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# TANGO: THEME OF CLASS AND NATION<sup>1</sup>

Julie M. Taylor

## I. INTRODUCTION

A favorite Argentine national pastime consists of debate over the supposed demise or latest claim to revival of the national dance. Is the tango already dead? Or are the dance and its music not only alive but one of the most complete expressions of Argentine character? Endless discussions of these conflicting opinions and the deep concern expressed on all sides over the death of the tango constitute the most important evidence that the dance, or at least its accompanying complex of music, song, and tradition, lives on in the minds of the Argentines. Other indications of this fact abound in a first glance at everyday life in the nation's cities and towns: the presence in every bookshop of current popularized analyses of the dance; the superabundance of recordings of each tango and each tango artist; the proportion of broadcasting hours dedicated solely to tango; the re-runs of old tango movies; and the use of the dance complex as the subject of new theater productions, art exhibits, and lectures.

An examination of the continuing role of the tango in Argentina today entails a definition of the interrelated elements of tango as folklore, song, and dance. The following investigation deals with three groups of themes: those consisting of the characteristics of the environment which produced the tango, those forming the moral or emotional base of the tango and explicitly stated in its lyrics, and those found in the choreography of the dance itself. The discussion then focuses on the significance and functions of the tango as a whole, as well as of its relevance to different classes and geographic groups.

These differing perspectives on the tango emphasize its descriptions of the experience of a transient, isolated, and frustrated existence haunted by a fear of social, economic, and sexual failures. I have attempted to add to the classic interpretation of the tango as an expression of the immigrant population in Buenos Aires by strongly suggesting the existence of connections between tango and certain folklore traditions of the interior. I also have suggested a way in which the danced themes of the tango may support rather than contradict the verbal themes of the lyrics.<sup>2</sup>

## II. THE THEMES

THE TRADITION: *EL ARRABAL*

One of the difficulties for the outsider approaching the tango is that not only are the words often impossible to translate without a special dictionary, but once interpreted they evoke a context of custom and history taken for granted by Argentines and thus seldom made explicit. Discussed first here will be themes important in the lore which surrounds the tango. These are the characteristics of the culture which produced it and in terms of which its own themes are often expressed.

1. The immigrants at the city's edge. The dream of a successful new life in a new world lured an ever increasing number of immigrants to the ports of the River Plate after 1870. A principal motivation for this wave of newcomers was the hope of owning land. For a number of reasons, however, it was nearly impossible by the 1890's for small cultivators to obtain land. The immigrant was thus forced into the occupation of tenant farmer or even share cropper (Germani 1962:192). Disillusioned by this state of affairs, many new arrivals tended to accumulate around the port cities. Here they mixed with other elements of the giant labor force congregating on the outskirts, the *arrabal* or *orillas*, of Buenos Aires (Scobie 1964:132).

Certain themes and attitudes expressed by the tango are seen as related—in ways still to be systematically investigated—to characteristics of the wave of foreigners. For example, the intensity of the nostalgia and resentment of the Argentine immigrant can be attributed to the often futile pursuit of economic and social success. His painful lack of a sense of belonging and permanence in his new country may be interpreted as due in part to the high proportions of immigrants to native Argentines. Similarly, defensive attitudes toward women are recognized to have been fostered by the low percentage of females relative to males in the foreign-born population (Germani 1955:136). It was also during this time that Buenos Aires developed into an internationally known center of prostitution.

However, as can be seen in the national gaucho epic *Martín Fierro*, the desperate lack of roots and the distrust of women obtained in the interior of Argentine as well. An introspective fatalistic pessimism, often considered to be the defining characteristic of the Argentine mentality is also characteristic of both *Martín Fierro* and the tango. The forces which formed the tango and its characteristic mentality were not all brought by the immigrant from the Old World nor did they come into existence upon his arrival. At the time of the influx of foreigners into the coastal cities, the frontier was closing in interior Argentina and the migration to the cities from the rural areas was beginning, two trends which profoundly affected the Argentine mentality (Germani 1962:257-8).

Although foreigners outnumbered the native born on the streets of Buenos Aires, native Argentine elements influenced the *arrabal* culture. These elements were brought in from the pampas by Argentines themselves or by other immigrants who had made their way inland before returning to the coast.

While the first immigrants left their mark on the new culture, their sons rejected all perceivable links with Europe and sought to acquire traits which would give them some claim to "Argentinism." They could acquire some of these traits from native *porteños*. Others they imitated from Argentines or other immigrants returning from a sojourn in the provinces, or from gauchos on their way with their herds to the slaughter-houses, all bringing with them aspects of the complex of pampa lore and traditions.

The presence in Buenos Aires of gaucho musical traditions from the interior, particularly of the *payada* and the *milonga*, directly concerns a study of the tango. The *payador*, a wandering troubador of the Argentine plains, was an expert in the *payada*, an improvised poetic form of riddle with rhyming question and answer, usually put to music. The *payador* sang of current events, of philosophy of life, and of social protest (Mafud 1966:25-34). Not only were many early artists of the tango also versed in the art of the *payador*, but the *payada* probably influenced at least one form of *milonga*, a gaucho folk song with tango rhythm. The *milonga* was played in Buenos Aires interchangeably with tango and often confused with it (Mafud 1966:26), resulting in a probable transfer of themes from gaucho to tango lore (Ferrer 1960:55).

