

“Era de lo más pobre y de lo más lindo”: Reconsidering Jorge Luis Borges’s Views on the Tango¹

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There is an anecdote that is frequently put forth as evidence that Borges knew absolutely nothing about music; that for all his refined craft and vaunted erudition, when it concerned the tango, Argentina’s most acclaimed modern writer was deaf. This anecdote appears in a book written by the Argentine jazz guitarist, Oscar López Ruiz. In these informative and entertaining memoirs, López Ruiz chronicles his twenty-five years playing, recording, and touring with the man who revolutionized the tango, Astor Piazzolla (*Piazzolla* 196-99). The careers of Borges and Piazzolla intersected in the mid 1960s, when the former agreed to contribute

1 I would like to thank the following friends, colleagues, and institutions for their advice and assistance in this project: María Andrea Campetella, Alfredo Alonso Estenoz, Julio Schwartzman, Omar García Brunelli, Nicolás Lucero, William G. Acree, Mabel Moraña, la Fundación San Telmo, and José Montelongo, librarian at the Benson Latin American Collection.

a handful of milonga and tango lyrics that the latter would set to music. The compositions that resulted from this agreement form the basis of the 1965 LP album entitled *El tango*. The anecdote where Borges betrays his defective musical ear concerns an exchange that took place during one of the recording sessions for this album. López Ruiz recounts this exchange, and the events leading up to it, in a section with a title that is misleadingly salacious: “Borges y la chica”.

López Ruiz’s narration begins several months before the exchange took place. During the compositional process, he writes, Piazzolla frequently invited Borges over to his apartment so that the poet could hear the music he was composing for the album. Astor played his compositions at the piano; his wife Odette María Wolff, better known as Dedé, sang the lyrics. To take these compositions from his living room to the recording studio, Piazzolla spent much of 1965 immersed in “interminable negotiations” at the administrative offices of PolyGram, the label that had held the contract for *El tango* (López Ruiz 196). Much of these negotiations surely concerned the number and quality of performers that eventually participated in the project. In addition to Piazzolla’s own group, the Quinteto Nuevo Tango, the album features a twelve-piece chamber ensemble drawn from the elite of Argentine classical musicians, a chorus, and a large orchestra. For the recitation parts, the producers recruited a popular and esteemed actor, Raúl Medina Castro. The lynchpin for the project, however, was Edmundo Rivero, the most prominent tango singer of the time.

Given this wide array of performing forces, *El tango* demanded many hours in the recording studio.² Borges, we learn from López Ruiz, attended all the recording sessions. Now, the guitarist admits, while those involved in the process find these sessions exciting, it can be tedious for “el ocioso observador [quien], por lo general, no lo pas[a] demasiado bien” (198). In his role of idle observer, Borges gave little indication of whether or not he was having a good time: he sat patiently in the control room,

2 *El tango* required multiple days at the recording studio. In his detailed and thorough discography, Mitsumasa Saito identifies four days: June 5, 6, 15, and 21 of 1965 (274). The aforementioned magazine article provides more detail, perhaps contradictory. The concretion of the album required twelve hours of recording, split up into six two-hour sessions, with each of the varied ensembles. It then required two additional hours of playbacks to record Edmundo Rivero’s vocal parts and Luis Medina Castro’s recitations.

hands resting on the handle of the cane he held between his legs. Over the course of several days, he made neither a comment nor a gesture that revealed how he felt about the music he was hearing.³ Nor did he react to the activity that was taking place around him, which according to López Ruiz's description, was quite hectic:

Entrábamos y salíamos permanentemente de la sala de control para escuchar las diferentes tomas que íbamos realizando de los distintos temas que componían el disco.

Borges, inmutable.

Comentábamos esto y aquello, nos reíamos como locos (nuestra costumbre de tomar todo con humor), puteábamos como camioneros borrachos y armábamos bastante escándalo haciéndonos todo tipo de bromas referentes a cómo habíamos tocado tal o cual parte.

Borges, inmutable. (198-99)

¡Borges, immutable! This phrase, highlighted by exclamation marks, as refrain and punch line for his anecdote.

