” 82).

17. “El tango antiguo como música, suele directamente trasmitir esa belicosa alegría cuya expresión verbal ensayaron, en edades remotas, rapsodas griegos y germánicos. Ciertos compositores actuales buscan ese tono valiente y elaboran, a veces con felicidad, milongas de la Batería o del Barrio del Alto, pero en sus trabajos, de letra y música estudiosamente anticuadas, son ejercicios de lo que fue, llantos por lo perdido, esencialmente tristes aunque la tonada sea alegre” (Borges, Prosa completa, vol. 1, Evaristo Carriego 92).

18. “Nada me cuesta declarar que subscibo a todas sus conclusiones, y aún a cualquier otra” (Borges, Prosa completa, vol. 1, Evaristo Carriego 89).

19. While a literal translation of this book of poems is “for the six strings,” it has also been rendered as simply “for guitar.”

20. “En el modesto caso de mis milongas, el lector debe suplir la música ausente por la imagen de un hombre que canturrea, en el umbral de su zaguan o en un almacén, acompañándose con la guitarra. La mano se demora en las cuerdas y las palabras cuentan menos que los acordes.”

21. “‘Jacinto Chiclana’ tiene el aire de la milonga guitarrera, o sea el tipo de milonga improvisada; ‘Alguien le dice al tango’ puede considerarse melódica y armónicamente dentro del estilo del 41; ‘A Nicanor Paredes,’ por su contenido, dramático, la he compuesto sobre 8 compases de canto gregoriano, resolviendo la parte melódica sin modernismos artificiales, todo muy simple, muy sentido y sincero; ‘El Títere’ puede definirse como el prototipo del ritmo ligero, jocoso y compadrón de principio de siglo.”

22. “La Payada inuena [sic] de los fogones pastoriles, únicamente romance de los nativos sanos de cuerpo y alma, se convirtió en la Milonga de los fogones y de los tugurios ciudadanos. Por eso la Milonga es la payada pueblera. Son versos octosílabos, que se recitan con cierta tonada no desagradable matizada con intervenciones adecuadas de guitarra, llenando los compases de espera entre una estrofa y otra, un punteado característico de tres tonos, mientras el milonguero resuella o se inspira.”

23. The original text uses the term bandoneón rather than concertina: “El instrumental primitivo de las orquestas—piano, flauta, violín, después bandoneón—confirma, por el costo, ese testimonio; es una prueba de que el tango no surgió de las orillas, que se basaron siempre, nadie lo ignora, con las seis cuerdas de la guitarra” (Borges, Prosa completa, vol. 1, Evaristo Carriego 90).

24. Editor’s note: Tango lyrics are notoriously difficult to render adequately in other languages. This English translation of “Sur” comes from Tanguito, Argentine Tango Academy in London, available at http://www.tanguito.co.uk/tango-culture/tango-lyrics/tango-lyrics-sur/ (accessed May 22, 2012). The website includes this additional context for the translation:

The South of Argentina is a physical and imaginative frontier that defined the nation. This spatial and temporal frontier, which evolved over time, illustrates divisions not only between the urban and rural worlds but also between modernity and past.
Sur is an elegy for a lost love, framed in the landmarks of Boedo and Pompeya, in the South of Buenos Aires. Sur describes a physical trip south of Buenos Aires and at the same time, an imaginary trip into the past, and laments both the end of a love story and changes in the barrio.

The thick wall described in the song not only marks the division between the end of the city and the beginning of the countryside, it also represents a before and an after, and is coloured by the bitterness of lost love.

25. Cara-Walker highlights an important trait in Borges’s milongas, their “conversational” character: “They involve a multiplicity of social voices which thrive on irony, on a tongue in cheek delivery, on a suggestive, understated, and allusive kind of speech which recalls (or implies at least) a previous utterance, a simultaneous aside, or a dialogue” (285). My reading of this trait, however, does not annul the lyric tone of the milonga poems.

26. Editor’s note: This milonga is not included in Alexander Coleman’s compilation Selected Poems: Jorge Luis Borges. I offer here my own translation.

27. Editor’s translation.

28. This omission is noted by Gobello and Bossio 30; and Cara-Walker 292.

29. Cara-Walker observes that “not only have the milongas remained quietly ignored even by scholars who treat traditional elements in Borges’ work, they are conspicuously absent from the text and indices of books dedicated to the author’s comprehensive works” (280).

30. Borges does not appear to include in this list the volume El hacedor (1960), which contained poems in verse and prose. The chronological order of the four collections previous to Para las seis cuerdas is Fervor de Buenos Aires (1923), Luna de enfrente (1925), Cuaderno San Martín (1929), and El otro, el mismo (1964).