Pampa traditions in the suburbs of Buenos Aires at the turn of the twentieth century were not as far removed from their original context as they seem today. Less than a century ago the plains stretched far into what is now city. It was into these flat lands that the *orillas* of Buenos Aires pushed (Borges 1930; Borges and Bullrich 1968). Under physical conditions identical to those of pampa towns, the extraordinary dispersal of the arriving population made possible a reproduction of pampa village life in the *barrios* within the city itself. Thus, suburban life became a real intermediate between country and capital.

2. *El compadrito*. The *arrabal* also helped nurture the flourishing underworld of Buenos Aires around the turn of the century. The hero or anti-hero, according to different interpretations, of the *barrios* in the decades between 1880 and 1930 was the *compadrito*. This figure seems to have taken over the task of urbanizing the gaucho traditions which he had inherited. He received his legacy through the *compadre*, still essentially a man of the country, who brought with him myth and memory, song and poem in which the gaucho figures as a great lover and fighter.

In spite of much confusion among the terms *compadrón*, *compadre*, and *compadrito*,<sup>3</sup> the most logical interpretation seems to be that which defines

the *compadrito* as a *compadre* "come to less" ("venido a menos"). Women were attracted to him as they had been to the romantic gaucho of the plains; but instead of becoming only an urban Don Juan, the *compadrito* became a pimp. As skillful and valiant a fighter as the *compadre*, he became, not a defender of rights, but a bully, a robber, and at times a killer. Although he had "come to less" than the moral level of the *compadre*, the *compadrito's* personal prestige soared. The power he wielded probably had much to do with the fascination of his image. Through his connections and often by means of violence, he occupied an important place in the local political organization of the *comité* system of patronage which came to dominate Argentine politics.

Losing all awkward traces of customs brought in from the plains or over from Europe, the *compadrito* assumed a façade of stylized clothes and movements. Expressing his and his *barrio's* rancor against the well-born, he, as a dandy, mimicked them and finally caricatured them, with his rings and perfumes, his tight black suit and long hair, his high-heeled shoes and carefully studied postures. Gradually, he made himself into his version of the very epitome of the elegant city dweller. Considered lazy, dishonest, and affected, he was at the same time glamorous and exciting, and he assumed in *porteño* mythology the place of first importance previously held by the gaucho in pampa lore. The myth of the *compadrito* and the lore surrounding the tango are inseparable. The *compadrito* was the man of the tango. And the tango was his dance, its choreographic style based on his affectations, developed in the brothels he ran on the edges of Buenos Aires around 1880.

3. *El lunfardo*. Tango lyrics were taken from the *compadrito's* unique vocabulary: *lunfardo*. This argot probably originated in the underworld of Buenos Aires taking its name from *los lunfardos*, or professional thieves. Later as it developed a huge vocabulary from the languages of the incoming immigrants, especially Italian, it began to corrupt further the already italianized Argentine Spanish to become in the end a slang to which any *porteño* can and often does resort as well as an integral part of the language of the tango.<sup>4</sup>

#### THE CONTENT: *LAS LETRAS*

The following themes or traits found different expressions in feelings characteristically associated with tango lyrics and in the lyrics themselves. Each tango is in itself a dramatic episode. The tale is often partly told in *lunfardo*. Couched in these terms is usually one form or another of the set of themes to be discussed in the following pages: the themes which form the moral or emotional content of the tango.

1. *El pueblo gris*. Considered as a whole the themes of the tango express the emotion characteristic of much of the Argentine nation: a pessimistic, bitter sadness. "Somos un pueblo gris," the Argentines repeat. ("We are a gray nation.") Many of the sober, pessimistic traits of the

Argentine are intensified in a true tango enthusiast, *el hombre tanguero*, to become at times a morbid bitterness. He has “that discontent, that ill humor, that vague bitterness, that undefined and latent anger against everything and against everyone which is almost the quintessence of the average Argentine” (Sábato 1965:16). Julio Mafud describes the *tipo tanguero* as

lone, silent, emotionally unsatisfied, a man who cultivates friendship and maternal love, with a great store of slyness in his social conscience, with certain resemblance to the *compadre*, exhibitionist in his *machismo*, using *lunfardo* in his speech, withdrawn into his ego and only coming out of himself to talk with a friend, . . . and always watching out so that he may not pass for a fool. (1966:13-14)

2. *El mufarse*. It is difficult to discuss the *tristeza* of the tango without implying either that the Argentine is an abjectly miserable person or that the emotion is a shallow one. Argentines sometimes remark that outsiders often refer to the tango as the “lament of the cuckold,” in reference to the frequency with which the lyrics bemoan the desertion of the poet by the woman he loved, who has been lured away by the “man who knew how to seduce her” (“Sentimiento Gaucho” by Juan A. Caruso). Perhaps the key to the basic sadness is to be found in the expression *mufarse* in *lunfardo*. An approximate translation would be “to mope,” but a careful explanation sheds light on the Argentine version of moping. *Mufarse* indicates not only anger and unhappiness, but also denotes indulging oneself in surrender to these feelings. It is the entire complex of actions and emotions involved in sitting alone at a table with a drink, sipping it slowly while contemplating the totality of one’s misfortunes and underlying basic bad luck, and *enjoying oneself*. This enjoyment seems to come in part from the fact that the process partakes of a type of intense introspection and the consequent formulations of complex personal philosophies very popular among *gente tanguera*. The exposition of earnest and abstract theories of Life, Suffering, and Love is a striking characteristic of traditional tango fans, both young and old.