Piazzolla was not amused by Borges's silence. He had invested considerable time and energy in bringing this album to fruition. Moreover, given his controversial status in contemporary Argentine musical culture he had much more at stake in the project than Borges. Better known for his tenaciousness than his patience, Piazzolla's deference to his collaborator's silence finally broke. This occurred during one of the last sessions in the studio, when the musicians were recording the milonga "A Don Nicanor Paredes." Borges had heard this milonga several months earlier in the more intimate setting of Piazzolla's apartment. But now, instead of Piazzolla's minimal piano accompaniment, Borges heard a large orchestra. Instead of Dedé's high voice, he heard the deep baritone of Edmundo Rivero. After the third or fourth take of the milonga, while the musicians were listening to how they had played, Piazzolla turned towards Borges who, as he had been doing all along, was sitting in immutable silence, and asked: "¿Y Borges? ¿Qué le parece? ¿Le gusta?" Borges, López Ruiz's recollects, responded thus: "Borges, inmutable, apenas si levantó la vista y dirigiéndose a Astor con su voz aflautada tan peculiar, y su tono entre

3 "Durante las varias sesiones que demandó la factura de este disco, Borges estaba invariable, silenciosa y pacientemente sentado en la sala de control del estudio escuchando los tediosos preparativos, ensayos y diferentes tomas que se hacían para obtener el mejor resultado posible" (López Ruiz 197-98).

aristocrático y estilo ‘el traga del colegio’, le contestó: ‘Sí; claro; por supuesto; pero qué quiere que le diga, Piazzolla, *a mí me gustaba más cómo lo cantaba la chica*’” (199, emphasis by López Ruiz). The girl, of course, was Piazzolla’s wife, Dedé.

Borges’s response caused a commotion in the studio. Again, López Ruiz:

Se recontra pudrió todo. Fue tal la explosión de carcajadas, Rivero incluido, que los cristales de la sala de control casi se parten en mil pedazos. Fue muy difícil retomar la compostura necesaria como para poder encarar una nueva toma. Para lograrlo tuvimos que hacer un paréntesis e irnos a tomar un café en algún bar de las cercanías, y después de reírnos y comentar hasta el cansancio la ocurrencia de Borges, retornamos a la sala y recomenzamos la tarea.

¿Qué había pasado con Borges? ¡Borges, inmutable! (199)

The musicians’ reaction to Borges’s somewhat innocent comment may strike readers as odd, even rude to an elderly blind man.⁴ So, let us provide some context. As mentioned above, the presence of Rivero was crucial to the topic, since in contrast to both Borges and Piazzolla, no one questioned his association with the tango.⁵ He was the most distinguished and successful of tango singers, at a time when the popularity of the music, both as music and dance forms, had declined precipitously. The prominence of Rivero’s name on the album cover reflects his celebrity and importance to the project. Not only was Rivero a great tango singer,

4 Their reaction may also have puzzled López-Ruiz’s local readers. The book was published in 1994, just a few years after Borges’s death. By then, critical views of Borges have shifted due, in large part, to the work of Beatriz Sarlo. But more significantly, a more benign view of the celebrated writer had spread throughout the general public. Thus, excluding the diehard Piazzolla fans who probably were the core readership of this López-Ruiz’s memoirs, it seems likely that many Argentine readers of this non-scholarly book would not only find the musicians’ reaction puzzling—an insider’s joke among musicians—but also distastefully rude to a blind and elderly man who was also an exalted national figure. To his credit, at one point in his narrative, López Ruiz acknowledges that the very advanced blindness that affected the poet contributed to his isolation from what was going on around him, but he insists that his lack of comments or gesture was weird: “Quizá la muy avanzada ceguera que padecía contribuyera a aislarlo de lo que sucedía a su alrededor, pero no hacía comentario ni gesto alguno que revelara sus sentimientos respecto de lo que estaba escuchando” (198).

5 Carlos Kuri states that, in this project, Rivero “consigue una posición clara cantando entre dos mentirosos” (204).

but also during the time the recording was made, he was viewed as a specialist in the milonga genre. This was not lost on López Ruiz: "Edmundo Rivero lo cantaba [“A Don Nicanor Paredes] con el sabor que únicamente él podía darle a este estilo de música, una milonga sureña de corte tanguero, y además, como tocaba muy bien la guitarra, a Astor se le ocurrió que lo hiciera en ese tema” (199). But it was more than a matter of questionable musical taste what irked López Ruiz. As can be gleaned from his memoirs, López Ruiz had a chip on his shoulder. He felt that Argentine society did not take musicians seriously, especially those who played popular music.⁶ López Ruiz was the consummate professional musician: musically literate, multifaceted, and experienced. So was Edmundo Rivero, an established professional guitarist, who played classical and popular styles, long before he had garnered any success as a singer. *La chica*, López Ruiz explains, was not: “la chica era la mujer de Astor, Dedé, quien aparte de ser una mujer encantadora, dulce, muy mona y excelente pintora, no era para nada una cantante” (199). For López-Ruiz and the other musicians assembled in the recording studio, the fact that Borges preferred *la chica* over Rivero not only proved that Borges knew absolutely nothing about music, that he was deaf, but it also betrayed a complete disregard for professional musicians.⁷

