

BY THE WAY

TRANSLATION TANGO

BY TONY BECKWITH



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Tango is music and words and movement. It is also an attitude: a way of talking about how life treats us, and how we feel about that.

It was originally the expression of an urban working class that saw life in terms of raw, limited options. In the world of tango, passions are barely restrained, betrayal lurks in every shadow, and rejection finds no solace. Like any art, tango is also a form of therapy that allows us to experience the giddy sweep of emotions involved in the perceived lifestyle of the tango singer, as portrayed in black-and-white movies from the thirties.

Tango lyrics evolved into an art form that sets trenchant, often cynical observations against a musical background that ebbs and flows with the provocative rhythms of the piano, the base, and the *bandoneón* (an accordion-like instrument).

I learned to shield my foolish heart
from those who laugh as they tear my world apart
They say that love and faith are lies
I look away, sheltered by my alibis (*)

Tango began as an after-hours event, a nighttime celebration that made daily burdens easier to bear and provided a forum for the boundless energy of youth. It was the blues, the jazz, the flamenco of Argentina and Uruguay—it was the music of ordinary people, the disenfranchised, tiny cogs in the incomprehensible machine of a newly industrialized society.

Backstreet dives in seedy barrios in Montevideo and Buenos Aires created the environment where tango music and lyrics fused together and movement was added by the dancing public. Now the triangle was complete, with the beating heart of the music and the mournful lament of the words bewitching the dancers as they stepped away from their everyday lives and surrendered to the seductive power of the tango.

Time passed and the tango made its way into the black tie world of the swankiest clubs in town. It was taken to Europe where it was enthusiastically received by the notoriously after-hours crowds in Paris, London, and Berlin. Along the way it did some social climbing, traveled on first class ocean-going liners, and hobnobbed with celebrities at the horse races. All this helped to intensify tango's world-weary outsider quality, and allowed the lyrics to ponder life from different perspectives. The boundaries became more elastic and all the while the music and lyrics became more intense, more introspective, exploring different moods and sensual experiences as the dancers moved around the floor in a trance.

Tango, then, is a physical experience as well as a virtual or a literary one. So how should we go about translating a tango? We should read it like a poem, for tango is certainly poetry. We should sing it like a song, of course. And we should view it like a movie, with a soundtrack that fills in the gaps of the story and conveys the mood. That—the soundtrack—is what we must translate, but we should not separate the words too much from the music. For the music and the lyrics are like two tango dancers, both involved in the same event but each approaching it from a different angle, blending and intertwining in ways that are as mystifying as they are beautiful. The lyrics aren't necessarily structured in a standard recurring pattern and don't always appear to fit smoothly into the music, as they do in some styles. The singer and the orchestra sometimes seem to be dancing both with and against each other in a tense partnership that proves that it takes two to tango.

The singer—purists will say tango singers can only be from Argentina or Uruguay—understands this dynamic and knows how to stretch and squeeze the words to make them fit the cadences of the music, trimming his or her lyrical sail to flutter and billow in the musical winds.

The translator must be aware of these factors and the tension of opposites that holds them in place, and must attempt to recreate as much of all that as possible in the target language. Like an actor, the translator seeks inspiration in personal experience, and looks inward to find the emotional charge needed to express tango's signature bitterness and despair:

Full of hope, a man searches every day
for the path that he once dreamed of
as he yearned to find his way.
Knowing that the road is long and hard
he is bloodied and he's scarred
by the dream he won't betray.

He drags his poor body over thorns
for the one who cruelly scorns
him as he worships at her feet
until his heart has ceased to beat.
That's the cruel price he has to pay
for all those kisses gone astray
and fickle love that slips away:
a heart that's wept until it's drained and bruised
from being so callously abused. (**)

Montevideo and Buenos Aires are port cities where waves of migration from Spain and Italy washed ashore in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. These migrants either went out to the sheep and cattle ranches of the interior, or stayed in the city and worked in the slaughterhouses, the packing plants, and the docks. They were tango's earliest audience. The overlapping of languages and cultures created new words and expressions, and a nascent slang—*lunfardo*—soon found its way into tango lyrics that reflected the gritty, rootless lifestyle of these new Rioplatenses.