Whether the drink is a small glass of red wine in the evening or the famous afternoon demitasse in the ubiquitous cafe, the *cafecito* over which many famous tangos are said to have been written, the introspection which accompanies it appears to satisfy the urge which compels other people into company to laugh and “forget about it all.”

How could I forget you in this lament,  
cafe of Buenos Aires,  
if you are the only part of my life  
which reminds me of my mother?  
In your miraculous mixture  
of know-it-alls and suicides,  
I learned philosophy, dice, and gambling  
and the cruel poetry  
of no longer thinking of myself.

Cómo olvidarte en esta queja  
cafetín de Buenos Aires  
si sos lo único en la vida  
que se pareció a mi vieja?  
En tu mezcla milagrosa  
de sabiondos y suicidas,  
yo aprendí filosofía, dados, timba  
y la poesía cruel  
de no pensar más en mí.

“Cafetín de Buenos Aires”  
E. S. Discépolo

3. *El hombre gil*. Much of this philosophy has the primary purpose of showing that its elaborator understands the true nature of existence and is an experienced, polished, suave and clever man of the world: that he is not *gil*.

So I learned  
that you must pretend  
in order to live decently.  
That love and faith  
and lies  
and people laugh  
at pain.

Así aprendí  
que hay que fingir  
para vivir  
decentemente.  
Que amor y fe  
mentiras son  
y del dolor  
se ríe la gente.

"Madreselvas"  
L. C. Amadori

*Gil* is used for the stupidly innocent. In his efforts to avoid revealing his innocence (which is inherent in the male sex until disillusioned by life), man in the world of the tango becomes obsessed with the *quedirán*, the "what-they-will-say," and sees the rest of the world as mocking observers. He thus devotes himself to constructing an appearance which will obviate among the surrounding observers a smothered laugh or a wink behind his back. The *hombre gil* is he who foolishly acts upon his ideals which, if he had learned anything at all from experience, should have long ago been destroyed and relegated to their place as useless though forever cherished childhood dreams.

4. The cuckold. The person most often responsible for the cruel awakening to an awareness of the real nature of the world is the woman who has been the object of the affections of the disillusioned lover. Love and suffering are inseparable in this tanguistic world view because, as one tango states, "Sabe que es condición de varón el sufrir" ("You know that it is the natural condition of man [as against woman] to suffer," "Sentimiento Gaucho" by Juan A. Caruso). Man, the idealistic, dreaming innocent is deceived and thus initiated in the ways of the world by Woman, the wily, unfeeling, vastly experienced traitor.

Then in my eyes  
I felt tears as,  
drawing out knives,  
we went out together, he and I,  
and while they were leading me away  
the *bandoneones* continued playing  
and that woman  
went back into the dance and danced.

Entonces en mis ojos  
sentí dos lagrimones  
sacando los cuchillos  
salimos él y yo  
y mientras me llevaban  
seguían los bandoneones  
y la mujer aquella  
entró al baile y bailó.

"Pobre corazón mío"  
Pascual Contursi

5. *La madre*. The only true values in a traitorous world are represented by the mother, the famed and long-suffering "little old woman."

Kisses and love  
 friendships, wonderful parties  
 and rosy illusions  
 in the world you have them in quantity  
 unfortunately.  
 There is only one mother  
 and though one day I forgot this  
 life taught me finally  
 that to that love  
 one must return.

Besos y amores  
 amistades, bellas farsas  
 y rosadas ilusiones  
 en el mundo hay a montones  
 por desgracia.  
 Madre hay una sola  
 y aunque un día lo olvidé  
 me enseñó al final la vida  
 que a ese amor  
 hay que volver.

“Madre hay una sola”

José de la Vega

Paradoxically, the mother, as the person who has initially led the son to hold his fanciful ideals about the world, completes the picture of every member of the female sex as a deceiver. This is recognized from time to time, but more often the bitterly disillusioned man comes to his senses to realize only that the true values of the world have been neglected as represented by the mother whom he has left alone in poverty and old age.

6. *La caída de milonguita*. The tango was often instrumental in the temptation of the son away from the values of his childhood as represented by his mother. At times this temptation came in the form of *la milonguita*, the dance hall girl become prostitute. She herself had often been deceived by the promise of a better life in the world of the tango. This was the fall of the *milonguita*.

Remember, Milonguita, you were  
 the prettiest girl in Chiclana  
 the short skirt and braids  
 and between the braids a kiss  
 of sun  
 and in those summer nights,  
 what did your soul dream, woman,  
 when it heard some tango on  
 the corner  
 talk softly of love?  
 Little Esther!  
 Now they call you Milonguita  
 flower of luxury and pleasure  
 flower of night and cabaret  
 Milonguita!  
 Men have done you wrong,  
 and today you'd give your  
 soul  
 to dress once more in percale. . .