Now, there are several possible explanations for Borges’s *ocurrencia*. Piazzolla scholar Carlos Kuri, for example, has interpreted Borges’s observation as a testimony to “la voz, secreta, afinada y dulce de Dedé” (41). Indeed, her son Daniel Piazzolla, himself a trained musician, confirms this notion: “Mi mamá no era una profesional del canto, pero ¡cantaba como los dioses! Era afinadísima y tenía un hermoso vibrato” (personal communication).⁸ Given the long and personal relationship between

6 His book is strewn with didactic passages on the nature of music and how much work and knowledge is involved in music making. These are often placed in copious and often lengthy digressions, often type set “side notes” where he explains this or that aspect of music, generally in painstaking detail. One of the goals of this book, one could argue, is to educate the almost exclusively Argentine reader on the nature of music professionalism.

7 The fact that Rivero was also an excellent guitarist surely touched a nerve.

8 Interestingly, recordings of Dedé singing Piazzolla’s setting of Borges’s lyrics, with the musician himself at the piano, circulate among Argentine collectors. I have had the good fortune to hear several of these recordings. Despite the quality of the recordings,

López Ruiz and Piazzolla, it seems unlikely that Dedé's voice was a secret to him. So again, what irked López Ruiz, was the fact that she was not a professional singer, that she most likely could not read music.

There are also less generous explanations for Borges's *ocurrencia*. An interesting one can be gleaned from the diaries of Borges's close friend and collaborator, Adolfo Bioy Casares. In an entry written around the time when Borges was visiting Piazzolla's home, Bioy Casares recorded the following observation:

Afirma: "La música de la milonga que Piazzolla hizo para Paredes, como éste es un difunto, es tristísima. Comprenderás que si Paredes murió en el veintitantos, yo no puedo estar muy apenado por su muerte. Además lo vi siempre a Paredes como un personaje genérico. Yo imaginé una milonga casi alegre, por cierto épica: ésta es quejumbrosa. Dijo Piazzolla que por primera vez se llevan los cantos gregorianos a una milonga. Así salió. También tiene final de cante jondo. Es una porquería". (1056)

So, at the recording session, by noting his displeasure with how his lyrics had been sung, Borges avoided mentioning his true displeasure with how his lyrics had been set.

But there is an explanation that, as Borges would say, is much nicer. Note how Borges, who was meticulous with his word choices, said he preferred "how" the girl sang the milonga. This invites us to explore the following question: how did Borges like milongas to be sung?

To answer this question, we must turn back the clock more than three decades, to the late 1920s, when Borges was writing a book on the poet of Palermo, Evaristo Carriego. This is not Palermo, Sicily, of course, but the neighborhood on the northern edges of the city of Buenos Aires. Palermo is now a very fashionable neighborhood but at the turn of the century it was known as "the neighborhood of the knife." This designation delighted Borges, of course, because he had grown up in Palermo, albeit, in a garden behind an iron gate, and in a library with a limitless stock of English books.

At the turn of the century, Palermo was one of the *orillas*, or outskirts, of Buenos Aires, that is, one of the less affluent neighborhoods that had formed around the center of the city. The outskirts were a transitional

Dedé comes across as a fine singer. In fact, Piazzolla's accompanying skills at the piano are less adroit.

space between the city and the countryside. This transitional state between urban and rural worlds was evident in the landscape: vacant stretches of land, corner general stores, saloons with pink mud walls, and dusty dirt roads that melted into the plains of the pampas.

The archetypal inhabitant of the outskirts was the *compadre*. The compadre lived between urban and rural worlds. His recent rural past was evident in the trades that he plied: cart driver, cattle driver, animal slaughterer, etc. There were several types of compadre. For Borges, the most interesting one was the *guapo*. The guapo, he asserted, was simply a man who was willing to put his life on the line; the cause did not matter. So, unlike common usage, in Argentine Spanish, the term guapo does not connote a man who is handsome, but one who is aggressively brave. For Borges, it was admirable that this type of men even existed. Men who, despite the poverty and bitter hardships they faced in their everyday lives, aspired to courage as their primary virtue. For these men, courage was a religion, a religion they practiced on the dirt roads of the outskirts, in duels fought one on one, always with knives, always to the death.