If I still had the heart
that I once had and freely shared;
If I could love again
as once I gladly dared;
Then I could kiss you
as I gaze into your eyes
without remembering the lies
that I once failed to recognize
until too late
when they had sealed my wretched fate. (**)

In its early days, tango was a kind of theater, a vehicle for exhibitionist behavior, and has never lost its sensuality or its sense of melodrama. After all, Italian street opera and Spanish *zarzuela* are in its genes. It can at times sound very much like a soap opera, a *telenovela*, of the kind churned out in Argentina and much beloved everywhere in the Spanish-speaking world. Tango speaks of love in all its phases and guises, but is at its

most eloquent when describing the heartbreak of love betrayed, unreciprocated or rejected. These are lyrics to sing in the wee blurry hours of the morning, when passions are either inflamed or doused, and tomorrow is a thousand miles away.

I was the prettiest girl
in my barrio
Nuns ran the school
where I used to go
And though my parents
were always broke
I hung around with
lotsa swanky folk

Now I'm an artist, singing in a cabaret
they call me a floozy and other things too
I'm just a party-girl, an easy lay
because I believed a man's lies were true

Colored lights attract the nightlife throngs
to the cabaret's exciting charade
Where I live out their fantasies and sing their
songs
and try to forget the mistakes I've made (***)

The emotions expressed in tango are not, of course, unique. Songs in every genre speak in anguish or joy about roughly the same things, and the lyrics of all long-established forms become smooth and well-polished over time. The translation must attempt the same smoothness and convey the same moods. A translator must, naturally, have a keen ear for speech patterns, especially for slang in the target language, because a tango singer will often be singing directly at someone or something—a lover, a friend, a honeysuckle vine clinging to a wall—and the translation is essentially a soliloquy. Tangos frequently tell stories, and the translator must also be skilled at working with narrative. Exercising in these various forms of writing is good for the translator; it broadens us and makes us ever more versatile. It takes us beyond prose, where the absence of music—actual or implied—deprives us of the challenge of fitting lyrics into an existing structure by chopping up sentences into single words and rearranging them in pursuit of mood and flow as much as meaning.

Pain takes isolation to extremes
and suffering makes us blind, or so it seems.
But I am cursed by a cruel coldness
worse by far than burning coals of hate,
than the void where lost souls congregate,
than the ghastly tomb where my love endures its fate:
cursed and robbed forever of all my dreams. (**)

Tango is an emotional rollercoaster, like soccer, the other national obsession. One day in 1964 I was in the Bar Dos Hermanos, half a block from where I lived in Montevideo. A soccer match had just ended badly for a local team. Manolo, behind the bar, twiddled the dial on the radio till he found a station playing tango music. He turned up the volume. “That’s how it is,” he said. “We have *fútbol* or we have tango. *Fútbol* can make you happy or sad for a few hours, but tango is with you every day of your life.”

Notes

(*) From *Madreselva* (Honeysuckle), 1930: lyrics by Luis Cesar Amadori; music by Francisco Canaro. First performed at the Maipo Theatre (Buenos Aires) by Tania, who then recorded it in 1931. Later performed by Libertad Lamarque in the 1938 Argentine movie of the same name. Translated in 1996 by Tony Beckwith.

The other lyrics are from *Gracias por venir*, the musical by Adrian Sorrentino performed in Washington, D.C. in November 2010. The two tangos featured here are:

(**) *Uno* (A Man), 1943: lyrics by Enrique Santos Discépolo, music by Mariano Mores.
(***) *Mi barrio* (My Neighborhood), 1923: music and lyrics by Roberto Goyeneche (“El Polaco”).

Translations (including tango lyrics) by S. Alexandra Russell and Tony Beckwith.