Te acordás, Milonguita,  
 vos eras  
 la pebeta mas linda e' Chiclana,  
 la pollera cortona y las  
 trenzas,  
 y en las trenzas un beso de sol,  
 y en aquellas noches de verano,  
 ¿Qué soñaba tu almita, mujer,  
 al oír en la esquina algún tango  
 chamuyarte bajito de amor?  
 ¡Esthercita!  
 Hoy te llaman Milonguita. . .  
 flor de lujo y de placer,  
 flor de noche y cabaret,  
 ¡Milonguita!  
 Los hombres te han hecho mal,  
 ¡Y hoy darías toda tu alma!  
 Por vestirse de percal. . .

“Milonguita”

Samuel Linning

As either a voluntary rebel against her miserable world or an involuntary, deceived conscript into the ranks of prostitution, she found herself as a common woman of the streets with a chance for a life far superior to her



former existence as a maid or laundress. Protected by some *compadrito*, she had her tiny share of comfort and excitement as well as the glorious dream of someday being noticed by a client of money and family who would whisk her away, if not to respectability, at least to luxury as his mistress. This dream became close to reality for the woman who numbered among her other talents the ability to dance tango. Such women could attain fame and material success as talented dancers; some, noticed because of their glamour and skill, actually realized the hope of escape from the *barrio* altogether.

7. The dream of social mobility. Although for the son of a "good" family the tango could mean the path through the brothels and to destruction, it had quite a different significance to the sons of the slums and tenements. As dancers, poets, or musicians, men hoped to attain the fame which had enabled so many tango artists to escape poverty or at least the world of drudgery as a laborer. The dream in which the glamorous scenes of downtown Buenos Aires ended the process begun in an orchestra in the houses of prostitution of the provinces was a temptation to any youth tired of his sordid *barrio* life.

Watch out—when at times  
you hear the *Cumparsita* [a traditional tango]  
I know how your heart  
beats while remembering  
that one day you danced it  
in the white scarf of a *compadrito*  
and without a penny  
and today you dance that same tango  
as a dandy.  
But you would give a lot  
to be for just one moment  
again the same *compadrito*  
of times past  
for so much glory tires  
and you look  
somewhat sad and old  
in the mirror  
of the mad cabaret.

Araca, cuando a veces  
oís la *Cumparsita*  
yo sé cómo palpita  
tu cuore al recordar  
que un día lo bailaste  
de lengue y sin un mango

y que hoy el mismo tango  
bailás hecho un bacán.  
Pero algo vos darías  
por ser por un ratito  
el mismo *compadrito*  
del tiempo que se fue  
pues cansa tanta gloria  
y un poco triste y viejo  
te ves en el espejo  
del loco cabaret.

"Bailarín *compadrito*"  
Miguel Buccino

Unrealistic though it actually was, this hope attained an all but miraculous realization in the life of Carlos Gardel, whose legend is treated below.

Themes of social protest did not make their first appearance in Argentina in the popular art of the tango. Precedents are found in the art of the *payador* which had an indisputable influence in the development of the tango. Underlining the fact that the tango has been called "the book of complaints of the *arrabal*," Mafud (1966:3-34) points out the association of

many authors of tangos with the anarchist movement of their times (see also Vilariño 1965:157-9). A list of titles suffices to demonstrate the resentment and protest in the tango: "Pan" ("Bread"), "Al mundo le falta un tornillo" ("The World is lacking a screw"), "La casita está triste" ("The Little house is sad"), "Vida amarga" ("Bitter life"), etc.

8. Return to the *barrio*. Whatever the path leading out of the *barrio*, the men and women who followed it away from a mother's home, a first love, and a band of faithful friends dreamed later of all that they had left behind.

An often encountered *porteño* emotion finds one of its expressions in the longing of the tango for familiar faces, for traditional houses and their patios converted into slum dwellings or *conventillos*, and for gardens and their grape arbors. While the traditional verses sometimes recall the Argentine interior ("Adios pampa mía" by Ivo Pelay), neither the provinces nor the native countries of immigrants are characteristic themes. The nostalgia may evoke rural elements, but these elements form an atmosphere which is part of an urban world. The *barrio* sometimes represents tradition and Argentine childhood, while the city's center has often come to symbolize international fashion and sophistication. But the theme of the return to the *barrio* should not disguise the fact that *porteños* identify both faces of the city with their Buenos Aires and celebrate both in the tango.

#### THE CHOREOGRAPHY

The choreographic themes of the tango reflect the world which appears in verbal form in its lyrics. The mannerisms, the style of the vocabulary of movements in which these themes are expressed, are the mannerisms and style of the *compadrito*. Details of the choreography have been attributed to the repertory of carefully studied postures and gestures of this dominant figure of the underworld: the straight, unmoving upper body is related to his characteristic stance, the smooth pattern of steps has been seen as a reflection of the same smooth patterns in the creole knife duels, the slightly forward tilt of the spine has been said to be the result of elegant high heeled shoes (Mafud 1966:40-41).

These traits, however, are merely accessories to the overwhelming choreographic statement of the central theme of the dance: the relationship of man and woman seen as an encounter between the active, powerful, and completely dominant male and the passive, docile, and completely submissive female. In the era of its invention the close embrace of the tango caused even the Pope to issue a judgment on the morality or immorality of so daringly suggestive a dance.