For Borges, the duels of the knife fighters had an epic dimension. They were epic, he frequently argued, because the courage of the knife fighters was disinterested. These men did not fight for love, power, or profit.⁹ The courage of the knife fighters was epic not only because it was disinterested, but also, because of its joy, a petulant, bellicose joy. A joy that was not contingent on circumstances. These men, Borges asserted, lived hard lives, but they were also hard men, and they had the courage to feel joy. As Borges once wrote:

Basta escuchar los tangos que he mencionado, o las congéneres milongas que los precedieron, para saber que los compadres que los inventaron, silbaron y divulgaron, no eran tal vez hombres felices, ni siquiera hombres valerosos, pero sí eran hombres cuya aspiración era la felicidad y el valor. Eso anhelaban, así les gustaba pensarse. ("Vindicación" 226-27)¹⁰

9 This notion is ubiquitous in Borges's writings that deal with temas orilleros. We find a pithy articulation in an interview with Victoria Ocampo. In response to her question, "¿Qué es que lo atrae en figuras como el orillero y el compadrito?" Borges responded: "Pienso que esos orilleros eran pobre gente que, para justificarse de algún modo, crearon lo que yo llamé alguna vez 'la secta del cuchillo y del coraje.' Del coraje desinteresado, se entiende" (23).

10 Originally published in *Saber Vivir*, Buenos Aires, Año V, no. 53, 1945.

The payador, a kind of gaucho troubadour, was often a direct witness to the duels and courage of the knife fighters. Argentine writers, moreover, often fused the knife fighter and the payador into a single character. Consider, for example, José Hernández's *Martín Fierro*, Gutiérrez's *Juan Moreira*, Santos Vega, and *Hormiga Negra*; or Carriego's poem, "El Guapo." According to Borges, the turn of the century milongas and tangos expressed directly the guapo's aspiration for courage and joy. These milongas and tangos were the sonic imprints of their duels. Like these duels, the milongas and early tangos had an epic dimension.

When Borges began researching his book on Carriego, the world of the outskirts had disappeared. Traces of this world remained, however, especially in the memories of its former inhabitants. Borges spoke to many of them. But there was one with whom he developed a friendship of sorts, and who became his primary source. This man was Nicolás Paredes, the subject of the milonga lyrics set by Piazzolla. Paredes had been a political boss of Palermo. It was rumored that he owed a life or two, the habitual euphemism for having killed a man.

When Borges met Paredes, the guapo was elderly but still imposing, and making his living as a card shark. Like the legendary knife fighters of the past, Paredes was not only a guapo but also a payador, that is, he practiced the old way of singing. He also sang milongas, and thus, can also be called a milonguero, a singer of milongas. Through Paredes, Borges met and heard other payadores and milongueros.

These men shaped Borges's views on the milonga: what it sang about, and how it was sung. He expressed these views in his book *Evaristo Carriego* (1930). Here, perhaps for the first time, Borges distinguishes the milonga as one of the two great conversational forms of Buenos Aires. The conversational tone of the milonga, of course, had a lot to do with how singers sang it, their intonation. Borges writes: "Los aires y los argumentos suelen variar; lo que no varía es la entonación del cantor, atiplada como de ñato, arrastrada, con apurones de fastidio, nunca gritona, entre conversadora y cantora" ("La canción del barrio", *OC* 1: 240).

In later writings, Borges often uses the expression *canturrear* to describe how the payadores and milongueros sang: "Los payadores y milongueros [...] habían canturreado casi en voz baja, con una entonación entre

lo cantado y lo oral" ("Prólogo" 142).¹¹ Borges had experienced this way of singing, which he describes as with *desgano*, from Paredes and other milongueros that he heard when he was researching his book on Evaristo Carriego.

In the prologue to the volume that collected his milonga lyrics, Borges invites the reader to imagine the voice of a virtual singer articulating his words in this manner: "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 un zaguán o en un almacén, acompañándose con la guitarra. La mano se demora en las cuerdas y las palabras cuentan menos que los acordes" (OC 2: 577). One assumes that if this is how he experienced payadores singing and how he wanted readers of his text to imagine the voice, then this is how he imagined the intonation of his own milonga verses.

Borges's most revealing discussion of how milongas were sung, however, can be heard in a public lecture that he gave towards the end of 1965, significantly, around the same time that Borges made the observation that so entertained López-Ruiz and company. During this lecture, Borges draws a sharp distinction between the old way of singing ("antigua manera criolla de cantar), exemplified by the payadores and the milongueros, and the way of singing that became popular in the 1920s, exemplified by the tango singer, Carlos Gardel. To describe the old style of singing, Borges notes two qualities not mentioned in his earlier writings. The first quality concerns intonation, or more accurately, its absence: the payadores and milongueros, it seems, sang out of tune.¹² It is the second quality that is more interesting, however, because it goes beyond the physical aspects of intonation: "Ahora, ¿en qué consistía, ante todo, la antigua manera criolla de cantar? Yo diría que consistía en un contraste, no sé si obra de la destreza o si obra de la mera torpeza del cantor. Creo que la segunda hipótesis es más posible, entre la letra, la letra que solía ser ensangrentada y la indiferencia del cantor" (OC 2: 93). For Borges, what distinguished the old style of singing was the contrast, the contrast between the bloody content of the lyrics and the indifference in the singer's intonation. It was as if the singer did not realize what he was singing about.

11 Originally appeared in Zubillaga.

12 "Ustedes me van a perdonar que desafine, porque también desafinaban los paisanos y los payadores" (*El tango* 93).

In the 1965 public lecture, Borges provides two examples that illustrate this bloody content. The first is a famous passage from *Martín Fierro*, the central work of nineteenth-century gaucho literature. Note the characteristic octosyllabic versification:

Por fin en una topada
en el cuchillo lo alcé,
y como un saco de güesos
contra un cerco lo largué.

Tiró unas cuantas patadas
Y ya cantó pa' el carnero.
Nunca me podré olvidar
De la agonía de ese negro.¹³

Now, in this conference Borges not only talks about the old way of singing, he also demonstrates it.¹⁴

Interestingly, Borges's rendition differs slightly from the original quatrains in *Martín Fierro*, reproduced below:

Por fin en una topada
en el cuchillo lo alcé,
y como un saco de güesos
contra un cerco lo largué

Tiró unas cuantas patadas
y ya cantó pa el carnero.
Nunca me *puedo* olvidar
de la agonía de *aquel* negro. (Borges and Bioy Casares 606)

By replacing *podré* for *puedo* and *ese* for *aquel*, Borges shifts the accents in the verses so that they align with the rhythmic patterns of the melody he has chosen to sing the text. Most likely done unconsciously, these changes suggest an ear that is sensitive to rhythmic subtleties of word-music relations.

As his second example of the violent lyrics, Borges quotes a stanza from the milonga “El carrero y el cochero de tranvía:”

13 My transcription of the original differs slightly from that in *El Tango* 93.

14 The reader can access these this recording at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C_3rxNmOGkU.

El carrero que es de vista
le tira una puñalada
y a las dos o tres paradas
le manda un tiro al cochero
que si éste no es tan ligero
y en el aire lo aventaja
media barriga le raja
como a una sandia¹⁵ costera
y le saca sin permiso
los chinchulines pa' juera.¹⁶

Now, over the applause that followed his singing of first excerpt, we hear Borges assert the following: “Muy bien, creo que he sido lo suficientemente desafinado, ¿no? Correctamente desafinado, históricamente desafinado” (*El tango* 94). To say the least, and in contrast to the aloof and clueless image projected in López-Ruiz’s anecdote, when it concerns tangos and milongas, this Borges does not seem immutable.

Both in concept and in practice, Borges emphasizes how, in the old style of singing, there was a contrast between the bloody content of the lyrics (*el hecho ensangrentado*) and the singer’s indifferent intonation (*la casi indiferencia del cantor*). He admits that he does not know if the singer’s indifference results from dexterity or mere clumsiness. He suspects it is the latter. If we want to be rigorous, Borges asserts, then we must view this contrast as a form of disability. But, if we want to be generous to

15 My transcription of this passage retains Borges’s vernacular pronunciation of *sandia*, which accentuates the first syllable and pronounces the second syllable as a diphthong. The reader can find a link to this recording at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JahApiDITmU>.