The male dancer in the tango seldom recedes. The advance of the man slightly inclined over the woman so that she is forced to recede is characteristic

of the tango and unusual among dances. The female shows no will of her own. Though they may be technically difficult for her, her steps must be performed to give the appearance that they are entirely due to her partner's masterful guidance. She is never allowed as in other dances to escape the man's embrace and must execute the most complex figures of the legs with her upper body immobile in a stylized, tense embrace, totally overpowered by the male.

The sexual themes of the tango as a dance may seem to contradict those of tango as poetry. The man, active to the point of being physically aggressive, and the completely passive woman seem the opposites of the roles designated to the sexes in the tango lyrics. Although opposites on the surface these two statements of relations between the sexes may both be forms of denying fear and timidity in the face of a threat of total failure. Perhaps a philosophy of bitterness, resentment, and pessimism may be oriented toward the same goal as that of a danced statement of *machismo*, confidence, and sexual optimism. It is possible that the philosophy has been elaborated to demonstrate that he who constructs it is a man of the world: that he is neither stupid nor naive. In the dance the dancer acts as though he has none of the fears which he cannot show the world—again proving that he is not *gil*.

### III. THE COMPLEX: THE TANGO TODAY

#### HISTORY: ESCAPE FROM THE *ARRABAL*

To understand the place of the complex of the tango in Argentina today, I will first briefly describe its trajectory from origins in the *porteño* underworld to a relatively accepted and acceptable place in normal daily Argentine life.

Soon after its early musical development and invention as a dance around 1880, the tango came to be considered the epitome of degradation. The time when the innocent whistling of a *milonga* by a young girl incurred punishment is still within the memory of older Argentines. The whistling may have stopped, but the process of popularization went on. This was aided by the playing of the organ grinders throughout the entire city of Buenos Aires. The *organitos* could play *milongas* and tangos with impunity while the less fortunate respectable citizens had to content themselves with listening. Nevertheless, the tunes became a part of *porteño* life, and the decent *porteños* began to acquire a taste for such music in spite of themselves. Not only did tango provide a major attraction for prostitutes, but politicians began to use it to draw people to the meetings of the *comités* of Buenos Aires.

The young men of society gave the tango what was probably the greatest aid along the path to success. After learning the scandalous dance on

their trips to the houses of ill-fame, and knowing what would make them successful in Europe, they took their new airs (imitated from the *compadrito* with his dance) to Paris. Thus, the dance of the Argentine brothels became the immediate rage of the continent—and subsequently, with the European stamp of approval to assuage American inferiority complexes, became acceptable in the land of its birth.

Only those events of the musical development of the tango which have had an impact on the image of the dance complex today and continue to survive in tango lore will be examined here. In the earliest days the guitar was a prominent instrument as might be expected in a form developing in contact with a folk tradition in which the guitar was predominant. But at the turn of the century the *bandoneón*, a German instrument of the accordion family, came into use in the tango. It gradually surpassed the guitar in popularity to become considered the quintessential instrument of the tango and tragedy:

<p>The spirit of your sound, you, bandoneon, has pity on the pain felt by others, and while wringing your sleepy bellows, it draws close to the heart which suffers most.</p>	<p>El duende de tu son, che, bandoneón, se apiada del dolor de los demás, y al estrujar tu fueye dormilón, se arrima al corazón que sufre más.</p>
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“Che, bandoneón”  
Homero Manzi

Leaving behind obvious gaucho elements or country traditions, the tango completed its transformation to an entirely urban form at the time of one of its major musical changes: the beginning of tango-song or *tango-canción*. Under the musical and poetic genius of Carlos Gardel and Enrique Santos Discépolo, the tango reached its artistic apogee in the 1930's. Frustration, bitterness, and resentment which had been emphasized by the tango over the years of its development reappeared during the World Depression and the following years, reinforcing the acceptance of the tango by making it again an expression of relevant themes of the time.

#### GEOGRAPHICAL DEBATE: RELEVANCE OF UNDERLYING EMOTION

Fierce debate rages over the place of the tango in Argentina today. Not even the degree to which the themes of the tango are accepted or to whom they are acceptable is wholly clear, much less what they mean to today's Argentines. The *porteño* maintains that the tango is his dance, that he only feels and knows its true significance and that tangos anywhere else in the Republic at best are poor copies of the tango *porteño*, and at worst cannot even be called tangos. He bases this claim on the interpretation of the tango as emotionally and artistically wholly due to the immigration from the Old World which inundated Buenos Aires at the turn of the century. Certain

themes and attitudes expressed by the tango are seen at present as related, in ways still to be systematically investigated, to characteristics of the waves of immigrants at the turn of the century. For example, the intensity of the nostalgia of the Argentine immigrant and his painful lack of a sense of belonging and permanence in his new country may be due in part to the uniquely high proportions of immigrants to native Argentines. Similarly, defensive attitudes toward women are recognized to have been fostered by the low percentage of females relative to males in the foreign-born population (Germani 1955:136). However, as suggested above, the tanguistic complex may be explained wholly or in part by the causes and effects of another great migration: that from the interior of the country to its littoral, more urbanized regions. I would suggest that this movement and the links which it created between rural and urban areas and thus between rural and urban lore and customs offer important clues to the origins of the mentality of the *hombre tanguero*.<sup>5</sup> If these links are seen to exist, the statement that the tango has been adopted by the provinces only in empty imitation of the capital will be conclusively disproven. The frequently encountered opinion that the tango would be significant only in a social structure which includes a lower middle class would also be brought into question. This supposition that the two-level Hispanic society of the interior does not respond to the tango may be responsible for an artificially limited investigation into the dance complex. The tango has enjoyed popularity even in the lower classes of traditionally Hispanic societies such as those of the Tucumán and Jujuy. This knowledge should preclude the focusing of further studies entirely on the significance of the tango in the laboring lower middle classes where it originated. Such a focus would be the logical outcome of a study restricted to the city, or even to the provincial towns, of Buenos Aires.