16 Surprisingly, the layout of this milonga text in the recent edition of Borges’s conferences on the tango does not reflect the octosyllabic structure that characterizes the genre. Moreover, the editor identifies Ángel Villoldo as the author (*El tango* 94). It is interesting to note, however, that Borges does not identify an author. During the turn of the century, milongas and tangos circulated anonymously. The person who first published a text, therefore, was not necessarily the author or composer. It is significant therefore, that when Borges collected this text in an anthology, where it appears in octosyllabic form, he identifies the text as an “Obra grabada hacia 1910 por Angel G. Villoldo.” That is, as the performer of the milonga, but not necessarily its author. See Borges and Bullrich 27.

generations of anonymous singers, he says, we could interpret the singer's indifference as a form of stoicism.¹⁷

Stoicism, of course, was one of the qualities that Borges admired in the guapos. The poet sings to this stoicism in his "Milonga de Albornoz:"

Un acero entró en el pecho,
ni se le movió la cara;
Alejo Albornoz murió
como si no le importara. (OC 2: 592)

After this long digression that led us on a journey through the outskirts of turn of the century Buenos Aires, we can return to 1965 and to the recording of *El tango*. Let us imagine Borges sitting in a modern recording studio, listening to the musical realization of the milonga lyrics he had written for his old friend Nicolás Paredes. What does he expect to hear? What would he like to hear? He probably expects the accompaniment of a laboriously strumming guitar. He probably expects the intonation of his verses to be conversational, somewhere between a singing and a spoken voice, and that the singer sing softly, never shouting. Perhaps, striving for historical accuracy, the singer could be slightly out of tune. And, even if the words turned to bloody acts, the singer would remain indifferent; the tone would be stoic. And perhaps, Borges may have hoped, Rivero and Piazzolla could achieve what generations of schooled musicians could not: create a music that was joyful, courageous, and epic, a music worthy of the milongas and tangos from the turn of the century.

Let us now turn to Piazzolla's setting of Borges's milonga. These are the lyrics of the first five stanzas of "Milonga de Don Nicanor Paredes:"

Venga un rasgueo y ahora,
con el permiso de ustedes,
le estoy cantando, señores,
a don Nicanor Paredes.

No lo vi rígido y muerto
ni siquiera lo vi enfermo;
lo veo con paso firme

17 Thus, Borges: "Esa casi indiferencia, si somos, bueno, si somos rigurosos, podemos considerarla como una incapacidad. Pero si queremos ser generosos con generaciones de payadores anónimos de la llanura, de las cuchillas y de las orillas, podemos considerarlo como una forma de estoicismo, también" (*El tango* 94-95).

pisar su feudo, Palermo.

El bigote un poco gris
pero en los ojos el brillo
y cerca del corazón
el bultito del cuchillo.

El cuchillo de esa muerte
de la que no le gustaba
hablar; alguna desgracia
de cuadreras o de tabas. (OC 2: 584)

The words turn to bloody acts in the fourth quatrain, where the poet alludes to a past knife duel. With all this in mind, and the eco of Borges's voice in our ears, I invite the reader to listen to the recording that eventually appeared on the album, and see whether Rivero's and Piazzolla's rendering of the lyrics meets Borges's expectations, as I have reconstructed them.¹⁸

As the listener surely noted, Borges never hears the chords of a guitar, which as we read earlier, he considered more important than his verses. Rivero does not sing in a conversational tone, and although he never shouts, he gets pretty loud. He also sings long notes in a full voice, in a manner that surely surpasses the modest abilities of the anonymous singers in the corner saloons. Even worse, when the words mention a knife and a duel, both the music and the voice turn dramatic, indeed, perhaps overly so. We do not hear a contrast between the bloody content and the intonation, a contrast that, for Borges, defined the old way of singing. In this music there is no stoicism, there is no courage, there is no joy. This music is not epic. If it expresses anything, it expresses sentimentality and nostalgia.¹⁹

18 The reader can find Rivero's interpretation of "Milonga de Don Nicanor Paredes" at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=58Jy1muCyMo>.

19 According to Estela Canto, Borges may have eventually found someone who sang the milongas to his satisfaction: "Años después, cuando Borges era director de la Biblioteca Nacional fue a verlo un cantor desconocido que había puesto música a algunas de sus milongas y cantaba marcialmente, acompañándose con una guitarra, algunos de sus poemas. A Borges le gustó como cantaba: de algún modo había atrapado el ritmo bravío que Borges quería dar a sus milongas. Dos o tres veces recibió al cantante en la

Now, let us return to the anecdote of Borges and the girl. If we want to be rigorous, and accept Borges's frequent admission that he did not have much of an ear for music, then we can consider his preference for Dedé over Rivero as evidence that his views on the tango cannot be taken seriously. But if we want to be generous to Borges, we could ask ourselves how Dedé's singing may have more closely resembled the tone Borges imagined when he wrote the lyrics. Of course we have no way of knowing how she actually sang them that particular evening when Borges's heard it. But we can imagine that Dedé, intimidated by the presence of the great poet, in the living room of Piazzolla's modest apartment, that she sang in a hesitant, conversational tone. One can suspect, that when the lyric described bloody events, she sang without much contrast, with an innocence analogous to the indifferent and stoic tone of the old way of singing. It seems unlikely that she could match Rivero's impassioned full voiced rendering. For, as López Ruiz pointed out, she was not at all a singer. She was not a professional.

For Borges, however, that fact that she was not a professional was not a bad thing. Borges had a patrician disdain for the professionalization among men and women of letters. This disdain, it seems, extended to tango singers. Consider the observation he made about the famous singer Carlos Gardel: "Cuidaba mucho de sus grabaciones; no se resignaba al menor error, excepto en la versión definitiva, en la que deslizaba alguno, para dejar en los oyentes una impresión de espontaneidad" ("Prólogo" 142). Borges's disdain for Gardel's professionalism, it seems, was not only aesthetic, but also ethical. Gardel sang for fame and glory. And Borges, we observed above, favored art that was disinterested, disinterested like the courage of the guapos.

Borges observed that the composers of the first tangos, the instrumental tangos of the turn of the century, were not professional musicians. They were cart drivers, cattle drivers, and animal slaughterers. If you remember, these were the same humble trades that produced the guapos. At the turn of the century, Borges observed, the composition of tangos was not important. He had heard, and this pleased him greatly, that a composer would often give a tango to a fellow musician as a gift.

Biblioteca Nacional y éste fue con él hasta la entrada del subterráneo de Independencia, que tomaba regularmente para volver a su casa" (127).

Pero todo esto se explica, yo creo, muy fácilmente, por el hecho de que la redacción de un tango, la composición de un tango no era muy importante entonces. He oído decir, y esto de diversas fuentes, que era muy fácil que un autor necesitado vendiera un tango a un ejecutor famoso. Y he oído decir, lo cual es más simpático, que a veces, entre compositores, uno le regalaba un tango a otro. (*El tango* 112-13)

Everything was done in an atmosphere of friendship and cordiality. Then, no one thought that a tango could earn a man fame or glory. For Borges, this had a lot to do with the aesthetic value of these tangos: He observed:

Es decir, todo eso se hacía en un ambiente de amistad, de cordialidad; no se pensaba que un tango pudiera hacer famoso o glorioso a un hombre. Todo era ocasional. Y quizá la única manera de producir una obra de arte perdurable sea no tomándola demasiado en serio, no dándole mayor importancia, distrayéndose un poco o, como diría los psicólogos actuales, dejando que la subconciencia fluya, o como otros dirían, la musa, [o] el espíritu santo; es lo mismo. (*El tango* 113)²⁰

For Borges, therefore, the fact that the non-professional composers of the first tangos did not take themselves or their tangos too seriously, or put differently, that their composition was disinterested, accounts not only for the aesthetic and ethical superiority of the early tangos, but also, may explain why they have endured. And, if you allow me one more unwarranted extrapolation, it seems likely that for Borges, Piazzolla took himself and his music way too seriously.

Based on the preceding discussion, I would like to invite those in the tango world to reconsider Borges's views on the milonga and tango. In the first place, because he did have a good ear, especially for the music that

20 As the astute reader of this journal surely noted, Borges frequently expressed analogous views about literature. The following excerpt, culled from his review of Adolfo Bioy's memoirs, *Antes del novecientos*, is noteworthy for its parallels with the preceding passage: "A trueque de infringir alguna vez las transitorias reglas de juego que son el arte literario de cada época, los mejores libros pueden ser obra de escritores ocasionales. El profesional suele confundir los medios y el fin y subordinar el éxito verdadero al éxito técnico; no así el hombre de buenas lecturas, que emprende al cabo de los años la redacción de un libro. El mayor riesgo que lo acecha es la tentación de exhibir un vocabulario variado; salvado ese peligro y otros menores, puede hacer obra duradera. La historia de las letras de América abunda en confirmaciones; bástenos recordar el caso de aquel periodista, que compuso en una pieza de hotel *El gaucho Martín Fierro*. Otro muy claro ejemplo nos ofrece este libro de Adolfo Bioy" (287).