#### TANGO: THEME OF CLASS AND NATION

Another likely source of variation in the degree of acceptance and amount of significance accorded the elements of tanguistic tradition is class difference. As a symbol of social mobility the tango has of course little appeal to upper-middle and upper-class Argentines since they feel that their social position has never been questioned at any time. The immigrant, on the other hand, sought not only economic and social success, but a new identity. The concern with the identity of the Argentine and his nation involves most people of all social positions. As yet the question of the nature of *argentinidad* has not been answered to the satisfaction of the Argentines. However, as they danced and listened to the tango over the decades they came to recognize the dance, its music, and its poetry as a statement of national identity. This feeling has been so strong and shared by so many that the

examination of the dance complex—as either a denial or an affirmation of its importance—has become an important part of the constant popular discussions of the essence of Argentine character and culture.

1. The Gardelian myth. The tango as a protest of present social conditions and a promise of better things to come and as a symbol of nationalism, are central to what is possibly the single most important element of tango lore: the legend of Carlos Gardel.

Gardel has remained, as its aesthetic and technical acme, the artistic embodiment of the tango for enthusiasts of any stratum of society. For the lower middle and lower classes he is more than an artist just as the tango is more than an art. He has become a symbol, an incarnation of the virtues admired by the people and the dreams they hope to realize. Gardel's smiling face is an integral part of the Argentine scene, beaming down at the public from the place of honor in the front of buses and taxis given to decals of his portrait. On these, on the innumerable postcards of the same theme displayed in every newspaper stand, on the covers of the new magazines and books published about the great singer each month, the famous features are as often as not framed by a decoration of bunting in the national colors if not backed by the pale blue and white flag itself. The face is more than a memory of a beloved departed person. It is the portrait of the suave, attractive man of the world which the *porteño* aspires to be. "The figure (*pinta*) cut by Gardel has given a fixed expression to the deepest obsessions (*berretines*) of the *porteño*" (Mafud 1966:92). Incarnating both the hopes and the history of the masses Gardel has become identified with the fatherland "because he is so much ours," say the Argentines. He has been the idol of the Argentine for some time: Carlos Gardel died in an air crash over Medellín, Colombia in June, 1935.

Gardel's trajectory from the *arrabal* to international society symbolized the miraculous fulfillment of the hope for a rise from the lowest stratum of society to the highest. He realized in his life the dream of every struggling dweller in the *barrios*. The illegitimate child of an immigrant French washerwoman, Gardel was almost certainly born in France. There even the semblance of certainty ends, however, and, with little proof on either side, Montevideo and Buenos Aires will probably struggle for years to come for the right to claim him as a native son.

Wherever his earliest years were passed, his adolescence found him in the tough *arrabal* of the end of the century. There in the daily fight for survival he tried a series of professions, eventually beginning his singing career employed by the political *comités*. From these origins, shared with every other frustrated or ruined inhabitant of the suburbs, he rose to wealth and international fame. He consorted with nobility in Europe and movie stars in North America: in his life lay proof that dreams were possible.

To the people he left behind he became a symbol of success. He represented the man without fears, the man without any of the awkward country mannerisms or foreign traits which could label him with his origin and class. He represented the completely urbanized Argentine: his elegant image carefully stylized and obsessively cared for, setting a new mode with his tuxedo and bow tie, his striped shirt, the calculated tilt of his hat. Without insecurity or stigma he could transcend the conditions into which he had been born.

Yet he remained a success with which the people could identify, and he was able to encourage this by giving the impression that he never denied his origins. As an example of fidelity to his mother and friends the singer embodied important virtues of the world of the tango. Like the true *hombre tanguero* he never forgot his friends, the *barra querida* represented by the people and places of the *arrabal*. Legend is replete with tales of Gardel's kindness, understanding, and generosity in his treatment of his less fortunate countrymen. Important in the Gardelian myth is his faithfulness to his mother. An only child, Gardel never married. The glamorous world of fame never seduced him away from his basic ideals and virtues.

Gardel's death was probably essential to his attainment of immortality. The elegant, triumphantly smiling image never disintegrated into the reality of an old man no longer able to sing. Claims that Gardel was unhappy in Buenos Aires, that he planned not to return, that he sang to empty houses in his own city could never be substantiated (Sebreli 1966:129). Nor could any account, imaginary or real, of his talent, generosity, *machismo*, or filial devotion ever be effectively disproven. But the fact that a romantic death may have made the myth of Carlos Gardel possible does not in any way negate either the existence of the legend nor its hold upon the public.