he knew and loved. Of course, he could not hear the technical details, like a professional could. But he had a kind of long-range hearing. Borges's hearing encompassed the city of Buenos Aires, from its center to its outskirts. And it extended from the present back to the nineteenth century. Borges developed this ear not in the library, but walking the streets of Buenos Aires, in search of the lost world of the outskirts. This Borges was a kind of amateur social anthropologist. I like to think of him, however, as Borges, *el compadrito*

El Compadrito Borges walked tirelessly through lost dirt roads on the edges of the city. He spoke to thugs, police chiefs, pimps, milonga singers, upper-class rakes, and tango musicians. He spent countless hours in seedy corner bars of the outskirts, listening to less than tuneful milongeros.²¹ This image, of course, contrasts with the image of Borges that predominates outside Argentina, Borges as the writer's writer who inhabits a world of libraries and labyrinths. This image is reflected in the doodle that Google put up on his birthday in 2011. This Borges, cane in hand, observes the universe from a library. In this image, there are no knife fighters.

The tango world has also insisted on the Borges of the library, and has treated Borges's views on the tango with suspicion if not scorn. His views have been characterized as elitist, ignorant, misleading, and even unpatriotic. This hostile reception from the tango world echoes more general views about Borges that became entrenched during the 1950s and 60s. During this period, both the nationalist right and the militant left characterized Borges and his writings as cold, sterile, anti-popular, and foreign-loving (*extranjerizante*). My reading of Borges follows critic Beatriz Sarlo, who called for a reconsideration of Borges as a writer who has two sides, who is at once cosmopolitan and national.²²

21 In an interview, biographer Enrique Rodríguez Monegal describes Borges's compadrito phase: "Después, cuando Borges vuelve [de] España, ya un muchacho de unos veinte años, una de sus formas de liberarse de la familia era irse de noche a recorrer los barrios de compadritos y burdeles. Incluso hay crónicas de amigos y conocidos que dicen que vestía como un compadrito, tomaba caña y había aprendido a bailar el tango como compadrito. Durante los años veinte, Borges salía a menudo con un grupo de amigos, entre ellos Leopoldo Marechal, y andaban mucho por los cafetines, donde conoció muchos [compadritos]" (Guibert 674).

22 See *Jorge Luis Borges: A Writer on the Edge*.

There are other reasons for reconsidering Borges's views on the tango. For one thing, the poet's insistence on the aesthetic and ethical superiority of the early tangos challenges standard historical narratives. These narratives, evolutionary in nature, culminate either in the tangos of the golden age, that is, the tangos produced between 1940 through 1955, or the *avante-garde* tangos of Astor Piazzolla.²³ This, of course, is analogous to jazz histories that have placed bebop at the cusp of the music's maturation. In recent decades, jazz historians have challenged these narratives; tango historians have not.

Moreover, and also analogous with jazz, most tango historians have interpreted the expulsion of the dancer as a definitive sign of artistic maturation. The tangos favored by Borges, in contrast, were completely subordinated to the dance form: "El tango fue primeramente un plano de baile, una indicación de cortes y floreos, una actualidad que no se preocupa" (*El idioma* 106). For Borges, a tango was not a tango unless it affected the body. As he told his friend Bioy Casares, in 1965: "El tango se siente con el cuerpo. Oís un tango y cambiás de postura, te encogés un poco" (Bioy Casares 1082).

Borges also invites a more sustained engagement with the music as music. Influenced by Arthur Schopenhauer and Walter Pater, Borges often asserted that music could express things directly, something that language could never do. If nothing else, Borges's emphasis on the music counterbalances much of the critical work on the tango, which has focused on the lyrics.

Finally, and most importantly, Borges invites us to see and hear the beauty in humble things. In an early and beautiful essay entitled "Sentirse en muerte," Borges describes the culmination of a long walk through an outlying neighborhood:

La marcha me dejó en una esquina. Aspiré noche, en asueto serenísimo de pensar. La visión, nada complicada por cierto, parecía simplificada por mi cansancio. La irrealizaba su misma tipicidad. La calle era de casas bajas, y aunque su primera significación fuera de pobreza, la segunda era ciertamente de dicha. Era de lo más pobre y de lo más lindo. (*El idioma* 130-31)

23 The *locus classicus* for an evolutionary history of the tango is Horacio Ferrer: *El tango: su historia y evolución*.

It was, Borges wrote, *de lo más pobre y de lo más lindo*. This description, I believe, goes very well with the milongas and first tangos.

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