The veneration accorded this image is interestingly manifested on the anniversaries of Gardel's birth and death. Especially on the latter day the tomb, with its chamber for the singer's mother at one side and a life-sized bronze statue of the hero, is almost invisible behind mountains of flowers and completely inaccessible in the midst of a crowd of around five to eight hundred people early in the morning and late in the evening to one to two thousand at midday. Most members of the public stand in silent tribute or attempt to approach close enough to deposit their offering of a small bouquet. The tomb is used as a stage by some of the visitors who keep it occupied all day, playing guitars, singing tangos, and giving speeches about the myth of Gardel, the danger of losing the national identity if this myth is lost, and harangues against those anti-Argentines who threaten the memory of Gardel.

Not only in public places does one see the famous smile. Reproductions of it are found in many Argentine homes, especially outside the center of

Buenos Aires, where they seem to assume significance within a religious context. Outside the national shrine of Argentina, the cathedral of Luján near Buenos Aires, are row upon row of tiny stands selling devotional candles, medals, rosaries, and other religious articles with a few souvenir items. It is startling to discover, beside a statue of the Virgin or of the latest Argentine saint, a tiny picture of Gardel. Or, between a rosary and a banner stating "I prayed for you at Luján," hangs another banner stating "Gardel lives in the heart of the people." In answer to questions, the booth owners quickly state that they carry the banners and pictures of Gardel only because they sell well, that their presence does not imply that they have anything to do with religion.

But, interestingly enough, if purchased together the religious statuary and the portraits of Gardel are not separated when displayed in a home. And if bought separately they are put together. It is not unusual to find that the picture of the singer has been placed on the same bureau top as the family crucifix with perhaps a candle, a rosary, or a madonna at its side. Again, those who have placed it there state that it was chance that occasioned the arrangement.

This association, however, would seem to be a frequently encountered example of the transformation of public adoration of Gardel into a literally religious veneration. This reverence takes an extreme form in a group of *curanderos*, spiritualistic curers, who despite laws against their practice continue their activities in Buenos Aires. The group with which I became acquainted appeared to consist of a core of about ten regular devotees living in Buenos Aires. At least another ten put in irregular appearances coming from as far as Mendoza and Bahía Blanca as well as the city and province of Buenos Aires. Exact or extensive information about this group was difficult to obtain as they were understandably secretive about their activities. The group consisted of followers of Mother María, a famous curer whose tomb lies near that of Gardel. They feel that with Gardel, as with Mother María, they maintain spiritual contact. Both figures are used as intermediaries in communication with God. It is believed that Gardel has been responsible for various miracles and that in order to obtain his favours or his intercession with God, one has only to pray to a picture of Gardel kept in the house or, better yet, to his statue in the cemetery.

Among members of this group the singer holds his position by virtue of his embodiment of both the important themes mentioned in this discussion. They state explicitly that he is a symbol of Argentina and loyalty to and identification with their homeland. And he seems to be considered a promise of the return of better social conditions. This last is evidenced by the ingemination of tales of Gardel's generosity to the humble and poor after his rise to glory. Legends of his benevolence are often mixed with memories of



the wonderful days of the first Perón regime when the people felt they were truly represented and cared for by the government.

2. Manifestations in everyday life. Among the upper classes and the intellectuals in Buenos Aires during the time of my study of the tango in 1966 and 1967, in art, literature, and music circles the tango was examined again and again as possibly containing some answers to the question of the nature of *argentinidad*. Under the leadership of Jorge Luis Borges, Argentine literature has long implemented the tango and its traditions as themes in its exploration of Argentine character. Other literary figures such as Ernesto Sábato have joined academic efforts toward the compilation of anthologies and the beginnings of sociological analysis of the tango. Many of the leading Argentine poets have devoted their energies to writing tango lyrics.<sup>6</sup>

The world of popular art is not the only place where the tango is still used as a musical theme: one of the leading exponents of the controversial movement of the "new tango" is Astor Piazzolla, student of Alberto Ginastera, Argentina's leading art-music composer. Piazzolla has written several tango suites to which ballets have been set, one of which is based on a scenario by Borges.

The "new tango" has not been limited to the concert hall. It had in 1966 taken over a prominent place in the most stylish night clubs of Buenos Aires. The fashion of going to these clubs to listen to particularly famed artists of both the slightly older forms of the *guardia nueva* as well as that school's latest product, "new tango," was still growing in mid-1967.

It is not only the trained and professional artists and thinkers who consciously occupy themselves with pondering the subject. Informal debates continue in the provinces and the *barrios* on the edge of the city itself. A semi-organized version of these discussions is that of the groups of young men who meet all over the country to listen to tango, read tango lyrics and the latest books and articles on the subject, and talk it over among themselves.

These groups I encountered in San Miguel de Tucumán, Trenque Lauquen, and Pehuajó. The members state that other such groups are found in Córdoba, Rosario, and the traditional barrios of Buenos Aires. It is also probable that more tango clubs are found in the towns of the northern provinces.<sup>7</sup>

In Tucumán and Pehuajó boys between thirteen and twenty formed what approaches the nature of a club: an informal affiliation of those youths of the town or neighborhood who are interested in the tango and who meet regularly, not merely to listen to their records and radios, which they can do at home alone, but to discuss their feelings and their findings in any of the works comprising the plethora of popular literature published on the tango.

In the families of boys of such a group, interest in the tango seems to begin quite young. Most members of the groups mentioned in this paper

began to think about tango as small boys when they and their friends began to play together at being *compadritos*. In contrast, among more educated people or those who live near the center of Buenos Aires where they are met by every fad which sweeps the city from abroad, interest in the tango appears much later, perhaps only with a conscious preoccupation with the question of national identity.

Perhaps the most striking characteristic of the groups of tango enthusiasts is the fact that the membership is exclusively male. Not only that, but none of the female friends or relatives of the members show the slightest evidence of interest in the tango. Active interest in the dance complex appears to be entirely male; women develop an interest in tango only if they develop interest in an *hombre tanguero*. This seems to be a pattern which has not changed much over the years from the days when men danced together to the *organitos* and in the brothels through the era of the café-bar to the present. Fifty years ago Felix Weingartner wrote, "The majority of the women who dance tango do so quite badly, while the men are almost all excellent dancers" (quoted in de Lara 1961:99). In 1966 a *porteño* told me that he as a boy in the 1940s had learned tango when he and a group of boys became interested in the subject together. They all learned to dance by practicing with each other. "It was difficult to find women who danced well. I practiced with my sisters and my cousins but the girls did it badly. I did not have a good partner until I married and taught my wife."

Like their counterparts in the city intelligentsia these boys think through the meaning of tango to themselves and to their country. Unlike the professional intellectuals, they create an entire personal philosophy based on very little besides the world-view expressed in the tango and gaucho philosophy as epitomized in *Martín Fierro*. And also unlike the upper classes, artists, and students, the boys of these groups dance their philosophies. Apparently the choreography of total aggressive dominance over the girl, the situation, the world, not only lets the dancer vent his resentment and express his bitterness against a destiny which has denied him this dominance. It gives him a moment behind the protection of this façade to ponder all that he is: the history and the land which have formed him, the hopes which he has formed and lost. "Only a *gringo*," says Sábato, "would make a clown of himself by taking advantage of a tango to chat or to amuse himself" (1963:16).

Thus while dancing a statement of invulnerability, the *hombre tanguero* sees himself, because of his sensitivity, great capacity to love, and fidelity to the true ideals of his childhood years, as basically vulnerable. "When I dance tango, I feel that I am myself." "The man who dances tango is more of a dreamer than others." Performing steps demonstrating perfect control, he contemplates his absolute lack of control in the face of history and destiny. "To dance a tango is to feel oneself a part of the land, a part of Argentina."

The nature of the world has doomed him to disillusionment, to a solitary existence in the face of the impossibility of a perfect love and the intimacy which this implies. He must find what comfort he can in the cultivation of deep friendships, not in the love of a woman, not even in the company of the girl with whom he dances. If she by chance might feel the same sadness remembering similar disillusion, the partners do not dance sharing the sentiment. They dance together in order to relive their disillusion alone. "Together with the girl, and it does not matter who she is, a man remembers the bitter moments of his life, and he, she, and all who are dancing contemplate a universal emotion." "I do not like the woman to talk to me while I dance tango. And if she speaks I do not answer. Only when she says to me, 'Omar, I am speaking,' I answer, 'And I, I am dancing.'"<sup>8</sup>

#### NOTES

1. This paper was written after twelve months of field work (1966-1967) supported by the Board of Foreign Scholarships, U.S. Department of State, through its program of grants for study in Latin America under the Fulbright-Hays Act.

2. A different approach to the study of the tango is offered in the content analysis carried out by Canton where he begins the important task of breaking down the phenomenon of the tango into different periods. He deals only with the first years of the existence of *tango-canción*, that is, until the death of Gardel.

3. The literature on the tango of the period of my research did not deal with the political significance of the *compadre* and *compadrito*. The function of these personages and the tango itself in the Conservative and Radical *comités* of the era is a subject which should be investigated and which will probably clarify this point, among others.

4. Mafud (1966:27) holds that the *payada* was influenced by the use of *lunfardo*; de Lara (1961:109) and Borges (1930) hold that the first tangos were composed without *lunfardo*.

5. I am at present carrying out further investigations on rural-urban interchange at the time of the formation of the tango and the influences of such relations on tanguistic mentality and art.

6. E.g., León Benarós, Jorge L. Borges, Nicolás Cocaro, Córdova Iturburu, Florencio Escardó, Baldomero F. Moreno, Alberto Girri, Leopoldo Marechal, Carlos Nastronardi, Manuel Mujica Lainez, Conrado Nale Roxlo, Ulises Petit de Murat, Ernesto Sábato, Cesar Tiempo.

It should be noted that neither the "new tango" nor the tango lyrics by literary figures are considered truly Argentine by people of less intellectual circles or lower classes.

7. This was confirmed in 1972 by a former school teacher from Jujuy. He had found that the *coyas*, the Indians and mestizos of the area had formed clubs the members of which referred to themselves as "gardelistas." This indicates one difference between these groups and those under discussion: the focus on interest seems to be on the figure of Gardel, whose old films the members meet to watch. Another important distinction is that the clubs in Jujuy had women as members.

8. From field interviews: Buenos Aires, Pehuajó, Mar del Plata.

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